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**HAVE**

*Finding the*

*Everyday Clues to*

**YOU EVER**

*Meaning,*

**WONDERED?**

*Purpose & Spirituality*

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# Introduction

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## Why wonder?

Gavin Matthews

*'He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.'* Albert Einstein

It was Marilyn Munroe who declared: 'We human beings are strange creatures.' She had a point. Alone among the animals inhabiting the earth, the task of asking 'Why?' has fallen to us. Blackbirds are content to sing, cows to chew the cud, and rabbits to, well, breed like rabbits. Even the higher mammals such as monkeys and dolphins seem completely unburdened by questions of meaning.

But we humans simply can't stop wondering about our experiences. Even as we do ordinary things like eat, sleep, work, pay taxes, and raise children, 'Why?' questions haunt our steps. And as Plato remarked:

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*This feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy.*

That's why I consider the aforementioned Marilyn Monroe to be a philosopher, and so are you—because you are *wired to wonder*.

This is a book all about wondering. But it's not a dusty academic book, nor is it loaded with technical lingo or arcane arguments. Rather it's about the thoughts and questions we all experience when we encounter the mystery and complexity of this world.

Have you ever looked at a sunset and pondered why it is so profoundly moving? Or perhaps considered why we long for justice and rail against suffering and evil, but respect and honour self-sacrifice? It's profoundly odd behaviour, to say the least, if we're little more than competing gene-machines seeking to be the fittest and survive.

Love is a funny thing too, isn't it? Clearly, it's linked with the need to reproduce but there's so much more to it than simply passing on our DNA. Even sex itself tends to get treated as something sacred, rather than purely a biological function. Have you ever wondered why? If you have, then this is the book for you.

We begin with some of the most broad and foundational wonderings that we all experience, and then zero in on some more specific questions towards the end, providing a progression from one chapter to the next. Each chapter also works as a stand-alone piece and makes sense on its own, allowing you to dive right into the topics which grab you most.

When I commissioned this project, I invited a range of contributors to collaborate and to write about the questions which

have most captured their imaginations. I was delighted by the responses I received—and am hugely grateful to all those who are featured here in this book. These men and women come from a wide range of backgrounds: science, law, linguistics, communication, theology, comparative religion, bioethics, history, and more. What they all have in common is that their wonderings have led them to a profoundly Christian spirituality. This doesn't mean what they explore will only be of interest to people who come to the same conclusions though. This book is for anyone who has looked at a landscape and contemplated why we are so drawn to beauty, or questioned why we humans are so insatiably curious about our universe, or even for those who have simply looked up at a million stars in a vast black night's sky and just *wondered*.

*Have You Ever Wondered?* invites you to sit back and enjoy being human, to appreciate once again the multi-sensory extravaganza of the cosmos, from the order that makes mathematics work, to the fascinating sense of self-awareness we experience. This book also urges you onwards, to embrace these wonderings and to see where these questions might lead. After all, pondering why the world *is* as it *is*, leads us onto wondering if it is as it *ought* to be, and then if *we* are as we ought to be. And if not, what might be done? It explores how so much of what we think and feel points to deeper spiritual realities.

It is wonder-full to be human, with this unique capacity to question, to ask, and to imagine. So, along with my sincere thanks to all who have contributed to this volume, and to 10Publishing, may I invite you to open these pages and wonder awhile.



# Have you ever wondered why we long for happiness?

Andy Bannister

We inhabit a happiness obsessed culture. Every day, a million Westerners type 'happiness' into Google. There are thousands of books telling you how to find happiness, multiple podcasts discussing it, and any number of movies and songs all about it. Coming of age in the 90s, I can still remember the cheerful bubble-gum flavoured lyrics of R.E.M.'s classic 'Shiny Happy People'.

But why do we humans pursue happiness? After all, the rest of the animal kingdom seems pretty content with just the biological basics: survival and reproduction. But humans? We need so much more than merely the bare necessities of life. What is going on here?

