

EVERYTHING MIND

what i've learned about hard knocks,
spiritual awakening, and the
mind-blowing truth of it all

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sounds true
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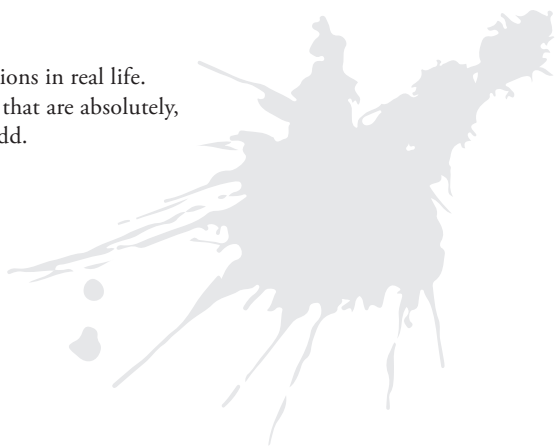
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You don't get explanations in real life.
You just get moments that are absolutely,
utterly, inexplicably odd.

NEIL GAIMAN



INTRODUCTION

So here's the thing: I didn't go to school for any of this spirituality stuff. I'm not a yogi from the Himalayas, a preacher in a pulpit, or a "spiritual teacher" with dollar signs in my eyes. The truth is, early in life my curiosity got the better of me and led me down some roads that resulted in years of heavy drug and alcohol addiction. These dark places ultimately brought me to a very real life-or-death search for something more. That search is what this book is about: finding deeper meaning in life and waking up to the spiritual essence that imbues it all—from monasteries to stadiums, meditation to stage dives, skateboarding to serving food in a soup kitchen, and *everything* in between.

Wait . . . so by "everything," do I actually mean *every single thing*? Why, yes—yes, I do.

So, what is Everything Mind? Well, I think a better question would be, “What isn’t Everything Mind?” We could start by saying that Everything Mind considers *every-thing* in our lives as part of the spiritual path. Our triumphs and heartbreaks, joys and suffering, the light and the dark—all are equally suitable teachers and lessons. Zen Buddhist teacher and poet Thich Nhat Hanh is famously quoted as saying, “No mud, no lotus,” which means that our best selves grow out of our darkest places—our pain and suffering. Experiencing life from the place of Everything Mind allows us to lay aside our fears of right or wrong thoughts and emotions. Then, we can begin to compassionately, and even humorously (at times), work with and through *all* of them with open and courageous hearts and minds.

That’s just the beginning. As we start to understand and engage our lives in a spiritual way, we realize that all that we *think* we are—our stories, hopes, experiences, fears, loves, and terrors—are just components of Everything Mind. This Everything Mind, this perfectly precise and inclusive stillness, holds each brilliant moment of who we are and who everyone is. It’s like losing yourself so completely in your favorite song that *everything* else fades away, leaving you—intentionally or not—in a state of nonself. The song has penetrated your being so deeply that you forget about your material self—your thoughts, judgments, opinions, and labels—allowing that moment to simply be as it is. That’s all there needs to be, and it’s perfect.

The good news is, to begin awakening to Everything Mind, you don’t have to be in a crisis of addiction (like I was), a religious scholar, or a renunciant. The tools for making positive changes and waking up to the deeper reality of life and of our human experience are, in this very moment, already inside of you. The celebrated, yet controversial, Buddhist teacher, poet, and artist Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said, “Everything is

a footprint of Buddha, anything that goes on, whether we regard it as sublime or ridiculous. Everything we do—breathing, farting, getting mosquito bites, having fantastic ideas about reality, thinking clever thoughts, flushing the toilet—whatever occurs is a footprint.”¹ Looking through a Christian lens, the theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “To be spiritual is to be awake and alive.”² I believe it’s important to note from the outset that being fully “awake and alive” isn’t something we can learn from a book. So think of everything you read in these pages as nothing more than suggestions to guide you back within yourself to the place where the deeper truth of who you really are is already “awake and alive.” This is the place where everything is a “footprint of Buddha”—the place of Everything Mind.

The S-Word. What Is Spirit?

Ah, Spirit. This can be a tricky discussion topic because Spirit has no ascertainable qualities; instead, it’s more like an essence, something that is fluid and constantly evolving. On the physical level, I think of Spirit as manifesting from its boundless, formless essence into the many people, plants, mountains, oceans, microbes, atoms, and all the other incredible things that make up our consciousness, our Earth, and the entire wild and inspiring galaxy.

Author and philosopher Ken Wilber describes Spirit’s evolution as *Spirit-in-action*, which means Spirit is perpetually awakening to more of Itself throughout each stage of Its evolution—from matter to body to mind to soul to Spirit—and with each unfolding, It becomes more aware of, and available to, Itself.

