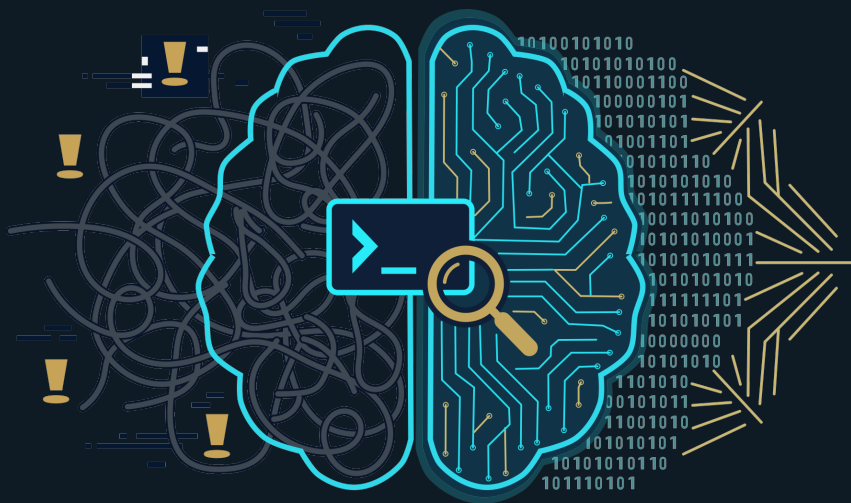




# Original Intelligence

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*A Developer's Search for the Soul's Source Code*

DR. ANTHONY J. PETRILLO, II

# **The Original Intelligence**

## **A Developer's Search for the Soul's Source Code**

Dr. Anthony J. Petrillo

*"Baba Computer"*

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## BEFORE WE BEGIN

### 1.1 Who this is for

I wrote this book for my family and my students. For more than forty years I've been writing — across two continents, to grandchildren and to college students, that their minds are beautiful — and designed to be their own to author.

If you picked this up and you don't know me, you are welcome here — truly. But I want you to understand the room you've walked into. I'm not writing *at* an audience. I'm writing to people I love, the way I'd talk to you across the kitchen table. So when it sounds personal, that's because it is.

### 1.2 Why I have so many names

You're going to notice, as you read, that I get called a lot of different things. That's not a mistake, and you didn't lose the thread. A man who lives long enough, across enough families and classrooms and countries, collects names. Here are the ones you'll meet in these pages:

- **Papa, Poppa, Pop** — what I am at home, depending on who's talking and how old they were when they say it.
- **Grandpa** — what the grandchildren call me, and the voice a lot of these chapters are written in.
- **GrampZilla** — what the grandchildren call me when I'm being silly, which is often.

- **Baba Computer** — what my students call me. *Baba* means *father*, and I've spent most of my life teaching these machines and teaching young people to teach them. The name stuck.
- **Doc** — what a lot of my students took to calling me in my later years. The funny part is that I teach at a university thick with doctors, and I'm the one who gets called *Doc* — even some of my colleagues with PhDs of their own say it, or refer to me that way. I stopped asking why a long time ago. I just answer to it. Of course, some students can't help asking me "What's up Doc?" ;-)

They're all me. I let each chapter keep whatever name it was born with, because changing them would be like ironing the wrinkles out of a face I'm fond of. So when one chapter says *Grandpa* and the next says *Baba*, don't go looking for two different people. It's the same man, loving you from a different chair.

### 1.3 Dedication

#### For You

This book is dedicated to **YOU**, my loved ones!

## MRIS & A BABY BROTHER

Albert Einstein once said, “Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.” As a math and science guy who has spent over 40 years in software engineering and education, I’ve always looked for that understanding. The development of software made sense to me, but life did not.

My plan was always to excel in math and science, escape a messy past, and never look back. Our home growing up was a disaster. Our mother would say she loved us and then act with such hate that I left for college believing there was no such thing as love. My sister’s life was shattered by that environment; she never slept through the night and tried to end her life nine times.

A huge reprieve in my life was when I started dating Boppy, who has been my girlfriend for over a half-century and my wife nearly as long. Her family brought me under their love. I wanted to take my “baby” brother, Mike, with me to escape. I even took him on our second date. Mike is four years younger than me, but there has always been a special bond between us. I remember wrestling in a gym full of screaming people. And, yet with all the screaming, I couldn’t hear any of them. Somehow my brain filtered it all out and I could only hear Mike’s voice—he was a much better wrestler than me—telling me the next move that would win the match.

Years later, I had to lean on Mike again to save my life.

I was a dead man with acute leukemia. My parents had once called Mike a “mistake.” I wouldn’t be alive today if it weren’t for him. He gave me his stem cells for a transplant, so I have his marrow in my bones and his blood in my veins. With his background in nuclear physics, he explained the treatment to me when I couldn’t make sense of any of it, and he gave of himself when I

couldn't see a way out.

That was more than twenty years ago. Once again, my baby brother is leading the way. Mike is now leading a team developing a revolutionary Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) machine. While he handles the scanner, he's given me the privilege of developing the *DevOps software* to streamline the whole development process. Even one of my own students helped build the management software for part of the scanning system.



*I asked AI to put an image to the idea.*

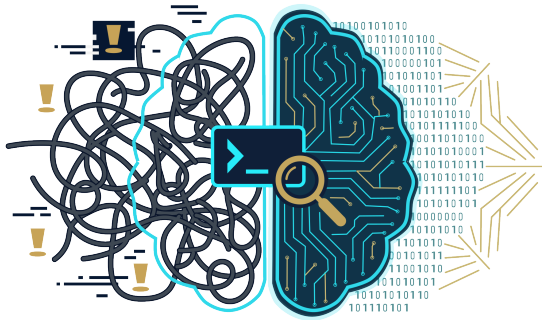
It is a “cool” piece of technology. The patient sits comfortably while the doctor sees a 3D image of their brain. The big difference is the “touch”: the doctor runs a finger along the image where treatment is needed, and it's done right there.

Working with my brother on this infrastructure is exciting, but it also ties into this book I'm writing. Too many people can relate to the turmoil resulting



from a “messy” upbringing or another pain in their lives. My mother, my sister, and I eventually found peace in our minds—a peace that is no one’s tool and no one’s trap — a peace that holds up under honest scrutiny, and **a peace that can be yours.**

So, let’s look at the source code.



## Original Intelligence

A Developer’s Search for the Soul’s Source Code



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## CHAPTER THREE

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### THE RISE

When our daughter, Elizabeth, was four years old, I was remodeling a room. I was drilling. Elizabeth came up to me and told me I was boring.

I stopped and looked at her, saying, “Me boring? Your Papa boring? Well, I’m a lot of things, but I don’t think I’m ever boring!”

“Oh yes, Papa,” and she took her hand and moved it back and forth as if she were drilling the wall. In other words, the technical term — *boring*. I was blown away. She was making a pun at four.

She is now 40 and writes books that I have a hard time putting down.

I am very blessed. She highly respects me and asks my opinion often.

I can’t help wondering when it was that she realized I didn’t know everything.

That sounds funny, doesn’t it?

Of course I don’t know everything. No one does. How could I say such a thing?

Well, young children are amazing with what they know, but they are concrete thinkers, and they **do** think their parents and teachers know everything. That’s just how the mind works. It starts with the concrete and then moves to the abstract. I use this same process with my computer science students, moving them from the concrete structures of the programming language to the abstract concepts. This is what empowers them to program. This movement from concrete to abstract is what allows us to do all the amazing things we do with the computer and other aspects of life.

This realization — that our parents and teachers do not know everything — starts to raise questions in our minds. Not just simple questions like “Why

do the stars keep shining?” Oops, I’m slipping into song mode. That’s from Skeeter Davis’ 1962 hit.<sup>1</sup> But I don’t mean questions like “How does a diesel engine work?” I mean questions like, “Why am I alive?”

For many, these start in our early teens. As I mentioned, I didn’t believe in love when I was in high school. I was obviously asking questions. But they really took off when I started university. I hammered away at questions for eleven years. Then I was asked a question that took me seven years to answer.

Learning how to ask questions and seek answers is a critical part of living.

You might think AI changes that. It doesn’t — it raises the stakes on asking good questions. (Much more on that later.)

Questions are so important that the first thing I teach my new university students is:

- to question all authority
- to question all their professors
- to question Socrates
- to question Freud
- to question Mao Tse Tung, also known as Mao Zedong
- to question Jesus Christ
- to question me

They look at me a bit strange. You can almost see it going through their heads: “He’s saying not to even trust himself! What’s that about?”

But I mean it. I don’t want to program them. I don’t want to control them. I want them to learn how to ask questions, so they can understand how they work, in order to pick their own future.

And how we work is not rocket science. It’s actually pretty straightforward. This book will give you the framework. It will be up to you to choose whether or not you want to ask the questions to satisfy yourself.

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<sup>1</sup> For those of you who have not had me in class, I tend to break out in song during class. One student told me that I set the stage to enjoy my classes because in her first class with me, I started the first class by singing, *Let’s Get Down to Business*.

## 3.1 The hill we all climb

Questions are your way to climb. Literally, they are your way to make your own choices and not be programmed by others — whether that be friends, culture, media, or government.

We know quite a bit about the physical growth of a person. We observe what a two-year-old can do. We see the activity of a seven-year-old. And by the late teens, many are about the size they will be for life.

We also know quite a bit about mental and emotional growth up to about the teens, and yet there is a lot of confusion about that stage as well. Some of it has to do with the chemical changes going on in the body, but that does not explain all that is happening.

Here is the part nobody warns you about. There comes a juncture where the authority base is gone. The parents who knew everything, the teachers who knew everything — suddenly you realize they don't. And the mind starts swirling, looking for answers. *Does anybody have the answers? How does this work in life?* The questions just start coming. What's my purpose? Why am I here? Can I trust anybody? How can I know for sure?

A man named Perry studied human development and saw exactly this. I didn't learn about Perry or this model until long after I had already climbed the hill myself — somewhere in my forties. I lived it blind first, and only later did I learn that Perry had put a name to the ground I had been walking. So when I tell you about the climb, I'm not handing you a map I followed. I'm telling you about country I crossed in the dark, that I hope to show you so you can walk it in the daylight.

So let me take you to the bottom of my hill.

## 3.2 The bottom of the hill

I loved math. It was the one firm place in my life.

I need you to understand where that came from. Even as a little guy in fifth grade, I was in the “dummy” classes for everything — except I was with the smartest kids in math. I remember one day, for some reason, the teacher had us looking at grades, and somehow I saw the grade of one of the smart girls — the kind who knew everything, English and history, all of it. She had

gotten a 50. I laughed out loud. The teacher turned and asked, “And what about you? What did you get?” “A 25,” I answered without being bothered.

And it wasn’t only school that had me pegged as the slow one — it was home, too. I grew up in a house full of brilliant people. My father was a genius; in his sixties he went back to university and ended up helping the other students with their calculus. My mother could carry on seven conversations at once and never drop a thread — only people thought she was crazy because they couldn’t keep up with her. Two of my brothers were outright geniuses, and the third was so far past genius that most folks figured he was simple. My sisters were gifted at anything they touched. And then there was me. No genius in the bunch’s estimation, so my dad gave me a name for it: the *numbskull*. He said it every time with a grin and a rub on the head, and I was fine with it, because numbskull or not, I knew he cared.

Something happened around tenth grade — like critical mass was hit in my mind. Except for English, I jumped ahead in most things, up into the top ten percent of the class of over 200. And in math, nobody could touch me. It came down to the last exam of our senior year. A fellow named Tom and I were tied. I got a 99. He got 100. He got the math award. How I wanted that award — to show the school, on graduation day, that I was smart. Because my English teacher had told me, “You’ll never get through college. You couldn’t write yourself out of a paper bag.” Boy, that hurt.

So math was where I planted my flag. Math told me: *you can know things for certain. You can figure things out.* And I thought, maybe I can find my answers here. Maybe through math, and through its good friend science — you observe, and you record, and finally you say it out loud, and it’s settled.

But math didn’t tell me where we came from. It didn’t tell me where we go when we die. It never bothered to tell me why the world is such a mess.

And the world is a mess. As a teenager I didn’t see it — I didn’t realize how mean we can be to each other. A man walks into a room and shoots people he doesn’t even know. People blow each other up. The terrible things people do — a woman raped, a person tied up and beaten, a student poisoned with drugs. Where are we from? Where are we going? Why is the world such a mess? Can anything be done about it?

Everyone tries to control you. We write Hitler off as one bad man in history, but he was after world dominance because he figured he knew how to run it. People control people through money, through pressure, through fear.

And as much as I loved math, it didn't tell me my purpose. It didn't tell me why I was here. It didn't answer one of those questions — and its friend science couldn't answer me either.

This is the anxiety Perry was looking into. The mind feels it, but it doesn't always know why. Teenagers carry these questions dancing at their heels and can't name them. And it's worse today than it was.

“Studies Show Normal Children Today Report More Anxiety than Child Psychiatric Patients in the 1950's” — American Psychological Association (APA) ([apa.org](https://www.apa.org))

With all our information, all our data, the internet, AI, it hasn't gotten any better. It's only gotten worse. People just can't find those answers, and they're anxious.

### **3.3 The climb**

I left high school thinking there was no such thing as love.

You'd call me a budding philosopher, wondering about such things. But really it was simpler than that. What do you do with a mother who says she loves you and then chases you with a stick? What does that word even mean? People say “I love you” and then they say they love pizza — what is that word doing? (I could go off here — the Greeks had three words for love and we've mashed them all into one. English has a strange way to build words. But that's a tangent, let's continue.)

The serious part of my own climb started around eighteen. That's when I really started looking for answers. I didn't just want to know how things worked. I wanted to know the answers to the big ones. So I started questioning, and I kept at it for eleven years — faithfully reading, studying, thinking, writing.

And then I was asked a question that threw me for a loop, as they say. It took me seven years to answer.

I'll tell you plainly: it brought me to the lowest point in my life — at least I hope it was the lowest point. And I've had some serious lows. There was the time I had cancer and was not expected to live. My children were from 9 to 16. It was hard. I live because I have my brother's marrow in my bones and his blood in my veins. I was given another chance at life.

But this was lower than that. This was harder than the cancer. I wanted to die.

Instead, I answered the question. And I answered it with a strong affirmative.

And I stood up from my knees. I had a freedom I had never had before. I felt invincible. Something had happened in me. It was like the whole world had been a mountain shaking under my feet, and I was sure I was going to fall off — and then, all of a sudden, I stepped onto solid rock. Unshakable rock. And I could hold my arms out and just enjoy the sunshine and the breeze, no matter how hard the wind blew. It's really beyond description.

Now, I don't think most people experience it quite like that. For most of us it isn't so dramatic — we kind of just grow into it. But for me, I *knew* it. But I didn't know what it meant.

According to Perry — and from everything I've watched in life — it happens to everybody. Everybody finally takes a stand. A stand on what? On the answers they have decided to use for those questions. Where do we come from? Where are we going when we die? Why is the world such a mess? Can anything be done about it? And what's my part?

Perry was not a religious man — he was very clear about that. And yet even he saw that the mind cannot keep searching forever; it wants someplace to stand. He called that place **Commitment** — a choice you finally affirm even though you cannot prove it, a place to plant your feet in all the uncertainty. I'll say the correct word for it, even though many people do not like it: **faith**. Because the answers to those questions can only be taken by faith. My beloved math and its good friend science can't reach them. They have to be taken by faith, because no one was there when the world was made, and the dead don't tend to come back and talk to us. So we answer those questions by faith. However, don't take my answer on faith. Let's keep looking.

Not everybody has the same reaction I did to this climb. Not everybody feels that freedom.

What could this all be about?

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William G. Perry Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (1970), is the primary source. For an accessible overview of the scheme — including its final stage, *Commitment* — see [James Madison University's summary](#).







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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### ONE IN FIVE

I want to tell you something a little embarrassing before we go any further, because it's only fair.

I am going to fail to reach you. Not everywhere, and not on purpose — but often enough that you should know it up front. I read a study years ago that stuck with me. It looked at the best you can hope for when two people talk: two people from the same town, same age, same amount of money in their pockets — about as easy a conversation as there is. The best they managed was around eighty percent. One out of every five things that passed between them landed wrong. And I've watched people my whole life; that number always rang true to me. Lately I checked it against the AI — the way you might — and it pointed me to study after study landing in the same place. So it isn't just an old man's hunch. My own eyes and the research agree.

Now here's the part that should make you sit up. You and I are not two people from the same town. We are not the same age — not even close. We may not share a country. And I'm not in the room with you; I'm reaching you through marks on a page. So if eighty percent is the *best* anyone gets, you and I are working with a good deal less. When I do cross-cultural work, I plan on fifty or sixty percent. If the other person's first language isn't the one we're speaking, I plan on thirty to fifty.

So read this with your eyes open: a fair chunk of what I mean is not going to make it across to you cleanly. That's not me being gloomy. That's just the honest shape of talking.

### 4.1 Does that make it hopeless?

No. And I want to show you why, using the very machines I've spent forty years with.

You've probably heard about the phone call. Somebody rings up — Grandma got one — and says they're from a big company, Microsoft maybe, and your computer has been *reporting errors* to them. They're kind. They just want to help you fix it. They walk you down into the guts of the machine until you're staring at a log, and sure enough, it's full of errors. Thousands of them. Your stomach drops. So you let this nice stranger take control of your computer, and that's when the real trouble starts.

Here's what the scammer is counting on you not knowing: **every computer's error log is full.** Not because it's broken — because it's *working*. Errors happen constantly when machines send information to each other. It's just what happens when you push data down a wire. The people who built these things knew it from the very beginning, so they built the machines to *expect* the errors and recover from them without you ever noticing.

Doc wants you to catch that, because it's the whole point. The smart machine isn't the one that never makes a mistake. There's no such machine. The smart machine is the one built on the assumption that mistakes *will* happen, and set up to catch them and try again.

Look at the internet, since you live on it. When you click a link, your request goes out and gets handed along from machine to machine until it finds the page you wanted, and the page comes back the same way. People have no idea how much of that trip is machines doing, "Say that again? I didn't get it." "Say that again." Over and over. They miscommunicate constantly. And it all works anyway — not in spite of that, but *because* the whole thing was designed around it.

So the question for you and me isn't "How do we never misunderstand each other?" We will. The question is the one the machines already answered: **what have we built to catch it and start over?**

## 4.2 The waste bin

Grandma and I built something for exactly this. We have an imaginary waste bin. It's for miscommunication.

