

Infinity Hidden in a Speck

Exploring one of the central paradoxes of being human
Dennis Rivers -- April 2011

In this essay I'm going to explore some of the ways in which we are grander than our wildest dreams. There is a movie currently in theaters that provides me with a wonderful jumping off place. The movie is called *Limitless*. But it could have just as easily been titled, *Limited*, because the main character, falling into possession of a cognition enhancing wonder drug, uses his newly expanded powers in service only of ancient motives. He is now smart enough to accomplish practically anything, so he chooses to become a stock market wizard. Then he goes for the really big stuff: he becomes a player in the mergers and acquisitions game on Wall Street. And he persuades his beautiful ex-girlfriend to come back to him. Cure malaria? Forget it. Cause the leaders of the world to see that peace makes more sense than war? Not a chance. Truly, this is new wine poured into very old bottles. But as flawed as it is by its limited horizon of possibilities, the film still raises a deeply important question, *how could each of us grow into greater fullness of being?*, even if the film itself gives a shallow answer.

One of the wonderful paradoxes of our time is the way that science is offering deeper and deeper support for a new spirituality-in-the-middle-of-life. By spirituality, I mean a sense of wonder, gratitude, connectedness and compassion, that is evoked by the continuing stream of new discoveries about both the universe and the human body. This is a new development for several reasons. Over the past several centuries, science and religion have competed fiercely for social influence, and along the way came to a truce by reinventing the



Spirit Within Stone
Sculpture by Vijali

old spirit versus matter dichotomy. The tacit truce required that scientists stop saying anything about the spiritual life, and that religionists stop making claims about the physical universe. This stale truce is now breaking down, which to my mind is not a bad thing, since human beings are both spiritual and material, and need a unifying rather than a dividing way of looking at themselves. In figures like John Muir and Walt Whitman, you can see spirituality both breaking free from traditional religion and also breaking away from the spirit versus matter dichotomy. That process, what one might call the reemergence of nature religion or Earth spirituality in Western culture, continues to this very day at an accelerating pace. New Druids take heart, your time has come!

The Hubble photographs of stars being born, and of zillions of galaxies filling up what were previously imagined to be empty quadrants of space, represent one of the most dramatic and inspiring streams of recent scientific information flowing into the mind of Earth spirituality. There is another stream of information coming to us, not as dramatic as star pictures, but much more intimate, with lots of implications about the people we can become and the world we can create. This is the information about our brains, each



Evolution of White Dwarf Star
Hubble Telescope

person's garden of approximately one hundred billion neurons. One author called it "the three-pound universe." Fifty years ago, biologist Jacques Monod could sneer, "what is the brain but a machine made of meat?" Very few people talk like that anymore. Just as the Hubble telescope dramatically changed our view of "empty space," new brain studies are dramatically expanding our vision of the six inches between our ears.

Current estimates are that the human body contains approximately one hundred trillion cells, including approximately one hundred billion neurons. The community that we call our body also contains approximately a thousand trillion bacteria, most of whom do their best to keep our show

on the road. One scientist made an estimate of how much information is stored in all these cells and came up with an estimate of around thirty-five trillion gigabytes, which is to say, really a lot.

So while we might be inclined, when looking at the vastness of the night sky, to imagine ourselves as mere specks in endless space, I want to invite you to explore the other side of the paradox. **We may be a speck, but we are also infinite.** Each person is a living universe, and as a culture we have hardly begun to mobilize the inner resources of each of those universes. We are more inclined to see ourselves as nothing, then to see ourselves as an infinity of resources waiting to be made manifest in works of creative love. (We also have a tendency to shoot one another with a thoughtlessness which is mind-boggling, so willing are we to erase these evolving universes.) What of our brainpower we are able to mobilize, we often use to reach the narrowest of goals, like the hero of *Limitless*.

One of the interesting aspects of evolution is that evolutionary processes themselves appear to be evolving. Evolution at its most rudimentary level seems fairly brainless: try everything and keep whatever works. But that apparently brainless process of trial and error has produced brains that plan, and love, and play peek-a-boo with their toddlers so that the toddler's brains will develop. If a fundamentally brainless process can produce brains, all bets are off as to what is going on in the universe. Planning represents the internalization of trial and error, in which different courses of action are imagined, and their consequences are imagined. Not as good as real trial and error, but much safer and getting better with the passing of time. Human beings are smack dab in the middle of this evolution of evolution. It remains to be seen how far we will be able to carry it forward.

