

Prologue:

'Our species needs, and deserves, a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works.' – Carl Sagan

People ask themselves: What am I? What is life? What is the universe? They go to their graves, never learning the answers. Maybe that is why our past was less than ideal. A history of violence, war and segregation. A culture obsessed with the pursuit of pleasure, and the aversion of pain. It doesn't need to be that way any longer. The modern world is a different place - far from perfect, but more peaceful and liveable than ever before. A time where all the knowledge, science and wisdom of the human race is available anywhere and all the time – with the click of a button. There is more information than ever before, and although not all of it is accurate, the truth is available to those who seek it.

Where do you start? The knowledge about the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world, based on what we learn from observation and experiment. We call it science. It is the work of generations of people who took five simple rules to heart. First, nothing is true simply because someone says so. Second, don't believe something because you want to. Think for yourself and question your beliefs. Third, use evidence gained from observation and experiment to test ideas. Fourth, follow the evidence, wherever it leads. And lastly, but most

importantly, remember you could be wrong, and there's nothing wrong with that.

These rules are the heart of science and helped mankind understand the universe to the extent we do today. Not everyone needs to be a scientist. And you don't need to know every little detail. But it's important to understand the bigger picture. It will help you understand the universe, and it will help you understand yourself.

Another important field is philosophy, which means 'love of wisdom'. It is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence – and without it, the world would have been a different place. While science is focused on evidence and facts, philosophy is focused on ideas, imagination and speculation based around facts. Some scientific discoveries may have never happened without philosophical speculation – which gives scientists a target to aim at, whether to prove or disprove the idea.

There have been many notable philosophers in recent history. A personal favourite of mine is Siddhartha Guantanma, an Indian philosopher who lived sometime between 600 BCE and 400 BCE. He believed the root cause of all human suffering was ignorance, and I couldn't agree more. It is the reason why some people do not care about the negative impact we have on the environment. They aren't bad people, they simply do not understand the nature of our connection to it. It is the reason why some people are still discriminatory towards others based on race, skin colour or sexual orientation. They do not understand

that humans are a complex and diverse organism, and there is a biological link between every human and all other life on earth. What difference is there between red apples and green apples. Not much, other than their skin. There may be some slight differences, but they are fundamentally the same.

The opposite of ignorance is knowledge, and the more knowledgeable we become, the less ignorance there will be. We are the first global-civilization in human history, and we can make the world a better place. Not only for ourselves in the here and now but generations yet to come.

You might ask: That all sounds great, but who are you, and why should I be interested in your story?

I am no one of interest. An ordinary person with a unique set of traits, interests and experiences like anyone else. Mine has led me on a quest for ultimate knowledge and wisdom. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to know exactly who or what I was, what the universe is, and what this experience was all about.

What started as simple questions and thoughts in childhood, became more and more complex in late-adolescence and early adulthood. I have spent endless amounts of time learning the scientific and philosophical truths about our existence.

I knew how to determine which information was credible, and which wasn't, because of a logical and critical mindset. And not only did I want to learn it all, but I also wanted to learn how to implement the

knowledge into my day to day experience, so I could better my own life and the lives of others.

There is still more to learn, and experiences to be had. It will never end, not at least until my experience comes to an end. I want to share my life with you, and what I have discovered along the way. I hope that it may enlighten you in some way, or at the very least, entertain and stimulate your mind. There will be some reference to science, philosophy, and to a lesser extent, spiritualism – but bear in mind that I am a rational, logical and secular agnostic, and it will be explained in a simple and relatable way.

Chapter 1: A Mostly Glorious Dawn

Most children start with a simple first word, something like ‘mama’ or ‘dada’. The first word I muttered was ‘light’. I don’t remember that far back, but it’s something my parents have told me time and time again. They said I had an infatuation with light, in all shapes and forms.

I remember seeing a home-video of my first birthday party. My uncle asked me to say my age to the camera, but I was preoccupied with the ceiling light. I kept looking at it, and even tried to reach for it.

‘Where’s the light?’ asked Mum.

‘There!’ I replied, enthusiastically. I did the same with candles too. Mum had to keep a close eye and moved my hands away from the flames.

Sometimes I think I have ADHD. It could explain some of my behaviour growing up. Whatever the reason, I had a fascination with light, and it never faded. Quite the opposite. The older I grew, the more I wanted to know about natural phenomena.