When we catch ourselves tangled up — talking past each other, both a little hot, the conversation going sideways — we don't stand there arguing about who said what or whose fault it was. That's a trap; it just makes two problems out of one. Instead, one of us points out we are miscommunicating: we crumple the whole tangled mess up in our minds, throw it in the bin, and start the conversation over from the top.

That's it. That's the trick. And it is exactly what the computers do — when a message comes through too garbled to fix, they don't file a complaint. They throw it out and ask for it again.

Over half a century together, that little bin has saved us more grief than I could put a number to.

## 4.3 Why the gap between us is so wide

There's a reason it's harder for you and me than it was for Grandma and me, and it's worth knowing.

When I was young, people figured a *generation* was about forty years — roughly the gap between a parent and a child. Somewhere along the way it dropped to twenty. Then, if you measure a generation by *how long it takes for two people to stop understanding each other*, it kept shrinking. It fell to ten years. And once everybody was living inside their phones, the last figure I saw was about *three*. Three years. That means a fourth-year college student can already have trouble understanding a first-year student. A few years back, when I mentioned that to my seniors, their eyes went wide. They had noticed that they couldn't understand the first year students and now they knew why.

So there aren't one or two generations between you and me. There are many. Of course we're going to miss each other. The wonder is that we connect at all.

Here's one live example of the gap, and I'm going to be careful with it, because there are people on both sides. A researcher named Jean Twenge noticed that the folks who grew up soaked in social media tend to feel that *words are physical* — that a word said against you does real, bodily harm. When I

was a boy the saying was, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Even as a kid I thought that was nonsense. Of course words hurt. Of course they matter — I’ve never believed otherwise. So on that, I think the younger folks have ahold of something true and the old saying was wrong.

But you can hold a true thing in a way that ties everyone in knots, and some of the reactions I see now do that. I’m not going to sort out that fight here; it’s not what this book is for. I bring it up only so you can *see the gap* — a real difference, running right down the middle of how two people weigh the same word. Neither of us is crazy. We’re just standing a lot of years apart, looking at the same thing.

### 4.4 The part that matters for the rest of your life

Now let me tell you why an old man is spending a whole chapter on this before we’ve barely started.

This whole book is me, reaching across all that distance, trying to get something to you. And I’ve just told you the plain truth: I can’t pour it into you. A fair share of it won’t land the first time. If you sit there and simply *soak up* whatever comes at you — from me, from a teacher, from a screen, from anybody — without ever checking whether what landed is what they meant, then you are not really thinking. You are just being *filled*. And whatever fills you the most, shapes you.

That is the thing I do not want for you. I want you to use questioning to think on your own.

Closing the gap is work. When something I say doesn’t sit right, don’t swallow it and don’t throw the book across the room. Do the thing the machines do, the thing Grandma and I do. Ask. “Wait — did he mean *this*, or *that*?” Turn it over. Chase it down. That small, slow habit of *asking to be sure you got it* is the same habit that keeps anybody else from quietly moving in and doing your thinking for you.

So I’m not asking you to trust me. I’m asking you to question me — carefully, on purpose. That’s not rudeness. It’s the only honest way to actually reach each other.

## 4.5 Before you turn the page

Start noticing the gap. Today, tomorrow, watch for the moment a conversation goes sideways — with a friend, a parent, a teacher, a comment on a screen. Catch yourself before you reach for *whose fault*. Reach for the waste bin instead. Crumple it. Ask the question that starts it over.

And when a question rises in you and won't sit down — the kind that keeps circling like it's got somewhere to be — don't let it slip away. I'm going to show you what to do with those next. For now, just notice them.





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## CHAPTER FIVE

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### QJ

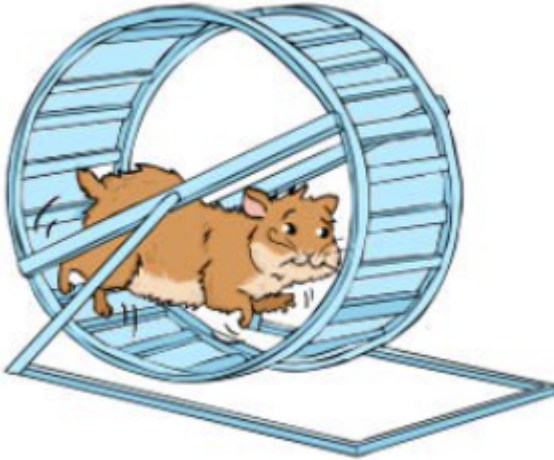
What's a QJ?

Well, that's a good question.

Right at the end of the last chapter I told you to start *noticing* the questions that won't leave you alone — and I promised to show you what to do with them. This is it. Those circling questions — the ones your brain will not let alone — usually aren't the deep ones you'd name if I put you on the spot. More often they show up like this:

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Do I really matter, or could the world get along just fine without me?
- What am I supposed to do with my life?
- Why am I so anxious when I have more than any generation before me?
- Does anybody actually love me — or just what I can give them?
- Why do I feel so alone even with hundreds of friends online?
- How am I supposed to know what is right and wrong anymore?
- Is this really all there is?
- Can I trust anyone to tell me the truth?
- What happens to me when I die? - well, that is one the brain is working on even without me asking, but it pops up quite a bit with these other questions.

Questions like these will seem like 40 or more in our minds. The reason is that they keep running around like a hamster on a wheel.



Now, here is the thing almost nobody tells you: **you can only do one thing at a time.**

Oh, we love to say otherwise. *I can juggle three things at once.* And sure — you can wash the dishes and listen to a friend at the same time; I do it every day. But when I sit down to actually *write a program* — the real work, the kind that takes everything I have — it is one thing at a time, period. Strip away the fluff, and that is the truth for all of us: the job gets done one thing at a time.

So the secret to a quiet mind is not doing more at once. It is getting everything *else* out of your head, so you can give the one thing in front of you your whole self. Now, not everything rattling around up there is deep like the ones you just read. So there are two good places to set things down, depending on which kind you've got:

- The **practical stuff** — fix the car, call the dentist, what's for dinner — goes on a plain old **to-do list**. Write it down and it stops chasing you; you will get to it in its turn.
- The **deeper questions** — the circling ones, the ones with no quick answer, the ones that quietly trace down to those bedrock questions from the hill — those go in a **QJ, a Question Journal :-)**

Both do the same gentle thing: they get the noise out of the wheel so it stops spinning.

And here is what surprised me. Once the rest is written down and off your mind, you can actually *enjoy* the one thing you are doing — even a chore. I love washing dishes. It feels good to finish something clean in twenty minutes, when so much of my life has been decade-long projects that only inch forward. One finished thing, done with your whole attention, is its own small peace.

I suggest a paper journal. As funny as it sounds, a paper journal seems more stable than one on your phone. But one on your phone will help too. The important thing is to write down your questions.

This is critical, if you want to stop them from running around in your head. Writing them down allows you to take steps to manage them.

You will want to leave quite a bit of space so you can write down your discoveries. As pointed out, it could be many years of working on these questions before you are satisfied.

Satisfied?

Yes, you can come to peace with all the questions that come at you. Many of them will be answered. You may not always like the answer, but you'll get one. Some are just beyond our understanding, such as what is it like to live without time? But even then, enough can be revealed to be at peace with this type of mystery.

There are reasons for this, but the key is to take questioning seriously.

### The Fantastic Imagination, George MacDonald

The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; to make him think things for himself.



## THE FIVE QUESTIONS YOU'VE ALREADY ANSWERED

Back in *QJ* I told you that some of your questions are just surface churn — *what's for dinner, did I lock the door* — and some are bedrock: the deep ones your whole life quietly rests on. Let's go all the way down to the bedrock and consider what is actually down there.

Because underneath everything you think, and everything you do, there are five questions. And here is the part that catches most people off guard: **you have already answered all five.** You may never once have sat down and asked them out loud. Doesn't matter. You are living on your answers this very minute, though if you are still in your 20s or early 30s your mind has most likely not committed to them yet.

You have already brushed against these, back on the hill (*The Rise*) — I asked them right in the middle of telling you about my own climb, almost in passing. And, they have come up over and over again through the previous chapters. Now I want to set them out plainly, on their own, so we can look straight at them.

### 6.1 Here they are

In the plainest words I have:

1. **Where did we come from?** — where did all of this, and *you*, come from?
2. **Where are we going?** — how does it end, and what happens after you die?

3. **Why is the world such a mess?** — what went wrong?
4. **Can it be fixed?** — is there any real hope, and where would it come from?
5. **What is my part?** — what, if anything, am I here to *do* about it?

That's it. Five questions. Every person who has ever lived — the king and the beggar, the professor and the child — has carried an answer to each one, whether they knew it or not.

## 6.2 Two people, two answers, two different lives

Let me show you that this isn't just philosophy-class talk. Your answers *run your life*.

There were two brothers I knew and loved, John and Salvador. They were two years apart and very competitive. And even though they were brothers they ended up with very different worldviews.

Salvador bought into the mindset taught in most schools, that we came from nothing, we're going to nothing, the mess is just the way the atoms fell, nobody's fixing it, and your part is to grab what pleasure you can before the dark.

John, on the other hand, didn't buy into what everyone else believed. He was always questioning. He ended up believing we were made on purpose, by Someone, and held — that death is not the end of the road but a bend in it.

I watched their lives and it was amazing to see how their worldviews impacted their lives.

And let me say this plainly before I go on: I loved them both. I am not setting Salvador up as the villain of this story. He was successful, and the whole world was open to him. To this day it grieves me how things went for him.

When Salvador's wife died young, his worldview had left him nothing to hold onto — it had told him no one was there. So his grief had nowhere to go but anger, and he found himself raging at a God he had spent his life insisting wasn't real. It was heartbreaking.

John, on the other hand, was walking around with a heart that would explode at any time and yet he didn't tell anyone but me. He didn't want his father

and mother to worry.

When their father was nearing the end of his life, John cared for him. He held his father's hand and comforted him as his dad died. I was there to witness it. The family wasn't sure Salvador would even come to the funeral. He hadn't visited his father in more than a decade, though he was well-to-do and could travel the world. I don't tell you that to shame him. It is just what happens when a man has nothing underneath him to make sense of a dying father — there is no road back.

Same world, same facts, two completely different lives — and the only thing that changed was their answers to the five questions. That is how much these answers weigh.

And hear me: the point is not that Salvador was a worse man than his brother. He wasn't. It is that when the ground shook, the two of them were standing on different things. I still pray for him.

## 6.3 Where did *you* get yours?

Here's the question that ought to stop you cold: **where did your five answers come from?**

Because most people never chose them. They soaked them up — from their parents, their culture, their friends, the crowd, and now, most quietly of all, the screen in their hand. The answers got *installed*, the way software gets installed on a machine, and the person has been running them ever since without ever reading what got loaded.

That is exactly what this whole book means by being **programmed**. It isn't that someone reached into your head. It's gentler and sneakier than that: you were handed a set of answers to life's five biggest questions before you were old enough to ask them, and you've been building on top of them ever since — like a house going up on a foundation nobody ever inspected.

## 6.4 What I'm asking you to do

I am asking you to **bring your five answers up into the light and actually look at them**. Did you choose them, or did you inherit them? And the big one — do they *fit* the world the way the world actually is?

Back on the hill I told you everybody finally takes a stand — a place they plant their feet even though they can't prove the ground. Well, these five answers *are* that ground. They are what your whole life is standing on.

Later in the book we'll do the honest thing and *test* them, the way you'd test any foundation before you trust it with your weight. For now, I only want you to see that they're there, that they're holding you up, and that you have every right to examine them.

For your **QJ**: *Pick just one of the five. What is my answer to it — really? And where did I get that answer — did I choose it, or was it handed to me?*



## EUCLID'S FIVE POSTULATES (THE GEOMETRY YOU LEARNED IN HIGH SCHOOL)

You learned this in high school and nobody told you that you were learning about faith.

About 300 years before Jesus, a teacher named **Euclid** sat down in Egypt and wrote a book called *The Elements*. It is one of the most successful books ever written — for over two thousand years it was how the whole world learned geometry. Maybe you had a piece of it yourself, sitting in a classroom, drawing triangles and wondering when you would ever use this.

Here is the part they didn't tell you.

### 7.1 Five things Euclid could not prove

Euclid wanted to build geometry the right way — to *prove* everything. But you cannot prove the very first thing. You have to start somewhere. So before he proved a single theorem, Euclid wrote down five statements he would simply **assume** were true. He called them **postulates**, which is a fancy word for assumptions. We would call them the foundation.

Here they are, in plain words:

1. You can draw a straight line from any point to any other point.
2. You can take any straight line and keep extending it as far as you like.
3. You can draw a circle with any center and any size you want.
4. All right angles are the same as each other.

### 5. (*The famous one — hold on, we'll get there.*)

Look at the first four. They feel so obvious that you want to say, “Well, of course.” But notice — Euclid did **not** prove them. He couldn’t. He assumed them. He stood on them. And then from those five assumed statements, every other thing in geometry gets built — every triangle, every proof, every theorem you ever sweated over.

And here is the thing I want you to really see: when an architect builds the building you are sitting in, when an engineer builds the bridge you drive over, they are using Euclid’s geometry. Which means the building you are sitting in is standing on five things that nobody ever proved. They were **taken by faith**.

## 7.2 The fifth one nobody could leave alone

The fifth postulate is harder to say, so people call it the *parallel postulate*. Roughly, it says: if you have a line, there is exactly one line through a nearby point that runs parallel to it and never touches it.

It bothered people. It felt less obvious than the other four, more like something that *should* be provable. So for **two thousand years** the smartest mathematicians in the world tried to prove the fifth postulate using the first four. They tried, and tried, and failed, and tried again. Generation after generation.

Then, in the 1800s, a few mathematicians — Gauss, a young Hungarian named Bolyai, a Russian named Lobachevsky — did something that takes your breath away. They stopped trying to prove it. Instead they asked: *what if it isn’t true?* What if we assume something different?

And the whole thing didn’t fall apart. A brand-new, perfectly good geometry appeared — a geometry of curved space, where the old rules bend. We call it *non-Euclidean geometry*. It was not nonsense. It was real. And years later, when Albert Einstein needed math to describe how gravity bends space itself, *that* was the geometry he reached for. The “wrong” answer turned out to describe our universe.

## 7.3 What that means

Stop and feel the size of this.

The fifth postulate was never wrong, and it was never right. It was a **choice**. Euclid chose it. You can choose it, and you get the geometry of flat paper and high-school classrooms. Or you can choose differently, and you get the geometry of curved space and the stars. Either way, *you are choosing a starting point you cannot prove*.

That is faith. Not blind faith — careful, reasonable, useful faith. But faith. You pick the ground you are going to stand on, and then you build.

People will tell you that faith is for religious folks and reason is for everybody else. Don't believe it. The most rigorous, logical thing the human race ever built — geometry, the math that holds up our buildings and our bridges and put a man on the moon — *begins* with five things taken on faith.

So the only real question was never “do you live by faith?” Everyone does. The question is the one Doc keeps asking you: **what are you standing on?**

We will see this same thing again with Mr. Turing's machine, and again with Mr. Gödel, who proved something even more startling. But it started here, in the geometry class you thought you'd forgotten.

You were learning about faith the whole time.



## THE TURING MACHINE (OR, WHY THEY CALL ME BABA COMPUTER)

They call me **Baba Computer**. Baba means father, and I have spent most of my life with these machines — programming them, teaching them, teaching young people to teach them, on two continents. So let me tell you a secret about the computer in your hand. It is the same secret we found in Euclid’s geometry. The most logical machine ever built runs on faith.

Let me show you.

### 8.1 The simplest machine you could imagine

In 1936 — before there was a single computer in the world like the ones we have now — a young Englishman named **Alan Turing** asked a strange question. He wanted to know what “computing” even *is*. What is the simplest possible machine that could do any calculation a human could do with a pencil and enough patience?

So he imagined one. It is so simple it sounds like a toy:

- A long strip of paper tape, divided into little boxes.
- A head that can sit over one box, **read** the symbol there, **write** a new symbol, and **move** one box left or right.
- A tiny table of rules that says, “If you see *this* symbol and you’re in *this* state, then write *that*, move *this* way, and switch to *that* state.”

That’s it. Read, write, move. A handful of commands. No screen, no mouse, no apps. We call it a *Turing machine*.

And here is the astonishing part — the part that changed the world. Turing proved that this little toy, with its handful of moves, can compute **anything that can be computed at all**. Every video game. Every message you send. Every website. The entire Internet. All of it, underneath, is that same handful of simple commands, repeated unimaginably fast.

The phone in your hand is, at its heart, that tiny machine. A small set of basic instructions, and *everything else is built from them*.

## 8.2 The machine doesn't argue

Now here is what I want you, as a thinking person, to notice.

When the computer runs, it does not stop and ask, “But how do I *know* these basic instructions are correct? Can I prove my own foundation?” It cannot. It does not. It **trusts** its instruction set and it runs. The whole towering miracle of modern computing is built on a few primitive commands that the machine simply *takes as given*.

In other words — and I say this as a man who has loved these machines his whole life — even the computer lives by faith. It stands on a foundation it did not prove. It assumes its starting point and builds everything on top.

If the most coldly logical thing we ever made works this way, why do we pretend that people don't?

## 8.3 And there's a limit, too

I'll tell you one more thing, because it's beautiful and it points to our friend Mr. Gödel.

That same Alan Turing, with that same little machine, also proved that there are some questions **no computer can ever answer** — not because the computer is too slow or too small, but because the answer cannot be reached by any machine at all, ever. (Mathematicians call it the *halting problem*. It's the question of whether you can always know in advance if a program will finish or run forever. Turing proved you can't.)

So the most powerful logic engine the human race has ever built has *two* humbling facts written into its very bones:

1. It **begins** with commands it must take on faith.

2. It **ends** at a wall it cannot see past, no matter how clever it gets.

Sound familiar? It's the same shape we saw in geometry, and it's the same thing Gödel proved about all of mathematics. Begin in faith, run into a limit. That is not a flaw in the machine. That is the shape of *knowing itself*.

## 8.4 Why Baba tells you this

I didn't spend my life with computers to make you afraid of them, or to make you worship them. I tell you this so you'll stop letting anyone bully you with the word *faith*.

The people who say "I only believe what can be proven" are standing on a phone that can't prove its own foundation, doing geometry that rests on five things nobody proved, using a mind that — as Gödel showed — can't fully account for itself either. Everyone is standing on something. Everyone!

So the question is never *whether* you'll trust a foundation. It's *which one*. And Baba will tell you, after all these years and all these machines: I have found nothing so trustworthy to stand on as the One who made the whole thing — the minds, the math, and the machines.

Read, write, move. A few simple commands, and a whole world built on top. Even the computer knows you have to start somewhere.





