

WHY GOD WON'T GO AWAY

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I read a book last year called “Why God Won’t Go Away”. Then this last January I read it again. It grabbed attention because I am forever on the lookout for evidence that might indicate that we humans have somehow been programmed genetically to have common mystical experiences and to share common religious drives.

Apparently, humans dream about universally common archetypes and symbols—we all have dreamt of flying, dreamt of crawling through unfamiliar houses, and the ever-popular dream of standing naked in a crowd of strangers. How come we all dream the same things?

And the biggie is, we’re all of us working hard to find the “true” God.

Why do we have that drive in common? Many people put this down to the fears all of us face—we’re scared because we’re all alone here on earth—we’re scared to face death—we’re scared of everything we can’t explain.

So, we create a god. I can’t begin to address the common dream issue—maybe Pirkko will someday, but maybe I can help with the need for a god issue.

The guys that wrote this book think there’s another very scientific reason why all humans feel this mystical drive. They say it’s all in your head.

They studied the relationship between the religious experience and how our brain functions, trying to shed some light on the mysterious connection between human consciousness and the persistent and peculiarly human longing to connect with something larger than ourselves.

They studied people who are very skillful in deep meditation and looked at what their brains were doing during this meditation.

You need to understand that I don’t meditate. I’ve sort of tried. I relax and try to clear all thoughts from my mind, but then I start thinking about what time it is and what I’m going to have for lunch or maybe I should be working instead of just sitting here. So, I have no way to relate to these mystical experiences I’m about to share with you.

But the sense that I got from hearing these stories is that I just might be missing something pretty extraordinary.

They also studied the brain activity of nuns who engage in intense religious prayers or in chanting. They gathered from the participants the feelings experienced during the peak moments of meditation or prayer or chanting. And they found there was a strong common reaction.

A Tibetan monk in the study gave what was a fairly typical description of how he feels as his meditation progresses toward this peak moment. First, he says, his conscious mind quiets, allowing a deeper, simpler part of himself to emerge. He believes that this inner self is the truest part of which he is, the part that never changes.

For him, this inner self is not a metaphor or an attitude—it is literal. It's real. It is what remains when worry, fear, desire, and all other preoccupation of the conscious mind is stripped away. He considers this inner self the very essence of his being. If pressed, he might even call it his soul.

He says that during this peak moment, he suddenly understands that his inner self is not an isolated thing, but that he is connected to and part of all creation. He feels as if he is part of everyone and everything in existence.

Doesn't this sound like an experience worth having?

There were different elements in each one interviewed, but all the people studied said that at that peak moments, they felt a merging with the universe, a loss of identity of self.

They also studied several Franciscan nuns during prayers. The nuns tended to describe this peak moment as a tangible sense of closeness of God and a mingling with God.

Wow! I guess there really is a God! Must be!

A 13th century Franciscan nun, Angela of Fooling—not one of the nuns in this scientific study—Angela wrote about this peak moment: “How great is the mercy of the one who realized this union. I possessed God so fully that I was no longer in my previous customary state but was led to find a peace in which I was united with God and was content with everything....”

Sister Teresa of Avila, another nun this time from the 1400's wrote, “God visits the soul in a way that prevents it doubting when it comes it itself that it has been in God and God in it, and so firmly is it convinced of this truth, that, though years may pass before this state recurs, the soul can never forget it, to doubt its reality.”

These peak moments are not commonly reached. People who have meditated for years may never reach the peak level, but it is people who are this skilled in religious meditation and prayer and who have had peak moments who took part in these studies.

It's difficult for those of us living in the practical world, and coping from day to day with the mundane challenges of existence to comprehend in any meaningful way the mystical sense of transcendent unity described by saints. It all seems so hopelessly cryptic, so unlikely.

In its essence, however, mystical experience is not as strange as it seems, and the first step in understanding its nature is to realize that it happens to all of us, all of the time.

If you ever "lost yourself" in a beautiful piece of music, for example, or felt "swept away" by a rousing patriotic speech, you have tasted in a small but revealing way the essence of mystical union. If you have ever been wonder-struck by the beauty of nature, you know how it feels when the ego slips away and for a dazzling moment or two you vividly understand that you are a part of something larger.

Here's a story that takes that losing yourself a step farther.