I learned to speak in sentences earlier than expected and would ask questions about everything. There was one day where we visited the park, and everything caught my attention.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, pointing towards the sky.

‘That’s the sun,’ she replied. ‘It keeps us warm.’

I pondered for a moment and turned my attention elsewhere.

‘And what’s that?’ I asked, pointing to a tree.

‘That’s a tree,’ she replied. ‘It helps us breathe.’

‘And that?’ I added, pointing to a line of ants scurrying along the ground.

‘Those are ants,’ she said. ‘Stay away from them. They bite!’

I learned that lesson the hard way. I was still new to the world and needed to know all the answers. My parents only had simple explanations, and that was enough to satisfy my young mind. They couldn’t tell me the deeper mysteries about the cosmos. Now I’m the one educating them. My quest for knowledge never faded. But it did take a

backseat for a while during childhood. I was too busy enjoying life as a middle-class kid in the 1990's.

We lived in a small house, but it had everything a kid could dream. My parents converted the garage into a playroom. We had all the latest toys, colouring-books and board-games.

There was a television set, built into a brown cabinet with panels, draws and speakers. It was a monstrosity compared to modern televisions. But at the time, it was the theatre of dreams. We used to spend hours upon hours watching movies, listening to music, playing games. My friends and cousins always wanted to come around. We had the best time.

My most prized possession was the Nintendo Entertainment System. I finished Super Mario Bros by the time I had turned three, something which my older brother never could do. He likes to think it was because I spent more time playing than he did and would always complain that I was 'hogging the controller'. Maybe he was right. My parents always worried that I spent too much time in front of the screen.

'Don't sit so close,' Dad always yelled. 'It's bad for your eyes.'

'But I need to kill the baddies,' I would reply.

I didn't care, I was too busy jumping on little mushroom men and turtle shells in a virtual world.

There was nothing extraordinary about my childhood. It wasn't perfect, and there were good and bad times, but it was enjoyable for the most part and a cherished memory. It was an improvement compared to

the childhood my parents and grandparents had. They lived in a different time and different circumstances.

Dad had a somewhat nomadic childhood. His father was a Pontic Greek and migrated to Australia to pursue a better life. He adapted to the culture well, learned how to speak fluent English, and worked several different jobs. He was a bouncer, a boxer, a police officer, and eventually, a farmer and truck driver – whatever paid the bills. He saw a photograph of my grandmother, and they started sending each other letters. Eventually, she came to Australia, and they married and started a family. I find it hard to believe that it was normal for love and marriage to happen like that back then. I'm not sure how they made it work, but they did.

They moved around to wherever they could find work, sometimes multiple times within the same year, and often settled in small towns. This made it impossible for Dad to have a normal childhood. Whenever he settled into a new school and made friends, it never lasted. They also worked long hours and sometimes left the kids alone for days at a time – even when they were only six years old.

'I used to fall asleep crying,' Dad once told me. 'But I had no other choice other than to be strong.'

He became independent at an early age, and learned how to cook, clean, and look after his younger brother. He even taught himself how to catch the bus. Compared to him, I was a wimpy kid. I was afraid of the dark, as well as mirrors, and even under-the-bed. I used to scare myself

by thinking there were ghosts and monsters everywhere and slept in my parents' room until I was at ten-years-old.

My dad's childhood wasn't all bad. He had all the freedom in the world and experienced many adventures that most kids could only dream. He climbed into paddocks and rode horses. He battled with roosters in chicken coops. He befriended all sorts of different farm animals.

'My childhood wasn't perfect,' he always said. 'But I wouldn't have had it any other way.'

Mum had an entirely different childhood. Her father was Italian and migrated to Australia to pursue a better life. He settled in Adelaide and worked several different jobs.

He saw a picture of my grandmother and fell in love. They sent each other letters, and eventually, they married and started a family. They had three children, one son and two daughters. Mum was the middle child. When my grandfather had enough money to start a business, he built a furniture store brick by brick and worked there until he retired. They enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle.

Mum had a more stable childhood compared to Dad. We used to say her upbringing was comparable to something from Happy Days or The Brady Bunch. They were well-behaved, disciplined, and a little naïve – even beyond adolescence. She passed the same values to me and my brother and raised us to be kind, caring and respectful. But we also had

more freedom and a sense of adventure. That was something we learned from Dad.