To further elaborate, in 1944, while giving a speech in Florence, Italy, the famed German theoretical physicist Max Planck said:

As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you as a result of my research about atoms this much: There is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particle of an atom to vibration and holds this most minute solar system of the atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.³

For me, Plank's "force" represents Spirit. Right now, you may be thinking to yourself, "Force? Spirit? Matrix of all matter? . . . What?" I completely understand how some of this may sound a bit weird, especially to those of you who are new to this wacky world of spirituality. If you find that's the case, I encourage you to take a few minutes (or as long as you need) to sit in contemplation of all this before you move on. Or, you can do what I would most likely do: throw caution to the wind and forge ahead, allowing things to unfold in their due course as you continue reading. Whatever works for you works for me.

Okay, So Then, What the Hell/Heaven Is Spirituality?

The beautiful thing is that if you ask ten different people what spirituality means to them, you're likely to get ten different answers, which makes it clear that spirituality truly is a highly individualized process and experience. Nobody owns it—not Buddhists or Hindus, Christians or Muslims, atheists or Jews. The abridged definition I most often use is simply: *waking up*. Spirituality is an interior journey, one that takes us beneath the surface of who and what we think we are and guides each of us home to our truest Self.

Spirituality emerges and grows from *our* individual experience of Spirit. That's one of the most important things I want to convey in this book: Find your own truth! I encourage you to become your own spiritual scientist. Be curious and, with an open heart and mind, explore what does—and does not—resonate for you on the spiritual path.

There are, of course, some pitfalls that can come with this path of direct connection. I'll address them in greater detail later, but briefly, here are two things to be aware of: when turning to your heart's guidance, watch out for any hidden, self-serving, or distorting motives; and don't allow your spiritual path to become one that is focused only on yourself and does not serve others in some way.

Exploration leads to practice—like spending more time in meditation, contemplation, or prayer, and a little (or a lot) less time on social media, or bringing more mindfulness (yes, I know *mindfulness* is a trendy spiritual word, but goddamn it, it's just so useful and convenient) to the activities we're passionate (and not so passionate) about. That's how we expand our perspectives. In doing so, we're also cultivating our inner knowing, wisdom, and intuition in a way that's directly experienced rather than hypothesized. It's in this authentic place that we uncover *our truth*—again, whatever that is for you—which is what matters most. I can never know what is happening inside of you—your thoughts, emotions, hopes, dreams, fears—so how could I, or anyone else, ever know what is and isn't spiritual for you, and vice versa? It's impossible. So, take an honest look inside and see, or, more accurately, *feel*, what is real for you, and then honor that, but try to do so with an inquisitive attitude, one that acknowledges that everything in life is subject to change (including our ideas, understandings, and experiences). There is *always* room for growth in our

spiritual development, so do your best to stay open and fluid rather than closed and concrete as you progress on your path. Perhaps most traditionally “spiritual” things won’t resonate for you, and that’s fine. Spirituality *is not* found only in designated places at designated times. Spirituality *is* and *means* whatever it *is* and *means* for you—but keep in mind that even *spirituality* itself is just a word.

For me, besides it being just a word, spirituality is about waking up to the deeper dimensions of life that lie beneath our daily experiences—those dimensions that are filtered through our senses. Third-century Buddhist philosopher and founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Nāgārjuna, taught what’s called the Two Truths doctrine—that form simultaneously coexists with formlessness, and that it’s thanks to this formlessness that form can even exist in the first place. The beauty of the Two Truths is that it gives expression to nondual truth, something I’ll explore in greater detail later on. But for now, just know that the Transformers theme song was really onto something when it said, “More than meets the eye.” (Not to downplay the importance of the Autobots waging battle to destroy the evil forces of the Decepticons, because that was some important shit too, but covering their ongoing saga is beyond the scope of this book.)

Other people are going to have different ideas, experiences, and definitions of spirituality, and that’s great. For example, a while back I interviewed Zach Lind, drummer for the band Jimmy Eat World. Knowing he was a Christian (who doesn’t allow himself to get wrapped up in the dogma), I asked him how he honored his faith and incorporated the Bible and scripture into his life despite the particularly unpopular or anachronistic elements in there like homophobia, violence, and sexism. Zach answered:

As a Christian, I feel that the Bible is important, but I also feel it's often misused. I like to allow my direct experience to be guided and inspired by what scripture says, but if there's something written that's different from what my own experience is telling me, I honor my experience. Like, for example, of course I believe it's okay for women to speak in church and to teach men, because my experience with women in my life—my wife, my mom, and my female friends—is one that tells me they can obviously teach and lead. So, I don't need to base my ideas of gender roles, especially in relation to the Church, on a text that's thousands of years old.⁴

As Zach exemplifies, spirituality, and even religion, is not a zero-sum game. It's about experience. It's about peeling away the layers of our unexamined beliefs, identities, and dogmas rather than adding to them. It's about waking up to deeper truths of who and what we are and what the hell is actually going on in this thing we call life. Thank God there are a number of different ways, paths, and teachings to help us do just that, many of which I'll explore throughout this book, but again, I can't stress enough the importance of you trying them out for yourself and finding the means and ways that are right *for you*.

