



Alan Lightman

Alan Lightman — who worked for many years as a theoretical physicist — is the author of six novels, including the international bestseller *Einstein's Dreams*, as well as *The Diagnosis*, a finalist for the National Book Award.

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The future of spirituality

For many years my wife and I have spent our summers on an island in Maine. It's a small island, only about 30 acres in size, and there are no bridges or ferries connecting it to the mainland. Consequently, each of the six families who live on the island has their own boat.

...I found myself falling into infinity.

My story concerns a particular summer night, in the wee hours, when I was out in my boat coming to my home on the island. I had just rounded the south end of the island and was carefully motoring towards my dock. No one was out on the water but me. It was a moonless night, and quiet, and the sky vibrated with stars. Taking a chance, I turned off my running lights, and it got even darker. Then I turned off my engine. I lay down in the boat and looked up. After a few minutes, my world had dissolved into that star littered sky. The boat disappeared. My body disappeared. And I found myself falling into infinity. I felt an overwhelming connection to the stars, as if I were part of them. And the vast expanse of time — extending from the far distant past long before I was born and then into the far distant future long after I would die — seemed compressed to a dot. I felt connected not only to the stars but to all of nature, and to the entire cosmos. I felt a merging with something far larger than myself, a grand and eternal unity. After a time, I sat up and started the engine again.

...the universe is made of material and nothing more...

I've worked as a physicist for many years, and I have always held a purely scientific view of the world. By that, I mean that the

universe is made of material and nothing more, that the universe is governed exclusively by a small number of fundamental forces and laws, and that all composite things in the material world will eventually disintegrate and pass away. Even at the age of twelve or thirteen, I was impressed by the logic and materiality of the world. When I was a teenager, I built my own laboratory. Among other projects, I began making pendulums by tying a fishing weight to the end of a string. I'd read in *Popular Science* that the time for a pendulum to make a complete swing was proportional to the square root of the length of the string. With the help of a stop watch and ruler, I verified this wonderful law. Logic and pattern. Cause and effect. As far as I could tell, everything was subject to analysis and quantitative test. I saw no reason to believe in anything intangible, ethereal, unprovable.

Yet after my experience in that boat many years later, I understood the powerful allure of the spiritual world. I understood the powerful allure of the nonmaterial and ethereal, things that are all encompassing, unchangeable, eternal, sacred. Things and experiences that are not reducible to logical analysis.

...we long for something that is eternal.

For thousands of years, we human beings have been torn between the material and the immaterial. Modern science has shown

that all things in the material world are impermanent and ultimately pass away. Atoms, once thought to be indivisible and indestructible, can be split. Stars, once thought to be eternal and even divine, eventually use up their nuclear fuel and burn out. At the same time, we long for something that is eternal. Part of us wants to reduce everything to atoms and molecules. And part of us wants to resist that temptation, wants to believe that some things defy such reduction. This tension has been the source of our science on one hand and our religion and spirituality on the other. This tension comes into the discussion of free will versus determinism, in questions of ethics and moral behaviour, in discussions of art and aesthetics. It is related to the definition and boundaries of science, and what constitutes faith.

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