Mum and Dad met at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Dad worked as an orderly, helping doctors move patients between rooms. Mum worked as a clinical secretary. They caught each other's eye, started dating, eventually fell in love, and got married. I always wondered how they made it work for so long. They came from similar backgrounds and cultures but were very different from each other.

We had a big family, and everyone was close. I saw my grandparents every weekend, and my aunts, uncles and cousins several times during the week. My cousins were my closest friends, and we've remained close to this day. Life was quite good, but it wasn't all rainbows and butterflies. My parents had a turbulent relationship and argued all the time. It was never too excessive, but it worsened over time. A big factor was when my grandfather passed away. I was around four years old at the time.

'Why are you crying, Dad?' I asked, wiping a tear from his cheek.

'Papou's not here anymore,' he sobbed. I didn't understand what he meant, but I knew he was sad. My grandmother was even worse.

'Don't cry grandma,' I said, running into her arms. 'I will buy you lots of furniture.' She wasn't a fluent English speaker but understood the sentiment.

Dad was deeply affected by the death. I think it made him depressed and bitter. The change in his personality took a toll on my

parent's marriage. He always wore his heart on his sleeve and was a kind and caring man. But he was also short-tempered and emotionally fickle, and that side of him worsened. When he was mad, his voice was his weapon. He used to yell and scream so loud, the neighbours used to say, 'here comes the tsunami'. I was embarrassed when they told me, but now I can't help but laugh.

Most people were intimidated by him. But I never feared him, even at his worst. I think it's because we had a close relationship, and I knew his better side more than anyone else. I did my best to calm him down, but sometimes I would get annoyed too. We would argue and debate, and sometimes I would even tell him to shut up. I wish I was more understanding at the time, but I was too young to know any better.

Mum was the opposite. She was reserved and quiet and hardly ever yelled. I can count the number of times she has ever sworn on my hands. When Dad carried on, she gave him the cold-shoulder. Most of the time it was well-deserved, but sometimes she held a grudge and acted in a way that was unreasonable and spiteful. There were instances where they didn't speak for days at a time, even after Dad had apologized.

Like most kids, I didn't like seeing my parents upset, especially at each other. But I took it upon myself to be the peacemaker. They were wonderful parents and worked hard to give me a good life. I felt the least I could do was help them make amends. It worked most of the time. It affected me though, in a good and bad way. It was good in the sense that I became very logical, diplomatic and pragmatic at an early age. Most

adults said I was mature and articulate beyond my age – and I accepted that praise with pride. The bad side was that, behind the brave façade, I was concerned about their marriage and often cried. The only one who ever saw was my pet dog. He may have looked like an ordinary Maltese Shih-zue, but he was more intelligent and understanding than most humans.

The experiences I had in childhood helped me become the person I am today. It wasn't perfect, but it wasn't bad by any stretch of the imagination. Some of my friends had broken homes, others had alcoholic parents. They often came to my house as an escape. I knew I had it good compared to them. I was raised with important values but also given the freedom to do what I wanted to do and be what I wanted to be. We had some rules and restrictions, but my parents were never too strict. They let me grow in the right conditions where I could be myself. They encouraged my curiosity and loved me no matter what. I am eternally grateful for that. I learned from the hardships, too. Without them, I wouldn't have become stronger, wiser and more resilient.

By the time I had reached childhoods end, I was advanced in academia and more mature than my peers. I excelled at reading, writing, maths and science. I remember reading entire novels from the third grade. It helped me develop a deep interest in classical history. I loved reading about heroes of the past and aspired to become like Alexander the Great. Not only because we shared the same name, but we also had the same background. I endeavoured to match his courage, leadership

and wisdom someday. I didn't become exactly like him, that would have been impossible. But I did learn a thing or two from reading about his life and the experiences he had, and in a sense, they became a part of me.

The person we become is defined by nature and nurture. Nature is the influence of genetic inheritance and other biological factors. Nurture is the influence of experiences and external factors once we're born.

When I reflect on my childhood, I can see how that manifested in my own life. I can see that some of the traits and quirks I had then continued to shine – like my curiosity and passion for knowledge. I can also see how the experiences I had played a role in shaping my personality and my life. I still had plenty more to experience in adolescence and young adulthood, however, and they were a different beast compared to my childhood.

But like anything in the universe, everything is constantly in motion. That includes people, too. We are changing all the time and will continue to change forever – and the more we understand about the world and ourselves, the better we can become. We're not defined by the past, but it becomes a part of who we are today, and we can use what we learn from our experiences to better ourselves.