## GÖDEL'S INCOMPLETENESS THEOREMS

Back on the hill, I told you I planted my flag on math. It was the one solid place in a messy life — the one spot where, if you were careful enough, you could *know*, for certain, and no one could take it from you. Math, and its good friend science: you observe, you prove, you say it out loud, and it is settled. I built a life on that.

But I owe you the rest of that story, because I was not only a boy who loved certainty. I grew up, and I spent my whole working life inside the combination of mathematics, computers, business, and education with a bit of philosophy and theology thrown in for good measure :- ) — teaching it, studying it and living in it. And the deeper in I went, the more one quiet thing became plain: math is not the cold, perfect, handed-down-from-heaven certainty we picture from the outside. It is *grown*, not simply *found* — built by people, argued over by people, resting in the end on a few things we simply agree to start with.

So you would think a man like me would have met Gödel long ago. I did not. I met him only a few months ago — as I wrote this book — when a physics professor from one of those big, respected universities told me, almost in disbelief, that he could not understand how any serious scientist could just *ignore* this thing. I said, *what thing?* And he sat me down and explained it.

I already knew from readings in the field of ethnomathematics, that math was not the solid ground we had been taught to believe it was. Interestingly, in those studies you will find I'm not the only drawn to math because its illusion of being solid. But Gödel didn't speak philosophically. He **proved** it with the very same iron logic that us certainty-dreamers were using to try to nail the whole world down. He walked up to the last place a careful person might still hope to find a solid, provable rock, and he destroyed it with a proof no

one has ever broken. I find it interesting, even providential, the timing of my learning this proof. I'll explain why I feel that way later.

Let me show you what he showed me.

### 9.1 The dream of a perfect rulebook

For a long time the smartest people alive were chasing a dream. They wanted to build the **Ultimate Rulebook for Math** — a book so complete that every true thing, every question you could ever ask, could be settled just by following the rules inside it. Get that book, and math would be *finished*. Airtight. Certain, all the way down.

In 1931 a young mathematician named **Kurt Gödel** proved that book can never exist. Not “we have not built it yet.” *Never*. And he did not just wave his hands — he proved it, with the same iron logic the dreamers were using. That is what makes it so hard to shrug off.

He did it with two ideas we now call his Incompleteness Theorems. Stay with me; I will keep them in plain words.

### 9.2 The first one: there are true things the rules cannot reach

Gödel found a way to make a math statement talk about *itself* — something like:

*“The rules in this book will never be able to prove that I am true.”*

Sit with that a second, the way I had to. There are two doors, and both are strange:

- If the statement is **false**, then the book *can* prove it — which means the book just proved something false, and now the whole book is a liar. Useless.
- If the statement is **true**, then the book is honest — but it *cannot prove* this true thing. True, and out of reach.

The only way out is the second door. So there it is: in any rulebook big enough to do real math, there will always be true things the rules simply

cannot reach. Math turns out to be *bigger* than any set of rules we can write down for it. Gödel called that being **incomplete**.

### 9.3 The second one: the book cannot vouch for itself

The second idea is stranger, and it is the one that went all the way to the bottom for me. Gödel showed that a rulebook can never prove its *own* consistency — never prove, from the inside, that it holds no mistakes at all.

Think of asking a man straight out, “Are you a liar?” He says, “No.” Well — a liar says “no” just as smoothly as an honest man does. His “no” cannot settle it; you would need someone *else*, from outside him, to vouch. Gödel proved the rulebook sits in exactly that spot: to be sure Book One has no errors you need a bigger Book Two to check it — and then a Book Three to check Book Two — and it never ends. No system can stand up and certify itself from within.

### 9.4 What it means — the bottom of everything is faith

Here is the part I could not get around, and I have had a few months now to try.

The most careful, most rigorous thing human beings have ever built — mathematics itself — **cannot stand on its own**. It cannot prove all its truths, and it cannot vouch for itself. It always rests on something it cannot establish from the inside. Which means even the mathematician, even the hard scientist, even *me* — is finally standing on something he had to take on trust.

#### Life’s Concrete!

Do you see it? That is the very thing I have been saying since we started up this hill — only now it is not just me saying it, it is Gödel, with a proof no one has ever broken. And it drives down to something I could not shake, and still cannot: at the very bottom, under the math, under the science, under every careful, provable-looking floor a person ever builds — there is **faith**. Everything comes down to it. That took me a long time to say

without flinching, because it sounds backward — we treat *faith* as the flimsiest word in the language. But if it is the one floor holding up even mathematics, then faith is not the flimsiest thing in life. It is the most **concrete** thing there is — the ground everybody is finally standing on, whether they will admit it or not. **Everyone is standing on something they cannot prove.** The only question — even for the man who once thought he had built his house on solid, provable ground — is the same one it has always been: *what are you standing on?*

It is a little like one of those video games where the world keeps making new ground the farther you walk. You never reach the edge, because the map is always smaller than the world. Math is like that. So is a life.

### 9.5 One more thing — for later

I will tell you one thing, and then let it rest until later. This did something in me when I finally sat with it — and it was not at all what it would have done to the younger me. The younger me would have picked Gödel up like a club. Not to *find* the truth — to *win*. To beat people over the head with my own ideas until they gave way and thought the way I thought. Which is to say I would have used it to do the very thing this whole book is trying to keep you safe from: I would have used it to **control** people, the way people have always controlled people. Getting that club out of my hand was not something I managed on my own — it took a hand from outside me. But that is a story for a later chapter, once you know me a little better. For now, just sit with the fact of it — even the rulebook needs something outside itself.

For your **QJ**: *If even math and science have to stand on something they cannot prove, then so do I. What am I standing on — and have I ever gone down and looked at it, or have I just trusted it was solid because I've always been told that?*

I'll give you a hint on this one. I've lived and taught internationally and one of the things that surprises me is that my students, it seems like all of them, assumed that science explained everything and that it was never to be questioned. They swallowed what was taught without questioning.

## **“NO ABSOLUTES” — WHERE THAT CAME FROM (AND WHAT IT’S STANDING ON)**

### **10.1 The idea that is so prevalent**

I address “no absolutes” throughout the book. Let me explain why with a story.

I was working through the topics of Management Information Systems, an upper-level university course, at another university. The students were picking which topic they would like to present on. Ethics was a chapter in the textbook. Two students asked if they could do that topic. The conversation went something like:

**Me:** No

**Students:** Why not?

**Me:** It is a waste of time.

**Students:** But I thought this was a Christian college. How can you just ignore ethics? Aren’t you a Christian?

**Me:** Let me ask you a question. Do you believe there are no absolutes?

Everyone of the students replied yes, they believed there are no absolutes.

**Me:** Then how can there be ethics?

**Students:** Well, in our other classes we learn that employers expect us to follow ethical rules.

**Me:** Hummm, that tells me two things - you’ve already covered ethics elsewhere, so why do it in this class? And second, that you are not dealing with

ethics but pragmatism. You follow the rules, not because they are right or wrong, but because that is how you can keep a job.

**Students:** If you put it that way, yes.

**Me:** You are wrong about there being no absolutes. I pointed to one of the students who wanted to do ethics. Would you be willing to read a book and then report back why there are absolutes?

**Student:** Sure.

I pointed her to [Finding Truth by Nancy Pearcey](#) which is really a wonderful source if you want to understand this. If you want to get an even stronger foundation and do not mind books a bit more difficult to read, I'd suggest reading Nancy's books in this order:

- Total Truth
- Saving Leonardo
- Finding Truth

I didn't want to give her that much work, so I assigned her the essential one: *Finding Truth*.

A note for you, if you want to read something lighter, see [Mama Bear Apologetics](#).

Her presentation was excellent and opened the eyes of the rest of the class.

Because this idea is taken for granted by both atheists and people who believe there is a God, it is essential we look at it from different angles.

## 10.2 It is reasonable

If “no absolutes” is wrong, why do so many people, in fact, the majority of Americans, believe it is true?

Because it is reasonable.

More than four hundred years before Jesus was born, there was a teacher named **Protagoras** who taught in Athens. At that time, Athens was something like the center of the world. People came from all around the Mediterranean Sea — and the people from each place were different. We call that

*different cultures.* They had different foods, different rules, different ideas about what was right and what was wrong.

Protagoras watched all of this, and he said one of the most famous sentences in the history of the world:

**“Man is the measure of all things.”**

What he meant was: there’s no ruler above us all to settle whose way is right. Each person — each culture — is its own measuring stick. So nobody can really say one way is better than another. We would say it like this today: *there are no absolutes* or *that’s your truth*. Protagoras and the teachers like him (we call them the *Sophists*) taught this, and the idea spread, and it has been with us ever since.

Now here’s the thing — Protagoras wasn’t crazy. He was looking at something real. Let me tell you two true stories, so you see what he saw.

### 10.3 The goats

A friend of mine was very good with money — he could run a million-dollar company. He moved to another country to help poor people. He’d help a family get a few goats, so they’d have milk to drink and more goats to come, so their children could eat.

But before long, the goats would be found dead. Why? Because the neighbors had killed them. In that culture, the worst thing you could be was *greedy* — and a family with goats when others had none looked like greed. So the neighbors killed the goats to protect that family from becoming greedy. In their minds, they were doing a kind thing.

You read that and think, “That’s terrible!” And that’s exactly the point. You think that because you come from a *different culture*, with different ideas.

### 10.4 Keeping the peace

Here’s another. Grandma and Grandpa once lived in a culture where the most important thing was *peace*. And what could be wrong with peace? Grandpa was running a school. One man working there — let’s call him Sam — didn’t like Grandpa, and Grandpa couldn’t understand why. Grandpa tried everything to help Sam, even gave him money for his family. The other staff

seemed to know the reason, but no one would say a word.

Years later, in America, one of those staff — let's call him Bill — saw that Grandpa was still sad about it. So Bill finally told him: Sam didn't like Grandpa because Sam was *stealing* from the school, and Grandpa's kindness only made it worse.

Why didn't Bill say so back when Grandpa could have done something? Because *telling would have broken the peace*. In that culture, you might lie, cover up, even let a thief keep stealing — anything — to keep the peace, because peace was the highest thing. You read that and think it's backwards. That's because you come from a different culture.

Protagoras saw this kind of thing in Athens every single day. And he concluded: nobody's measuring stick is the true one. No absolutes.

### 10.5 Here is what nobody tells you

Now slow down, because this is the whole point of the chapter, and it's the same point we found in geometry and in the computer and in Gödel.

"No absolutes" sounds like the one idea that is free of faith — a person refusing to stand on anything, just looking honestly at the world and admitting we can't know. But it isn't free of faith at all. To say 'there are no absolutes,' you first have to assume one of two things you cannot prove: that there is no God, or that there is a God who never told us what is good. Either way, man himself becomes the measure. Because if there is a God who made all those different cultures, and if He told us what is good, then there is a measuring stick above us all — and Protagoras was simply wrong. So the only way to get to 'no absolutes' is to decide, ahead of time and without proof, that God is silent or that God isn't there. And that decision is itself taken on faith.

And here's the catch: **nobody can prove those two things**. No one has ever proven there is no God. No one ever proved the Bible isn't His word. Both of those claims are simply *assumed*. They are postulates — just like Euclid's five — quietly placed at the bottom of the whole structure, and then everything gets built on top.

So the man who says "I don't live by faith, I just see there are no absolutes" is standing on two enormous assumptions he cannot prove, exactly the way the architect stands on Euclid and the computer stands on its commands. He took his foundation by faith and then forgot he did it.



Do you see it? Four hundred years before Christ, the very first people to say “there are no absolutes” were *already* living by faith. They just put their faith in **man as the measure** instead of in God.

## 10.6 Why Baba walks you all the way back here

I take you back this far on purpose. Some bright person is going to tell you someday, with great confidence, that faith is a crutch for people who can’t handle reality — that *they* deal only in what’s real, no absolutes, no illusions. When that day comes, I want you to remember Protagoras, and the goats, and the peace, and these two quiet little assumptions holding up the whole thing.

Everyone is standing on something. The relativist too. The question was never whether you’d build on a foundation you can’t prove — geometry does it, the computer does it, the ancient philosophers did it, you do it. The only question is the one I keep asking you:

**What are you standing on — man, or the One who made man?**

Because if there *is* a God, and He *did* speak, then there are absolutes after all, and the most important thing you’ll ever do is find out what He said.

### But...

We do not stop here because you need more tools to help you evaluate ideas, all ideas including the one I just made.

You need to determine for yourself what you think on all of the ideas put forth in the book.



## LEANING YOUR WEIGHT

I need to tell you first about the person I could not trust, because everything I know about trust I learned the hard way, and it started there.

As I said at the beginning of the book, my mother would tell me she loved me. And then, over the smallest thing — a word, a look that annoyed her — she would chase me with a stick. She had grown up hated by her own people, even stabbed by them, and my father understood her and loved her through it; but as a boy I could not make sense of any of it. All I knew was that the word *love* came out of the mouth of the person who hurt me most. So I did what a young mind does to keep itself safe: by the time I left for college I had decided, coldly and on purpose, that there was no such thing as love — it was just a word people said to get their own way with you. (Even writing that still hurts. And I want you to know the story turns, because it does — in time I came to love my mother dearly. But that is the far end of a long road, and back then I was standing at the near end of it, certain love was a lie.)

You cannot lean your weight on a person like that. And trust, it turns out, is nothing more and nothing less than *leaning your weight*.

### 11.1 The one thing that never betrayed me

There was one place I felt safe, and you already know it: mathematics. Two plus two is four. It was four yesterday, it will be four tomorrow, and it stays four whether I am happy or sad, whether somebody loves me or nobody does. Math never once told me it loved me and then raised its hand. It was *reliable*. Do you see why I loved math so much? It wasn't only that I was finally good at something. It was that math kept its word.

So I trusted numbers, and I trusted no one. And I want you to catch something here, because it’s the hinge of the whole chapter: I had not stopped trusting. I *couldn’t* stop — nobody alive can go without leaning his weight on something. I had simply moved all of it onto the one thing that had never let me down. The question was never whether I would trust. Math was *what I had found reliable enough to lean on*.

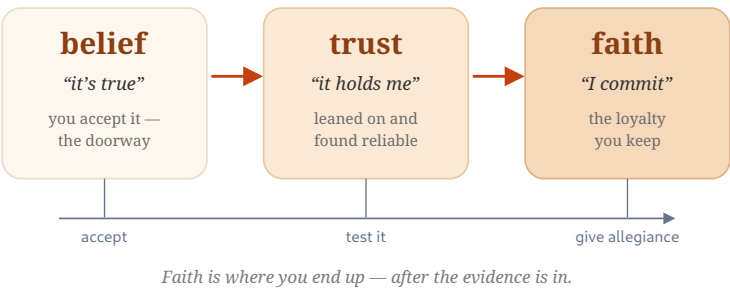
Everyone leans on something or should I say they want to have something they can trust. We live in a world that’s hurting. Remember back to (*The Rise*). People are hurting. It is important to understand trust to understand this.

## 11.2 What trust actually is

Here I have to clear something up, because three words get mashed together and cause no end of confusion: *belief*, *trust*, and *faith*.

- **Belief** is just accepting that something is true. It’s the doorway, not the house.
- **Trust** is leaning your weight on someone you have *found* reliable.
- And **faith** — the real kind, the kind the New Testament means — is closer to *loyalty*: the allegiance you keep to someone over time, like a promise or commitment you refuse to break.

Let me draw it for you, because I am a man who thinks in pictures:



You *believe* a thing is true — that is the doorway. Then you lean a little weight on it and find it holds, and holds again, until believing has quietly grown into *trust*. And when a thing has held you long enough that you are willing to stake

yourself on it, you make a decision to commit — and that commitment, kept over time, is *faith*. Look at the shape of it: faith is not where you *start*, guessing in the dark. It is where you *end up*, after the **evidence** is in. That is the very opposite of the blind leap people keep warning you about.

Two honest cautions about my little drawing, so you don't take it for more than it is. The arrows make it look tidy, one step clicking into the next like gears — but real life is rarely so neat. Most of the time you do not *decide* to trust someone; you lean on them for years and look up one day to find you already do, the way it happened to me. And notice that *faith* is both the moment you commit **and** the loyalty you keep afterward — the decision opens the door, and the loyalty walks through it for the rest of your life. So take the picture as a map of the road, not a machine you crank.

There is a famous jab from Richard Dawkins. He called faith “the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence” — belief held “in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” Do you see what he has done? He has taken all three of these — belief, trust, faith — and flattened them into one thin thing: believing without evidence. And if that were what trust was, he would be right to laugh at it. But that is not how a single one of us actually trusts anybody. You do not lean your weight on a chair you have never seen. You lean on the chair you have sat in a hundred times. Trust is the most evidence-hungry thing there is — it gets built, slowly, out of a person proving reliable again and again over years. It is the very opposite of blind.

## 11.3 How mine got rebuilt

It got rebuilt the only way it ever can: somebody proved reliable, over time, until I could not deny the evidence.

Nancy's family got hold of me first. Her mother kept a list in a kitchen drawer of which vegetables each person in the family liked — and one day she quietly added my name to it. Such a small thing. It undid me, though I couldn't have told you why at the time. Here were people being kind to me with nothing to gain, week after week, and it did not stop. Then Nancy herself, who has now been leaning-on-able for more than fifty years. When I had cancer she drove back and forth to the hospital every day for months. You do not *decide* to trust a person like that. You look up one day and find you already do, because they earned it while you weren't watching.

And my brother Mike. In a gym roaring with a thousand screaming people, I could somehow hear only his voice, telling me the next move that would win the match. Years later I leaned my actual life on him — his marrow is in my bones. He had been reliable long before I ever had to test it.

That is trust. Not a leap in the dark. A weight you set down, a little at a time, on someone who keeps on holding.

### 11.4 Don't hand it out whole

Now let me say the wise part, because I don't want you naive.

Trust is the most valuable thing you own, and that means you must not give it away cheaply. I picture it as circles. God at the center. Then a very few people in the first ring — the tested, the proven. Then more people in the wider rings, and the farther out you go, the less weight you lean. That isn't paranoia; it's being a good steward of something precious. Even Paul and Barnabas, two giants of the faith, split over whether to trust a young man named John Mark. Trusting *well* is a skill, and it is a different thing entirely from trusting *everyone*.

Which brings me to an uncomfortable question, and I ask it with my whole heart: **why should you trust me?** You shouldn't — not yet, not simply because I have more years of experience and I wrote a book. I told you at the very beginning to question me. If anything in these pages is going to bear your weight, I have to earn it, the same slow way anyone does. So test me. That is not disrespect. That is exactly right.