Many people who may not consider themselves “spiritual” are essentially living a “spiritual” lifestyle (again, remembering that spirituality is just a word). It's in keeping ourselves open to others that we're available to receive wisdom teachings at all times. For example, my friend Chris Stedman is an atheist. He's also the humanist chaplain at Yale University, and author of the book *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*. (*Faithiest* is a derogatory term used by some atheists to describe other atheists who respect and are open to dialogue

with religious people.) Chris wouldn't necessarily call himself spiritual; however, I'd say he's one of the most heart-centered and spiritual people I've ever met. In *Faithiest*, he wrote:

The truth I aim to communicate is a simple and universal one: that all folks, whether Muslim or Christian or Hindu or atheist, deserve equal dignity. I hope my story will illuminate the problems that arise when we dehumanize people because of their atheism or religiosity, and when we resort to negative rhetoric and name calling instead of seeking to understand our differences.

Just as I've personally reclaimed "queer" from those who have used it in an attempt to discount the legitimacy of my identity, I now reclaim "faithiest." If such a label insinuates that I am interested in both exploring godless ethics and identifying and engaging shared values with the religious—in putting "faith" in my fellow human beings and our shared potential to overcome the false dichotomies that keep us apart—then I am all for it.⁵

For me, this is as fine an example of spirituality as any other I've come across. Living a compassionate and heart-centered life, one that also seeks to benefit other beings, is spiritual, regardless of whether you choose to call it that or not. A lot of people get caught up in the semantics and have heavy associations around certain words, like "God," and "spirituality," but I don't. In the interest of full disclosure, here's a heads up: I do use words like *spirituality* and *God* and *sacred* throughout this book, but never with a dogmatic or authoritarian intent. When you read the word *God* here, it could just as easily be replaced with *ISness*,

Being, Suchness, Stillness, Emptiness—Everything Mind—and still have the same meaning.

To again quote the brilliant Meister Eckhart, “I pray God to rid me of God,” by which I believe he meant: may all concepts about God be removed so She or He or It can be directly experienced as a living reality. Eckhart further elaborated on this when he wrote, “Love God as God is—a not-God, not-mind, not-person, not-image—even more, as he is a pure, clear One, separate from all twoness.”⁶ To break that down, Eckhart is saying that God is in every single thing, just as every single thing is in God, because God is “separate from all twoness,” which can also be understood as panentheism.

This is reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*, which states that no person or thing exists on its own, so everything is empty of an individual and permanent self—separate from all twoness. So let’s just say that, whether we like it or not, God is completely unavoidable. On the other hand, if you prefer, you can give it another name and just throw the entire notion of God out the window and focus on the rest of the material in this book. I’m equally cool with whichever way you decide to go on that.

Why Spirituality?

It’s not like spirituality is going to magically fix everything. In some cases it can make things seem worse and more chaotic before they get better. If we’re being totally real about our practice, spirituality will inevitably, at some point, shake and crumble the carefully crafted foundations of what we believe about ourselves, others, and life in general. This is because spirituality dismantles all the conditioning we’ve been subject to since birth, be it from our family, friends, teachers, or

society as a whole. Raw spirituality, rather than adding more beliefs and ideas about who and what we think we are, peels them away, bringing us deeper within ourselves to the place where the realest of real truths resides—another topic I'll come back to later.

I know the entire previous section hammered home the fact that spirituality is just a word, and thus, whatever we make of it, *it is*. However, I also think it's worth mentioning that when I talk about spirituality, I mean it as something that's raw and direct. It's not just about creeds or beliefs, but rather about being directly of the heart and the mind in a way that's undeniable. That is why cultivating a spiritual lifestyle might be one of the most challenging undertakings you'll ever face.

Things such as learning to live mindfully (that damn word again) with the acceptance of whatever life hands us, seeing (and honoring) the beauty, wonder, and interconnectedness of all things (and I mean *all* things—remember that mud and that lotus), and cultivating a greater sense of loving-kindness for ourselves as well as others definitely won't always be the blissed-out love-and-light endeavor that many think spirituality is supposed to be.

So, *why* spirituality? Why not? Many of us have sought happiness in things like food, drugs, shopping, sex, and TV, only to realize that what they offer is nothing more than fleeting satisfaction. Hey, I love to zone out and watch *The Walking Dead* as much as the next guy, but once that hour of zombierific goodness is over, it's over, and then what? That new car, laptop, or guitar that makes us so happy when we buy it—the one that we're extra careful not to get any scratches or scuff marks on—usually loses its appeal not too long after we've acquired it. Once the nicks and dings begin to appear (and they always do), we're on to the next thing.