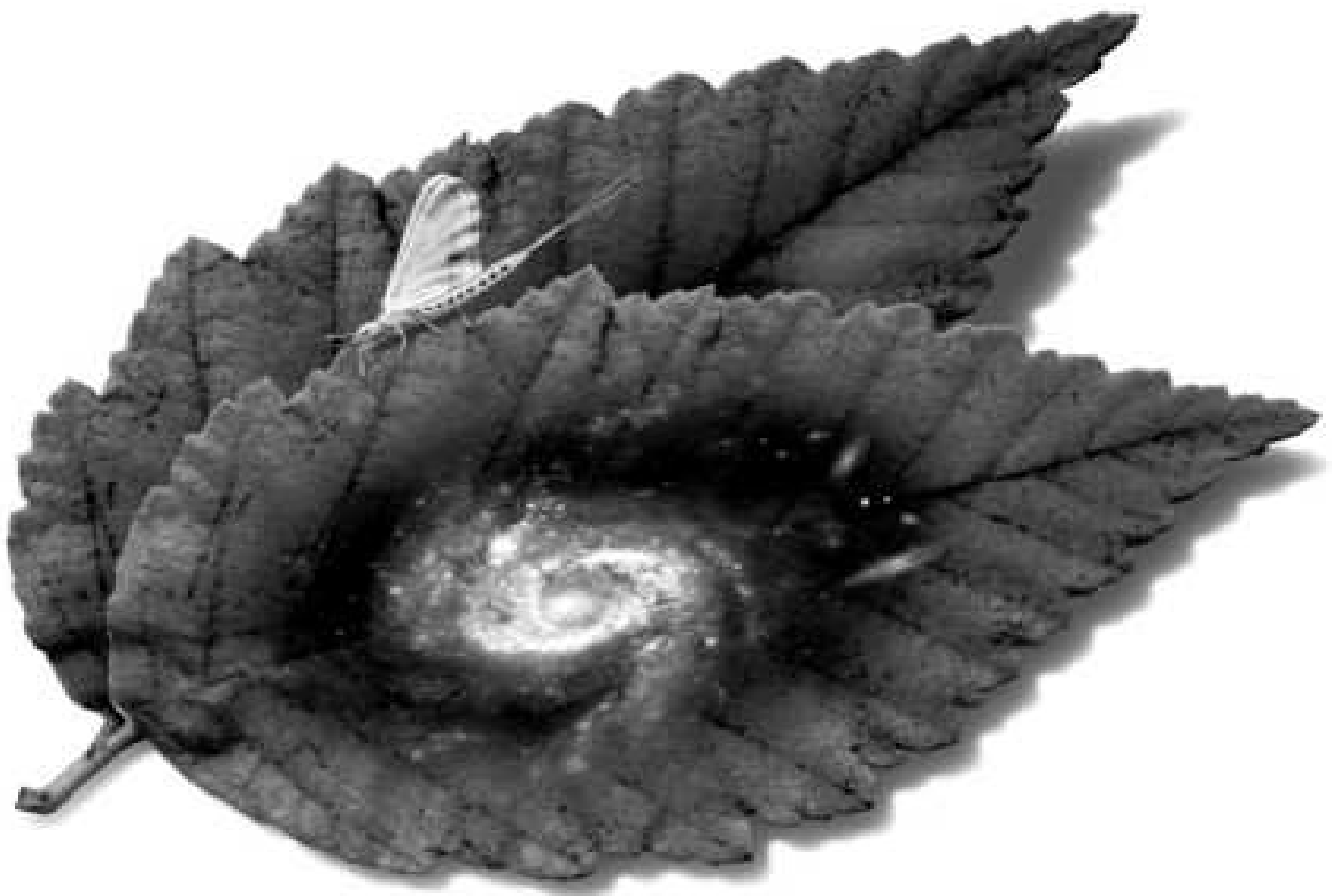


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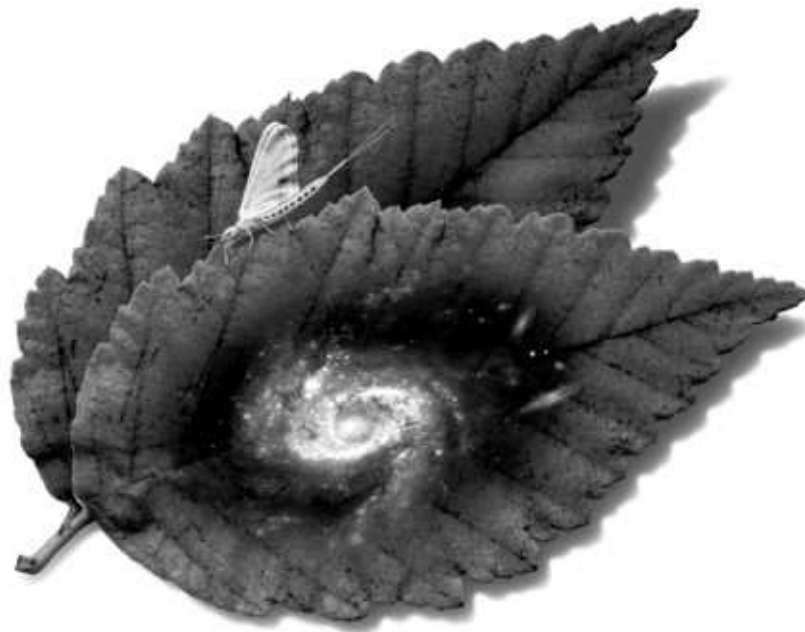
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David Cortesi

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A skeptic's paths to a richer life

David E. Cortesi

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Introduction

This book is a long answer to a short question. Here's the question: Can you build a vital, fulfilling life experience using methods and ideas that are purely secular, not based in religious doctrine?

If that seems like a pointless question to you, you are probably one of the majority of Americans who profess a religious belief. You naturally assume that when you need an answer to one of life's big questions, you'll find it in that belief - and probably you will. But some of us do not find any religion satisfactory, and I am one. Although I am content with my choice, when I watch people who diligently practice a religion, I see their practice yielding important benefits. I had to ask: are those benefits uniquely "religious" and so unavailable to people like me? Or do they have secular sources? Are all the routes to wholeness, to an integrated life practice, exclusively religious? Or can a secular life practice lead to a meaningful, satisfying life?

This book is my answer, to be shared with others who want to deepen their lives and who find religious ideas unhelpful.

If you are comfortable in a religious belief, understand that this book is about finding secular sources for things that your religious practice ought to be giving you. If you aren't getting them, I respectfully suggest you look deeper into your own faith. But you are certainly welcome to walk along with the rest of us on our quest!

The goods of religious practice

When I observe the life-styles of devout people, I see their religious practice delivering these important values:

- The philosophical comfort of existential validity - in plain language, assurance that one is not an accident but an intentional creation, with a role in a great story.
- The social and material support of a congregation of likeminded people.
- The psychological benefits of contemplative prayer and meditation.
- The emotional comfort of ritual.
- For a few, the bliss of ecstatic union with the All.
- Constant challenge to be a better person, to transcend one's limits.
- The use of a predefined ethical system.
- Fearless awareness of death and comfort in bereavement.

These are the benefits for which I hope to find secular sources. As a skeptic by inclination and training, I have been quite selective in my search. I only tell you about things I have personally tried, or things that are documented in respected scientific journals, or things that, like the philosophy of Epicurus, are both satisfying to common sense and visibly harmless.

