

Chapter 2

Our Quantum Selves

I can recall the moment with utmost clarity even though it occurred nearly 40 years ago when I was 23 years old. I remember how my breathing quickened and my body surged with excitement as the car headlight beams illuminated the huge buck deer standing on its hind legs with its neck stretched up into the apple tree. His antler rack gleamed in the headlight's glare and I agonized that I had no cartridges for the 30-06 rifle in the car trunk. But there was something else that I now consider fascinating albeit shameful. It was the fact that while I stared at that deer, I felt no ambivalence. It didn't matter that I thought that night poaching was reprehensible and that poachers deserved the most severe punishment under the law. That thought was disconnected, out of commission. The only thing that existed in my brain at that moment was how I was going to shoot that deer out of the tree!

This incident occurred in a remote part of New Brunswick, Canada where my father and I had been hunting. We had hunted together for many years after I had seen the movie *I Never Sang For My Father* and I had made the choice to make the most of my relationship with him while he was still alive. We had been hunting that day but hadn't seen anything. I had dropped my father off in the local town for some errand and was driving back to the old farmhouse in the woods where we had been staying. That's when I swung the car into the field just to see what was happening under that apple tree. When I saw the buck stretched up into that tree, I didn't wait long. I didn't want to scare him off. I sped back to the farmhouse to get the bullets I would need.

A strange thing happened as I hustled in and out of the farmhouse. The owner stopped me for a short conversation. He was a bent elderly man with creases and wrinkles on his face and a soft slow voice when he spoke. I don't remember all of the conversation but I do remember when he said something about how the local boys around there tended to do some things at night that they shouldn't. I remember how he then stopped speaking and studied me in a quiet way. Did he know? Was there something in my countenance that had given me away?

Speeding back to the apple tree, I planned on how I would commit my crime. I would load the gun, drive up into the field with the lights off, line up the gun and then flick on the high beams at the last second. I was getting close. My heart pounded rapidly as I swung the car onto the field. I stopped the car and lined up the gun in the direction of the tree's silhouette. I pulled the toggle for the high beams. Nothing! Nada! He had gone. The tree was empty and there were no glowing green eye reflections anywhere to be seen. What a let-down! But then something else came into my mind. I started feeling a kind of relief.

I've reflected on my one attempt at poaching many times over the years. Sometimes I've shared it with patients when it somehow fit into some discussions about low versus high consciousness. The incident has a certain irony for me. Most of the transgressions I hear from patients have involved affairs. I've never had an affair with the opposite sex despite several opportunities. But I honestly tell people that I was ready to trade my soul for a buck deer. Not a woman. A damned deer! Pretty pathetic! I'd like to think that I've grown more capacity since then.

The second close call I'd like to share came from the time in my life when I was an undergraduate at Columbia College in New York. I had been dating a girl from Brooklyn who had been extremely open and vulnerable with me despite the fact that we had no commitment to be exclusive with each other. I think she just assumed I would be. She wore her heart on her sleeve as she was that kind of a person.

The incident started when I was having coffee by myself in a café on campus. Out of nowhere a very pretty brunette came up and asked my name and whether or not I wanted some company and conversation. Of course this kind of incident is a young man's wildest dream. It didn't ever happen to me...maybe to others but not me. I recognized the girl from several times when I had heard her sing and play the guitar at the Postcrypt, a gothic feeling coffee house in the basement of the local chapel. She had a penchant for wearing turtle neck sweaters which showed off her shapely form. A gorgeous folk singing girl who wanted to spend some time with me! I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

We talked and talked, learning about each other's backgrounds. She didn't hesitate when I invited her out to a local bar for some drinks which we couldn't buy on campus. We talked some more and the talk became more intimate. I shared with her how I was being confronted in some radical honesty groups I had been attending. Among other things, she shared with me how she had not yet had an orgasm in any sexual experience. She looked at me with a quizzical look. I was aware that I still had a lot of homework to prepare for the following day's classes and I told her so. "We need to leave soon because I have a lot on my plate to do tonight." She replied "You sure do!" and smiled. I was sure that I knew what she meant.