"At midnight, in the shadowy choir loft of a candlelit gothic cathedral of the Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, a 54-year-old businessman named Bill sits in a crowded pew enjoying a concert by the innovative jazz ensemble known as the Paul Winter Consort. It's a hallmark of Winter's group to set their stage in unusual, and atmospheric venues—canyons, beaches, old stone barns—to reflect the moody, reverent spirit of their music, which often blends their own live performances with the recorded songs of nature. Tonight's concert, for example, has included a lyrical duet with a school of singing humpback whales and a haunting serenade built around the keening of eagles. Now, as the evening draws to a close, Winter and his group are providing the instrumental accompaniment to the tape-recorded singing of a pack of free-roaming wolves.

The rhythmic, otherworldly wolf serenade echoes eerily in the monumental quiet of the cathedral's soaring spaces. The wolves raise their voices in raw howls of sheer animal power, then let them soften into haunting and melancholy sighs. This grand old church has never heard such a choir, and the unhurried rise and fall of Winter's moody soprano sax—sometimes harmonizing with the animal voices, sometimes joining them in a gentle exchange of rhythmic call and response—adds a powerfully hypnotic dimension to the music. In a more conventional venue, the effect of this remarkable performance would weave a powerful spell, but in this old cathedral, lit only by the soft glow of candles, with shadows gathered in the eaves and dancing on the limestone walls, it's enough to lift listeners out of their everyday lives, and into another world.

And as the wolf serenade reaches its emotional crescendo, that's exactly what's happening to Bill. Quietly, unconsciously, he has allowed himself to be absorbed into the song of the wolves, lulled by its haunting rhythms and the beauty of those wild voices. He feels deeply, serenely at peace. Then, suddenly, he is seized by a surge of excitement. It rushes up from the gut in a burst of joy and energy, and before he can think twice about it, Bill is on his feet, with his head thrown back, and he is howling from the bottom of his soul.

Remarkably, at the same moment, other people have begun to howl. At first it's half a dozen, scattered throughout the church. But in moments others follow their lead and soon the entire cathedral is alive with joyous noise, as hundreds of people joyfully join in the primal song of the wolves.

"I don't know why that happened," says Bill, looking back upon the moment. "There was no signal that I can recall. I don't remember what my thoughts were, it just seemed to rise up through my body and I just let it out."

Normally a reserved and dignified person, Bill says he wasn't worried, as he howled, that others might think him strange. "I felt very comfortable with that group of people," he says, with a shrug. "Somehow, I knew I was among people who would understand." Bill doesn't know why he felt such a sense of connection with that group of strangers, or what, exactly made him howl. "It was very primal, very liberating," says Bill. "When everyone was howling, the whole church, that was a very a spiritual feeling. Not religious, but definitely spiritual. It's hard to put into words," he says, "there's really no way to explain it."

In fact, the authors of this book believe that there is an explanation to these stories—they believe that Bill and his fellow audience members were swept away by a distinct neurological chain of events that, for a few remarkable moments, relieved them of the notion that they were each separate and isolated and plunged them into a sense of primal and liberating union, not only with the wolves, but with one another.

In order to better understand this chain of events that takes place in the brain during these peak moments, I need to do a short and quick explanation of how four areas of the brain function. If you brought your brain with you today, you may want to take it out now and follow along with me.

The four areas that figure importantly in this process we're going to be discussing are the visual area, the orientation area, the attention area, and the verbal conception area.

The first one—the visual area, in the front of your brain, is where images are received and then translated into recognizable objects. Then that image is mixed together with input from other parts of the brain to add depth of meaning and emotional meaning.

Your brain may get input of an image of a brown furry object. That image means nothing unless it has a context for your brain to work with. So, this visual association part of your brain sorts through its files and determines that this image is a dog, not a wolf or a bear. Then it gathers emotional input from other areas and lets you know a dog is something you like that that you're fond of scratching behind its ears.

The second area is the orientation area. This sits on the back and top of your brain.

This area gets input from all the senses. Its main job is to orient the brain's owner in physical space—it keeps track of which end is up, helps us judge distances and angles, it allows us to safely negotiate the dangerous physical landscape around us.

To do this, the brain must first figure out the physical limits of your body. It has to draw a sharp distinction between you and everything else in the rest of the universe that is not you.

People who have suffered an injury to this orientation area have a lot of difficulty maneuvering in physical space. For example, if they were given the task of trying to walk over and climb into bed, their brains are confused by the constantly shifting angles and depths. Every time they take a step, the angle of approach changes, the distance to the bed changes. They can't locate themselves in the physical space they stand in. So, they end up missing the bed altogether when they try to climb in or just fall on the floor.

