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P U R P O S E

HOW WE CREATE THE
MEANING OF LIFE

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enchantment, take me away

Wittgenstein noted that “the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.”⁶⁰ Self-enchantment is the modern way to solve life’s problems; a new reality can silence the naysayers and bean

counters. Plato's cave analogy is apt. You see shadows on the cave wall. They are images of self as evaluated and labeled. But you are not what you own. You are not what people call you. You are not how social science describes you. You are not a predicted probability. These are mere shadows. Walk out of the cave, into the light, and something different emerges: your personal power, your loving spirit, your ultimate Being—your *enchanted self*.

In the light of this new reality, you can awaken the giant within, save your soul, and discover pure consciousness. You can rise above the labels and stigmas and rankings of self by going *under* them. Under them all resides something more profound. It is a more authentic, a more magical, and most importantly, a more moral reality. The enchanted self is the “real me,” which exists in a mystical realm beyond the narrow confines of science, society, and time.⁶¹

The most compelling aspect of self-enchancement strategies is that they are impossible to disprove. This is what the New Atheists and other individuals bent on “disproving” religious, spiritual, and New Age faiths cannot seem to comprehend. Faith creates a language, a logic, and a perception of the world and emotion—in sum, a reality all its own. This means that it *feels true* to the believer, regardless of what critics argue. As Durkheim realized, a nonbeliever trying to critique faith “is like a blind man trying to talk about color.”⁶²

The promise of self-enchancement simply feels true to many, which explains the wild popularity of religious and spiritual paths to self-discovery. The tactics, language, and metaphors can be vastly different, but the most alluring narratives of self-discovery are always hopeful and enthusiastic. As evidence, I will briefly discuss three highly popular articulations of modern self-enchancement.

Tony Robbins represents the seminar-style, results-driven aspect of self-help. Rick Warren epitomizes a contemporary Christian vision of salvation. And representing the enlightenment arm of self-discovery is Eckhart Tolle.

It is important to note that I am not disparaging or condemning these thinkers and their philosophies of life. Rather, I hope to indicate what unites and what divides them. Their unifying element is their shared attempt to define and locate an enchanted self. But they differ on *how* to do this.

Self, to Robbins, is an inner giant.⁶³ This seems appropriate because Robbins is larger than life, in body, in charisma, and in the self-help industry. He is an attractive and commanding figure who exudes warm enthusiasm and true empathy. He promises that we can find happiness and success—romantically, socially, and professionally—by simply following his strategy. It is a bold and unbelievable claim (which he readily admits). The process involves attending his seminars, meeting with his staff coaches, and utilizing his products (tapes, DVDs, books, etc.).

The key to Robbins's strategy is that change and results are dependent on *you*. No one can do this for you. You have to want it. Life needs to be on your terms. These are his mantras and they communicate a very definitive self, one that has all the power in the world at its disposal. The choice to use this power is ours!

Robbins writes, "We're all here to contribute something unique, that deep within each of us lies a special gift . . . Each of us has a talent, a gift, our own bit of genius waiting to be tapped."⁶⁴ His cheerful encouragement, interspersed with amazing stories and demonstrations of inner giants being let loose (like walking on hot coals), seek to help us tap our own genius. Robbins exhorts you to "focus on what *you* really want," and "find *your* own answer."

This is the elegance of the inner giant. The person you want to be and the life you want already within you. Robbins doesn't have to solve your life's problems, because only you can solve them. You need to be the giant. Once you become a giant, you can and will solve everything. The logic and psychology of this strategy appears sound. It is true that humans have agency. It is also true that people who feel empowered will be more likely to pursue their goals. Robbins's promise hinges on this basic premise—your self has power. Now, get up and use it!

But many people don't know how to use it. He suggests that they need to figure it out for themselves. While he cannot tell us specifically how to use our inner giant, he has endless stories of how others use theirs—presidents, movie stars, and business moguls. Consequently, failure to use your inner giant cannot be a function of his method (the rich and famous have already done it!); it must be your fault. This is the brilliance of Robbins's philosophy—if you don't believe in his message, it won't work. Faith is not an outcome of the process; it is a prerequisite for it, just like it is in most religious traditions.

Where Robbins is trying to release giants, Rick Warren is a giant-killer. Monotheisms greatly diminish the self, because the central character in the story of your life is not you, it's God. No little gods are allowed. Vanity, pride, opulence, and hedonism are offensive to him. Power, wealth, and status are bestowed by him. Consequently, the self is primarily a servant. And in the contemporary evangelicalism of Rick Warren, self is a servant only to God.

Consequently, Christian self-help helps you become a servant of God. Of course, the big question is "What does God want?" Monotheisms provide astoundingly detailed responses to this question. And the specifics are endless. But as to the self, they are all in agreement—the self is insignificant compared to God. And yet the self still matters. Why? Because God says it matters. Monotheism combines the feeling of mind-boggling insignificance with a sense of endless power because God loves *you*. The object of God's love is your enchanted self.

