

# THE EXISTENTIAL FILES

A Guide to Living in a  
Meaningless Universe

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*by*

**DR LOUIE SAVVA & DR MATTHEW SMITH**

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# Introduction

## Zero Viewers and the Only Way Is Up

The first episode of *The Existential Files* had zero viewers. We know this because we counted. Louie, ever the optimist, pointed out that the only way was up—and then, in the same breath, suggested that if he killed himself there would be minus one. Matthew, reaching for a whiteboard that happened to be in the room, started taking notes.

That was us. One of us wants to burn the whole thing down while making you laugh about it; the other wants to draw a diagram of the ashes and ask what we have learned. Somehow, across sixty-two episodes, that combination worked. Not because we arrived at answers—we did not, and we remain suspicious of anyone who claims they have—but because we kept showing up to ask the questions.

This book is the result of those conversations. Not a transcript—God help anyone who tries to read a transcript of two psychologists from the south of England arguing about whether chickens should go extinct—but the substance of what we talked about, shaped into something you can read without having to pause every thirty seconds while Matthew finds his pen.

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We should probably tell you who we are. We are both psychologists. We both did degrees in psychology, we both did PhDs, and we both ended up in that slightly odd position of having spent years studying how the human mind works and coming away thinking: right, so what do we actually do with any of this?

Because that is the thing about psychology—and science more broadly—that set us off on this whole journey. Science is brilliant at answering certain kinds of questions. If you want to know how a brain processes colour, or why people obey authority figures, science is your tool. But if you want to know what to do on a Monday morning when you wake up and think, “What is the point of all this?” science is not built for that. You cannot put the meaning of life under a microscope any more than you can use a telescope to find the best pop song. These are the wrong tools for those questions.

What interests us are existential questions: the ones that remain after the data has done its work. You wake up. You are alive. One day you will not be. What are you going to do with the bit in between?

We had been having these conversations for years anyway: over pints, on the phone, in the margins of academic life where we were supposed to be discussing something more respectable. We came at the same territory from different directions. Louie through his blog, *Everything Is Pointless*, and his existential nihilism; Matthew through a more open-ended refusal to settle too quickly, and a habit of asking “but what do you mean by that?” just when Louie was getting to the good bit.

We are, it should be said, very different people who happen to be close friends. Louie likes pulling rugs out from under people.

Matthew is the one with the whiteboard. Louie tends to make the claim; Matthew asks the follow-up question. Between those two impulses, a conversation happens.

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There is a line of Louie's that Matthew has heard often enough to mouth along with it: the universe is absurd. Not just a bit odd or mildly confusing, but fundamentally, structurally absurd. Existence is a nonsense story with a semblance of meaning to it. Science can study the semblance. It can map the structure, catalogue the patterns, even make predictions. But the nonsense part—the bit where you step back and ask why any of this is here at all, and what you are supposed to do about it—that is not a scientific question. It is an existential one.

That is where this book lives.

We are not here to sell you comfort. We are not going to tell you that everything happens for a reason, or that the universe has a plan, or that a positive mindset will make the darkness disappear. We think honesty is a better starting point than reassurance. The universe does not owe you meaning. Nobody handed you a manual. You are here anyway. Now what?

## What This Book Is

This book follows the threads of those sixty-two conversations and pulls them into something resembling an argument—though “argument” may be too neat a word for a project built out of two people repeatedly returning to the same enormous problems from slightly different angles.

We begin with the absurdity of the universe and the limits of science in dealing with it. From there we move into nihilism: what it is, what it is not, and why it is more interesting than its reputation suggests. We explore consciousness and identity, pain and happiness, death, selfhood, and the persistent question of what human beings actually are. And, because every honest enquiry into meaning eventually ends up there, we arrive at the practical question: how do you live? What is worth doing? What do you do with your Monday morning?

We do not pretend to have answers. But we have had a bloody good time asking the questions. We hope that somewhere in these pages, between the philosophy and the profanity, you find something that sharpens your own questions, steadies your own Monday morning, or at the very least gives you something to laugh at.

Dr Louie Savva  
Dr Matthew Smith

# Chapter 1

## The Universe Is Absurd

Let us start with the bad news.

The universe does not care about you. It does not know you exist. It has never known you exist and it never will, because the universe is not the kind of thing that knows anything. It is not watching, not listening, and certainly not keeping score. If you were to vanish right now—poof, gone, every trace of you erased from existence—the universe would not pause. The stars would not dim. The tides would not hesitate. Nothing would change, because nothing was paying attention in the first place.