Or else, if they do eventually manage to get their body onto the mattress, they are unable to adjust their pillow or pull up the covers, because their brain can't figure out the distinction between the pillow and their bodies.

Actually, there are two halves of your orientation area—right and left. The left half defines the brain's spatial sense of self. What are the limits of me? And the right half defines the physical space in which that self can exist. Together, these two halves analyze all the input from the senses and get you into bed every night.

The third area in your brain is the attention area. This plays a major role in governing complex body movements and behaviors connected with reaching goals. It sifts out or blocks out all the irrelevant information so that you can focus on reaching a goal.

It's what allows you to read a book in a noisy restaurant or to daydream while walking down a crowded street.

And, the fourth area is called the Verbal Conceptual area.—where the brain names and catalogs your world, names opposites, and handles logical functions in your life. This area is vital for all of our mental functioning and especially important in religious experience.

These four areas are the most complex neurological structures in your brain. They work together to let us experience reality as a vivid cohesive whole that flows smoothly and comprehensibly from one moment to the next.

The fuller these perceptions, the greater our chances for survival, which is, after all, the ultimate goal of our brain.

Let's say you're taking an evening stroll around your garden. You've got all this input continually flowing into your brain and the four areas I've just described are sorting the input and analyzing it and letting you know how to think about it.

You're able to step over the row of carrots and avoid walking into a tree because your brain is aware of where your body is in relation to the rest of the space of the garden.

But, wait a minute—what's that up there in the tree? It looks like a tiger! A threat is perceived by the brain.

It's not a brown fuzzy dog this time—it's a tiger! Instantly, all the systems in your brain are put into overdrive. Your heart is told to beat faster to get the blood moving. Your lungs are told to pump faster to get more oxygen to where it might be needed. Your blood pressure increases. Your leg muscles are ready to get you into action. This is your brain's arousal system getting your body ready to fight or run. It's all about survival.

But, wait a minute—you look at the tiger again and you suddenly realize it's only a large dead branch in the tree. Whew! The perceived threat disappears. Now, the quieting part of your brain goes to work to lower your blood pressure, slow down the heart, and, in general, it works to save your body's store of fuel and energy for the next tiger you see.

So, what do lions and tigers and bears have to do with the Tibetan monks we were talking about earlier?

Each of these monks who participated in the study were asked to meditate. To slow down all the outside influences into their brain. To attempt to achieve a peak moment.

Immediately after achieving this peak moment, they signaled the scientists who then, with a brain scan, looked at the activity levels in the four areas of the brain we've talked about. The scan showed a whole lot of increased activity in the orientation area of the brain.

It looked like the brain was working very hard to tell the meditating monk where he was in reality and defining extra clearly for the monk who his self was as opposed to the rest of the space.

But the monk reported a strong sense of oneness with the universe. He felt no sense of self at all. How could this conflict be happening? Why does the monk experience this sense of mystical lost of himself?

The authors of the book claim that an unusual condition has been brought on in the monk's brain through his deep prolonged meditation. During his peak moment.

The monk has set out intentionally to meditate. He works hard to block out all sensory input, to shield his mind from all intrusions from outside. His brain slows the flow of input.

When this happens, the orientation area becomes increasingly deprived of information. As meditation deepens, the attention area tries even more intensely to keep the mind clear of thoughts and more and more input is choked off.

The quieting function in your brain is doing everything it can to calm you to slow your heartbeat, to slow your breathing. Well, pretty soon, you've blocked out nearly all input and your body is so calm and the brain begins to get concerned about this state of ultra-calmness.

It needs to bring the body back into balance.

So, the arousal system kicks in with an instantaneous burst. The result is that your brain is overwhelmed with simultaneous floods of quieting commands and floods of arousal commands. You have an intense quieting of the orientation area at the same moment that you have an intense arousal of the orientation area.

The orientation area has no input coming in to work with. It's unable to just shut down. So, it does the best with what it has. It can't define the physical space you are in with no input, so it tries to generate a sense of absolute spacelessness, and your mind interprets that as a sense of infinite space, of eternity, or a timeless, spaceless void.

At the same time, the orientation area can't figure out your body's physical boundaries, with no input, so the mind perceives that as a limitless self. In fact, there is no longer any sense of self at all.

In this state, the monk who is meditation, who has reached his peak moment, would feel an absolute sense of unity, without thought, without words, without sensation.

