

# What am I doing on earth?

Most people have busy lives. You, the reader, will likely be one of those busy people. Maybe you have set aside a little time to specifically read this, with maybe a little extra time to think about it. Or maybe you picked up this paper (or are looking at it on a computer screen) so see whether the first few lines intrigue you enough to keep going – before returning to your busy life.

Once in a while, however, our busy lives seem to come to a **STOP**, and we begin to ask questions. Questions about our values. Questions about our identity.

There can be many different **STOP** signs in our lives. These would include dramatic events – maybe the loss of a loved one; a broken or a new relationship; illness; a change in employment or housing. Time to think.

Sometimes just being in a strange place may induce the question as to how we got there! I recall a number of years ago spending an evening in a fancy tango restaurant in Buenos Aires and halfway through an exquisite bottle of red wine the thought struck me: “*What on earth am I doing here?*”

I can detail a lengthy chain of events that rationally (and innocently) explains how I got to where I was. In fact, this is a remarkable exercise, to review one’s life and appreciate the many twists and turns it took to get us to the present moment. To give you an inkling of why I was so puzzled about being in that particular restaurant one night in Buenos Aires, I must tell you a few things about my life. I grew up in a humble family in North Germany, the younger to my only sibling, my sister. Learning came easy to me, and I became the first of my family to enter university. Moreover, I gained acceptance for a scholarship to study abroad and ended up going to Oxford, UK, to earn a master’s degree in applied statistics. A few signposts in the road found me going to Israel for Ph.D. studies, then to Stanford, California, for post-doctoral work, and a few years ago I took up a professorship at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. A fellow professor in a different department responded to a request from a former graduate student to attend a conference in Buenos Aires and thought that this was a good opportunity to meet me! Thus, I received an invitation by email to a

conference in that part of the world, accepted, for the first time met this colleague from Ames, and ended up in the fancy restaurant on a particular excursion for invited speakers one night. So, that is what on earth I was doing that night in Buenos Aires, but whether it was the wine or something else, I distinctly remember that strange sensation of wondering how I got there. I guess we could call it an out of body experience – some part of Me watching me and smiling. As it were, my question still comes up once in a while, albeit in slightly permuted form. More appropriately, I should have asked then and am occasionally asking now, “*What am I doing on earth?*”

The rephrasing of the question already suggests that the answer should be given on multiple levels. The most immediate and commonplace answer would be to describe more or less what it is I am doing most of my waking time. This is the answer we would give at a party, for example, when we meet someone who does not know us, and they ask “so, what do you do?” I could certainly fill out a few details of my biography for you. I have had an interesting life, and if you come to think of it, who has not? This chapter is not an autobiography, however, and a few remarks suffice. In my professional life I am a professor at Iowa State University in the area of computational genome biology. Most of my working day is spent working with colleagues and students on research problems having to do with the analysis of plant genomes (the genetic blueprint). The day is filled with discussions, meetings, reading, writing, computer programming, and for some parts of the year teaching. Then there are family and friends, house cleaning and gardening, shopping and cooking and eating – you can fill in the gaps. That’s what I do. Thus is the description of what I am doing on earth on the **physical level**.

There are other levels to our lives, though, which are not visible. There is the **mental level**. My doing gives evidence of my thinking, of course, but there is more to this level. Just take the example of writing this chapter. The physical doing is taking notes with a pen on paper, then typing sentences into a computer file and editing the document. What precedes and accompanies all these doings are thoughts that by some unknown process arise in my brain. Through psychology and neurobiology we may be able to explain some thought patterns, but for the most part this is a fascinating and mysterious realm. Where do our thoughts really come from? How does a creative thought really arise, something that has never been thought before? These are questions about who we are, aren’t they, and yet how often do

you think about your thought processes? I would guess that most of us, most of the time, take our thinking for granted and merely get on with the doing.