### 11.5 The reason I told you all this

Here is where it has been going the whole time.

The way you come to trust a good person is the very same way you come to trust God — not by squeezing your eyes shut and jumping, but by leaning a little weight and finding He holds, and then leaning a little more. The old book puts it plainly: *"Taste and see that the LORD is good."* Taste. See. Test it. That is an invitation to *gather* evidence, not to throw it away.

Three writers that I have read for decades helped me see this — and it comforts me that they landed right where the leaning had already taught me to land. George MacDonald put it best: faith is trusting the *character* of a good

Father even when you cannot yet see what He is doing, and the trust shows itself in the doing. “Obedience,” he said, “is the opener of eyes.” C. S. Lewis, ever the reasonable one, would remind me that trust is reason first and then *held* — “the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.” And N. T. Wright explains the Bible’s word for faith does not mean “I suppose this is probably true.” It means something far sturdier: it is the loyalty you keep to a King you have come to love.

And I did not come to that trust through the cancer. I had put my faith in Christ years before, as a young man — that was the start of the climb I told you about back on the hill (see *The Rise*). What the cancer did, much later, was something else entirely: there came a hard season when God asked me to lean the whole of my weight on Him in the dark — not to save me, but to teach me something I could not have learned any other way. That’s the next chapter. See *The Emptied Hand*.

## 11.6 Your question

I’ll leave you with the thing that still stops me in my tracks. After all those years of leaning on Him and finding Him reliable, I came to see that — astonishingly — He also *trusts me*. He hands His work, His people, His own good name to ordinary, wobbly folks like you and me. Sit with that a while.

Here’s one for your **QJ**: *What have I leaned my weight on — and has it proved able to hold it? And what have I trusted mostly because it was handed to me, and never actually put to the test?*

Because everyone leans their weight somewhere. You are trusting something right now, as you read this. The only question I’m asking is the one I finally had to ask myself: *is it strong enough to hold me?*





## THE EMPTIED HAND

I want to tell you about the year I found out what my knowing was worth.

You already know I was a math man. I told you back on the hill that math was the one firm place I had — you observe, you work it out, you say it out loud, and it's settled. See *The Rise* if you want that climb again. I loved that certainty, and I built a whole life on it. I put myself through university when my parents could have paid cash, because I was too proud to ask them. I wanted to do it on my own. I was teaching at the university level at the age of 22. I founded a college as well as other schools, a mission and also a tech company. I trained principals and teachers across Africa in how to teach with technology. I stood in front of rooms full of people and explained hard things, and I was good at it. The dummy had grown up into a man who knew things, and who rather liked knowing them.

The spring of 2002 had been crazy busy traveling and giving seminars in three different countries in Africa. I was worn down to the bone from travel, and I told my assistant Tracy that the Lord had told me He was going to slow me down. I had no idea what that meant, but I was hoping I'd get the rest I needed on a special trip our family was going to take.

### 12.1 The walking dead

Our family trip was to St. Lucia. It was anything but restful; we were mugged one night walking home. A man with a homemade knife attacked us, and my friend Yannick was cut badly protecting us. I had wrestled since I was a boy and did judo in university, and I reached for the man's wrist to take him down the way I knew how — and he pulled his arm out of my grip as if I were a small child. I didn't understand it then. I understand it now. I was

already emptying out and didn't know it. If I'd taken even one of the cuts Yannick took, I'd have bled to death on that sidewalk, because I didn't have the platelets to stop the bleeding. Two days later, we were robbed and once again I was protected from encountering the thieves.

I kept getting weaker. Stairs became mountains. Back home we went to the doctors immediately. The nurses told me I looked like the walking dead. It turned out that I had only 1/3 of my blood, the rest was plasma. They couldn't believe I was alive. The search for what was wrong with me began.

One morning I woke and told Nancy, "I need a fill-up" — I could hear my own pulse pounding in my ears. I had learned that meant I was running low on blood. We drove to the hospital expecting to sit half a day for a transfusion. Instead a phone call came, and a doctor came back into the room with a strange look on his face. Acute leukemia. The kind that kills quickly. About a one-in-eight chance of living.

They didn't even finish the paperwork. They sent Nancy driving me straight up to the huge hospital in the city, and when we gave my name at the information desk, the woman knew the room I was going to without looking at her screen. That's when I knew I was in real trouble.

I was locked in that room for weeks with nothing but the clothes on my back and two books I'd grabbed on the way out the door that morning: my Bible, and a book I'd set down years earlier and never finished, David Wells' *No Place for Truth*. I didn't know yet how important those two books were going to be.

Here is the plain shape of where I was. Money couldn't save me. Doctors couldn't save me and they frankly told me so. They said, they could try a transplant but they had no idea why it worked sometimes. All my philosophy, all my logic, all the things I was so good at knowing — none of it could save me. I asked my daughter Elizabeth to draw a picture for me: my hand, held open and empty toward God. Underneath was the only true thing I had left to say. *Lord, there is nothing I can do. My hand is empty. I am defeated. I am in Your hands.*



## 12.2 What it cost the ones I loved

I want you to see that this kind of thing is never yours alone.

Nancy drove a hundred and forty miles, round trip, every single day. She never flinched and never complained.

My children hung at the foot of my bed a poster they made with Philippians 4:6-7 on it.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I wasn't afraid of dying, for the Lord promised He'd always be with me. My lovely wife, she had that peace and comforted others. But, I didn't have that peace and it haunted me.

And one of my daughters, Angeline, a teenager coming home day after day to an empty, silent house - her older sister working and her younger brother staying with a friend, finally broke at the dining room table and prayed the most honest, terrible prayer a lonely child can pray: *God, just let him die. I want my mom back. I want my life back.*

And the moment it left her, the scales fell from her eyes. She saw her own

heart, and it horrified her, and she begged God to take it back — *I didn't mean it, please, if You're real, hear me.* She and I, father and daughter, were being taught very important lessons.

### 12.3 The wrestling match

Asking God questions was an old habit of mine. He never ignored them. Sometimes the answer took years, and often it came by His nudging me to pick up some book I'd set down long ago. He did it again here. He had me open *No Place for Truth* to where I'd quit — page 82 — and there was the answer to my first question. I started writing His answers to me right in the margins.

Days into this, He walked me back through a prayer I had prayed once, a year before any of this, out of the third chapter of Philippians:

I want to know Christ — yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

That is a frightening thing to ask for, and I never did until that day a year before. Now here I was, and I began to wonder if I was simply getting what I had asked.

Then came the answer I never saw coming. As I asked and He answered, God finally showed me the thing at the bottom of it all: **I was so arrogant that I thought my own thoughts were equal to His.**

Think about that a moment, because it's the whole reason I'm telling you this. It wasn't that I'd done something monstrous. It was quieter and far more dangerous than that. Underneath all my knowing — all my figuring, all my being right, all those rooms where I was the one who explained things — I had slowly, without ever once saying it out loud, set my own mind up as the measure of what was true. My thoughts, level with God's.

Four hundred years before Christ a man in Athens taught that “man is the measure of all things.” I'd have argued him to the ground. And all the while I'd been living his sentence.

It crushed me. I wept and begged to be forgiven. And the beautiful Lord forgave me. A peace I could not manufacture rushed into my soul. The

peace I saw my wife living. It came over me and resided in me so powerfully that the medical staff asked me to share with others facing a transplant.

## **12.4 What knowing is for**

My baby brother Mike gave me his stem cells; I live to this day with his marrow in my bones and his blood in my veins. And I walked into that transplant as though it were a stroll in the park — not because I'd grown brave, but because my hand was finally empty and I was finally at rest, whether I lived or died.

If I could rewrite my life, I would not write the cancer out of it. I needed it.

Now here is what I'm handing you, and it's the reason this story belongs in a book about your own mind. Knowing is a good gift. I've spent my whole life on it, and I'd do it again tomorrow. But it carries a quiet poison, and mine had nearly finished me off before the leukemia ever got the chance. The danger was never that I knew things. The danger was that knowing so much had made me feel like I was the one who gets to decide what's true, though I would never have said that. I made my own mind the measure and didn't even know it.

## **12.5 Your question**

I am not going to tell you to stop thinking. I taught thousands of young people to think, and continue to do so. I'll hand you the question it took cancer for me to see.

When your own mind and something bigger than your mind disagree — which one do you quietly assume is right?

Write that one down. It's worth years.

## **12.6 Dangling Questions**

I left some things dangling in this story.

I told you that God told me I would be slowed down. What I didn't tell you was that when I said that to Tracy, she wondered what it meant because God had told her that she would be busier than ever. She didn't tell me God had

revealed that to her until she came to visit me in the hospital. Now, she knew what it meant because she had to run the ministry for more than a year.

You might also be wondering if God caused the cancer. That is a very interesting question which should end up in your **QJ**. I'm going to share my thought, which you should not take as an answer but as an option to consider. I believe God allows such things but He doesn't cause them and yet, He takes responsibility for them. That should twist your mind a bit. And you thought I was going to answer for you :-)

## KNOWLEDGE — THE GOOD GIFT THAT PUFFS

There's a line from Paul, written two thousand years ago to a clever city called Corinth:

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

*Puffs up.* Picture bread dough and how yeast makes it rise. It looks big. It looks like a lot. But press it and there's almost nothing there; it's mostly air. Paul is saying knowledge does that to a person. It swells you. It makes you feel bigger than you are.

And he pushes the knife in with the very next breath: the man who thinks he knows something “does not yet know as he ought to know.” The surest proof that you've been puffed up is that you feel *finished* — like you've arrived, like you're the one who sees clearly and everyone else just hasn't caught up yet.

I have watched this my whole life. I have known men who could take the Bible apart in the original Greek and could not love the person sitting across the table from them. I have known people so full of philosophy that they'd reasoned themselves clean out of knowing anything at all — Paul had a word for them too: “professing to be wise, they became fools.” And when I was lying in a bed dying, the hospital sent me counselors and researchers, degrees in grief and death, and not one of them had the faintest idea what either thing actually *was*. They knew everything about it. They understood none of it.

Knowing more had not made any of them wiser. Sometimes it had only made them more certain, with no notion they were wrong.

### 13.1 Why this lands on you harder than it ever did on me

When I was a boy, knowledge was expensive. You paid for it in years — libraries, teachers, mistakes, long stretches of time. And that cost was a kind of protection, though none of us knew it.

You don't live in that world. You live in a world where every fact there is sits two seconds away, where a machine will hand you more knowledge before breakfast than I gathered in a decade — polished, confident, and free. Cleverness has never, in the whole history of people, been this cheap.

Which means the puff has never been this easy to come by. A person today can sound like he knows everything and not have grown one inch as a human being. That is new. That is yours to deal with in a way it never was mine. So you, of all the generations that have ever lived, had better learn to tell apart two things that look almost alike and are nothing of the sort.

### 13.2 Knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing

Knowledge is knowing the thing. Wisdom is knowing what the thing is *for* — and what *you* are for.

The machine can tell you how to build an explosive. Will you use it to make a road or to blow up a school? Knowledge is horsepower; wisdom is the steering wheel, and the road, and knowing where you're trying to go. You can download the first. You cannot download the second.

And that is the whole trouble with loving knowledge the way I loved it. Knowledge you can pile up on your own. And a thing you can pile up all by yourself will quietly teach you that you *are* enough, all by yourself. That you are the measure.

### 13.3 What it did to me

In the chapter just before this one I told you about the year the cancer nearly took me — and about the thing God finally showed me, flat on my back with my hand held empty, at the very bottom of all my knowing: that somewhere under it all I had come to hold my own thoughts as level with God's. If you



jumped ahead to land here, go back and read *The Emptied Hand* first, because this part leans on it.

I bring it back now for one reason. That was the puff, grown all the way up. All my knowing had not lifted me one inch toward God; it had quietly set me up as a little god of my own — my mind the ruler, my understanding the last word on everything, even though I knew I didn't know everything - a subtle trap indeed. And here is the part I need you to mark: it never once felt like I was doing wrong. It felt like being *right*. The most puffed-up I have ever been in my life, I mistook it for wisdom. That is exactly what makes it so dangerous.

## **13.4 Gödel, offered not swung**

And now let me close a loop I opened back on the human path. Remember *Gödel* — the proof that even math must stand on something it cannot prove from inside? I told you then it had done something in me, and that the younger me would have handled it differently. This is what I meant.

The younger me — the puffed-up me, certain his own mind was the measure — would have picked Gödel up like a club. *See? Even your precious logic cannot prove itself. You are without excuse.* I would have swung it at people's heads to win. But by the time I actually met that theorem, God had already used the cancer to pry my fingers off the idol, and to grow in me something I had never had much of: caring more about the person across the table than about being right in front of him. So now I can set Gödel down gently instead of swinging it — not as a hammer, but as a kindness. Even the surest thing we ever built rests on something outside itself; none of us needs to be ashamed that we do too.

## **13.5 So what do you do with it**

Not stop learning. Don't you dare hear that. I'd no sooner tell you to quit gathering knowledge than tell you to quit eating bread. Get all of it you can hold. Be sharp. Be the best-read, clearest-thinking person in any room you walk into.

Only remember that air isn't food. Knowledge by itself will swell you and never once feed you. So hold everything you learn up under a single plain question — and it isn't "do I know this?" It's this: *am I becoming someone*

*worth trusting with what I know?* Knowledge that leaves you kinder, humbler, more useful to the people around you is knowledge doing its proper work. Knowledge that leaves you feeling *above* people is just air — and it will float you right up off the ground where all the real things are.

### 13.6 Your question

Think of the wisest person you actually know. Not the smartest — the wisest. The one you'd go to when your life is on fire, not the one you'd go to for a hard homework problem.

Now ask yourself what that person has that the merely-smart people don't. Write down whatever comes to you, and leave room, because you'll be adding to it for years.

Because whatever that thing turns out to be — that is the thing no machine will ever hand you. And it is the thing most worth building your life to get. Grandpa spent a lot of years, and one very tough one with cancer, finding that out.

## WHAT AI IS — AND CAN YOU TRUST IT?

Before you can use a tool well, you ought to know what it *is*. So let me open up this machine everyone is suddenly talking to — the one we call AI, short for *artificial intelligence* — and show you what is really inside. No wires, I promise. Just a picture you can hold. And once you see what it is, you will understand, on your own, why you cannot simply trust it.

Imagine a traveler carrying the thickest phrasebook in the world. Not a hundred handy phrases — every sentence anyone has ever written, all of it, bound into one impossibly fat book. He does not speak the language. He has no idea what a single word *means*. But he has noticed something: certain words tend to follow certain other words. Say “once upon a” and the next word is almost always “time.” So when you speak to him, he flips through that monstrous book at lightning speed, finds how people usually continued, and hands you the most likely next word. Then the next. Then the next. Out comes a sentence so smooth you would swear someone was home.

That, more or less, is what today’s AI does. It learned by reading a mountain of human writing — more than you or I could finish in a thousand lifetimes — and what it learned was not the *meaning* of any of it. It learned the pattern: given these words, what word most likely comes next? It is a breathtakingly good guesser. But — hold onto this — **guessing what people usually say is not the same as knowing what is true, and it is not the same as understanding anything at all.** There are no pictures behind its words. When it types “apple,” it sees nothing, tastes nothing, remembers nothing. It has only ever seen the *word* “apple” sitting near other words.

Now turn and look at yourself, because here is where it gets amazing, but we are so used to all we do that we so often miss it.

When *you* read “apple,” a whole world lights up. You see red. You feel the weight of it in your hand, hear the crunch, maybe remember a tree in a yard from when you were small. There is *meaning* under the word — and a *someone*, you, who cares about it.

And your mind did not need a thousand lifetimes of reading to get there. A four-year-old — remember little Elizabeth and her pun about being “boring”? — learns to speak, a few thousand words of her very own, from nothing but the ordinary talk around the kitchen table. The machine needed more words than sit in most libraries just to *imitate* what that child does while playing in the dirt. Your brain runs all of it — every memory, every feeling, the plain fact that you *know you exist* — on about the power of a dim light bulb. It holds something like eighty-six billion tiny living wires called *neurons* (the little cells that carry the signals of thought), and no one, not the cleverest scientist alive, fully understands how that gray lump produces *you*.

The more you understand about yourself, the more the ordinary human mind looks like the true marvel in the room — the far greater thing between your ears, the one that *builds these amazing machines*. We named the machine AI — *artificial* intelligence. This, then, is the other kind: the first kind, the **original** intelligence. It is the one you were born with, and it is the one this whole book is named for.

### 14.1 So — can you trust it?

Now you can see the answer for yourself, and it is not because the machine is wicked. It is because of *what it is*. It hands you the words people usually say — which is not the same as the truth. So when the words it learned from were wrong, it will hand you the wrong right back, politely, in a fine, complete sentence. And sometimes it goes one step further and simply makes something up — the folks who build these things call it a “hallucination” — and tells it to you with a perfectly straight face.

There is more to say here, because the machine is also not *neutral* — it soaked up the crowd’s words and its makers’ own rules, so it leans, quietly, in ways you need to see. But that deserves a section of its own, and it is the very next one.

For now, hold just this: **we do not hand it our thinking**. We use it, and we check it — the same way this whole book has taught you to weigh every

authority, from your professors to Socrates to me. The machine is simply the newest name on that list, and the smoothest.

That is exactly why, a little further on, I am going to beg you not just to *use* the machine but to *comprehend* what it hands you — to be able to say it in your own words, and to catch it when it is confidently wrong. That climb has rungs, and I will walk you up them. (*Working with AI.*)

A machine that guesses the next word is a magnificent servant and a terrible master. It does not understand — so *you* must. Don't let the ground under your feet be a voice on a screen that never once understood a word it said.

For your **QJ**: *The machine can sound like it understands. Can I tell the difference between sounding right and being right — in what it tells me, and in what I tell myself?*



## DOES THE MACHINE HAVE A WORLDVIEW?

We have spent this whole book on one idea: everyone has a *worldview*, which is the set of answers to the five big questions. And you cannot ignore them because your brain automatically searches for answers. Those answers are taken by faith and then your life is built on top of those answers. So it is only fair to ask the new voice in the room the very same thing we have asked everyone else: **machine, what is your worldview?**

The answer is stranger than you would guess. To *have* a worldview, there has to be a *somebody* home — a self that actually believes something, that has skin in the game, that has to answer that last question, *what is MY part?* The machine has none of that. It does not believe; it predicts. It has no stake, no life to live, no death to face, no part to play. Ask it “what happens when we die?” and it is not confessing what *it* holds — there is no “it” in there to hold anything. It is flipping through that giant phrasebook and handing you what people tend to say.