When we left the bar, she leaned up next to me and encircled my waist with her arm. I asked her where she lived and it was only about two blocks away. My mind swirled as we walked those blocks and I became more and more tense. In fact I was trembling by the time that we got to the doorway of her building. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Are you having some sort of performance anxiety?" I paused and then answered slowly. "No, I just think we'd better call it a night." She looked at me with a perplexed look and didn't say anything. I was still very tense and didn't know what to say as well. It was awkward so I turned and walked away.

It wasn't performance anxiety that had bothered me. It's true that at 19 years old I wasn't very confident about my sexuality. However, I don't know of any 19 year old boys who would pass up the challenge to override their sexual insecurity. It was something else. As I had approached that girl's doorway there was a struggle going on in the back of my mind. There was a smoldering awareness of a future nightmare. In that nightmare I'd be talking with the other girl who I'd been dating and who had been so open and vulnerable with me. I'd tell her about my recreational sex with the brunette folk singer and I'd see her be crushed by the awareness that my concern for her was so limited. I could fall back on the technicality that we had no agreement for exclusivity but that still wouldn't stop her pain. I was also aware that there was another route I could go to avoid the nightmare. The other route involved keeping everything secret about having another lover. For some reason, I didn't give that much thought. That's not how I wanted to be as a person. I guess you could say that having a secret life seemed like an even worse nightmare to me. I trembled my way out of a lusty relationship that night but I kept something important.

What makes us be so paradoxical? How can we behave like a sociopath in one situation and yet we can show real virtue in another? What makes the difference and how can we influence our selves so

that our integrity is more consistent? These are not mere academic questions. For years, my private practice has been chock full of patients who agonize over their inconsistencies: “Why do I lose it and get so violent when I get angry?” “Why do I keep lying when that’s not the way I want to be?” “Why can’t I allow myself to share fun with my family when I can joke around with the folks at work?”

All of these inconsistencies bear on the most common mistake that we make in our belief about our human nature. We over attribute to trait and we under attribute to state. In other words, we view our human nature as being more consistent than it really is. We see our behavior as deriving from a fixed and consistent personality. We fail to notice how personalities and behavior often change over time with different situations. In my deer hunting saga, I was acting like a psychopath against my own beliefs. I was only able to think about the excitement of the moment. I didn’t even think about how I would explain a dead deer to my father when he returned from town. With the folk singing temptress, I acted like a different person. I had an abundance of what I call “future sight.” I could see the lies I would be required to tell or the emotional wounds I would have to inflict. My intuitive view of the world was very different in the two situations. Why was that?

Each of us lives in our own virtual worlds.

The reason why we sometimes behave so inconsistently is that **each of us lives in our own virtual worlds**. I know. It sounds strange. At first glance, the word “virtual” stands out in my statement. But notice that I referred to “worlds”, plural. That’s really the more bizarre aspect of that statement. But the full truth is even more bizarre. **Each of us lives in our own virtual worlds which activate mostly in our unconscious. When each of these worlds activate, then a somewhat different “self” activates as well.** If this idea seems too incredible, then consider the following. Over 50 years ago, the Soviets demonstrated that involuntary reflexes change depending upon the contextual state in a person’s brain. In other words, reflexes are not specific to the person. They’re specific to the dominant state being activated within a person’s brain. In one situation, a person may have an orienting response to a particular stimulus. However, in a different situation the same person may have a defensive reflex to the same stimulus. Another example of this principle is that people’s color preferences change throughout their day. Studies have demonstrated that people prefer cooler colors when they’re in a more serious responsibility state of mind but they prefer warmer colors when they’re in a more playful state. It’s normal for these preferences to flip flop throughout the day. As our states flip flop, many esoteric things happen. Powerful neuropeptides keep creating different neurohormonal environments in our brains. Each prevailing environment can influence a person’s brain to operate in a different way. Meanwhile, different motivational systems compete with each other for dominance. It’s far more complex than any computer ever made.