Fights could become negotiation sessions, a kind of a etherialization of conflict. Competition and cooperation could merge and produce a family of creative hybrids that produce more and waste less, both in terms of resources and in terms of lives.

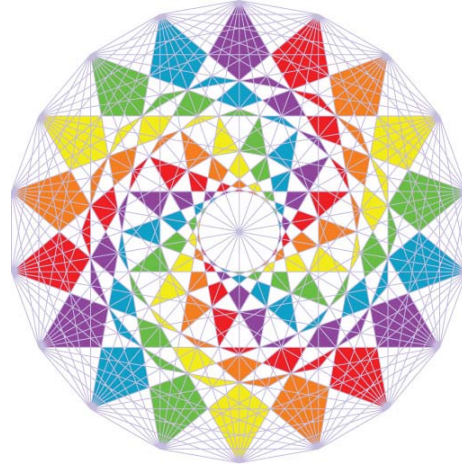
This universe of which we are a part, which is continually changing and learning in and through us, does not fit very well with our current, winner-takes-all, everyone else becomes a slave, version of capitalism, which is spiraling toward self-destruction. In this version of capitalism, only the titans at the top get to dream big. Everyone else has to have smaller and smaller dreams. Your destiny is not to use your one hundred trillion cells to produce something great and beautiful. Your destiny is only to wash the boss's limousine, and then go back to your tiny room and comfort yourself by watching men on TV trying to get a little white ball to roll across a piece of lawn and land in a little cup, while your teeth fall out because you can't afford a dentist. Every social scheme has its set of uniforms, into which it will try to zip its population. That's why we need poets, science fiction writers, exotic religions, visionary artists and brain scientists, because we need to be able to dream outside the current box. Discovering that you are an entire creative universe with arms and legs is a way of reaffirming your fundamental human dignity, no matter what forces are trying to push you into a life of obedient, unchanging and unthinking servitude.

As we reach out to discover what our hundred trillion cells could become, we may collide with the smallness of the life expectations of the people around us. I see one of our tasks to be turning this collision into a transformation. Our task is not to criticize the people around us, our task is to live more radiantly and with more abundance of spirit, so that the people around us feel invited and encouraged to live a more expansive life.

What Sort of Aliveness is the Universe Trying to Give Birth to in Me?

And what are the dimensions of that more expansive life? What qualities does the universe seem to be trying to evolve in and through us. I have spent most of my adult life exploring this question with the help of the writings of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, and many experiments in living. They, in turn, were influenced by hundreds of thinkers, so the list actually represents a consensus of many minds. Here is my working list of the qualities of *full aliveness* in each of us which are waiting to be cultivated, in exactly the same way that our biceps are waiting to fill out as the result of good workouts. An equally interesting way to describe these fourteen qualities is to say that each of us was born pregnant with all of them, and our life is the process of giving birth to all of them in greater and greater fullness and completeness: the infinity hidden within the speck you call "me." Each of these qualities has no final boundary, there is no limit as to how deeply they could be developed, or how intricately they could be interwoven.

I present these radiant qualities as if they were branches of a tree, feathering out into finer and finer detail, because the tree form is such a familiar model. Because these fourteen qualities continuously interweave and support one another, a more revealing (but more complex) way of presenting them would be a Mandala, as shown below.



Graphic by Adam Apollo Walsh

1. **The Openness to Learn/Change/Evolve Branch:** Understanding life as a continuous process of developing new awarenesses, understandings and skills. Understanding everything that we call a "problem" as a challenge to learn something new, to re-evaluate one's ideas, assumptions and behaviors, and to develop new skills. Embracing problems (personal, social, political, ecological) as opportunities, rather than running away from them.
2. **The Compassion Branch:** caring, lovingkindness, respect, generosity, concern for the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing of all creatures.
3. **The Truthfulness Branch:** honestly, sincerity, genuineness, congruence (inner condition matches outer expression), turning away from self-deception and deception of others in all one's relationships.
4. **The Courage Branch:** courage, hopefulness, faithfulness to others and to one's deepest ideals, a deep sense of self-worth that allows one to face one's mistakes, psychological empowerment or "agency" (a sense that one can influence one's environment in order to meet one's needs, or the needs of one's children).
5. **The Awareness Branch:** Learning to pay sustained attention, and to include more and more in one's field of attention. Often accomplished through meditation, contemplation, quiet prayer, some forms of martial arts and sports training, and native traditions of hunting.