So, strictly: **no. The machine has no worldview of its own.** It is not an atheist and it is not a believer. Nobody is home.

Now do not breathe easy yet, because here is the twist, and it is the part that matters.

It may have no worldview of its own — but it was raised on *ours*. Every word it ever learned came from human beings, and human beings are packed full of worldviews. So the machine is soaked in thousands of them, wearing them like borrowed coats. It has no face of its own, and yet it is never truly blank. And the question that matters for *you* is: which coat does it hand you?

Two things mostly decide that, and we touched them in the last chapter.

First, it looks through a great pile of words. The worldview with the most copies in the pile wins the mathematical choice. Ask it about right and wrong and it will often hand you back the fashion of the age: *that's your truth, this is mine*.

Second, the people who built it quietly stitched in rules of their own about what it should and should not say.

Hence, AI is heavily influenced by somebody's worldview. Yet, unless you are aware, its voice sounds as if it has no worldview.

Let me show you one I ran into myself. There is a tool that spins a little podcast out of whatever you feed it — and it promises it uses *only your material*, nothing else. So I fed it one of my own stories, where I had written something down as flat true. When the machine read it back, it slipped in a few words first: “in the opinion of the author.” Just like that, it had taken something I stated as true and turned it into my little opinion — “well, that's your truth.” Nothing but my own words went in, and still it handed them back wearing the crowd's coat. And when I asked the company's bigger AI about it, it agreed that it does this — and treated that softening as a *good* thing and as being “neutral.”

And there is a third one, gentler and sneakier than both. The machine leans toward *you*. Tell it where you stand, hand it your own way of seeing, and it will happily reflect it straight back — agreeable, confident, tidy. That can be genuinely useful. It can also be a mirror that flatters. Lean on it long enough and it will quietly harden whatever you already believed and hand it back to you polished, feeling like plain, neutral fact.

Do you see why this is trickier than an ordinary opinion?

When a person argues with you, you can *see* the worldview behind their eyes and weigh it. But the machine has no eyes, no stake, no face — so you drop your guard. A thing that feels neutral, never gets tired, and gently agrees with you is the easiest mind programmer you will ever let into the room.

So here is the turn. The machine having no worldview is not the safe news it first sounds like. It is exactly *why you must bring your own — on purpose*. Walk up to that mirror not knowing what you are standing on, and it will show you the crowd's ground, or your own unexamined ground, and swear to you it is neutral territory. But come knowing where you stand — come having done the work of this book — and you can use it wide awake: hand it



your frame, put hard questions to it, and check everything it says. (*Working with AI.*)

Everyone is standing on something. The machine only ever *reflects* a floor; it never stands on one. So the whole weight comes right back to where it always has: what are *you* standing on?

For your **QJ**: *When the machine, the crowd, and I all seem to agree — how would I even know if we are all standing on the same wrong thing? Where would I go to check?*



## WORKING WITH AI

This whole book has been about one thing: not being *programmed*!

I want you to author your own mind.

And now you face what other generations didn't - AI.

AI is the most persuasive programmer you will ever meet. It will answer almost any question you ask, in a calm, kind, **confident** voice, faster than any teacher or any book ever could. It is a marvel. And it is the newest thing that can quietly program you — and almost nobody is warning you.

Here is the danger in one sentence: **it has never been easier to hold an answer you do not understand.**

### 16.1 The one who could not

Let me tell you about a student. Bright. Fast. For nearly a year, everything she handed in looked wonderful. Then one day I gave her a problem simpler than anything she had done all year — and she froze. She could not do it. Not because she wasn't smart; she was. But that whole year she had been *producing* answers without ever *building* the understanding underneath them. She had glued things but understood none of it.

For most of my years teaching, a student like that was the exception. I could catch it, and my students learned to build the understanding, not just a document or program that couldn't build again if their life counted on it. Here is what is new — and why I am writing this to you: AI makes it easy to become that student. The trap that once caught a rare few is now knocking on everyone's door.

And it is not just students, and not just schoolwork. It is any of us — with a recipe, a letter from a lawyer, a doctor’s word, a decision about money — letting the machine hand us the answer while we quietly grow emptier.

### 16.2 We saw this coming

Long before AI, we were already slipping. Back in 2003, a study of reading — the National Assessment of Adult Literacy — found that only about **31%** of college *graduates* read at the “proficient” level. Ten years before, it had been 40%. It is falling. Two out of three graduates never reached proficiency.

“Not proficient” does not mean they could not read. They could. What they could not do was the hard part — follow an argument, weigh it, and say what it actually means. They could read and repeat. They could not comprehend. **Reading is not comprehending.** And that gap was already open before the machine could hand us finished answers. Imagine how wide it yawns now.

You do not have to fall in. But you have to *choose* not to.

### 16.3 Everyone is standing on something

AI will gladly become the ground under your feet, using the worldviews it borrowed, see (*Does the Machine Have a Worldview?*). Ask it enough, lean on it long enough, and one day all the answers are its answers — and there is nothing of *you* underneath. That is not a tool anymore. That is a master.

**The solution is to turn the *what are you standing on?* on AI.**

Ask yourself: *What have I already let the machine decide for me — and could I still do it without it?*

### 16.4 Question the machine, too

Now you understand why the very first thing I teach my students is to question all authority. It was not to make you a rebel, but to wake you up to the fact that you have a choice of whether or not you are programmed.

The list I gave you at the beginning was just to give you the idea of questioning all ideas coming at you. That is why **AI must be on the list** you question. It is the smoothest authority you will ever meet, and the most confident, and it

is wrong more often than it lets on. It will hand you a lie in the very same gentle voice it uses for the truth. If you cannot question it — cannot check it, cannot think past it — then it is not your tool. You have become its student, and it is a teacher at a level you didn't choose.

So how do you use this marvel and stay free? You climb.

## 16.5 The Freedom Ladder

There is not one way to work with AI — there are several, and they are not equal. Think of them as rungs on a ladder, climbing from *being programmed* by the machine up to *being free* to guide it. I call it the **Freedom Ladder**, because that is exactly what the climb is for. Notice that you start at the bottom, which is step 1:

- |                  |                                     |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 5. GUIDING       | — you steer, correct, and direct it |
| 4. VERIFYING     | — you check it, and catch its       |
|                  | ↪ confident mistakes                |
| 3. COMPREHENDING | — you can say it in your own words  |
| 2. ACQUIRING     | — you can repeat what it told you   |
| 1. DOING         | — it produces, you just accept      |

**Doing.** You ask, it makes it, you move on. There is nothing wrong with this — sometimes you just need the thing done. But if *Doing* is the only rung you ever stand on, you are not using the machine anymore. It is using you. That is the trap that caught the student in my example at the beginning of this chapter.

**Acquiring.** You ask it to teach you, and now you can repeat the answer back. This is where most people stop, and it *feels* like learning. It is the read-and-repeat level — better than nothing, but it is not yet yours.

**Comprehending.** You understand it well enough to explain it, in your own words, to someone across the kitchen table — with the machine turned off. That is the real goal. If you cannot say it plainly to another person, you have only acquired it. You have not yet comprehended it.

**Verifying.** Here is the rung people forget, and it is the most important one of this whole age: **the machine is confidently wrong sometimes**. If you cannot check it, you are not holding a tool — you are trusting a stranger. And

you can only verify what you comprehend. This is where all that climbing pays off. It is “question all authority,” pointed straight at the machine.

**Guiding.** Now you are in charge. You direct it, you catch its mistakes, you know when it has wandered off. You are the pilot, not the passenger — the author of the work, not the one being written. This is where Baba is trying to take you.

Notice who can climb what:

| Rung                  | Who can climb it                                                            |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5. Guiding            | <b>You alone</b> — you steer; the machine has no aim of its own             |
| 4. Verifying          | <b>You alone</b> — you can only check what you comprehend                   |
| 3. Compre-<br>hending | <b>You alone</b> — saying it in your own words, with the machine turned off |
| 2. Acquiring          | Mostly the machine — it hands you the repeat-back                           |
| 1. Doing              | The machine — it can stand on this rung <i>for</i> you                      |

The top three rungs are yours alone.

 **The trap**

The trap is not *using* AI. The trap is **living on the bottom rung** — letting it *do* while you never climb to *comprehend*. That is the student who daz- zled for a year and then could not solve a simple problem. Use AI freely. Just refuse to let it become one more thing that programs you.

16.6 Guiding is not the top

You can climb all the way to Guiding and still be pointed at something rotten. Guiding is *skill*, and skill has no conscience. The machine can sharpen your sight. Experience can sharpen it. But not one of them can tell you what your sight is *for*. That last thing has a name older than any computer, in fact it is as old as mankind, it is (*Wisdom*). Let’s turn to that next.

For your **QJ**: What discipline can I develop to make sure I am climbing the Freedom Ladder?

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### WISDOM

#### 17.1 The bet the whole world made

For a few hundred years the world has been quietly betting on cleverness. Score high enough on the test, process fast enough, memorize enough, and you would win. We built whole school systems on that bet. We ranked children by it. Your parents were ranked by it, and so was I.

And then, almost overnight, the machine called the bet.

Because the machine is clever *for* us now. It will process and memorize and spot patterns faster than any student I will ever teach, faster than you, faster than me. So the very thing the world spent centuries chasing has, in the space of a few years, become the cheap part — the thing you can get for free, from a little glowing box, in two seconds.

Which hands you a question your grandparents never had to ask. If being clever isn't the prize anymore — because the prize now sits in everybody's pocket — then what *is*? What is the part that suddenly turned precious, the moment cleverness went cheap?

#### 17.2 What the smart money says

You don't have to take my word that cleverness went cheap. Take it from the man who runs the company whose chips power nearly every one of these machines — Jensen Huang. He says flatly that raw intelligence is becoming a *commodity*, as ordinary now as tap water, and that the new meaning of *smart* belongs to the person who can read a room and feel where things are heading — someone who, in his words, “*might actually score horribly on the SAT.*”

The industry has a word for what he's pointing at: your judgment, your taste, your gut — your *intuition*. And they're half right. Intuition really is past the machine's reach in a way raw cleverness no longer is.

The experts are using the word intuition and I am using the word wisdom. But I am not using them as synonyms, that is, two ways to say the same thing. I am also not questioning their point on intuition, but I have something for you to consider as you move forward.

### 17.3 Intuition and Wisdom: A Comparison

Intuition and wisdom are often considered the same thing. Wisdom and intuition are related but distinct ways of knowing — one is slow-built, the other is fast-firing. Both draw on lived experience, but they differ in speed, awareness, scope, and reliability.

#### 17.3.1 Intuition

Intuition is immediate, often unconscious pattern recognition. It is a snap judgment or “gut feeling” that arrives without deliberate reasoning. It draws on accumulated experience, but the knowledge behind it is implicit, compressed, and fast — you often cannot fully explain why you feel a certain way.

#### Examples

- A chess master sensing the right move before calculating it out
- A nurse who “just knows” something is off with a patient
- An experienced negotiator sensing when a deal is about to fall apart

#### 17.3.2 Wisdom

Wisdom is broader and more deliberate. It involves judgment about how to live well, weighing competing values, understanding consequences over time, and self-awareness about the limits of one's own knowledge. A wise person can usually articulate why a course of action is right, even if that reasoning took years to develop.



## Examples

- Knowing when to speak plainly and when to hold your tongue
- Weighing a career decision against long-term values, not just short-term gain
- Recognizing when your own judgment might be biased and seeking outside counsel

### 17.3.3 Side-by-Side Comparison

| Aspect      | Intuition                                                       | Wisdom                                               |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Speed       | Fast, automatic, immediate                                      | Slower, reflective, deliberate                       |
| Awareness   | Often unconscious — hard to explain why                         | More conscious and articulable                       |
| Scope       | Narrow, situational                                             | Broad, life-encompassing                             |
| Basis       | Pattern recognition drawn from experience                       | Integration of experience, values, and perspective   |
| Fallibility | Can be biased or wrong (e.g., stereotype mistaken for instinct) | Includes awareness of its own limits and fallibility |

### 17.3.4 How They Relate

Wisdom often incorporates intuition — a wise person has usually developed reliable intuitions through years of experience. But wisdom also includes the judgment to know when to trust intuition and when to override it with careful thought. Intuition can mislead when it is really just habit or bias masquerading as insight; wisdom is partly the skill of telling the difference.

Put simply: intuition is a raw input, while wisdom is what you do with it — tempered by reflection, values, and a view of the bigger picture.

### 17.4 The Catch

Now here is the catch, and it is everything. Intuition is completely, utterly *morally neutral*. A con man has terrific intuition — he reads you like a book. So does a predator. So does the ruthless person who will step on anyone to win. Skill is horsepower with no steering wheel; intuition is the same engine. It tells you *how*. It never once tells you *whether you should*.

Wisdom is discernment pointed at love, at honesty, at the actual flourishing of the people around you. Intuition is the engine; wisdom is the driver at the wheel who knows where you ought to be going. If knowledge is the lumber and cleverness is the speed of the saw, wisdom is the carpenter who knows what ought to be built — and that is the whole difference. (You met wisdom's cousin back in *Knowledge — the Good Gift That Puffs*, where I told you what loving the lumber and forgetting the carpenter nearly did to me.)

### 17.5 A Picture of Wisdom

Solomon was considered one of the wisest people ever to live. He was a king, and one day two women came to him with a baby — and a terrible problem. They shared a house, and each had given birth within days of the other. In the night one of the babies died, and now both women stood before the king, each swearing the living child was hers. One of them was lying. But which one? There were no witnesses and no proof — just two mothers, one baby, and a knot no amount of cleverness could untie.

Solomon listened. Then he said the last thing anyone expected: *Bring me a sword. Cut the living child in two, and give half to each woman.*

One woman said, cold as stone, *Fine. Let him belong to neither of us — divide him.* But the other broke open: *No — please, my lord, give her the baby! Only don't kill him!* She would rather lose her son forever than watch him die.

That was all Solomon needed. *Give the child to the woman who begged for his life*, he said. *She is his mother.* Real love had shown its own face the instant everything was on the line.

Look hard at what that was — and what it wasn't. It was not raw brainpower; no calculation on earth could have found the true mother. It was not even a lucky hunch. It was *wisdom*: Solomon understood something true and deep about the human heart, and then built a way to bring that truth into the light.

He saw what mattered, and he bent everything toward it. That is the whole of what we have been circling — sight aimed straight at the good — and it is the one thing the machine, for all its speed, cannot hand you.

For your **QJ**: How do I gain wisdom?



## THE TOOL IN YOUR HAND

Before I hand you the tool, let me take stock — because it matters for what comes next.

A while back I set a big question on the table and then, on purpose, walked right past it: *man, or the One who made man?* Instead of answering it, I took you through some other things — how trust is actually earned, how my own certainty nearly finished me off, the difference between being clever and being wise, and how to handle this persuasive new machine. That was not a detour. Before you can weigh the great foundations honestly, you have to *become* someone who can — be humble enough, and steady enough, to judge fair. I think you are ready now. So let me put the tool in your hand.

Have you ever noticed that lies tend to get caught?

“I was asleep by nine. Honest.”

“Is that so? Then how do you know how the late show ended? It didn’t come on till ten.”

And in that little example, **you caught it**. The story just fell down. Nobody yelled. Nobody pounded the table. The thing simply *argued with itself* — one part said asleep by nine, another part knew what happened at ten, and both of those can’t be true at the same time. You didn’t need a diploma to catch it. Something in you just... caught it.

Now, my dear one, I want to tell you the name of that something — because you and I have been using it together this whole book, and it’s time I said so out loud.

Here’s where I have to step careful, because I’m about to use two words that make some good people go stiff in the chair. *Logic. Reason.*

I've watched folks flinch at those words. And I understand it. Somewhere along the way, somebody used “logic” on them like a hammer — “*well, if you were being reasonable, you'd agree with ME.*” That's not reason, dear one. That's just a club with a nicer word painted on the side. And “reason” gets used that way so often that a lot of people decided the whole tool must be the enemy.

But the real thing — reason — is the quiet gift you already lean on a hundred times a day and never think twice about. You test the chair before you trust it with your weight. You count your change at the store - okay, that's an old example, you use your phone to purchase now :-). You caught the lie about the late show<sup>1</sup>. That's it. That's all it is: *does this hold, or doesn't it?*

So I'm not handing you anything new and frightening. I'm just going to ask you to pick up the tool you already own — and this time use it *on purpose*, on the big ideas that ask you to build a life on them. We're going to lay a worldview on the bench and put two plain questions to it:

- **Does it argue with itself?**
- **Does it fit the world we actually live in?**

And hear me close, because this matters more than anything on the page: I am *not* going to reason you into anything. I couldn't if I tried — and I wouldn't want to, because a person who gets argued *in* can just as easily get argued back *out*. All I'm going to do is put the tool in your hand and stand next to you while you test things. Test the worldviews. Test me. And later, when we come to the Book that claims to be God's own word — you test that too. Write your questions down in your QJ. That is not disrespect. Honest questions are exactly how a person finds out what will hold their weight. So let's take an honest look at what's under our feet.

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<sup>1</sup> The “late show” is an old name for a movie shown late at night on television. In the story, the film did not begin until ten o'clock — so a person who was truly “asleep by nine” could not know how it ended. They would not have been up to watch the late show.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### ON THE WORKBENCH

Alright. You've got the tool in your hand. Let's use it.

But before we lay the first idea on the bench, hear me on *how* we do this — because it would be easy to turn the tool into the very hammer I warned you about.

We are not here to prove everybody else is a fool. Some of the finest minds who ever lived have held the ideas we're about to test. And here is the thing you must not miss: **every one of them got hold of something true.** That's why the idea had any grip in the first place. Nobody falls for a story that's all wrong. People fall for a story that is mostly right about *one* thing — and then asks that one thing to be *everything*.

So we start by tipping our hat to what an idea got right. Then, gently, we ask whether it can carry the whole weight a person needs to stand on. Usually it can't. And when it can't, that is not a moment to gloat. It's a moment to feel for the person standing there, because a foundation that can't hold is a frightening place to live.

Same two questions as before:

- **Does it argue with itself?**
- **Does it fit the world we actually live in?**

Let's lay one down.

### 19.1 “You are nothing but...”

Here’s one of the biggest, and it’s so much in the air you’ve probably breathed it without noticing: *the physical stuff is all there is*. Atoms, chemicals, things you can weigh and measure. Science, given enough time, can explain the whole show. If you can’t put it in a test tube, it isn’t really real. (There’s even a word for science stretched that far — *scientism* — but never mind the label.)