As we ponder this question, perhaps the first thing to explore is what exactly we mean by the word 'happiness'. Ask most people, 'Do you want to be happy?' and of course they'll say

‘Yes!’ But inquire, ‘What do you mean by happy?’ and that’s a bit tougher to answer. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle once suggested that there are actually four levels of happiness and to be truly happy, we need to ensure that we are living at all four levels.<sup>1</sup>

Happiness level 1 is basically animal happiness and involves fulfilling your appetites. So, for example, I see the chocolate doughnut. I eat the doughnut. I am happy. I feel good—and I can, of course, if it’s a box of six and my wife isn’t watching, repeat this exercise. Eventually though, the happiness will be over (and probably over with a side helping of nausea).

The same is true of that other appetite, sex. In the context of committed love, sex can be amazing. But abuse it, for example treating the other person as a means rather than an end, then a great deal of unhappiness can result. Indeed, if you misuse any of your appetites—eating to cope with anxiety, or having transient one-night stands to cope with loneliness or boredom—you will soon end up deeply unhappy. And if you’re unhappy at level 1, suggested Aristotle, the only way is up, to level 2.

Happiness level 2 is all about comparison, about having more or being better than the next person. There’s nothing inherently wrong with developing a skill and using it well. Excelling in sport, succeeding at work, coming top of the class: all that can bring happiness. But be warned: you won’t be at the top for ever. Indeed, trying to live entirely at happiness level 2 can be deeply stressful, as you worry what happens when you’re no longer the fastest, smartest, or whatever. And even when you do win, sometimes the victory can seem hollow. In the movie *Cool Runnings*, about the Jamaican bobsleigh team’s debut at the 1988 Winter Olympics, the coach (played by John Candy) wisely says

to the team: 'A gold medal is a wonderful thing. But if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it.'

When happiness level 2 lets you down, you need to move up to level 3. Happiness level 3, said Aristotle, is all about living for somebody other than yourself. One prime example would be parenting; pouring your time and energy into caring for children. Alternatively, you can serve others by donating your time, money, or talents to help those around you. But the problem is that these things also come to an end. Those you care for will one day no longer need you. And if you're not careful, this approach to life can subtly become profoundly selfish—possibly without even realising it, your motivations can morph from wanting to help others to wanting to feel good or look good in front of others.

So where now? If happiness levels 1 through 3 don't ultimately satisfy us, presumably the only way is up? At the top of this ladder lies our last hope, happiness level 4. To paraphrase our old friend Aristotle, level 4 comes when you connect to an ultimate source of happiness outside of yourself.

This reminds me of something that Jesus of Nazareth once taught. Jesus had much to say about happiness, often highlighting our tendency to look for it in all the wrong places. Seeing how our search has disappointed and drained us, Jesus said: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'<sup>2</sup>

The basic problem with happiness levels 1 through 3 is that we bear the weight of the effort— we exhaust ourselves trying to reach that ever elusive goal of happiness, only to watch it constantly recede into the distance, like the end of a rainbow. Trying to find happiness this way will drive you to craziness or cynicism or, more likely, both.

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But Jesus offers us something refreshingly different. For Jesus claimed to be God himself, stepping into space and time and history. As the very one who made us, he is also the one who knows what we really need, what we were truly designed for.

There is nothing inherently wrong with food and sex, sport and success, generosity and self-giving. But they can never ultimately satisfy us. And for a very good reason: we were made for so much more. Jesus said, 'I have come that [people] may have life, and have it to the full'.<sup>3</sup> When we encounter him, we discover something infinitely more than a happiness whose shine quickly fades; we discover a joy that nothing and no one can ever take away from us.

Have you ever wondered why  
the best stories are about good  
and evil?

Andy Bannister

A strong contender for the most well-known phrase in the English language must be: ‘Once upon a time ...’ Whether we are children or adults, we *love* stories; indeed our love of stories is something uniquely human. From the earliest recorded cave paintings to the latest movie, across time, country, and culture, humans are a storytelling species.