Chapter summary

Here is what follows this Introduction:

- Chapter 1 elaborates on the good things any religious practice should give to those who devotedly practice it.
- Chapter 2 explores the philosophical and emotional implications of being a "mere accident" and shows how contingency can be turned into triumph.
- Chapter 3 reviews the research that shows how crucial human contacts are to your life and health and points out many techniques to improve them.
- Chapter 4 introduces a single model incorporating meditation, contemplation, and prayer, and introduces simple meditation practices whose benefits have been documented.
- Chapter 5 shows how pervasive ritual is in everyone's life, and suggests ways to take control of the rituals in your life.
- Chapter 6 surveys the literature on the mystical experience, showing that it is probably a real, though rare, state of brain function; then takes up the tough question of whether the experience is worth pursuing.
- Chapter 7 proposes that we cannot be taught heroes but have to discover them, each of us in an idiosyncratic way; but then says there are plenty of them to be discovered.
- Chapter 8 tackles the problem of defining and justifying a personal ethical code, drawing elements from a wide range of traditions.
- Chapter 9 urges the importance of facing up to death and bereavement, and shows ways to prepare for one and deal with the other.
- Chapter 10 surveys the research on what makes people happy, and covers a number of strategies for becoming more happy.
- Chapter 11 is about four radical techniques for making oneself more resilient in the face of disaster.

Notes and References

A numbered reference like this¹ refers to one of the notes that begin on page 201. Some notes only give a citation for a quote or statement, but others expand on the main text, or shed a sidelight on it, or take off at a wild tangent to it. Your rule can be: if you want to know more about the sentence with the note, turn to the note; if not, skip it.

On page 231 you'll find a list of books that can take you deeper into any of the subjects I touch on. A bibliography of print and internet references follows it.

Acknowledgements

The following people made constructive or challenging comments on early drafts: Marian Cortesi, Gloria Gatlin, Katie Hover, Nancy Howe, Thane Plambeck, Pam Sogard, Jon Thompson. The book is far better for their input.

I was very fortunate to be able to wander amid the amazing riches of the Green Library at Stanford University; without it, I could never have finished this work.

1. Benefits of a Religious Practice

Even a perfunctory religious practice takes time, energy, and money. If a middle-class family only goes to church every Sunday, that still costs a few hours a week and a few hundred dollars a year - time and money for which any family could easily find other uses. A devout person's practice can dominate life with activities like prayer five times a day, or daily attendance at mass or temple. It takes as much as a tenth of one's income, and fills the remaining free time with voluntary activities such as being a reader or a deacon.

Why are people willing to donate so much of their precious time and wealth? The simplest explanation is that a religious practice returns immediate, practical benefits that amply repay the believer's investment. Any religion, whatever else it may be, can be viewed as a kind of mutual-aid society, set up and maintained by its community of believers, with a mission of delivering important social, psychological, and material benefits.

Religions are so effective at this part of what they do that we can fall into the habit of assuming that the benefits they dispense are uniquely religious in nature, unavailable from any other source. I don't think that's so; but let's look in detail at what I believe are the important benefits that a religious practice delivers.

Existential validity

This dry philosopher's phrase is the vital center of what most people mean when they talk about "the meaning of life." Every religion supplies answers to the questions like "why am I here?" and "how am I to live?" According to a standard psychology text, the feeling that you have answers to such questions "lowers anxiety and promotes resiliency, hope and peace."

Noncontingency

A Jewish, Christian, or Moslem believer gains the comfort of an assured place in the scheme of things as a "child of God," created by God intentionally for some purpose. The purpose may not be clear, but it can be sought.

As a Hindu, you know that you're the current embodiment of a spark, an atman, that has existed for immeasurable time. As a Buddhist you can take comfort in knowing that your nature and your birth situation were determined by kamma accumulated in past lives, and that with effort in this life, you can improve the circumstances of your future lives, eventually escaping the wheel of suffering entirely.

In philosophical terms, a believer is assured that he or she is noncontingent; in other words, not an accident. If you aren't an accident, it follows that your personality, your features, your talents and shortcomings, your birthplace and parents - your whole inheritance - are not accidental either. In philosopher-speak, your "nature is determined" by a supernatural plan.