He has, in essence, tricked his own brain into creating a world of unreality. What he was experiencing felt very real. But what we think of as reality is only a rendition of reality that is created by the brain.

This sense of unity with the universe, total loss of self, is the ideal of Eastern religions. To reach Nirvana or experience the Tao, you must lose your self.

Western religions generally encourage a more active type of religious experience. You don't clear your mind of all input. Instead, you focus very intently on an object or on God or on a cross.

For the sake of this discussion, let's assume that the focus of attention is the mental image of Jesus or Christ. It would perhaps be a nun attempting to reach a peak moment through intense prolonged prayer.

When our Buddhist monk meditated, the attention area of the brain tried to block all input from getting through. But our nun's brain is working in a different manner.

The brain has been instructed to focus exclusively on the image of Jesus. Now, the attention area is focusing on this goal—to keep the image of Jesus always in the front of things.

That requires sustained attention, sustained activity by the brain. So, instead of quieting everything down, the arousal system goes to work.

At first, the nun experiences a mildly pleasant state of excitement. As her concentration on Jesus deepens, the intensity of the experience increases, until finally, the arousal system is running on a full head of steam.

Again, the brain sees this extreme condition, and gets alarmed and signals the quieting function to get to work to bring things back into balance. And, again, the orientation is confused by the intense arousal that has pushed it to orient you in space and time, and then by the new intense quieting that cuts off all outside input--and the only information it's been given is the image of Jesus.

So, it has no option but to create a sense of reality for you and that reality is Jesus. Jesus becomes the breadth and depth of reality at that moment.

For the Catholic nun, experiencing this peak moment, she might interpret this mystical experience as a melting into Jesus, becoming one with Jesus. She is convinced there is a God, because she has just experienced God. God was real at that peak moment.

God can't go away. We can each of us trick our brains into experiencing what all the holy books tell us is God. Everything the church has told you is real. You've felt it. It's why monks chant, why Muslims bow, why dervishes whirl.

And, when all of us do this chanting or dancing or bowing or deep meditation all together at one time in a religious or mystical setting, then we become a society of "us'es" who can say, "Yes, it's true. We all felt the presence of God."

But, why would the human brain, which evolved for the very pragmatic purpose of helping us survive, why would it possess such an apparently impractical talent? What evolutionary advantage would a mystically gifted mind provide to help the human survive?

The very nature of the evolutionary process suggests that the mind's ability to enter into this peak experience condition did not happen specifically for that purpose. Evolution is pragmatically shortsighted. It favors adaptations that provide effective survival advantages, in the practical here and now.

Those adaptations that increase the organism's chances of survival are genetically passed along. Those that don't are ruthlessly thrown out.

It's likely that many of the human mind's higher functions—our ability to ponder philosophical ideas or to experience complex emotions such as love, grief, and envy,

developed from more simple brain processes that did evolve to handle more basic survival needs.

In the same way, it is likely that the mechanism in the brain that allows these peak moments came out of the brain's circuitry that evolved to keep us mating and reproducing. The same structures and pathways in the brain involved in creating a peak moment, the arousal and quieting functions, probably evolved originally to link the act of sex and reproduction to the powerful sensations of orgasm.

Yes, sustained sexual activity can bring you to a state of loss of self, of timelessness, that is similar to that achieved in a peak moment. In fact, running a marathon or Sufi dancing can get you there as well.

But, before you quit meditating and start jogging or dancing or whatever, remember that the high you experience is not the same intense experience as a mystical peak moment.

They merely use the same processes and pathways in the brain. Mystical moments may be an accidental by-product of machinery already in place in the brain.

All of these test and studies and interviews may help explain what is going on when you reach a peak moment. But it doesn't answer all the questions.

At this point, we are left with two mutually exclusive possibilities—either spiritual mystical experience is nothing more than a confusion of brain signals. In that case, we've just learned how to trick ourselves.

Or, the state of absolute union with God and the universe that the mystics describe does in fact exist and the mind has simply developed the capability to perceive it.

If the brain were not assembled as it is, we would not even be able to perceive a higher reality, even if it did exist. Is there really a God behind all of this?

It seems to me we all have a choice. We can reach a state of mystical reality, by tricking our own brains and simply bask in this wonderful experience.

Or we can subscribe to the notion that God has given us this marvelous ability to experience Him for real, up close and personal. Pick the road that defines reality for you.