

# **My Pilgrimage toward Truth: *The Story of One Soul's Journey to Universalism***

by

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The word "pilgrimage" brings to mind the idea of a prolonged journey. It suggests extended travelling, to a far-off place, a distant location where something **HOLY** is to be *found, contemplated, and enjoyed*. So, if my "pilgrimage" toward Truth implies travelling to a place, then what exactly is that place? What is that place which is here described as "Truth?" It is a "place" in *consciousness*; it is a state of insight, or inner knowing. Moreover, my movement toward this inner knowing is something that I am able to trace back to the very first dawning of my self-awareness in early childhood. The setting was an obscure municipality in the state of California, namely San Bernardino. San Bernardino is a small city situated about 50 miles east of Los Angeles. I was actually born in the city of Los Angeles, but my family relocated to San Bernardino shortly after my birth. Thus, it was in San Bernardino -- many years ago -- that my "pilgrimage toward Truth" first began.

As I look back to this period of my childhood and of my newly emerging self-awareness, what now seems most significant to me is the sense of **AMAZEMENT** and **AWE** that I felt when I first recognized, "**I EXIST,**" or rather, when I first *experienced-the-truth-of* those words. I felt utterly **SURPRISED** by the fact of my own existence, and this feeling of surprise was combined with a sense of *mystery*. My own "I" (or, *selfhood*) stood before me -- so to speak -- as a profound mystery. As I stood over against myself *mentally*, I experienced my own existence as a **fascinating MYSTERY** that needed to be solved. Confronted with the fact of my own **I- EXISTENCE**, and at the same time finding myself inseparably bound up with a massive **OTHERNESS** (i.e., the existence of *other-beings-like-myself*, as well as a world of apparently material things), the pressing question for me became, "**How can this be?**" As I look back on my life, I can clearly see that it was these questions about existence that set into motion my lifelong quest in search of God. For surely, whatever the specific solution to this mystery turns out to be, arriving at such a solution would have to be the very essence of what it means to find God.

From a very young age -- certainly well before entering elementary school -- I had a strong intuitive understanding of a religious notion that is sometimes expressed in the words, "***I am not this body.***" That is, even as a child (and therefore entirely without the use of any intricate reasoning processes, or logic), I possessed an experiential certainty concerning my own spiritual nature. I *instinctually* "knew" myself to be a spiritual being, an ***INVISIBLE, INNER BEING***, different from my physical body. Of course, being a child, I could not yet verbalize my understanding, i.e., I could not at that time put it into words as I am doing now. Nevertheless, a spiritual sense of my own being was definitely already present even at that early stage in my development.

When I was a bit older, during the years after my entrance into elementary school, I discovered that I possessed a deep-seated aversion toward the popular idea that *human consciousness* is dependent on *physical matter*. Various people and occurrences in my environment at that time conspired to pull me into the belief that *human thought* and *mental-life-in-general* are altogether at the mercy of matter, being either ***identical with***, or in any case ***produced by***, brain processes. The degree of dislike that I felt toward *materialistic views* of human nature bordered on utter revulsion. For example, I would often overhear adults speaking among themselves in a way implying that a person's intelligence and memory could be totally destroyed due to brain damage from events like strokes and heart attacks. I also had to constantly confront the suggestion from people around me that the event called "death" actually annihilates human beings, i.e., that it wholly and irrevocably extinguishes a person's existence. At this stage in my development, I did not see any way to *logically* disprove these suggestions; nonetheless, I still felt strongly that there was something fundamentally wrong with all such materialistic views regarding human nature. It seemed certain to me not only that people were something ***different from*** their bodies, but also that people are ultimately impervious to any sort of ***domination/control by*** the body. Thus, even at this early stage in my development, when I was not old enough to be able to actually express it in words, I nonetheless had a definite conception of the *inner self* (or, ***human "I-ness"***) as being an impregnable, inviolable *center-of-consciousness*.

Although this awareness of Spirit ("Idealism"), along with an associated distaste for Materialism, seemed to arise within my soul in a *purely instinctual fashion*, I also felt an intense desire to unravel the ***MYSTERY*** of spiritual existence by means of rational thinking. I initially searched for answers within the confines of the "Pentecostal-Holiness" tradition into which I was born. By the time I finished junior-high school, I had already

