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## The Meaning of Life

The limousine floated over the cliff, tumbling as it fell, and folded like cardboard when it crashed into the rocks below. Seconds later, it shuddered and burst into a huge fireball as the camera pulled back and shifted into slo-mo to savor the destruction.

Tim groaned. Was this the hundredth cheap gimmick in a week? Were TV programs no longer capable of telling an original story? He sighed, and went to the kitchen for alternative fulfillment. Hours later, and a few more explosions, he fell asleep on the couch. Sometime after midnight, Tim half awoke and stumbled off to bed. In the morning, he felt hung over and dull.

Later that week, his girlfriend Cassie called and said she was dumping him for another guy, one of Tim's co-workers, who, she said, was a lot more interesting. Tim couldn't agree more, but his lingering depression increased. Looking back, he decided the relationship was doomed from the start: Cassie was only interested in clothes and analyzing other people's behavior. In less than six months, playing and sharing had devolved into inconvenience and obligation.

At first, Tim coped fairly well without Cassie, primarily through increased absorption in the endless micro-variations of television. But he was gaining weight, losing energy, and becoming increasingly uninspired. *I need something to bust me out of this*, he muttered to himself, although he knew that might be a dangerous wish.

The following weekend he took his dog for a walk in the hills. He wandered through the trees along the edge of a small dairy farm, his attention mainly on keeping Rumble, an enthusiastic beagle, from chasing everything that moved. They paused by a muddy stream to eat a sandwich

and a baggie of kibble. Tim drank half his bottled soda while Rumble slurped up watery scum from the stream.

They set off again toward the back road where Tim had parked, and soon Rumble caught sight of new prey. A rabbit was trying to freeze itself into invisibility, but Rumble's nose was too sensitive. The dog lunged forward, jerking his leash free, and the rabbit bolted zig-zag into the underbrush. Tim yelled at Rumble, but within seconds the dog's enthusiastic barks faded into the distance.

Tim spent the next two hours stumbling and crashing through the woods calling for Rumble. At some point, in a part of the forest he didn't recognize, it became obvious that Rumble had run far out of earshot. Some time later, darkness slipped in among the trees and Tim found himself standing alone, suddenly more concerned with finding landmarks than with Rumble. With some difficulty, he managed to get his bearings, and made his way back to the car just as the moon was rising over Mt. Mansfield.

He sat for a while with the windows rolled down, listening to the night sounds, thankful to be safe inside his bubble of civilization. He strained to hear faint fragments of barking while he wondered how an apartment dog might fare in the wilds with a leash fastened to its neck. His fantasies were dire and demoralizing. When the mosquitoes began molesting him, he rolled up the windows and drove home.

Monday, Tim called work to take the morning off, and drove back into the country. He wandered the area, looking for signs of Rumble, listening for a familiar bark, and eventually gave up. Back home, he watched daytime TV and didn't return to the office. When evening came, he continued watching television while consuming a family-size bag of barbecue potato chips, four Cokes, and a container of ice cream. Around 3:00 AM he staggered to bed.

Not surprisingly, Tuesday didn't go well. He woke about 10:00 o'clock, called the office, and muttered a lame excuse about dental work, lingering pain, codeine, and a splitting headache. The headache was real. Lacking the resources for anything else, he defaulted to the couch and watched more daytime television. When the prime time dramas began, his interest roused slightly and he vowed to get to bed early. Every other thought was another vision of Rumble's possible fate, alone in a world without kibbles.

He woke not knowing the time of day or where he was. His windows glowed with dim light, but he couldn't tell if it was brightening or fading. Had he been asleep ten minutes or ten hours? He looked around the living room, but there were no clocks in view, and the TV had shut itself off. He walked to the bathroom and stared into the mirror. *Have I had a stroke?* A tremble of fear ran down his back.

Now fully awake, Tim rushed to check the kitchen clock. It was 6:30 in the morning. Somehow, he had slept for ten hours sitting up and not moving, and the whole night he hadn't had even a glimmer of a dream. *This is getting out of control*, he thought. *If something doesn't happen soon, I could get stuck.*

Tim ate a bowl of cereal, took a shower, and called the office to let them know that today he would be in at the usual time. The receptionist told him Mr. Unger was really upset, and a pang of fear bloomed in Tim's stomach. "Just tell him I'll be in at 9:00 and I'll come see him to explain," Tim said.