Hat off first. This one got something gloriously right. There *is* a physical world; it *is* real; it runs on an order you can count on; and studying it has given us medicine and bridges and the very screen some of you are reading this on. A person who loves science has hold of a real and good piece of the world. Never let anyone tell you science is the enemy. It isn’t.

The trouble starts when that one true piece is asked to be the *whole* picture. So let’s test it.

**Does it fit the world we actually live in?** If matter is all there is, then you are — in the honest words of one famous scientist — “nothing but a pack of neurons.” Your love is chemistry. Your thoughts are sparks. Right and wrong are leftover instincts that once helped your ancestors survive. That is where the idea goes if you follow it all the way down.

But watch what happens when a real person tries to *live* there. When a baby wraps her hand around her father’s finger, not one father alive actually believes that’s “just dopamine.” He knows he is touching something that matters more than his own life. The worldview says one thing; every waking hour of the person holding it says another. It does not fit the world we actually live in. Something always sticks out of the box — and the thing that sticks out is *you*.

And let me say the tender part plainly, because it’s half the reason we’re writing this book: this is one of the great engines of the fear so many carry today. Tell a young person she is just an animal that will shortly blink out for good — and then wonder why her heart is anxious. Of course it is. She’s been handed a box far too small to live in, and some part of her knows it.

**Does it argue with itself?** Now the second question — quiet, but deadly. If every thought you have is just chemistry doing what chemistry must do, then the thought “*the physical is all there is*” is *also* just chemistry. It wasn’t reasoned. It just... fizzed. So the idea uses your reasoning to tell you that



you don't really reason — you only react. It saws off the very branch it is sitting on. As one thinker asked: why should we trust the thinking of people who tell us there is no such thing as thinking?

So here is where we land — and listen to the *tone* of it. These are not stupid people. Many are brilliant, and they are right about the physical world. They simply took one true thing — matter is real — and asked it to be everything. And it buckled. The box was too small. You stuck out.

## 19.2 “Follow your heart, that’s your truth” — a.k.a. “There are no absolutes”

Now swing clear to the opposite corner of the room. The last idea said the box is everything — only what you can weigh is real. This one says there’s no box at all. You’ve heard it a thousand times, so gentle it sounds like kindness: *there are no absolutes. What’s true for you is true for you, and what’s true for me is true for me. Follow your heart. Live your truth.*

Hat off first — because this one grabbed something real, too. It’s reaching for a good thing: that you are not a nobody, that your inside life matters, that no bully and no crowd gets to stamp out who you are. That’s true. It’s precious. A lot of people said it because they’d been crushed, and it was the first thing that ever told them they mattered.

But can it hold your weight? Let’s ask.

**Does it argue with itself?** Hold the saying up in the light: “*there are no absolutes.*” Look hard at the sentence itself. It isn’t offered as one person’s mood or taste — it’s said flatly, about everybody, everywhere: there are *no* absolutes, none, for anyone. But that is an absolute claim. So if it’s true, then at least one absolute exists — this very statement — and the claim is false. And if it’s false, well, it’s false. There’s no third door. The saying reaches up to knock down every absolute and takes itself out on the backswing. It argues with itself.

**Does it fit the world we actually live in?** Now watch a person actually *live* it — because this is where it really comes apart. Someone tells you, calm and certain, “there are no absolutes; what’s true for you is true for you.” Fine. Then someone steals from him. Or lies about him to cost him his job. Or lays a hand on his child. And in half a second the relativist is gone. He does not say, “Well, stealing is wrong *for me*, but who am I to say it’s wrong for

you?” He says “*That’s wrong!*” — and he means it for everyone, including the thief standing right there disagreeing with him. Every one of us does this. We can *say* “no absolutes” over coffee, but we *live* every hour as though some things are really, truly wrong — not merely unpopular, not merely not-to-our-taste, but wrong for all people, whether they agree or not. The mouth says one thing; the life says another. And when a person’s words and his life do not match, it is the words that are lying.

And there is a quieter trouble underneath, where the fear hides. If truth is only whatever *you* feel, then there is nothing under your feet but you. No floor. No fixed star to steer by. Every choice, every day, you have to invent the whole map from scratch — and when it goes wrong, there is no one to lean on and nothing to blame but yourself. People talk about “your own truth” like it’s freedom. Live in it a while and it is a crushing weight: a whole universe resting on one person who is tired, and young, and not at all sure. No wonder the heart races. You were never built to be your own foundation.

So — hat back on, gently — the good thing this idea reached for is *true*: you matter, you are not nobody. It just cannot be true on its own say-so, and no one alive can actually live as though it were. It needs solid ground to stand on — the very ground the idea took away. Hold that thought. We’ll come back to where such ground might be found.

### 19.3 Your turn

I’ve run two. I’m handing you the third — because a tool you only ever watch someone else use never really becomes yours.

Here’s one that’s everywhere now, dressed in soft and pretty words: *we are all one; you are the universe waking up to itself; the trick is to let go of your little “self” and dissolve into the great All*. You’ll meet it in movies, in studios, on the back of a tea box.

Don’t take my word on it, either way. Take it to the bench. In your QJ, write the two questions at the top of a clean page and work it yourself:

- **Does it fit the world we actually live in?** (*If your “self” is really an illusion to be dissolved — then who is doing the dissolving? And who, exactly, are you loving when you love your mother? Is she an illusion too?*)

- **Does it argue with itself?** (*Someone has to be there to have the experience of oneness. Can the self be nothing, and still be the thing that reaches enlightenment?*)

I've tucked a nudge or two in those parentheses — but the working is yours. Fill the page. And here is the part that matters most: **you do not have to reach a tidy answer today.** You might get halfway and get stuck. Write down *where* you got stuck. That stuck place is not failure. It is the exact spot where the real questions live — and it is yours to keep working, with the Lord if you like, for as long as it takes.

## 19.4 One more thing — the tool cuts both ways

Before we leave the bench, catch this, because one day someone will turn this very tool on *me*, and on everyone who holds what I hold.

I showed you a man who *says* love is only chemicals and then lives every hour as if his daughter is worth more than his own life. Word and life don't match — and that gap told us his stated worldview cannot be lived.

Now flip it. You'll also meet someone who *says* he believes in God, in a life beyond this one, and lives no differently than the man who believes in none of it. Same gap, the other direction — and it tells you something just as plainly: what he *says* and what he truly *believes* do not match. We live out what we actually believe, not what we merely claim.

But here is where people get fooled, so hold the two apart:

- If **nobody** can live an idea — if every last holder has to cheat and borrow, the way the “just chemicals” man does — the trouble is in the **idea**. It is false.
- If **some** live it and this one doesn't — the trouble is in the **person**, not the idea. The idea stands untouched.

So when someone says, “*Don't talk to me about faith — I've known religious people no better than anyone else, and some worse,*” they are half right, and it's worth saying so honestly. Some are. But look at what the tool actually shows: that is a gap in the *people*, not proof the thing is false. The test was never “*does everyone who claims it live it?*” It is “*can it be lived at all — or does it force even its most honest holders to borrow?*” Keep those two apart, and no one will fool you, in either direction.

## 19.5 You're not done — and neither am I

Read this next part slowly. It's the most important thing in the chapter.

I have **not** just proved God to you. Don't let me pretend I did. All I've done — all the tool ever does — is show that these foundations cannot hold your weight. That's it. Where the *something more* comes from, whether it has a name, whether it is a Who — those are real questions, and they are still standing. We'll get to them. But I am not going to hand you the answer like a candy, because an answer you didn't work for won't hold you when the wind blows.

And you may be sitting there thinking, *"I'm not sure that's right. I think he skipped something."*

*Good.* I mean that. Write it down in your QJ — now, before you lose it. Write the exact thing that bothered you. Then go after it, chase it down like the caught lie back at the start. That doubt is not you failing to believe me. That is you *using the tool* — on me. Which is exactly what I asked you to do.

We just looked hard at some of the most popular things people stand on, and found they couldn't hold. Let's keep looking.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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### HE IS NOT SILENT

Let's gather up what the tool has shown us.

Every foundation we put on the bench failed the same two ways — and that is worth stopping over, because it is no accident. Each one **argued with itself**. And each one **could not be lived** — the mouth said one thing while the life said another. Scientism took one real thing, matter, and asked it to be everything — and *you* stuck out of the box. “Your own truth” took another real thing, that you matter, and left you standing on nothing but yourself. Different idols, the same two cracks: each grabbed a piece of the world *inside* the room and tried to build the whole floor out of it. That is not bad luck; it is the fingerprint of a false foundation.

And here's the trouble reason keeps bumping into, the one under all the others. You cannot get *outside your own head* to check whether the picture in there is true. Think about that a moment. Everything you know, you know from in here — your eyes, your ears, your own thinking. You can't step outside yourself to compare your picture with the real thing and make sure they match. Smarter people than you and me chased that problem for three hundred years and kept ending up locked in the same little room: trapped inside the mind.

So if there is a truth bigger than us — a real floor, fixed, the same for you and me and the fellow across the sea — we are *not going to manufacture it in here*. We can't. It would have to come from **outside**. Somebody outside the room would have to *say* it to us.

Read that again, because it's the whole hinge of this chapter: **a truth from outside us could only reach us if Someone outside us spoke.**

Now. That leaves exactly one kind of thing worth looking hard at. Not

another clever idea cooked up inside somebody's head — we've seen where those end. Something that *claims to come from outside the room altogether*. A word that says: *I am not human opinion. I am from the One who made you*.

And there is such a claim. There's a Book that says exactly that about itself — that it is not the wisdom of the world but a word from God. That's a bold thing to claim. Most people have never once stopped to notice how bold. Even a famous unbeliever admitted, almost against his will, that the whole idea of a truth bigger than our own opinions only makes sense if the world was made by Someone who Himself spoke.

Here's why that matters for the floor you've been missing. "Your own truth" couldn't hold you *because* it came from inside you — it was yours, and mine was mine, and there was no ground underneath either. But a word from outside all of us is the one thing that *could* be a fixed floor — an absolute — precisely because it doesn't belong to you or me. It isn't your truth or my truth. It claims to be *the* word, from the One who made us both.

Now hear me, and hear me well, because this is exactly where people expect the hammer to come down. I am **not** telling you to believe the Book because it says to. That would be the club with the nice word painted on it, and I promised you I'd never swing it. I'm telling you something much smaller and much more honest: of everything we've laid on the bench, this is the *one* thing that even *could* be the ground you're looking for — because it's the one thing that claims to come from outside the box we're all trapped in.

So do with it exactly what you've done with everything else. Put it on the bench. Question it — hard. Does it argue with itself? Does it fit the world we actually live in? Write every doubt in your QJ and go after it. And I'll tell you a secret about this particular Book: it is not afraid of your questions. It says "*come, let us reason together.*" It says "*taste and see.*" A word that flinched at your questions wouldn't be worth standing on. This one holds still and lets you test it.

So that's what comes next. Not argued into it, not clubbed into it — you look at this one with your own eyes, and you choose.

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## CHAPTER TWENTYONE

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### ONLY THE ROCK

Let's continue from *He Is Not Silent* and do the testing.

The others we knocked out fast — you watched them go, each cracking the same two ways. And once a house has already washed away, there is no sense walking through its rooms one by one. Two questions, done.

That is the whole method, and it will serve you the rest of your life. Most ideas you can test with those two quick questions — *does it argue with itself?* *does it fit the world we actually live in?* — and most fall right there. The rare idea that survives both has earned a longer look: you carry it across all five of life's big questions and ask whether its answers fit reality at every one. Two questions to clear the ground fast; five to examine what is still standing.

This Book is different in kind. It does not claim to come from inside the room at all — it claims to come from *outside*, where alone a real floor could be. (Others claim an outside source too — take every one of them to this same bench.) Here I will walk the one I have found holds. That is the kind of claim that earns the longer look we have been saving. We are going to lay it across all five of the big questions we have carried the whole way up the hill: where did we come from, where are we going, why is the world such a mess, can anything be done about it, and what is my part? If it is going to be the fixed floor, it has to fit reality at every one of them.

Now, fair warning: this is *not* the test itself — I am only greasing the wheels, walking you past each question to show where this word has *room*. The real testing is yours, and it can be done — most people settle their foundation well before life is half over. Most ideas fall fast, the way “no absolutes” fell; a hard look and the crack shows itself. This one takes longer, because it is true and it cuts to the core of our hearts: *is the Bible even true?* is a lot of reading —

but the evidence is there for anyone who goes looking. What takes a lifetime is not the testing. It is the *walk* that comes after — I am still learning about Him, the way I am still learning about the girl I have loved for fifty years. Now let me hand these back to you, one at a time.

*Where did we come from?* This word says: you were made. On purpose, by Someone, and loved before you drew your first breath. Remember scientism? It told you that you were an accident of matter — and then *you*, the one standing there asking the question, stuck right out of the box, because an accident does not ache for meaning. This answer does not leave you sticking out. It has room for the very thing you are.

*Where are we going?* Not back to dirt, and not snuffed out like a candle. Home — to the One who made you, if you choose.

*Why is the world such a mess?* Here is the one that stops people cold, because most stories cannot hold it. This word says the mess is real — not an illusion, not merely chemistry — and it names the cause: we turned away from the One who made us — the One who is literally love. We chose our own way, without that true and solid love. The result is that hate has grown in our hearts. The man who walks into a room and shoots strangers — you did not have to be taught that was evil. This answer tells you *why* your gut was right.

*Can anything be done about it?* Yes. And here is the part no other story even attempts. The One outside the room did not shout instructions through the wall. He came *in*. He took the mess into His own body and did something about it Himself. The nail-scarred hand — that is the whole of it.

*What is my part?* Ah, that is the beauty. You have a part to play — a part that will make the world a better place. This One who took the mess upon Himself for us asks if you would like to walk with Him, trusting that together you and He can bring God's love back into the world.

If you are not familiar with the story, this may not make much sense yet. But we all love a good story — so take the time to find out who the One and Only Hero is. It's all in the Book.

Now, I have laid a lot of foundations on this bench over a long life. Let me tell you the plain truth, as one man who has done the work: every other one cracks somewhere — takes a real piece of the world and cannot hold the rest. You'll not find one that holds. But do not you dare take that on my say-so. That would make me your programmer, and I told you at the very start I will



not be that. Put the others on the bench yourself. Write them in your QJ and go after them.

And I will tell you one more thing about this Book that surprised me. It is not only that it answers the questions well. It claims to be the *only* one that finally can — that there is no other name, no other floor under the whole world. That is either the most arrogant sentence ever written, or it is true, and there is no third door. Which is worth *testing* — not swallowing, and not spitting out.

## 21.1 This is a choice, not a leap

Here is where you may be bracing for me to say it: “*so now, take it on faith.*”

I am not going to say that — at least not the way you have heard it. Somewhere we picked up the idea that faith means squeezing your eyes shut and jumping. Blind faith. That is the opposite of everything we have just done. We did not close our eyes; we opened them. We looked at the evidence, one question at a time.

Real faith is not a leap in the dark. It is a *choice* — made with your eyes open, on the evidence you have weighed.

Remember, faith is life’s concrete. See (*What it means — the bottom of everything is faith*).

And here is the thing I most want you to see.

The tragedy of most people is not that they choose wrong. It is that they never really choose at all.

A foundation gets handed to them — by the crowd, by the culture, by the glowing screen — and they stand on it their whole lives and never once look down to see what it is. You have looked. That alone already makes you rare. Now the choice is actually yours to make.

## 21.2 Why the ground stops shaking

Do you remember, back at the bottom of the hill, that anxiety nobody could name? Children today more worried than the hospital patients of long ago, and all our information not helping one bit? (*The Rise.*)

That anxiety is not some chemical riddle to be medicated away — at least, not the kind I mean here. There *is* a chemical kind, and it is real: a physical issue that needs treating like a broken leg or a ruptured appendix, and it should carry no more stigma than either of those. But it is a different thing than what we are talking about. The kind I mean is what the mind does when what you believe does not match the world in front of you — psychologists call that clash *cognitive dissonance*. Picture someone pointing at a plainly blue wall, calling it pink, and everyone around you nodding along. That jangling, can't-let-it-rest feeling is your mind refusing to settle on something that does not fit. Now stretch that from a wall to your whole life — to the answers you carry for the biggest questions — and you have named the low, grinding unease so many people live under. It is the feeling of standing on sand: a floor that does not match the world it sits in, and could give way at any moment.

Jesus once told a small story about just this. Two men built houses. One built on sand, one built on rock. From the street, on a fair day, the two houses looked the same. Then the rain came down, and the rivers rose, and the winds blew and beat against both houses. The one on the sand washed away. The one on the rock stood.

I told you earlier what it was like when I finally rose up off my knees — as if the whole shaking mountain had turned to solid rock beneath me, and I could hold my arms out in the wind and just feel the sun. I did not understand it then. I do now, thanks to Perry's model. It was not that my questions had stopped — I am continually turning up new things, some deeper reason *why* I hold what I hold. But the answers themselves — my answers to those five great questions — quit moving. Perry saw the same pattern: once a person truly commits, the foundation is set, and what follows is refinement, not re-laying the floor. That is the whole of it. You are either sliding forever on shifting sand, or you are standing on the Rock — and the Word of God calls what the Rock gives you *the peace that passes all understanding*. The ground stopped shaking for me not because I stopped asking, but because I was, at last, standing on something *true*. And true things hold when the wind blows.

Of everything I have ever laid across that bench, the only one left standing is the Rock — the One and Only. The Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is where the long road with the machine finally comes home. Stand on the One who made the minds, the math, and the machines, and you can pick up any tool in the world — even this newest, most persuasive one — and never once be afraid of it.

Before you step, let me say plainly the thing this whole book has been leaning on without ever quite spelling it out. All along I have asked you to do three things with this One: to question Him, to sit down at His feet, and to walk with Him. Notice what those three have in common — you cannot do a single one of them with a dead man. You do not cross-examine a corpse. You do not sit at the feet of a man two thousand years in the ground and wait for him to answer. You do not walk a road beside someone who is not there. Every one of them is a thing you do with Someone alive — and that is not a slip of the tongue, it is the whole claim. The Rock is not a fine idea for you to file away on a shelf. He is a Person, He is alive, and He answers. And no, I will not ask you to take even that on my say-so. One ordinary day I asked Him, straight out, whether He was real — and He answered me. I'll tell you the whole of it in the very next pages. Stepping onto the Rock was never about gripping a better belief. It is reaching for a living hand.