Some stories are here today and gone tomorrow but others become classics, retold for generations. When a story is first written, it’s hard to tell whether it will become a classic but I would suggest that one thing most of the greatest stories have in common is they are built around a common theme: the triumph of good over evil.<sup>1</sup>

Whether it's Katniss bringing down the establishment in *The Hunger Games*, the defeat of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, or the fight against the Empire in *Star Wars*, or Harry Potter versus Voldemort, good over evil stories abound. The list of examples could go on almost endlessly. For sure there's some dystopian fiction out there; but in almost all the classic stories, evil always gets a good kicking. In our most loved, most enduring stories, good wins.

But have you ever wondered *why*? After all, if we live in a godless universe, all that matters is survival and reproduction. The only truthful story in this case would be something like *The Little DNA Molecule That Could*, which I suspect would be somewhat lacking in the plot department.

Not merely do we love stories, despite their total uselessness to the whole he-who-passes-on-his-DNA-the-most-successfully-wins game, but in a godless universe, they're not only useless, they're a load of old rubbish, aren't they? First, because 'good' and 'evil' are meaningless categories in a world which just consists of atoms in motion. Morality is just a nice story for children—but grown-ups need to have the courage to say 'Bah, humbug!' to all that. On top of which, in a godless universe, the grim truth is that good doesn't triumph. It simply *doesn't*. Chaos wins in the end: suffering and death await all of us and the story of *your* life is the same as everybody else's: 'Born. Suffered. Died.' So in a godless universe, our love of stories where good wins is merely delusion, wish-fulfilment, or brilliant marketing by publishers.

My guess is that this conclusion doesn't sit well with many of us. Could it be that we're drawn to these classic stories because deep in our very bones we know that they resonate with reality? That in some way we sense they are reflections of the one true story?

The theme of good triumphing over evil is, of course, profoundly Christian. It is the theme that runs through the whole of the Bible culminating in the story of Jesus and his victory over the forces of darkness. That Christian storyline is reflected in many of our favourite stories, sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally. For example, Tolkien wrote:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.<sup>2</sup>

While in a 2007 interview, J. K. Rowling explained how the *Harry Potter* books were deeply influenced by her faith.<sup>3</sup> Then the *Star Wars* stories contain many Christian ideas: just think of the sacrifice of Obi-Wan Kenobi in *A New Hope*, for example.

If Christianity is the true story of how a good God created a good world for human beings; of how we were corrupted by greed and power; and of how God stepped into creation to rescue us at the cost of his own life, it should not surprise us that human beings engage in our God-given role of ‘sub-creation’.<sup>4</sup> When we create stories of our own, we naturally find that these reflect the One True Story.

But one last thought. It’s been suggested that you can divide most of the world’s stories into two types: comedies and tragedies. A tragedy is a story which begins with all going well and then ends in *catastrophe* for somebody. (Think Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and the titular character’s downward spiral into murder and insanity.) If you graphed the trajectory of a tragedy, it would look like a frown. By contrast, the graph of a comedy looks like a smile—it seems all has gone wrong, but

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then comes a dramatic turn of events and the story climbs up to victory (or what Tolkien called *eucatastrophe*).

If atheism is true, if we live in a godless universe, then we are living in a tragedy. No matter how high humanity may squirm up the greasy pole of existence, everything ends in ruin. But if Christianity is true, then no matter how dark things may look, we know that this is not the story's end. Evil will be ultimately defeated and, long after the last tear has fallen, only that which is good remains. As Sam Gamgee said to Frodo in the film adaptation of *The Two Towers*:

*It's like in the great stories Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why.*

I believe that our love of stories was wired deeply into us by the God who created us, as one more clue, one more pointer to who we really are and for what—indeed for *whom*—we were really made. And so the question becomes, will we follow Ariadne's thread, the trail of the stones in the wood, the light from the lamppost—will we follow these clues where they lead? Or will we switch off the TV, close the book, and mutter 'it's all meaningless' to ourselves? Now that really *would* be a tragedy.