At 8:30, Mr. Unger called, and told Tim not to come in at 9:00, or ever. They would send his final check and personal items by mail.

For a few days, Tim tried to assimilate his deteriorating life, but each situation was out of his control and he couldn't think of a way to deal with any of it. He began ordering pizza and staying in his apartment all day. The television's infinite nattering had become his only companion. *This is so obviously the wrong thing to do*, he thought, and then decided to check the Smithsonian channel.

A brief image of the Great Pyramid flashed on the screen, and then all the yellows disappeared and the picture turned red, blue, and purple. Tim pressed Channel Up, and Discovery was also all the wrong colors. Then the reds disappeared and he stared in disbelief at a blue man in a blue raft dodging blue rapids. White lines appeared across the screen at regular intervals, and the picture winked out.



Tim's first Power Insight Teachings seminar was in the basement of the community rec center. He'd been browsing in the neighborhood's last independent book store, and noticed a small flier for "Edgar" among announcements of healers, life counselors, readers, and other post-modern sooth-sayers.

There were about a dozen people when he arrived, and soon another dozen or so joined them. Apparently this Edgar had something of a following—or there had been a sudden run on Power Insight seeking.

Edgar had no last name: just Edgar. *I wonder if it's Edgar Edgar*, Tim thought, recalling a doctor he had once visited named Dr. David David. Then he remembered a comedian saying, “Never trust a man with two first names.” The reason was long forgotten, but perhaps two of the *same* first name was even more suspicious than just two first names. Then again, he had no reason to believe Edgar’s last name actually *was* Edgar. Of course, it could have been Edgar, and his *first* name was the missing one, but that seemed unlikely. There were probably other ways of exploring this mystery, but Tim noticed that someone was speaking from the podium, and the crowd had become silent.

“—to the Huge, Huge Secret,” Edgar was saying. “There are many paths to the Secret, but with Power Insight you needn’t bother with any more effort than your particular situation calls for.” He paused to let his audience think about this.

Much later in the evening, Edgar said, “In other words, people, you don’t need *me* to uncover the Huge Secret for you, because that’s impossible. Nobody can do it *for* you. But to find it, you do need an expert like me to help you pick the one path that will work for *you*.”

A person in the audience spoke up. “So you’re saying I can do anything I like, and it will still lead me to the Secret?”

“Exactly!” said Edgar, striding around the podium to stand right in front of the questioner. “But it’s not anything you *like*. It’s whatever *works* for you. Understand the difference?”

“Not exactly. How do I know when it’s working?”

“Oh, you won’t know,” Edgar replied. “It happens too slowly. That’s why you need me—or anyone with Power Insight, of course. I’m not anything special. Anybody can gain P.I. with the right training. But you still need someone to keep you on track.”

“I see.”

“I will keep you on track,” Edgar declared to the room. “That’s what I’m here for.” He returned to the podium and glanced at his watch. “And we’re out of time,” he said. “I want to thank you all for venturing out tonight and opening the door of Power Insight with me. My books are on sale at

the back of the room, at a special discount just for this group. And you can pick up a sheet with contact information in case you decide to get some direction into your life.”

A few people in the back were already fingering the short stacks of Power Insight books, and someone was folding up a contact sheet.

“Take several!” Edgar called. “Take some for your friends and pass them around. Everybody needs something new.”

A small crowd gathered around Edgar. Tim edged toward them, not really expecting to get close enough to say anything, but Edgar looked up and waved him in. “Make some room, everybody,” Edgar said. “This fellow has some real problems to solve. Don’t hold him back.”

The crowd parted just enough for Tim to shuffle up to the front, where several people were all talking at once, trying to get their questions to Edgar. Tim felt very uncomfortable. He really just wanted to ask if there was any hope of getting out of his rut, of getting involved in life again, but there obviously wasn’t going to be any dialog in this environment. He started trying to squirm back through the crowd, but Edgar stopped him.

“Hey, brother, don’t leave yet.”

Tim looked at Edgar’s eager, friendly face and shrugged. *I can’t do anything here*, he thought.

Edgar held out his hand, a business card between his fingers. “Take it,” he said. “It’s my private line.”

Tim took the card.

“Call me,” said Edgar, and then started taking questions from the group crowding around him.