We’re not going to sink our discussion too deeply into geeky techno-talk about psychophysiology. However, it’s important that you understand the quantum nature of what we call “self.” Our self and our virtual worlds keep changing along with our felt sense of spirituality. One of the easiest ways to see this is when we become angry with our intimate partners. Many of us say or do things in the heat of anger that we later regret. One hour after a vicious quarrel, some will lament that they were so “stupid” for having inflicted such abuse on their spouse. They were stupid in a way but there’s a better term for it. “Level of consciousness” is better and it relates to a field of study in psychology. In a low level of

consciousness, our felt sense of spirituality is absent. In a high level of consciousness, our spirituality helps to steady us and make our minds more flexible. In fact, the more advanced parts of our brain turn on and give us more horsepower. It's as if in a low consciousness state our brain runs on a Commodore 64 personality program with only 64 K of memory. In a high consciousness state, our brain can run a sophisticated Windows personality program with many gigabytes of memory. Of course this is a metaphor but the increased capacity of the brain at higher consciousness is measurable. Functional MRI studies show metabolism increasing in advanced brain structures such as the prefrontal cortex and the upper anterior cingulate. These areas of the brain override automatic responses and allow the brain to be flexible and creative. In a low consciousness state, the brain is rigid and capable of only its old habitual ways of responding.

There's a practical side to understanding our brains. If we know what can increase our level of consciousness then we can manipulate it to our advantage. Having a higher felt sense of spiritual meaning in your unconscious can help protect you from regressing to a low consciousness state. It may also help you to stay alive as described by Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search For Meaning*. Frankl observed how concentration camp inmates who felt connected to meaning were the ones more likely to survive. Meaning Protects! When you're wired with meaning, you can think more flexibly and better protect your long range interests because of what I call "future sight." In a high consciousness state, your unconscious creates an intuitive model of future worlds depending on different courses of action. When you're in a low consciousness state your unconscious can only create a primitive model of the world. It's a dumb model because it lacks much information about the future. This is what often happens when someone physically abuses a spouse. The long-term future is not being calculated down below. Only the present exists in the implicit world model.

Under certain conditions, positive emotions will increase our level of consciousness. However, not just any positive emotion will do. Some regressive states (e.g. addiction, pathological narcissism) won't work. They can actually decrease our level of consciousness instead. The positive emotion that raises consciousness the most involves our love of transcendent values and meaning. Transcendent values extend beyond our selves and aren't confined to comfort and self-satisfaction. When we love truth, responsibility for welfare, contribution, advocacy or creation then we are extending values outward beyond the self and we undergo a kind of micro-transcendence.

We usually think of transcendence as occurring in a phase of life. We don't think of it as occurring moment to moment. However, if we want to grow our spirituality then micro-transcendence is a very useful term. It reminds us that most of our opportunities for spiritual growth occur mostly on a very small "micro" level. It's with small momentary choices that we can grow our spirituality the most. It's when we transcend in this way that our brains open up the higher level of consciousness. Our concern needs to transcend our mere self interest. It may include self interest but it also needs to concern truth, the welfare of others, concern for the world beyond us and may or may not involve concern for a deity. Belief in the latter doesn't guarantee a high level of consciousness. A fanatic who wants to murder all nonbelievers in the name of God would not be exhibiting a high level of consciousness.

Consider the following illustration. In Figure 1, the lower values pertain to creature comforts or narcissistic self-definition. Pride, appearance, comfort and pleasure are all fine condiments in life and are healthy to enjoy under certain conditions. When no one gets hurt, no one has to lie and welfare is protected then there's no reason to forgo these fine condiments in life. Momentary joy or pleasure is not

inherently sinful. The problem comes when we sacrifice truth or the welfare in the pursuit of our self-focused values.