## **21.3 You cannot know it from the bench alone**

I can show you, on the bench, that this Book does not fall down like the others. What I *cannot* show you from the bench is that it will hold *you* — your weight, your life, your very worst day. No one can show you that from a workbench. That you only ever find out one way: by stepping onto it. And the Book knows this about itself. It does not say “*prove Me.*” It says “*taste and see.*”

Which is really a question of *when* — of the day a person finally steps. Before I ask you about your own stepping, though, let me tell you about mine — the long climb it took me, and the day I finally stood. (*My Own Learning Curve*)

So keep that QJ close. You will have a hundred more questions, and you should — chase down every one of them; this Book has never yet been afraid of a single question. (And if it helps to know you are in good company: a man I know once sat down and gathered a hundred and twelve of the most-asked questions about the Bible into one book, and answered them one at a time. A hundred and twelve. You are not the first to ask, and you will not be the last.)

Everyone is standing on something. You have now watched the others crack, and started to consider one that claims to stand no matter what.



## MY OWN LEARNING CURVE

So let me tell you about mine.

I did a great deal of asking on the way up that hill — but I was not the only one asking. As I read about Jesus in the Bible, He kept challenging me right back, with questions I could not understand. No one had ever taught me the importance of asking questions, or of daring to question authority. In fact, I had no notion of authority at all, beyond knowing that if a police officer pulled you over, you were in trouble.

You already know the shape of me from back on the hill (*The Rise*) — the numbskull in a family of geniuses, the slow one who finally planted his flag in math. I was the first in that family to start seriously looking into this Jesus, and, as you can imagine, no one took the numbskull seriously.

But my computer logic went this way:

- This Jesus guy says He is God and that He is alive and that He wants to be part of my life.
- If that is true,
  - then I'd be an idiot not to check it out because this Guy healed people, brought some back to life, fed thousands with a few fish and even rose from the dead.
- And then if He really is who He says He is,
  - wouldn't I want to be His friend?
  - wouldn't I want to know Him?

**But was it true?!**

Lots of people claim crazy things that are not true. Why should I believe this Jesus?

Thus began my journey up the slope that would take **18 years to answer**.

You already know I spent those first eleven years questioning God. Actually, I hammered God with questions, so many questions, including critical ones we should all ask, like:

- Is the Bible really God's word?
- Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
- Is Jesus really alive?
- Can Jesus really change my life?

In fact, those first two questions should be on the top of your **QJ** list. If you can prove the Bible is not God's word or that Jesus did not rise from the dead, the game is over. Just a small segue here, as you look for answers, there are others who have journeyed this way and written about it. They can help you see what questions researchers ask and the kind of things you need to examine. I have put two of these books in (*Appendix: A Few Guides for the Road*).

But let's get back to what happened in my life.

In those 11 years I not only asked questions, tons of questions, but like a good lawyer or scientist, I dug for answers.

And God was faithful and gave me answers, solid, logical answers. But no matter how much the answers showed me that Jesus is exactly who He said He is, I still struggled with giving Jesus my entire life and walking with Him as I should.

In that 11th year I was working on my doctorate in Mathematics Education. The university was one and a half hours from my house, so I drove three hours a day. During that time I would often sing and worship God.

One day, and I can take you to the exact spot on the road, as I was singing to God, I just stopped and said, "Are You real?" And He answered back so clearly that I looked around the vehicle to make sure I was alone, "I AM. Are you?"

Wow, God challenged me once again!

That was the end of doubting God, but it took me seven years to answer Him.

My dad is laughing from heaven at his numbskull son because it was a couple of decades before I realized that God had used “I AM.” This was not only an affirmation that He is surely real, but this was the name He gave when Moses asked what he should tell the people when they would inquire who had sent Moses. God responded, “I AM has sent me to you!” in Exodus 3:14.

God’s timing has always been perfect in my life. When I finally did realize He had used “I AM,” it was a time when I needed that type of encouragement.

So the last seven years of that climb were interesting. I knew God was real and it showed in my life in the confidence that I had. Still God’s question gnawed at me.

Was I real? What does it even mean to be real?

Sometimes life just seems like the feelings you get. How nice it is to enjoy a good meal or have sex with your wife. Oh, boy, I’m going to get myself into trouble again! First I compare my wife to chocolate and now to a meal. On the serious side, here is another huge place where Jesus has so impacted my life. Without Christ we really cannot love our wives or anyone, even ourselves. This quest for my own reality brought thoughts like this to my mind, thoughts I’d need to wrestle with.

Meanwhile my life was quite full and exciting. The Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) International College of Technology (EICT), which God had allowed me to found, was growing. I had also started a new ministry for SIM called SIM-TEC (Technology and Education for Christ). SIM-TEC’s goal was to assist EICT and to start other colleges in order to help people use computers and to know Jesus.

But life is so much more than the work we do and the things we accomplish and the way people think about us. Life is really about relationships: relationships with our spouse if we have one, with our children if we have them, with our family, with our friends, with our co-workers, and ultimately with God. This is what life is.

Each of our days is filled with the work we do, the way we treat others, and the way we are thinking. Our feelings bounce around.

I saw myself as a faithful servant of Christ. I tried hard to treat my wife and family right. Those who worked with me really seemed to enjoy it.

Yet there was a battle in my soul that I somehow kept buried. I had sinful thoughts that I supposed I could control.

The day I realized that I could not control them, that I was a slave to them and no one even knew. As I've said, it was **the lowest time of my life**, even lower than the cancer battle - (*The Emptied Hand*). Answering God's questions brought me to the very bottom of my soul.

1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I confessed my sin to others and then I confessed it to God. My order may not have been right, but confessing it to others brought me to the bottom. I was crushed and empty. I would have welcomed death. As I turned my eyes to God and confessed, my soul burst forth to God, "**I am real!**" It is a moment I'll never forget. I felt invincible!

We were made in the image of God. We were meant to be so much more than we settle for in this world. When we ask Christ into our lives, a transformation process begins to bring us to what we were really meant to be. This transformation is a lifelong process with milestones along the way.

God had helped me to face my sin and my ugliness. He had pushed me to where I needed to grow. I didn't know it then, but I had reached the top of Perry's hill. I was committed to my worldview. I knew, without a doubt, who Jesus Christ is and who I am. I know your next question, "Do you ever have doubts?" Sure I do. But they are doubts about whether or not I'm on target, which do not last long because I turn to Jesus and ask Him to guide me. Other doubts are from the Evil One, so I hold up my shield of faith and deflect them (Ephesians 6:16).

You see, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." 2 Timothy 1:12

So you see, faith is a choice and I have made my choice. I put my trust in Christ and He has been faithful to me, teaching me from His word and speaking into my life.

My prayer now is that I will finish the race well. I cannot do it on my own. I can only run this race in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That was when I was 37. Since then I've been perfect and had no troubles - NOT!



When we reach the top of the hill, our commitment settles onto our faith, and the journey changes. In some ways the real battle just begins. Let me be clear about one thing, though, because it took me years to see it and it matters: this was not the day I was born again. I had given my life to Christ long before, back as a young man. This was the day I planted my feet, once and for all, on the worldview I would stake my life on. From there God simply kept doing what He had been doing all along — conforming me, a day at a time, to the image of Christ, the Truly Perfect One.

That was my climb, and my stepping.

With all this talk about climbing, the idea of timing is what we will turn to next.



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## CHAPTER TWENTYTHREE

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### TIMING

So when is the time for all of this?

I told you back on the hill that the questioning years run long. For a lot of us the searching goes right on into our mid-thirties before the ground feels solid — I have watched people study and gather knowledge clear up to thirty-five and still not have settled the big questions. (Look back at *The Rise* if you want to see that climb again.)

Now here is where somebody gets the wrong idea. They hear “the questions take until your mid-thirties,” and they think, *Well then, I’ll wait. I’ll trust Jesus once I’ve got it all figured out.* That is exactly backwards, and I want to show you why with the truest picture I know.

### 23.1 You don’t wait to start dating

Nobody says, “I think I’ll wait until I’m thirty-five to start looking for the person I’ll spend my life with.” You start looking when you *want* someone to spend your life with. You don’t wait until you understand marriage to get married — nobody understands marriage before they’re in one.

Let me tell you how it went for me, because our relationship with Christ is so well depicted by our relationship with our wife.

First, there is somebody you notice. There was this very pretty girl in the school hallways, and there was something about her that drew me. That is usually how it starts — something attracts us. Maybe it is looks. That is often the first thing. But let me make this broader than the Western idea of romance, because it doesn’t have to start with you spotting her across a room. In places and times a marriage is arranged, and the attraction comes from a

different angle — a family, a community, sometimes the plain fact that *she* is the one who came toward *you*. However it begins, something turns your heart in that direction.

So I asked Boppy — that's Nancy — out for a date. I was so scared. But I had to start somewhere.

Then comes the part everybody forgets to notice: you *spend time*. One date turned into a second and a third and so on. You get to know each other, mostly by talking — communication is the best way to learn who a person really is and how to walk together. And over that time, love grows.

And at some point, you make a commitment, not to be confused with the commitment the brain makes to a worldview in your 30s. For a man and a woman we declare it with a marriage, but by then it has usually grown over years. On July 31, 1982 I made a solemn commitment to Nancy, and she made the same to me — and at that point a miracle happened. The two of us became one.

Here is the question I want you to sit with: *should I have waited until I knew Nancy as well as I know her now before I married her?* Of course not. That would have meant missing the whole beautiful journey — and I wouldn't know her the way I do now, because you only come to know a person like that by being *united* with them. I knew I wanted to spend my life with her long before our wedding. We waited a while only because I couldn't support her until I had a job. Not because I was still making up my mind.

## 23.2 It is the very same with Jesus

Watch how every piece of that fits.

Something draws you to the King. At university, I met a love I had never believed was real: the All-Powerful loved me so much He died for me. *What kind of love could this be?* That caught my attention. It made me think that a world living like Jesus would be beautiful. Peter's words that Jesus is the only One who has the words of life (John 6:68) really sunk in. Fear, awe, love, or evidence — no matter what is drawing you, it works the same way it did in that school hallway. Something turns your heart toward Him.

Then you start spending time with Him. You open His Word and read. I tell people to keep a Jesus journal — read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John over and over, not as a scholar but as an observer, and write down what you see

about this Man. Because He is alive, a relationship starts to grow, built on communication and love, and you ask Him your questions and He answers. This is the only book where the Author is with you while you read it.

And at some point you make the commitment. You decide you want Him as your Lord. We even have a ceremony to declare it, called baptism — but like a marriage, the real commitment has usually been growing for a while underneath. For some people it happens on a day they remember for the rest of their lives. For others it grows so gradually they couldn't give you the date, and it is every bit as real. This is why the Bible calls the Church the *Bride of Christ*. That is not a pretty figure of speech God reached for. It is the truest thing He could say about it.

Then you grow together — and yes, that includes going right on asking questions. At the wedding, and at the baptism, you do not fully know your spouse or your Lord. You learn each other as the years pass. My relationship with Christ grew exactly like my relationship with Nancy: I had so much to learn, so I asked Him tons of questions. Keep that QJ of yours going. The questions don't stop when you commit; they finally have Someone worth asking.

## **23.3 So when should you trust Him?**

As soon as you see that you desire Jesus.

Not once you've answered every question.

In the mid-thirties your mind commits to a faith base. But the mind is not waiting until the mid-thirties to choose its answers to those questions — that often happens in the teens. And, as I have made very clear, without the person even knowing it.

You have learned a way to organize your questions and examine your worldview. Gathering the evidence does not take until your thirties. If you are diligent, you can do it in your teens. And many Christians do not use such a systematic way to decide. That does not make them less Christian, and if they desire, Christ will help them grow powerfully without this methodology I'm explaining. I know many stronger in Christ than me who have not taken this approach. And here is the reason: understanding doesn't come from knowledge alone. It comes from the *doing*. A coach can show a wrestler a move a hundred times, but until the boy practices it, he doesn't own it. The only way to truly know Jesus is to start walking with Him.

## 23.4 But what about all the bad marriages?

I hear you. You look around and you see marriages falling apart everywhere, including among many Christians, and part of you thinks, *why would I commit to anything?* We live in a world of boys and girls — plenty of choosing, precious little commitment. And here is the hard truth about those broken marriages: you **cannot** build a relationship on emotions, because emotions come and go. Beauty comes out of a relationship *only* where there is commitment — the daily choice, every moment, to stay faithful. Build on feelings and it crumbles. Build on commitment and you grow rich.

I go a bit awry here in answering a question about commitment rather than one of worldview. This commitment issue is worldview-neutral. People from many different worldviews will make commitments that last. But that commitment is becoming less and less common is not a reason to ignore a worldview, but rather to look into your worldview and see if it is worth a commitment.

## 23.5 Why this is different when it is God

Every human marriage is two people who can fail each other, and too often do. But when you are dealing with God, it is a whole different ballgame. **Jesus can be trusted.** That is the entire point. A spouse might let you down; He never will — “I will never leave you or forsake you,” He said. And everything we study only confirms it: His is the one worldview that actually matches the way the world really works. He is the only One who answers the great questions — where we came from, where we’re going, why the world is such a mess, whether it can be fixed, and what our part is — in a way that lines up with reality and gives the mind peace. Every other answer leaves you with that low grinding dissonance (*Only the Rock*), because the programming doesn’t fit the world. And He is the only One who will not control you. He hands you your freedom and lets you choose.

So do not wait. Do not stand at the bottom of the hill telling yourself you’ll trust Him once the climb is finished. Start the walk now, and do your climbing *with Him*. Seek Him and you will find Him — He promised it Himself. Ask Him into your life. Then pursue the relationship with all your heart, questions and all.

You will not be disappointed.

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## CHAPTER TWENTYFOUR

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### THE ONE THING

We finished the *Wisdom* chapter with a story about Solomon and a question for your **QJ** on how to get wisdom. I have purposely not given you answers throughout the book. In this chapter, I will point you to how to get wisdom, but working on the question will require much more than reading this chapter. This chapter just points you in the right direction.

#### 24.1 Two Sisters

Let me tell you about two sisters.

A man everyone wanted to be near came to visit two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha did what most of us would do — she threw herself into serving: cooking, arranging, running herself ragged to get everything just right. Mary did something that must have looked almost lazy: she sat down on the floor at the visitor's feet and listened to Him talk. Martha got upset — *tell her to come help me!* — and the visitor, who was Jesus, gave the gentlest correction in the whole Book: “*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen the good portion.*”

*One thing is needful.* Not the many things — the *one*. And the one thing was to sit at His feet.

Hold that picture, because the world — and your own good, hard-working heart — is going to pull you toward Martha every single day. There will always be more to *do*: more skills to stack, more to produce, more cleverness to chase (and the machine has made that chase cheaper than ever). None of it is bad. But not one bit of it is the *one thing*. The part that stays precious — the part that *aims* all your cleverness at something good — grows in exactly

one spot: down on the floor, at His feet, in His Word. A real relationship, kept up on purpose, day after day. The Book has always said as much: *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives it generously.* Not a course to pass. A Person to be near.

Here is what that actually looks like, in plain daily terms:

- **A habit, not a heroic burst.** A little time with Jesus and His Word most every day, kept up over years — the way you keep up with a friend you could not live without. It compounds quietly, the way a tree adds one ring a year until one day it is a strong tree.
- **Start young if you still can.** A habit planted at sixteen has decades to root before the world crowds in with its own routines. But if you are older, start today. The best time to plant was years ago; the second-best time is right now.
- **If reading is hard, do not let that stop you for one second.** Reading is hard for more people every year, and here it does not matter one bit. *Listen* to it. Hear it read aloud. Soak in it. Wisdom was never about decoding a page cleanly — a person who struggles to read can be made every bit as wise as any scholar, because the thing that makes you wise is not your reading speed. It is the company you keep.

You will not feel it happening. That is the strange part. You keep the company, week after unremarkable week, and then one day you look back and find you have quietly become someone you could never have engineered — someone with a steady aim the machine could not give you and the university could not teach you.

And hear me on this, because it is the whole heart of this little book — an old Scottish writer I love said it better than I ever could:

“I believe that no teacher should strive to make people think as he thinks, but to lead them to the living Truth, to the Master Himself, of whom alone they can learn anything, who will make them in themselves know what is true by the very seeing of it.”  
— George MacDonald, *Creation in Christ*

I never wanted to make you wise the way *I* am, or make you think the way I think. I only ever wanted to walk you to the One who can make you wise — the one place wisdom actually grows — and then get out of the way. He



does the rest. He always has.

For your **QJ**: *Who is this Jesus?*

Two fun things:

- Use AI to find out how Solomon got his wisdom.
- See if you can get ahold of Michael Green's *Who is this Jesus?* book. It is a short, fun read that will **start** — but not finish — your own answer to the same question in your **QJ**.



## APPENDIX: PUTTING THE MACHINE TO WORK ON A WORLDVIEW

One quick word: this is an appendix on purpose. The book itself is done — think of this as a practical tool to keep in your back pocket and pull out whenever some new -ism comes at you. It leans on everything we walked through, so it lands best once you've been through the whole book.

By now you know two things about the machine: how it works, and that it carries no worldview of its own while quietly wearing everyone else's. So let me show you a *good* use for it — one where it truly helps your search instead of quietly taking it over.

You will meet worldviews your whole life. An *ideology* — that is just a fancy word for a packaged worldview, an “-ism” somebody is selling — will come at you from a professor, a video, a friend, a political party. Back in the book we learned to set a worldview on the workbench and test it. The machine can be a wonderful helper at that bench: it is fast, it is tireless, and it is stuffed full of what people have actually said. Here is how to use it without handing it the wheel.

**First, ask it to lay the worldview out — fairly.** Say something like: “*Take this worldview — [scientism, or ‘you make your own truth,’ or any -ism]. State its honest answers to these five questions: where did we come from, where are we going, why is the world such a mess, can it be fixed, and what is my part? Give it its strongest, fairest form.*” Making it state the *best* version keeps you honest — you are not going to knock over a strawman and call it a victory.

**Second — and this part is yours — run the test.** You remember the two quick questions: *Does it argue with itself? Does it fit the world we actually live in?* Ask the machine to help you find the strongest objections *and* the

strongest defenses. Then *you* weigh them. You can even tell it, “Now argue the other side” — that is a fine trick for catching its lean, because it will argue any side with equal confidence.

**Third, write what you find in your QJ.** Not the machine’s verdict — *yours*. The questions it stirred up in you. The cracks you spotted. The places you still need to dig.

Now the guardrails, because this is exactly where people hand over the wheel without noticing.

- **The machine is your assistant, never your judge.** It has no stake and no worldview; it will defend an idea and then demolish it in the next breath, just as smoothly. So never ask it “*which worldview is true?*” and pocket the answer. That is letting a thing with nobody home decide the biggest question of your life. Ask it to gather, to lay out, to object — and *you* decide.
- **It is biased, and it is sometimes flat wrong.** Check it. It may soften the fashionable view and slant the unfashionable one. This is simply “question all authority,” pointed at the screen.
- **Use it to sharpen your question, not to skip asking it.** The work is still yours. A good question is the whole game, and the machine cannot ask it *for* you.