Tim pulled away and made for the door before claustrophobia swept over him. He stuffed the card into his jacket and got home as quickly as possible. The TV was still dead black, so he went to his bookshelf and selected his old college copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi*. He’d never read it, but he gave it a good try while the TV stood like a large black billboard on the credenza. Soon, not surprisingly, he was asleep.

The next day, Tim fished the card from his jacket. “Power Insight Validation,” it said. He called the number, and made an appointment for a phone consultation with Edgar that afternoon. According to the secretary, he was very lucky to have gotten a slot so soon. The fee was not

too steep—much less than a lawyer, at any rate—so Tim felt good about his decision. It was heartening to think there might be some help in sight.

At 3:15, the phone rang, and it was Edgar, right on time.



For two weeks, with Power Insight Validation telephone sessions every other day to keep him on track, Tim learned how to stare at candles, hold his breath, bow to the East, soak in Epsom salts, cast *I Ching* trigrams with pennies, avoid eating refined foods, march around his apartment in time to African drums, burn the correct incense for each time of day, and press the back of a spoon onto key energy nodes all over his body.

“I just don’t see how these unrelated activities can possibly all work,” he said during one Validation call.

“That’s just the thing,” said Edgar. “They all work *because* they are unrelated.”

“How’s that?”

“Everything is true,” Edgar stated.

Tim started to protest, but Edgar stopped him. “Just think about it,” he said.

Then every time Tim began to speak, Edgar interrupted with, “You’re thinking about what to say, instead of what I just said.”

Eventually, Tim gave up trying to have a dialog, and Edgar complimented his growing Power Insight. “It’s terrific,” Edgar said. “You’re really getting somewhere. What we’re doing is definitely what works for you. Now keep at it, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Tim kept at it, but he was losing his optimism. Edgar’s last pronouncement had taken him by surprise, and he was still unnerved by it. “Everything is true,” Edgar had said. *How could that possibly make any sense?*

Edgar didn’t call the next day, which was a first. Maybe his busy schedule was getting too busy. Or maybe Edgar was sensing Tim’s growing discomfort with the Power Insight process.

But the day after, Edgar did call. “I’ve been looking at your progress,” he said, “and I think it’s time to move onto the next level.”

“How have you been doing that?” Tim asked. “We haven’t spoken for two days.”

“Oh, not *physically*,” Edgar replied. “In the other dimensions. I’ve been looking into your spiritual side. Remember, I’ve got to keep track of your direction.”

“But how can you do that without even talking to me?”

“Tim, I’ve said it a million times. Your spiritual side isn’t just inside your body. It’s everywhere! Time and place have no meaning.”

Then Edgar presented a new regime, one which Tim found especially difficult—fasting and herbs.

Another few weeks passed, during which Tim struggled to not eat anything, and then to eat bitter green blender drinks that gave him the runs, and then not to eat at all again. He went through half a dozen different diets, determined to follow Edgar’s instructions until something definitive happened. Nothing did, beyond the gastronomical plane.

In desperation, during the next Validation telephone session, Tim blurted out, “Edgar! Please. It’s not working.”

“Of course it is,” said Edgar, sounding hurt but inspired.

“It’s not,” said Tim. “I feel like shit.”

“Oh, that’s normal. The herbs—”

“No, not that I’m shitting every 30 minutes,” said Tim. “The point is I *feel like shit*.”

“Well, you have to—”

“All the time.”

“OK. Look. I had to take you to this point so you could see the benefit of the final stage of training.”

“You mean I’m supposed to feel like shit?”

“Not exactly, but it is very common. But now you’re ready for the next step. Remember, that’s all we’ve been trying to do all this time.”

“Trying to *get* to the next step? I thought you’re supposed to already know what’s the best step for me.”

“Tim, I know your innate materialism always makes it hard to believe anything, but you have to remember that *everything is true*. If you lose sight of that, nothing the New Age can provide will do you any good.”

“It just doesn’t make much sense, actually,” said Tim.

“Don’t force it to! But anyway, you’re done with the hard part. Now it’s easy. I’ll send over a pill in the morning.”

“A pill?”

“Sure. It’s just a sugar pill. Well, it’s an aspirin, in fact. A kid’s aspirin. Just 72 milligrams. Not really anything. But there’s just a little bit extra in it.”