The opposite view is that each of us is the expression of a random shuffle of the deck of human DNA, so the only possible answer to "why am I here?" is, "You just are, OK?" That idea is usually presented as profoundly scary. However, we need to pass through the fear and find the clarity on the other side.

A role in the great war of good and evil

Some doctrines offer the believer a role in a cosmic drama of good against evil. The believer is not merely a non-accident, but an actor in an engrossing drama.

In many Christian denominations, members are encouraged to think of themselves as "peculiar people"² whom God has set apart from mundane society. Other religions encourage the sense of uniqueness by emphasizing the constant need to be vigilant against the infidel, the godless, the material world, against the temptations of everything outside the faith. At its most vivid, among some

Christian Fundamentalist denominations, this attitude encourages believers to think they are under daily assault by evil spirits sent by Satan. Here's a recent example of this kind of thinking. After a deranged man shot up a prayer meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, one student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary told the New York times,

It is the enemy, conducting spiritual warfare. It's an attack on Christianity in general, on christians, and it's Satan trying to stop God's work on Earth. He'll use whoever he wants, whoever he can. The guy who did this was obviously angry. Satan uses anger.³

You might suppose that thinking this way would lead to fear, even paranoia. On the contrary, and I speak from personal observation, it salts an otherwise-drab life with drama, and gives believers frequent feelings of triumph. They enjoy testifying about resisting the wiles of the devil, saying things like "I said, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' and I just walked right out of there"⁴; and they enjoy giving credit for all successful outcomes to God: "I just yelled 'Jesus, help me' and hung on to the wheel, and He helped me pull that car right out of that skid, praise His name."

A belief like this is a great gift to those who can hold it. It doesn't matter how humble or wretched mundane life might be; the believer can think: I have a vast unseen dimension; I can defy and outwit the very Antichrist; I can call upon God Almighty whenever I need him. I cannot offer an exact secular substitute, but just the same, a person who grasps the scientific world view is able to bestride the world in a different way. We'll see how in Chapter 2.

Community

Denominations differ in the degree of community they create, but any time "two or three are gathered together" for worship⁵, a community of like-minded people is formed. It is a powerful psychological benefit to be accepted as member of any group of people. To be a part of a group of people who all hold opinions like yours on important subjects is even better. In Chapter 3 we will look at comparable alternatives.

Community-building

The act of meeting regularly for worship services holds each congregation together. At the assembly on Friday, Saturday or Sunday the members see each other, become familiar with each other's faces, and keep up to date on each other's life passages - new babies, children moved away or come home again, people ill or recovered. And they note each other's needs. ("Poor old Johnson, he can hardly walk since that stroke." "Well, at least he's on his feet again. I think I'll stop by and see if his wife needs any help.")

A wonderful feature of the modern Catholic mass is the "kiss of peace," when everyone hugs or shakes hands with everyone else within reach. Some Protestant denominations emphasize and intensify the congregational spirit with an "us versus them" mindset, call each other Brother and Sister, and label nonbelievers as "worldly" or "unsanctified." Similarly, the Quran reminds believers they are "the best community" among mankind⁶.

Professional advisor and arbiter

Every church, mosque, and synagogue comes equipped with a fulltime, trained counselor, arbiter, and personal advisor: its pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, roshi, or whoever. Free access to a sympathetic, confidential advisor is a benefit that the congregation gives to itself.

Mutual aid

The Latter-Day Saints have a particularly strong mutual aid organization. A Mormon in trouble anywhere in the USA can find willing help at any local Stake. But in all churches, membership is a link to a circle of people that can be called upon for help in time of trouble, for job contacts, or just for sympathy.

In many churches on Sunday morning there is a public announcement of communicants in need: "Let us pray for Brother Smith, who is in the hospital with heart trouble, and let us pray for Sister Jones, who has family problems."