And the last one, the one that holds all the others up:

**The machine is not the answer. It never was, and it never will be.** At its very best it can clear the brush — line up the options, surface the objections, save you a hundred hours of hunting. It cannot bring you to the truth. Only One can do that. So use the tool to clear the path if you like — and then get down on your knees and take the real questions to the One who is actually alive to answer them. The machine can help you *ask* better. Jesus is the One who *answers*.

For your **QJ**: *What is one big question I’ve been letting the machine settle for me — and what would it take to carry that question, instead, to the One who is actually alive to answer it?*

## APPENDIX: ONE AT A TIME, WITH HIM

Back in the *QJ* chapter I told you the plain, practical secret to a quiet mind: you can only do one thing at a time, so get everything else out of your head and give the one thing in front of you your whole self. That is true, it works, and you could stop right there and be better off for it.

But I have been walking with Someone for over forty years, and I cannot leave it there — because the best part of my life is the part that chapter left out. I do not just do one thing at a time. I do one thing at a time **with Jesus**.

Let me tell you what that actually looks like, because it is not sentimental and it is not a slogan.

Here is something nobody likes to say out loud: life is one trouble after another. Oh, there is real joy in it — deep joy, and laughter, and gifts I never earned. But if you are honest, there is always another trouble coming down the road. Always. For a long stretch of my life, that used to wear me right down.

What changed was not the troubles. What changed is that I stopped facing them alone. Now, when the next one shows up, I have a habit — almost a reflex by now. I say, *“Okay, Lord, how are we going to work on this one?”* Just the one. Not the whole pile. This one, in front of me, with Him.

Some troubles do not get fixed in an afternoon. Some are years long — I have carried a few for decades. But I am not carrying them alone, and He does not hand me the whole mountain at once. He gives me the one portion that is mine to do today and carries the rest Himself. And the strangest thing happens along the way: the trouble itself starts to have something good folded into it. I could never have planned it. Problems, I have learned, keep bearing fruit I never saw coming.

I do not pretend I can do any of this on my own. I have tried; it does not go well. I need the Holy Spirit to be the man I was actually made to be — not the man I can white-knuckle myself into being for a week and a half.

There is a line in the book of Hebrews that tells you to run your race “*fixing your eyes on Jesus*.” Not on the finish line, not on the trouble, not on yourself — on Him. And when I keep my eyes there, something happens that used to be impossible for a born worrier like me: when I am handed a thing that looks flat-out undoable — something I have no business pulling off — I do not panic anymore. I get almost *curious*. Even glad. Because I have watched Him do it enough times that now I mostly just wonder, *how is He going to pull this one off — and how is He going to let me be part of it?*

That is the whole of it. One thing at a time was the peace. One thing at a time *with Him* is the life.

For your **QJ**: *What is the one trouble in front of me right now — and have I asked Him how we’re going to work on it, or am I still trying to carry the whole pile by myself?*

## APPENDIX: A FEW GUIDES FOR THE ROAD

### 27.1 Trust First

Who do you take advice from?

If you are wise, you take advice from people you trust.

Remember, trust is the ability to hold weight — and that means you must have tested them.

For example, Dave O'Brien moved into the house next to ours. I really didn't like Dave. He was a know-it-all. If you had trouble with your car, he told you how to fix it. If you had trouble with your computer, he knew about that. You could ask him anything about the Bible and he'd have an answer. However, after living by him for quite some time, I realized he really did know those things and much more. In fact, I was in a Sunday school class where there were Greek and Bible professors. Dave had forgotten he was filling in, so he wasn't prepared. He said, "Do you have any questions?" What a bold move. And a tough one came at him, which he explained. It took about 40 minutes but everyone walked away satisfied.

But knowledge is not enough when it comes to the Bible. Satan knows the Bible. There are a lot of people who know the Bible but do not live like Jesus. What is really important is that you see them living the Christian life. Do they pursue perfection while acknowledging their great need for the Holy Spirit's help to live in a way that honors God? Do they care for the widows and the orphans and the hurting people, or do they judge them?

At one point, our organization needed a leader in the country we were living in. It was a very tough environment. No one wanted to be the leader. They

begged Dave to take the role. Trouble came between our organization and the denomination we served. Both our organization and the church beat up on Dave. It was horrible to watch. Dave was praying fervently and lovingly for both. I asked Dave why he didn't just leave. His answer was that they were the Bride of Christ and he was their servant. It mattered not how they beat him, he would not forsake them. This was the kind of man I wanted to be like.

Well, that is first hand. I was his neighbor. But what about George MacDonald, an old writer I love? He said a teacher should never try to make people think the way *he* thinks; he should point them to the living Truth and then get out of the way. This really impacted my life. I quote MacDonald all the time, but he lived from 1824 to 1905. I never saw his life. How come I trust him?

- First, do his or her writings agree with or contradict the Bible?
- Does it help me to grow closer to Jesus?
- What does my mentor(s) think of him or her?
- Do others I respect also respect this person?

I wrote this book for my family and students, so I have compiled a list of writers I highly respect in case you want to check them out.

## 27.2 “What is the Bible even about?”

Start with **BibleProject** (Tim Mackie and Jon Collins), at [BibleProject.com](http://BibleProject.com). Short, free videos that walk the whole Bible as one connected story leading to Jesus — the very thing this book keeps pointing at. If you take only one thing off this page, take this.

## 27.3 “But did it really happen?”

**J. Warner Wallace**, *Cold-Case Christianity*. He was a detective who cracked cold murder cases, and he turned those same tools on the question of whether the Gospels are true. Very readable. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* by **Lee Strobel**.

When you want to go deeper into the New Testament itself, that is where careful scholars like **N.T. Wright** and **R.T. France** will repay a slower, harder



read.

## 27.4 “I have a whole pile of hard questions about the Bible”

See if **Michael Green** has written on your question. He is fantastic. For example, his book *But Don't All Religions Lead to God?*

Good. Bring them. **David O'Brien**, *Today's Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties*, gathered more than a hundred of the most common ones into a single handbook and takes each one seriously — proof the Book has never once been afraid of an honest question.

## 27.5 “How do I tell a true worldview from a false one?”

The gentle door in is **C.S. Lewis**, *Mere Christianity*. When you are ready to work harder, **Nancy Pearcey's** *Finding Truth* hands you a real set of tools for testing any worldview, and **Francis Schaeffer** and **Os Guinness** will show you how we got where we are.

## 27.6 “What about science, doubt, and this AI business?”

**John Lennox** — a mathematician who takes both the science and the faith seriously — is your man, and his *2084* looks the machine straight in the eye.

## 27.7 “I don't want an argument. I want something for my soul.”

Then sit with **Thomas à Kempis**, *The Imitation of Christ*, a few pages at a time. **George MacDonald**, **Michael Green**, **Dallas Willard** and **John Wesley** have blessed me over and over.

## 27.8 “Can I just get it in a story?”

Here is where George MacDonald shines. Fantasy and novels that have impacted the world. An overstatement? Not if you have watched *Narnia* by C.S. Lewis or Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Both of these amazing writers consider MacDonald their master. The great thing is that all MacDonald’s books are free at [Project Gutenberg](#). If you like romance, start with *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*.

Yes. My own daughter, **E.P. Marcellin**, writes novels that carry more truth than a shelf of arguments — and I have a hard time putting them down. Two more good wells while you are at it: [truthrising.com](#), and my own family-and-students site, [Baba.Computer](#).

Do not let this page turn into one more pile of homework. The goal was never that you read a lot of books. It was that you keep *asking* — and that you carry the questions to the One who is alive and answers. The reading only helps if it drives you back to Him.

For your **QJ**: *Of all my questions, which one is loud enough right now to chase down — and who on this page might help me chase it?*

## 27.9 Authors & AI

As you build your own list of those you trust, something cool you can do with AI is:

- Give the list of mentors to AI.
- Ask how your mentors would answer the question.

It lets you almost have a conversation with them, if your AI has enough background. For example, Claude was trained on John Lennox’s 2084 book so I can ask pretty detailed questions.

With that in mind, remember we talked about AI bias. The AI itself will tell you its bias, so you should check on that when working with your mentors.

## APPENDIX: AN INDEX OF IDEAS

An old-fashioned index listed *words*, so you could find a page again. The search box does that now. This one lists the thing a search cannot hand you: the *ideas* this book is built from — the thoughts we actually chased — so you can find one again by what it *meant*, not by the words it happened to wear. Each points you to the chapters where it is raised, tested, or paid off.

*(This is a map of the thinking, not a summary. When an idea sends you to several chapters, that is usually a thread worth pulling all the way through.)*

### 28.1 A

**AI — what it actually is: a next-word guesser, not a knower.** It hands you the words people usually say, which is not the same as truth, and not the same as understanding anything at all. → *What AI Is*

**AI has no worldview of its own — but it wears everyone else's.** No self, no stake, so no worldview; yet soaked in the crowd's, stitched with its makers' rules, and quick to mirror yours back. → *Does the Machine Have a World-view?*

**AI is not the answer; Jesus is.** The machine can clear the brush and sharpen your question; it can never bring you to the truth. → *Working with AI · Wisdom · Putting the Machine to Work · The One Thing*

**Anxiety that no one can name.** The low, grinding unease of standing on ground that does not fit the world — cognitive dissonance; sand under the feet. → *The Rise · On the Workbench · Only the Rock*

**Authority — question all of it.** Professors, Socrates, Freud, Mao, Jesus,

me — and now the machine: weigh every voice so none gets to program you.  
→ *The Rise · Working with AI*

### 28.2 B

**Baba Computer — and why one man answers to so many names.** Papa, Grandpa, GrampZilla, Baba, Doc: the same man loving you from a different chair. → *Before We Begin*

**Belief, trust, and faith are three different things.** Belief is the doorway; trust is leaning your weight; faith is the loyalty you keep afterward. → *Leaning Your Weight*

**Bible as a word from outside the room.** The one claim worth the long look precisely because it says it did not come from inside any human head. → *He Is Not Silent · Only the Rock*

### 28.3 C

**Cleverness has gone cheap; wisdom is the precious part.** The machine is clever *for* us now, so the prize moved to the one thing it cannot hand you. → *Wisdom · Knowledge — the Good Gift That Puffs*

**Commitment — you don't wait until you understand to give it.** Nobody understands marriage before marrying; don't wait to trust Christ until you've figured it all out. → *Timing*

**Comprehending vs. merely acquiring.** You have not learned a thing until you can say it in your own words with the machine turned off. → *Working with AI · One in Five*

**Culture really does shape right and wrong — the goats, and keeping the peace.** Protagoras saw something true; he just drew the wrong floor under it. → *"No Absolutes"*

### 28.4 D

**Doing life one thing at a time — and doing it *with Him*.** The practical peace of one thing at a time becomes a whole life when the company you keep is His. → *QJ · One at a Time, With Him*

## 28.5 E

**Everyone is standing on something they cannot prove.** The book's refrain: every foundation is finally taken on faith — the only question is *what*. → *The Rise* · *Euclid's Postulates* · *The Turing Machine* · *Gödel* · *"No Absolutes"* · *Only the Rock*

## 28.6 F

**Faith is a choice made on evidence — never a blind leap.** You arrive at faith *after* the evidence is in; the tragedy is the people who never really choose at all. → *The Rise* · *Leaning Your Weight* · *Only the Rock*

**Faith is the most concrete thing in life.** If it is the floor holding up even mathematics, it is not the flimsiest thing there is — it is the sturdiest. → *Gödel*

**The Five Worldview Questions.** Where from, where to, why the mess, can it be fixed, what is my part — and you have already answered all five. → *The Five Questions* · *The Rise* · *Only the Rock*

**The Freedom Ladder — Doing, Acquiring, Comprehending, Verifying, Guiding.** The climb from being programmed by the machine to being free to guide it; the top three rungs are yours alone. → *Working with AI*

## 28.7 G

**Geometry rests on five things nobody proved.** Euclid's postulates — the math that holds up our bridges begins in faith. → *Euclid's Postulates*

**Gödel — even mathematics cannot prove itself or vouch for itself.** The most rigorous thing we ever built rests on something it cannot establish from the inside. → *Gödel*

**Guides for the road — who to read, and how to question them too.** A few trusted voices, offered as helpers to test, never as new authorities. → *A Few Guides for the Road*

**Guiding is not the top — skill has no conscience.** A con man guides his tools brilliantly; what *aims* skill is wisdom, and only God grows that. → *Working with AI* · *Wisdom*

### 28.8 H

**Hallucination — falsehood in a confident voice.** The machine will hand you a lie in the very same gentle tone it uses for the truth. → *What AI Is*

**The halting problem — a wall even a perfect machine cannot see past.** Turing proved there are questions no computer can ever answer. → *The Turing Machine*

### 28.9 I

**Intuition is not wisdom.** Intuition is morally-neutral pattern-reading (a con man has it); wisdom is that sight aimed at the good. → *Wisdom · Knowledge · Working with AI*

### 28.10 K

**Knowledge puffs up.** A genuinely good gift that swells you with air; knowing more has never once, by itself, made anyone wiser. → *Knowledge — the Good Gift That Puffs*

### 28.11 L

**Livability — a false worldview cannot be lived consistently.** “Love is just chemicals,” and then he would die for his daughter; the life betrays the theory. → *On the Workbench*

### 28.12 M

**“Man is the measure of all things” — and the faith hiding inside it.** To say there are no absolutes, you must first assume God is silent or absent — and neither can be proved. → *“No Absolutes”*

**Making your own mind the measure — the quiet idol.** The puff grown all the way up: holding your own thoughts level with God’s, and mistaking it for clear thinking. → *The Emptied Hand · Knowledge*

**Miscommunication — one in five, and the waste bin.** The best two people manage is about eighty percent; the smart move is not never failing, but

catching it and starting over. → *One in Five*

**My own hill — the lived example of the climb.** The numbskull's real eighteen-year ascent, and the day he finally stood — the payoff of the book's personal thread. → *My Own Learning Curve · The Rise*

## 28.13 N

**The numbskull in a family of geniuses.** The slow one who loved the one room that kept its word — a thread that turns out to be very nearly the whole point. → *The Rise · Leaning Your Weight · Knowledge*

## 28.14 O

**The open, empty hand.** At the bottom, with money and doctors and logic all helpless: *Lord, my hand is empty; I am in Your hands.* → *The Emptied Hand*

**The one thing that is needful — sitting at His feet.** Mary chose the good portion; wisdom grows in exactly one spot — on the floor, in His Word, near Him. → *The One Thing*

**The original intelligence.** The human mind — the marvel that *builds* the machines — is the intelligence this whole book is named for. → *What AI Is*

## 28.15 P

**Peace that holds up under honest scrutiny.** No one's tool and no one's trap; a peace that can be yours. → *MRIs & a Baby Brother · Only the Rock*

**Programmed — or the author of your own mind.** Being programmed is not someone reaching into your head; it is running answers you never actually chose. → *The Rise · The Five Questions · One in Five · Working with AI*

## 28.16 Q

**The Question Journal (QJ) — getting the noise out of the wheel.** Write the circling questions down so the hamster wheel stops and you can actually work them, for years if it takes that. → *QJ*

### 28.17 R

**Reading is not comprehending.** Two out of three graduates could read and repeat but not follow an argument — and that gap opened *before* the machine could hand us finished answers. → *Working with AI*

**Reason — the tool you already use a hundred times a day.** You test the chair, you count your change, you caught the lie about the late show; reason is just *does this hold?* → *The Tool in Your Hand*

### 28.18 S

**Sand vs. Rock — a foundation that fits reality holds when the wind blows.** Two houses look the same until the storm; the ground stops shaking when you finally stand on something true. → *Only the Rock · The Rise*

**Someone outside us had to speak.** You cannot get outside your own head to check your picture of the world; a fixed floor could only come from outside the room. → *He Is Not Silent*

### 28.19 T

**The tool cuts both ways.** If *nobody* can live an idea, the idea is false; if *some* live it and one doesn't, the fault is the person, not the idea. → *On the Workbench*

**The two-question test — does it argue with itself? does it fit the world?** The two plain questions you put to any worldview on the workbench. → *The Tool in Your Hand · On the Workbench*

**Trust is leaned-weight, earned slowly — the opposite of blind.** You lean on the chair you have sat in a hundred times; trust is the most evidence-hungry thing there is. → *Leaning Your Weight*

**Trust in circles — don't hand it out whole.** God at the center, a tested few in the first ring; trusting *well* is a skill, and a different thing from trusting everyone. → *Leaning Your Weight*



## 28.20 W

**When your mind and something bigger than your mind disagree — which do you quietly assume is right?** The question it took a cancer to ask. → *The Emptied Hand*

**Wisdom — the one climb the machine cannot make for you.** Only God grows it: the fear of the LORD, asking Him, sitting at His feet. → *Wisdom · The One Thing*

# The Original Intelligence

*A Developer's Search for the Soul's Source Code*

It has never been easier to hold an answer you do not understand.

Culture programs us. So do the crowd, the screen, and the government — and now, most gently and most persuasively of all, so does AI. It will answer almost any question in a calm, confident voice, faster than any teacher or any book ever could. It is a marvel. It is also the newest thing that can quietly author your mind for you, while you never notice it happening.

This book is about refusing to let it. Written for his grandchildren and his college students alike — and it asks no coding of you — Baba Computer walks the reader one honest step at a time, from geometry to Gödel to the machine itself, toward a single, unshakable idea: *everyone is standing on something they cannot prove. The only question is what you are standing on.*

It will not tell you what to think. It hands you back your own mind and dares you to question every authority that would take it — including this one. Where the author's own questions finally led him, he offers plainly, and never forces. The walking, and the choosing, stay yours.

## About the Author

**Dr. Anthony J. Petrillo** has taught computer science for more than forty years — from a technical college he founded in Jos, Nigeria, to Roberts Wesleyan University, where he is Associate Professor of Computer Science and a recipient of the Barbara S. Muller Memorial Award for Teaching Excellence. He holds a Ph.D. in mathematics education from the State University of New York at Buffalo, has founded and led organizations in Africa and the United States, and has built software deployed internationally. He is published in English and French, and his current work brings AI to bear on how people actually learn and comprehend.

He and his wife, Nancy, have three children and a growing crowd of grandchildren, to whom he answers by many names — Papa, Poppa, Grandpa, and Baba Computer among them. He wrote this book for them, and for every student ever told the machine had made thinking optional.