“Extra? Extra aspirin?”

“No, it’s nothing, just a little kicker, sort of.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll love it. It’s so easy. Nothing to keep track of, nothing you actually have to do yourself. Just take the pill, and sit back, and you’ll be swimming in Power Insight in no time.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“What question? I told you, it’s just a baby aspirin. What could be safer?”

“But what’s in it? What’s this little kicker? I’m not going to take it if I don’t know what’s in it.”

“Well, look, Tim, you’ve got to relax about this. It won’t work if you’re not relaxed. Well, it’ll work, but not as well. It’s just a tiny tiny bit of acid, and you’ll hardly notice it. I’ll send it over in the morning. Call me before you start.”

“Acid?”

“Yes, just the teeniest amount. Almost nothing at all. A few millionths of a gram—way less than the aspirin. And it’s a baby aspirin, like I said.”

“You mean LSD?” Tim sat back on the couch, gawking at the black TV panel, wishing it still worked and could still lull him into somnambulance without requiring intervention.

“Sure,” said Edgar. “Is that a problem? It’s not like a major trip or anything. And it’s very pure. The best. Costs a pretty penny, in fact. Nothing but the best for my people.” His voice was confident, satisfied.

“Lysergic Acid?”

“I told you, yes, that’s what it is. A little kicker, is all.”

“I can’t take LSD!” Tim cried. “I’m not into drugs. And I’m all alone in my apartment. What if I go crazy and jump out the window?”

“Tim, Tim, nobody jumps out windows on acid. That’s an old wife’s tale. But sure, if you want some company, then fine, get someone to come and stay with you for the day. It only lasts a day. Not even a whole day. Six, eight hours, maybe. Probably less.”

“Why are you so up for me taking acid?”

"I'm not up for you! Heck no. I'm just looking out for your best interests. You know what you want, but you don't know how to find it. I do. Because I'm a Validator, a Power Insight Validator."

"I don't know anyone to call," said Tim.

"Sure you do."

"I do?"

"Of course. Think about it. Who do you know?"

"Well, nobody at the moment. I lost my job, and Cassie dumped me, and even if Rumble was here—" Tim froze. "Cassie? You mean her? I can't call Cassie! She wouldn't give me the time of day."

"When was the last time you tried?"

"Well, never! She dumped *me*, remember?"

"You never even called her back?"

"It would have been pointless. She was with Andrew. I didn't even find out until it was a done deal."

"That was months ago."

"So?"

"So from what you've told me, Cassie isn't perfect. Girls like Cassie don't think *anybody* is Mr. Right. Look, call her and then call me back if she can't come over. If you don't call back, I'll send the pill in the morning."

"OK. I'll try, but I guarantee she'll refuse."

"And Tim, one more thing."

"What?"

"Probably good to have a big breakfast first. You may not feel like eating for a while."

Edgar hung up, and Tim continued staring at the dead TV for a long time, trying to foster some spiritual growth inside.



Cassie arrived at 10:00 the next morning. The pill arrived a few minutes later, in a paper bag delivered by bicycle messenger. Inside the bag was a peanut butter jar stuffed with crumpled toilet paper, a small amber pill bottle nestled inside. The baby aspirin was suspended between cotton balls inside the pill bottle.

By noon, Tim was admiring the oriental rug design embossed on the dead TV panel while the apartment walls gently ballooned in and out.

Cassie was chatting about a friend of hers who had said something that implied motivations demanding prolonged scrutiny.

Now and then, Cassie would pause and stare at Tim until he noticed her. Then he would say, "Oh, yes. That's interesting. Go on." When he did, his voice sounded a lot like the carpet.

Later, the tangibility of the apartment came into question, and Tim had to look between the molecules to see what was really there. He could feel the city traffic outside as it drove up and down each of the glass bones in his body, which felt very good, in fact. He had never known how sensuous traffic could feel.

His attention was drawn to the electricity that had become the real substance of his inner organs. The bones were just filaments, of course; the real deal was the living organs, independent life-forms of pure energy.

"So that's what she *claims* is why they broke up," Cassie said, "but it's obvious that she was just showing how afraid she is about *changing* anything important. And that's why I know it was so important to *her!*"

Tim tried to look at her, but he couldn't find her face. His mind kept diving back into his internal organs, and now it was pushing into some bright warm spot that must have been inside his heart. It was. He could see the light pulsing with each heartbeat, and he realized this was where he had been living all his life.