It has been well documented that people who are active church members gain health benefits. For example, active church members have a significantly lower post-operative mortality rate than those who are not. The percentage of non-members who die in the days following a major operation is nearly double the percentage of church-goers who die. We'll consider some of the many possible explanations in Chapter 3.

There is comfort in being part of a group of people that you can trust to think the way you do on key issues⁸. It's relaxing to be with people among whom you will not have to defend or justify your opinions. Conversely, it is stressful to be among people who, however nice they might be otherwise, are likely to challenge your convictions if you voice them.

This trust is a great stress-reducer for a parent. Believers with children expect, rightly or wrongly, that other children in the church community are better playmates and potential mates for their own kids. I was a child of devout parents and, remembering well what hellions I and my peers were, I would say this is a pathetic mirage! But true or false, the expectation itself reduces stress.

Contemplation and tranquility

Most religions encourage some form of contemplation. Imagine kneeling in the tranquil dimness of a Catholic church; fixing your gaze on the illuminated crucifix over the altar or on the twinkling votive candles; letting the rosary beads slip through your fingers as you whisper simple, patterned prayers. Whatever else it may be, this is meditation, and its real, physiological benefits have been well-documented in the literature⁹.

The believer comes to prayer with a list of worries - family problems, financial problems, concerns for the world at large - and, in the quiet of the prayer, organizes these worries, considering each one and putting it into a context of the eternal. The believer who prays properly can't avoid getting up with a clearer, more settled mind and a more positive attitude.

We'll explore some of the psychological results of these things in Chapter 4. There are secular routes to contemplation, tranquility, and clarity.

Ritual and pageantry

Rituals are immensely comforting. They bring stability to life. They help us process shock, trauma, and uncertainty. We can use rituals to motivate and program our own minds in positive or negative ways.

A religion provides its followers with a variety of satisfying rites and celebrations for major life transitions. In addition, church rituals provide esthetic experience. From the grandeur of a Papal mass to the gripping psychodrama of a revival meeting, churches "make show" to the satisfaction of the congregation. Isaiah Berlin has said,

I am not religious, but I place high value on the religious experience of believers. I am moved by religious services - those of the synagogue, but also of churches and mosques. I think that those who do not understand what it is to be religious, do not understand what human beings live by. That is why dry atheists seem to me blind and deaf to some forms of profound human experiences, perhaps the inner life: it is like being aesthetically blind."

In Chapter 5 I urge you to examine the place of ritual in your secular life. Every person and family develops rituals; but are yours healthy and supportive? (I leave it to you to find your own esthetic satisfaction.)

Mystical ecstasy

A few people have the fortune to be visited by a mystical experience of life-changing force. A central feature of such experiences is a blissful sense of losing the self in a greater All. For example,

...all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words - where death was an almost laughable impossibility - the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson¹²

The mystical experience has usually been pursued in a religious context, and when it is achieved in that context, it is interpreted in religious terms. However, mystical experience can be sought in other contexts. In Chapter 6 I adopt the view that this, like every other experience anyone can have, is in the last analysis a state of the brain. The question is, how to induce that state, and is it worth the effort?

Self-transcendence

Every religion constantly urges its members to be better people, to transcend their mundane lives, to achieve more, give more, challenge themselves to be more. A cynic might snap that most people manage to ignore the challenge, but nevertheless, some do take it up and transcend themselves in the religious context. Whether its the young woman later known as Mother Theresa, first seeing Christ in the faces of the poor, or the alcoholic who stays sober through AA's semi-religious program, or the Buddhist who diligently practices compassion for all sentient beings, some challenges to self-transcendence do work, do inspire people to become heroically better.

Outside of religion, inspirational models and heroes are said to be rare in American culture. In Chapter 7 we consider where we can look for inspiration, and end up considering the meaning of Quality.

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