In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren describes our deepest selves: "Like God, we are spiritual beings—our spirits are immortal and will outlast our earthly bodies."⁶⁵ Your godlike spirit contains your purpose. As Warren explains, "you were created to become like Christ." Consequently, with deep self-awareness you will better understand God. Warren encourages readers to look into the self: "Don't just *read* this book. *Interact with it*. Underline it. Write your own thoughts in the margins. Make it *your* book. Personalize it!"⁶⁶ Warren's evangelicalism and that of millions of other American Protestants contain the central message that we can all have a deeply personal relationship with God—your true self is you in the eyes of God.⁶⁷

This is how God becomes a believer's generalized other. In thinking deeply about self, the believer is trying to measure up to God's standards. Those standards, and not the cruel and calculated assessments of the world, will determine the most important things: salvation and eternal life. Mercifully, we are told that God is fair and loving. In fact, Warren is very upbeat about the whole relationship. There is no fire and brimstone in his theology. "The smile of God is the goal of your life," advises Warren.

Since pleasing God is the first purpose of your life, your most important task is to discover how to do that. The Bible says, "Figure out what will please Christ, and then do it." Fortunately,

the Bible gives us a clear example of a life that gives pleasure to God. The man's name was Noah.⁶⁸

Like Robbins, Warren relies on stories to illustrate the existence of the enchanted self. But these are not the stories of corporate, political, and entertainment luminaries. Rather, they are the ancient stories of the Bible. And around 60 million Americans think the Bible “should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects.”⁶⁹ An additional 100 million Americans believe that while the Bible must be interpreted, it is “perfectly true” if done properly. In sum, most Americans believe in a Christian self.

Still, the self-help industry races on. It is like the funeral business—steady in good times and bad. Even devout Christians need help in realizing their enchanted selves. And like the inner giant, the servant of God can be discovered by looking inward with a bit of encouragement and guidance.

Eckhart Tolle finds a wholly different enchanted self, one that is more palatable to individuals leery of the glitz of Robbins or weary of the traditional Christianity of Warren. Tolle's enchanted self is not a giant or God's servant; it is *Being* in the moment.

Like Eastern mystics, Tolle discovered his enchanted self through solitary examination. He describes his revelation:

I couldn't live with myself any longer. And in this a question arose without an answer: who is the “I” that cannot live with the self? What is the self? I felt drawn into a void! I didn't know at the time that what really happened was the mind-made self, with its heaviness, its problems, that lives between the unsatisfying past and the fearful future, collapsed. It dissolved. The next morning I woke up and everything was so peaceful. The peace was there because there was no self. Just a sense of presence or “beingness,” just observing and watching.⁷⁰

The revelation of having no self fits with the findings of brain science and replicates the experiences of the Buddha, David Hume, and countless other deep meditators.

From Tolle's perspective, the loss of self inspires no lament. It brings him peace and, as he puts it, a state of deep bliss. This happy outcome is

what makes Tolle's story appealing. He is not so much killing the self as he is awakening some deeper Being, a way of experiencing each moment with control and contentment.

He promises that "nonresistance is the key to the greatest power in the universe. Through it, consciousness (spirit) is freed from its imprisonment in form."⁷¹ He further explains:

The joy of Being, which is the only true happiness, cannot come to you through any form, possession, achievement, person, or event—through anything that happens. That joy cannot come to you—ever. It emanates from the formless dimension within you, from consciousness itself and thus is one with who you are.⁷²

Like Robbins and Warren, Tolle asserts that the solutions to life's problems are already within you; you just need to look. He promises that if you look hard enough you will see that you are pure consciousness.

Where Tolle finds a timeless dimension of Being, Warren finds a spirit loved by God, and Robbins finds a customized genius. While very different in description, each of these enchanted selves suggest a better you—a happier, freer, more powerful, and more confident self. You are escaping the confines of a disenchanting society and shattering the bars of Weber's iron cage. Tolle, Warren, and Robbins are successful at articulating an intuitive and beguiling enchanted self.

The enchanted self is good by definition. There are no contemporary purveyors of purpose asserting that, at your very core, you are evil and despicable. Cold social science, harsh religions, and dark ideologies might sometimes offer a less-than-attractive picture of human nature, but self-help is upbeat by its very nature. The promises and strategies of this industry are premised on an unquestioned faith that an enchanted self exists.

In all cases, the enchanted self is thought to be found through deep introspection—in meditation, prayer, or seminar workshops. Religious groups, spiritual advisors, and personal gurus provide a framework from which we hope to lure out our enchanted self. People are attracted to transcendent metaphors like God, otherworldly genius, or transcendent Being. These visions, if we believe them, make our moral goodness feel absolute and eternal.

They make us self-enchanted, taking us to a place where the cruel and calculated assessments lose their sway, because we feel a grander significance. As moral egoists, it satisfies a deeply human instinct, our search for moral order.

The question becomes how one can come to believe in the enchanted self. We cannot trick ourselves into believing in Robbins's inner giant, or Warren's Christian soul, or Tolle's true happiness.

Faith, as all these writers assert, is *within* you. We are instinctually and reflexively drawn to narratives of moral order that reflect positively on us. But the metaphors and messages of successful purveyors of purpose are socially established and depend on communities and cultures to validate them. These social forces are what make certain articulations of purpose feel more real, and we cannot command them because they are imposed on us from without.