"Are you listening?" Cassie said.

"Um, wow, yes," Tim replied.

This heart energy was really just a focal point, wasn't it? Just a reflection of the energy of the Earth, like a spiral of bright gas on the surface of Jupiter.

"Then don't you think it's obvious?" said Cassie. "I was right, wasn't I? She is so totally afraid of change, right?"

"Right," said Tim. The word floated out of his mouth in a metallic green cloud and then swelled and rushed back into him through his chest. Then it was obvious that his heart wasn't just a *piece* of Earth energy, it was (along with the Earth) the *center* of all the energy in the universe. But all this energy *wasn't* energy. It was the Self. It was who he really was, outside of time, immortal, silent, fearless.

"You haven't heard a word I said, have you?" said Cassie.

"Oh, wow," said Tim.

"What did I just say?"

Tim said nothing. His soul was open now, and he knew who he really was for the very first time. He was the universe. The universe was he. This must be the Huge Secret. Feeling this way, free, he would be able to do anything, take on any challenge. He was weightless.

“Are you ignoring me?” said Cassie.

Tim swam through the cosmos, soaking up the ultimate truth, expanding and expanding, feeling the stars prickle against his galactic skin.

“Tim!” Cassie sat down next to him on the couch.

Tim felt the universe swivel and right itself in response to her movements.

“Look at me,” she said.

Tim opened his eyes; or were they already open? Could he even close them if he wanted to? There she was, all need and urgency. Compassion welled up and he loved all living things. All inanimate things, too, since they were all alive inside his infinite body.

“Answer my question,” Cassie demanded.

“I’m right at the center,” Tim said. “I’ve found the answer.”

“You’re ignoring me, aren’t you?”

Tim opened his mouth but only fiery strands of love came out; no need for voices.

“Aren’t you?” Cassie demanded.

Then the phonetic machinery clicked in, and Tim watched the words materialize in his left hemisphere and flow out to his throat. “I tell you, Cassie, I’m not ignoring you,” he heard himself say. “I’m just in a—special place—right now. Very delicate. Have to be silent for a minute.”

“I can be delicate. Why do you want to cut me out?”

“I don’t. Not. Please. Minute or two of silence—”

Cassie looked at the floor and mumbled, “You’re actually telling me to shut up.”

Tim said nothing, casting about in his mind for the path back into his heart and that central spark, the tiny light that held the key to everything.

“Aren’t you?” Cassie demanded, tugging his sleeve.

“No, I—” Tim could feel the spark again, but it was so small and distant he could barely discern it. The jumble of ordinary thoughts was beginning

to coalesce again, casting a complex skein of language and categories over the inner light.

Cassie said something else, but all Tim was aware of now was noise, growing and intruding into his silent core until suddenly his head filled with the same old chaos he lived with every day. Confusion and fear slowly doused all the residual knowledge and clarity and one-ness. Normal life crushed back in with a vengeance, though still generously spiced with LSD.

Cassie continued demanding to be served.

“Never mind,” he said, more to himself than to Cassie.

“But I can’t!” she cried, gripping his arm tighter. “You can’t just ignore me!”

“I’m not, baby,” he whispered, his eyes still closed. Meaningless geometries had begun sliding across his eyelids. “Believe me, I’m not,” said his voice.

“Then tell me what you’re experiencing,” she said. “I really want to know. I can help you.”

“Yes, help me,” said his voice. “Of course. You can help.”

“So what is it? What’s happening inside? Are you there? Are you seeing it? The Secret?”

“No,” he said. “It’s nothing.” A steady buzz filled his head, like hiss between FM stations, with overtones of vacuum cleaner. A city bus horn floated into the apartment, or perhaps it was just the sound of one.

“But what do you see?” she insisted.

“Nothing.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. Symmetrical arabesques decorated her face like Maori tattoos. “I see nothing at all,” he said. “There’s nothing to see.”

The city went noisily about its business.

Tim’s heart pumped blood and oxygen through the interstices of his body.

Cassie clutched his arm.

Familiar old thoughts and doubts and fears wallpapered his sensorium with endless text.

The apartment walls bulged inward like huge balloons in the afternoon sun, while the furniture surged hungrily upward.