read through the entire King-James version of the Holy Bible numerous times. I undertook this early Bible reading with profound feelings of reverence, and my Bible studies during this period were extremely enriching spiritually. But I did at times find myself struggling with the widely-held religious doctrine of the *eternal damnation* of the “unsaved.” During that time period in the United States, nearly all adherents of the Pentecostal-Holiness faith held firmly to the idea of the everlasting punishment of sinners in Hell. My maternal grandmother, for example -- whom we affectionately addressed as “Momma Lela” -- was absolutely convinced that the “fire” of Hell was quite literal and exceedingly **HOT!** I still have extremely vivid memories of how, on countless occasions throughout my childhood, my beloved Momma Lela would be cooking something in her kitchen and how -- having accidentally burned her finger, or noticed the heat of the oven -- would exclaim with great conviction something like, “*Praise God! I am a Christian! I will not have to go to Hell! They say that the fire in Hell is many times HOTTER than any fire on this Earth!!!*” My grandmother, Momma Lela, was a beautiful soul, an incredibly magnanimous and kind-hearted Christian. Moreover, she was always ready to forgive anyone who wronged her. But despite her own abundant generosity, deeply-loving heart, and persistent willingness to forgive others, this precious soul had no expectation whatsoever that God would show the same sort of “unconditional love” to sinners in Hell-fire that she herself so admirably demonstrated toward her fellow human beings. My grandmother was persuaded that sinners would NEVER be allowed to escape from Hell, once they had already died without “getting saved.” I am absolutely certain that my grandmother herself did not particularly care for this cruel doctrine of eternal damnation. Rather, like so many other sincere Christians, she simply accepted this doctrine because -- throughout her life -- that was what she had always been taught.

This doctrine of eternal damnation was quite puzzling to me even as a small child. Furthermore, it was largely due to my dissatisfaction with this particular teaching of the church, as well as my growing doubts about certain other “literalist” ideas of *fundamentalist* Christianity, that I began to explore other spiritual traditions. It was around this time period, for example, that I discovered Mary Baker Eddy’s book, *Science and Health*. This book emphasized what I call *the primacy of Spirit*, and did so in a manner that immediately resonated with my own “idealist” leanings. I read this book voraciously and repeatedly. Moreover, I credit my study of Christian Science with ultimately leading me to the discovery of another source of “pan-spiritualist” inspiration that proved to be highly significant for my

growth, namely the philosophical writings of Bishop George Berkeley. Berkeley, who was Bishop of Cloyne in Ireland, and lived from 1685 to 1753, was probably the “purest” example of a metaphysical “Idealist” in the entire history of Western thought. According to Berkeley, this Universe, i.e., the whole of Reality, is 100% *spiritual*. In other words, Berkeley’s view is that so-called *matter* is only something that people mistakenly imagine to be in existence. For Berkeley, there is --strictly speaking -- no such thing as matter. This whole Universe of Being is nothing other than a vast multitude of “spirits” (specifically, the one *Infinite Spirit*, God, and an immense community of *finite spirits* that includes human souls and angels).

Now, in fairness to Bishop Berkeley, the following point needs to be stressed: In order to make people understand that this *pan-spiritualist* view of Reality might possibly be true, it is first necessary to bring them to a correct understanding of *sense-perception*. What actually happens when we perceive things by our five senses? More specifically, what sort of process is involved when we **SEE THINGS**? The truth is that *seeing* is not at all the kind of direct process that it is commonly believed to be. The common belief about *seeing* (i.e., visual sense-perception) is that seeing involves a **direct confrontation** with a world of “external things” existing separately from our minds. Moreover, *unless we make a **STRONG** effort to really think our way into this issue deeply*, we will most assuredly have the feeling that Bishop Berkeley’s claims are utter insanity. We commonly speak and think along the following lines: “*I’m standing here in church. In front of me there is a pulpit, and there is a lectern on the pulpit. I **SEE** THE LECTERN. I **SEE** THE PULPIT. Both the lectern and the pulpit that I see are really out there, external-to-my-mind, along with many other material objects. They are all located out there in physical space.*” Briefly, according to the common view of sense-perception, it would be absolutely ridiculous to say that the things we see exist entirely within our own minds.

However, the truth is: Although we habitually speak and think about **SEEING** in above-described fashion, in doing so we are greatly mistaken. The entire “visual field” that we experience when we’re awake is actually just as much “in the mind” as are the many “visions” that arise in our consciousness during a vivid dream. Once we come to understand that the *real universe* is actually hidden behind the “veil” of our own visual experience, it will become much easier to arrive at the all-important insight that we live in a Spiritual Universe; in other words, it will then be much easier to accept that what is concealed behind this “curtain” of visual imagery is 100% Spirit. That is the reason why -- prior to fully publishing his views about a *totally-spiritual* universe -- Bishop Berkeley first wrote at

great length concerning his “theory of vision.” He published his work on vision in 1709 under the title, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*. My study of this book was tremendously helpful, in that it enabled me to see more clearly how my deeply-felt inclination in favor of the “primacy of Spirit” could in fact be rationally defended.

This “Idealist” worldview (i.e., the belief that *we live in a spiritual universe, and that matter does not really exist as a “separate substance”*) was precisely the position that I had instinctively believed to be correct from my earliest childhood. This, then, was the point in my development at which I made a decisive transition from a merely *intuitive awareness of Spirit* to what can be described as “*Spiritual Science*.” (As I use the expression “Spiritual Science,” it is not limited only to Rudolf Steiner’s *Anthroposophy*, but is rather a descriptive, “umbrella” term for the whole field of the *science of Spirit*, that is, my use of this expression is entirely non-sectarian.) Accordingly, what I had previously “felt” in my soul *instinctively* was now becoming increasingly *rational*.