To complete this discussion, we need to note that we also live on a **spiritual level**. This level relates to our attitudes, our character, our beliefs, to our values and conscience. This is a level that provides checks and balances for the mental and physical levels. For example, some thought may come up and suggest doing something, but there may be some other part of us that suggests otherwise. More than the other levels, the spiritual level relates to who we are. We may be doing this or that and thinking all kinds of thoughts, and while this is going on, there is still Us seeing us.

In any given moment, we live and express on all these levels. We express our character, we think, and we act. The sum total of our facilities to reveal our presence on these levels is absolutely astounding, including the capacity for feeling and expressing emotions on all these levels. Take a moment to appreciate your hand, for example. It is an amazing instrument. Think of just a number of different things it can do – writing, touching, playing music, ... . So, here we are, on earth, with these tremendous facilities, but how often do we stop and assess how they are being used and what they really should be used for? This is the fundamental existential question of what we are doing on earth.

Obviously each person will have to give the answer for him- or herself in his or her own living. And in fact everyone does, whether they do it consciously or not. The evidence of our living tells the tale. Yet there is urgent need to make the question and answer conscious. The mass of humanity running around unconsciously, trying to make or squeeze out a living, fighting for space and goods and recognition, destroying each other and the planet in the process – that is the ugly consequence of a complete lack of understanding of who we are. The same holds true for individual life experiences. My refrigerator sports a magnet saying “To change everything, change your attitude.” Also appropriate would be “To change everything, get to know yourself.” What is our core identity? If you consider yourself a bunch of molecules put cleverly together and interacting with other stuff in the environment simply to assure its own propagation in some sense, then that will determine a large part of your experience – probably in a naturally hostile and competitive world that you can only hope to live in with relative prosperity and health, for whatever life span you

can hold on to. At the core of all spiritual traditions is a different view of identity, one of oneness with all of Life.

My personal answer to the question of what I am doing on earth is best summarized by the simple statement “Behold, I create.” There is no argument here. You, the reader, will have to recognize the essence of Life yourself. Our certainly limited understanding of Life does not change its nature, simply our experience of it. But whether you agree or not, whether you have beliefs and concepts about Life or God, at this moment you are invited to acknowledge a singular premise, which is that the essence of Life and therefore of you and me is that of The Creator. I am not suggesting a particular image of a personified deity by using these words. Myths of creation are central to all religious traditions, from pagan to monotheistic. The particular concepts are of no concern here. Let us simply explore the implications of accepting the identity of The Creator in our own lives and beyond.

There is evidence of the creative spirit of Life all around us. The cycle of the seasons provides an ever powerful display of Life bursting forth in the spring and going through modulations of intensity, including apparent barrenness in the winter. Almost anywhere you can view an amazing array of life forms. This is obvious in nature. I sometimes go to Omaha Zoo, and I never fail to be awed by the displays. The range of human creativity is similarly amazing, spanning the range from art to sciences and technology. I am of course most familiar with the creative process in science. That is what interests me in research. In that realm creativity is needed in ever new ways of asking questions, probing our world to try and understand how things work. How does a plant develop from a simple seed? How do plants defend themselves against pathogens and environmental stresses? What is in a plant genome and how are the genes switched on and off at different times? I feel I have a privileged life to be able to work in such an interesting profession, in which my job description includes to be creative! But the same attitude applies to all areas of my living. I love fixing things in my house, painting the walls, decorating, generally taking care of the place so that it is functional and beautiful and welcoming. I have endless creative opportunities in my garden and woods. And in all my relationships and interactions with other people, I always evaluate the interactions by their creative outcome. At any moment in life, in any situation, there is always something to create, something to contribute, something to do to leave the place more beautiful than when we entered. This can be, and most often will be, a simple act – an encouraging word, a smile, a small task done to add to

order and beauty. The same moment and situation can also be wasted, opportunities missed, or a destructive spirit can be expressed that takes away and adds ugliness. What shall it be?

As we express the attitude of The Creator consistently, we experience life on yet another level, the **level of being**. We realize that this is not an attitude we can choose to have or not, but that being creative touches who we really are. And because this is the nature of Life, we immediately recognize the oneness of all creation – Life animating everyone and everything, one whole coordinated process, with us playing an integral part of all of this.

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