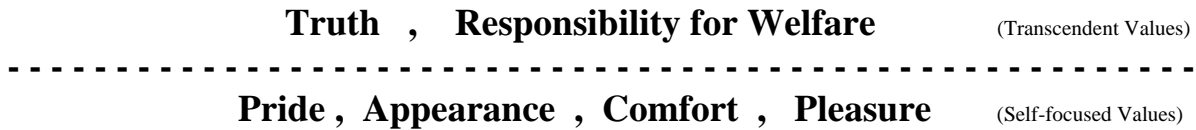


Figure 1. The battle line between transcendent vs. self-focused values

Many people use a subtle rationalization to justify their all too frequent lies. They claim that they don't want to hurt the other person so they tell a lie instead. On the surface, it appears that they're protecting the other person's welfare but they're really protecting their own comfort instead. They're afraid of the other person's emotional backlash or even their own painful guilt at witnessing the other person's feelings. They're not really protecting anyone's future welfare. They're interested in avoiding discomfort in the present. This is the most common reason why people lie in relationships. It's a momentary spiritual failure to transcend.

In clinical work with my patients, I sometimes train them how to shift their level of consciousness to a higher plane whenever they face disapproval in conflict. Figure 2 shows a model that I use to illustrate how their intuitive model of the world changes in 3 dimensions as their level of consciousness increases. They become more concerned with transcendent values, more concerned about others in addition to their self and also more concerned about the future.