During the years following this transition to “rationality,” I studied extensively the pan-spiritualist tradition of Western Idealism. The idealist thinkers of the West who contributed to my spiritual growth are far too numerous for me to list them all here. However, I would like to mention the debt of gratitude I owe to the German thinker Gottfried Leibniz, the Austrian “philosopher-clairvoyant” Rudolf Steiner, and the “*Personalist*” Idealism developed here in the U.S. (for example, by the so-called “Boston Personalists”). Moreover, as a result of steeping myself in the study of Idealism, I gradually came to realize that the doctrine of eternal damnation could not possibly be correct. It became transparently clear to me that the very nature of God (*Spirit/Reality/Truth*) amounted to an inexorable **GUARANTEE** that **all souls would eventually be saved**. This, then, marked the halfway point in my journey to Universalism. The final missing component would now be relatively easy to obtain.

After graduating from high school, I eventually enrolled as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Riverside. Here, while working toward a B.A. degree in Psychology, I continued to study and expand my knowledge of metaphysical Idealism. These philosophical investigations ultimately led to my delving into the Hindu and Buddhist spiritual traditions. It is to Hinduism, paradoxically, that I must give credit for my finding a way back to my Christian roots. My studies within the Western philosophical tradition up to that point had done very little to help me bring about a reconciliation between traditional *Christianity* and *rationality*, but as I entered ever more deeply into Eastern Philosophy, my

own Christianity became increasingly comprehensible. In fact, it seems to me that certain insights that I acquired through the study of Eastern Wisdom are what enabled me truly *to understand* Christianity for the first time (although some of these had also been **remotely alluded to** by Mary Baker Eddy in the Christian Science literature). My study of Hinduism in particular is what “opened my eyes” to the deeper dimensions of spiritual Truth within the Bible. I came to understand that there was profound *esoteric content* within the Bible, even though the vast majority of Christians remained “blind” to this content, not even suspecting that it might be present. I came to see that Christianity was a religion of boundless spiritual treasures, but that its vast stores of spiritual Wisdom were hidden behind thick “clouds” of sensual *imagery, metaphor* and *symbolism*. When meditating on Christian references to such things as the “*cross,*” “*the shed blood of Christ,*” “*the Lamb of God slain from the foundations of the world,*” etc., I now saw that it was a mistake simply to stick to the surface imagery and interpret these things ONLY literally. (NOTE: Apart from Hinduism, the Swedish thinker Emanuel Swedenborg -- whose work *Heavenly Secrets* I began to study during this period -- was also helpful to me in this regard.)

However, even though the sensuous “pictures” of Christian symbolism *per se* cover up the deeper *spiritual* Truth, I also came to understand that this concealment itself was an expression of Divine *Wisdom / Providence*. For a literal interpretation of the Bible -- which latches on to the surface, and clings to the images or symbols -- can be *salutary* to “fledgling” souls, and can nourish these souls toward the higher stages of growth that are required for spiritual/mystical contemplation.

After earning a B.A. degree in Psychology from the University of California, I remained at the same University for my graduate studies toward an M.A. and PhD, but I changed my major at that time to Philosophy. I persisted in my study of Eastern thought throughout my years as a graduate student at UCR. Furthermore, it was Eastern thought, and in particular certain works published by the *Vedanta Society of Southern California*, that nurtured my spirit into full appreciation of what would prove to be the “missing piece” for a comprehensive universalist perspective. That missing piece was the *unity of religions*. Among these works from the Vedanta Society, two books stand out in my memory as especially salient, namely *The Spiritual Heritage of India* and *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*. Both of these books were written by a highly erudite monk of the Ramakrishna Order; his name was Swami Prabhavananda. Finally, I should mention that it was my study of Hinduism that led me later to embrace the Baha’i Faith, which lays great stress on religious unity.

Thus -- through the powerful stimulation I received from an exposure to Eastern thought -- my ongoing pursuit of spiritual Truth had now brought me to that additional idea which would make for a comprehensive “universalist” stance. For over and above my recognition that God will ultimately save all souls in this *spiritual* Universe, I had now reached the point where I could accept that further insight, which is intimately related to universal salvation, namely the following: In the highest sense of the word, there is only **ONE** Religion, and all so-called “religions” are at best nothing more than approximations to, or partial manifestations of, the one Religion of God. In other words, as I view the matter, these two elements taken together -- i.e., *universal salvation* and the *unity of religions* -- add up to a complete picture of Universalism.

Consequently, on one level, attainment of this insight marks the “end” of my journey to Universalism. However, viewed from another standpoint, my arrival at this culmination-point merely signalizes a shift into a different phase of the journey. I now look forward to an eternal continuation of my travels, but henceforth I will travel as a navigator within the “vehicle” of *Universalism*. My ongoing exertions within the “arena” of *self-development* and *service-to-others* will provide the “fuel” that empowers this vehicle for perpetual expansion and growth in universalist **WISDOM**.

Respectfully submitted,

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