6. **The Creativity Branch:** creatively, curiosity, exploration (with openness to new experience), thinking outside the box, willingness to try something new, acceptance of moments of failure as part of the creative process.

7. **The Commitment/Sustained Engagement Branch:** Continuity of energetic engagement, patience, perseverance, "Seven Generations" perspective, promise-keeping, fruit orchard tending, the long view, raising children. Turning away from instant gratification and short term solutions with giant long terms costs (such as nuclear power, lotteries that supposedly fund education while making the poor poorer, or the current practice of states selling their office buildings to private investors, and then immediately leasing them back, in order to bring in a temporary flood of cash that supposedly "solves" state budget problems while leaving the state taxpayers burdened with decades of high rent payments).

8. **The Gratitude Branch:** Expressing gratitude, appreciation, wonder, awe, receiving each moment as a gift, lowering one's threshold of delight, sympathetic delight in the happiness of others. Taking delight in those things that are available to all (the sun, the sea, the sky), relinquishing all senses of entitlement that come at the expense of others (my "right" as an American to any oil in the world, for example).

9. **The Responsibility Branch:** Mindful of cause and effect, aware of the interwovenness of our lives and ecological fates, willing to acknowledge mistakes and make amends and restoration.

10. **The Forgiveness Branch:** Forgiving oneself and others, willingness to start over, focusing on making a better present and future, rather than punishing others (or self) for the past, focusing on direction of development rather measuring oneself and others against static images of perfection.

11. **The Emotional Aliveness Branch -- celebrating and grieving:** Open to experience both joy and sorrow, both frustration and fulfillment, both excitement and stillness. Moving away from "playing dead" as a coping style.

12. **The Finding Meaning/Making Meaning Branch:** Organizing and expressing our experiences into coherent patterns of words, music, movement, imagery, celebration and ritual, each according to their temperament (following along the lines of Rilke's advice in *Letters to a Young Poet*).

13. **The Transforming Power and Spiritual Dimensions of Beauty:** Open to experience beauty (in the Navajo sense of cosmic harmony) in nature and in the human personality. Also open to experience the ugliness we have created in nature and human life: war, oppression, exploitation, pollution and extinction. Open to be a bridge for the transformation of the world from ugly ways toward beautiful ways of living, treating one another and caring for one another as "all my relations."

14. **The Spiral of Nurturing Branch:** Active concern for the personal development of every person one meets/knows, in terms of the first thirteen dimensions shown above. Active concern for the unfolding into full personhood of all people on Earth, active concern for the Web of Life. Evolution selects for life that nurtures new life.

A Closing Meditation

Personal unfolding will never be easy, since there is a lot of momentum to stay asleep and undeveloped, coming from both within us and outside of us. So we need ways of waking ourselves up, a bell to ring in the dormitory of our minds, to summon our infinite inner resources to the tasks of creative love, and the building of a new civilization based on the fourteen qualities described above. As some of you will know from my little book on the evolution of prayer, I am an active explorer of new forms of prayer, meditation and affirmation. I invite you to explore repeating the



Starstorm
Fractal Image by Vicky Brago-Mitchell

following affirmation, or something similar, as you are falling asleep, and just as you wake up. I also invite you to accompany this affirmation with whatever vivid imagery would express for you the meaning of these words. If you could imagine yourself as being a composite of Buddha, Jesus, Catherine the Great, Mme. Curie, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Albert Schweitzer, Joan of Arc, St. Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis, and St. Thomas Aquinas, all rolled together, plus any other noble people you would like to add to this list, I am convinced that you would have only touched the beginning edge of all that life wants to express through you. The emerging picture of the brain suggests to me that we all hold greater possibilities than we can possibly imagine. May each of us open, in our own unique way, to be a garden of eternity.

With every breath and every step
I open my life to infinite well-being,
and to the unfolding of the Universe
in me and through me.
With every breath and every step
I commit myself to the well-being
of all sentient creatures.