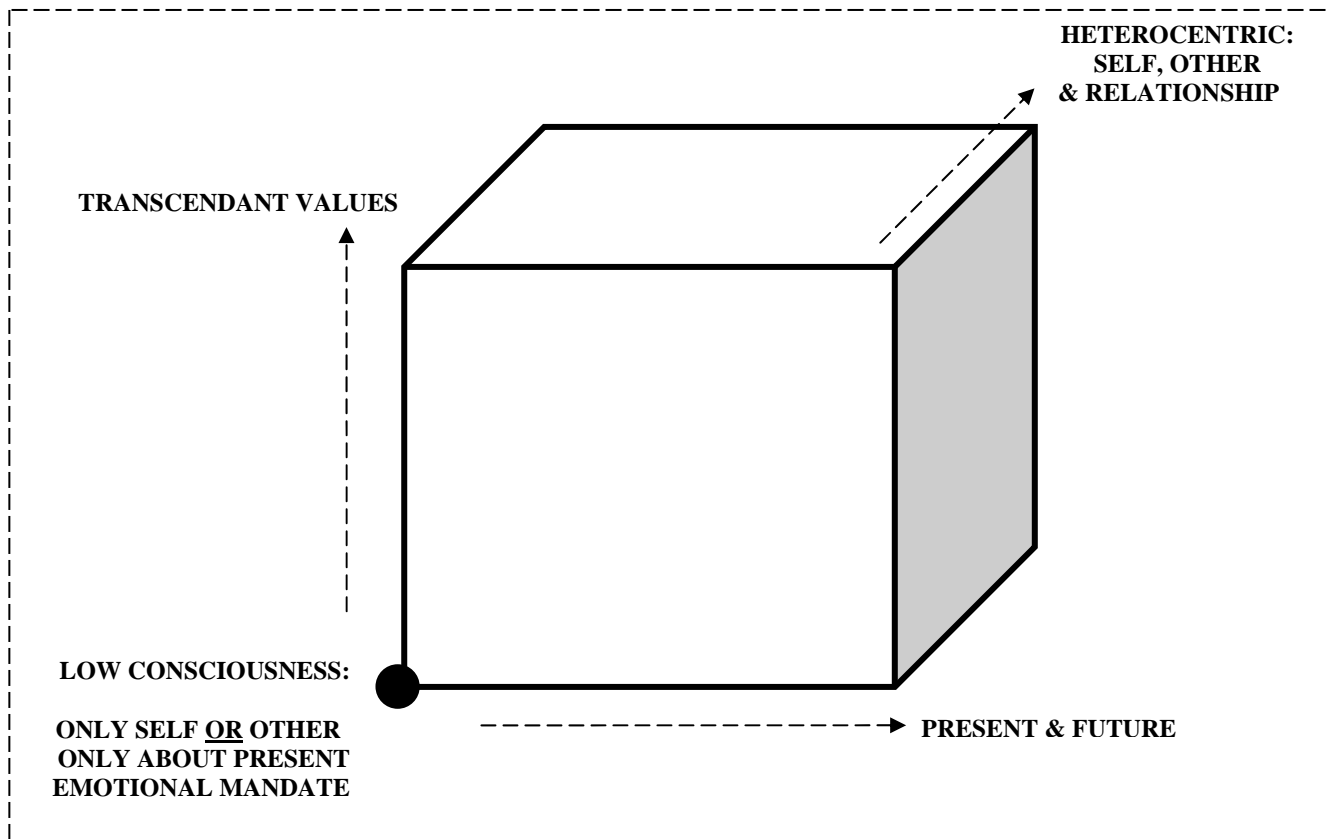


Figure 2. Increasing consciousness from a low consciousness state

As shown in Figure 2, a low level of consciousness usually involves a limited scope of concern. Our motivations are monocentric in that we’re caring about only one person. A person might have an egocentric view that only he or she matters. Conversely, the person might have a so-called codependent view that only the other person matters and not his or her own self. Either of these involves a low consciousness state being expressed in different ways depending on how the person is wired. You might say that real sin is monocentricity when a person’s unconscious model of the world only values one person. Many people suffer from so-called “codependence” and are the opposite of being self-absorbed. They’re self-denying and self-neglecting instead. It’s an interesting concept that people can sin in the direction of self-abuse. Think about it. It becomes possible with a monocentric focus on the other person in a way that excludes the one’s self.

As level of consciousness increases, the value of multiple concerns becomes possible as the brain gets more horsepower. We care about self, care about another and even care about the relationship itself as yet another entity. Our brains are able to balance these concerns and intuitively handle the possible conflicts. The unconscious world becomes heterocentric at this higher level of consciousness because it values multiple concerns even though external behavior may not show it. If you’re in a high level of consciousness state during a conflict with your spouse then you can intuitively value both of your concerns at the same time. You may choose to sacrifice for your partner because you want to protect the balance in the relationship. You may be aware that your partner will gain more than you will lose. Conversely, you may decide to hold fast and let your partner suffer because you know that you don’t want to injure your relationship with too much self-sacrifice. In a high state of consciousness our unconscious

can do intuitive balancing because it can do multiprocessing. It can perform many calculations in parallel while consciousness is limited mostly to linear processing.

Real sin occurs with a monocentric focus

Figure 2 also shows how in a low level of consciousness our scope of concern is limited mostly to the present. For example, in a rage state we may only care about showing how “right” or how powerful we are in the moment. We’re usually trying to make sure that we don’t appear unimportant or weak. We don’t sense the future consequences of our raging behavior. It’s only about the emotionally driven mandate to defend our pride. Our spiritual frame of meaning is not operating in our unconscious so our intuitive morality doesn’t guide us. If we reverse this state by activating our love for spiritual values then our level of consciousness increases. We’re less likely to hit, threaten divorce or call our intimate partner a “bastard” or a “bitch.” We become more intuitive about the probable future consequences of our choices. The keyword here is “intuitive.” Even while we’re using the term “higher level of consciousness” it’s important to understand that what really expands is our unconscious model of the world. This improved unconscious context steers our conscious thoughts and gives rise to what we call “intuition” and “wisdom.”

As we’ve seen, activating a spiritual frame of meaning can do some pretty powerful stuff. It can help us broaden our scope of concern to include others, self, the relationship, nature, future generations and the world itself. It can make us intuitively smarter about possible futures that depend on our choices. But the question still remains: How do we develop an unconscious spiritual frame that’s strong enough to do the job and how do we activate it even if we have it?