This is not necessarily a gloomy thought. It is just a fact—one of those facts that hides in plain sight until somebody points it out, after which you cannot stop seeing it. The universe walks down the street naked, as Louie once put it. It does not hide from us. It has no secret meaning tucked away behind the curtain, waiting for the right person to discover it. What you see is what you get. The king is in the altogether.

And the good news is that, once you accept that, everything else gets more interesting.

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One of the ideas we kept returning to across *The Existential Files* was that existence is a nonsense story. Not a tragedy, not a comedy, not an epic or a romance. A nonsense story. It has a semblance of structure. Characters appear, events unfold, things begin and end. But the story as a whole does not add up. There is no author, no plot, no moral waiting at the bottom of the page.

This is what we mean when we call the universe absurd. Not absurd in the everyday sense of silly or ridiculous, but absurd in the philosophical sense: there is a gap between what we want the universe to be and what it actually is. We want it to mean something. It does not. We want there to be a point. There is not one that has obligingly presented itself. We want the story to make sense, and it stubbornly, magnificently refuses.

Camus understood this. The absurd does not arise simply because the universe is meaningless. A rock does not care that it is meaningless, and neither does a star. The absurd arises because a meaningless universe has produced creatures who demand meaning from it. Without us standing here asking what it all means, the universe would simply be. It is our wanting that makes it absurd.

There is nothing hidden behind this. No secret knowledge, no final revelation, no backstage area where the real explanation is waiting. The universe is right there in plain view, and it is exactly as baffling and purposeless as it appears.

\* \* \*

This brings us to science, which we both value immensely and which is nevertheless the wrong tool for some jobs.

Science is magnificent at answering certain kinds of questions. If you want to know how the brain processes colour, why people

obey authority, or how natural selection produces complexity, science is what you want. But a tool is only useful for the job it was designed for. You do not complain that a microscope cannot show you the Milky Way. You do not blame a telescope because it cannot help you identify a good pop song.

And you cannot use science to answer existential questions. Science can tell you how emotion works; it cannot tell you what to do when you wake up on a Monday morning and think, “Why am I doing this?” Science can describe the mechanics of death; it cannot tell you how to live with the knowledge that one day it is coming for you.

That does not make science useless. Far from it. Science can inform existential reflection. Evolution tells us something vital about where we came from: that nobody designed us, that we are not the product of intention, that we are accidents of chemistry and time. But evolution does not tell you what to do with that fact. The data is scientific. The conclusion is existential. And the gap between the two is where we live.

\* \* \*

To understand why we think the universe is pointless, it helps to understand William Paley and his watch.

Paley was an eighteenth-century clergyman who offered what looked, for a while, like a knockout argument for God. Imagine, he said, that you are walking along a beach and you find a watch lying in the sand. You examine its gears, springs, and crystal and conclude that somebody must have made it. There must be a watchmaker. Now look at nature. Look at a blackbird, a hedge, a waterfall. Are these not even more intricate, even more beautifully arranged? There must be a maker behind them too.

It is a lovely argument. Then Darwin came along.

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection explains how complexity can arise without a designer. That is the key point. Not that living things are not remarkable. They are. Not that they are not intricate. They are. But their intricacy does not require intention. Given enough time, enough variation, and enough selection pressure, complexity emerges without anybody planning it, wanting it, or standing over the process nodding approvingly.

And that has consequences for how we think about ourselves. Nobody set out to create human beings. When the first self-replicating molecule appeared in some primordial pool, it did not think—could not think—“One day I am going to be a person.” There is no line of intention connecting that molecule to us. There is only the blind, impersonal process of natural selection.

We are not the climax of a plan. We are what happens when matter keeps going.

Darwin once remarked that what is true for the gnat is true for us. If a gnat came up to you and said it was stressed about work, you would laugh. Its lifespan is about twenty-four hours. What work? What stress? But our position is not different in kind, only in scale. In the grand scheme of things—and the grand scheme of things is the only scheme that matters here—our lives are a blink. A flicker. Gone before anyone notices.

\* \* \*

This is usually the point where people assume we must be depressed.

We are not.

Louie runs a blog called *Everything Is Pointless*, and it is not a cry for help. It is a starting position. Once you have

accepted that nothing has inherent meaning—that the universe did not put you here for a reason, that your existence is an accident, that one day you and everyone you have ever known will be gone and eventually forgotten—the question changes.

It stops being, “What is the meaning of life?”

And becomes, “What do I do with my Tuesday?”

That is a much better question. “What is the meaning of life?” presupposes that there is one, and sends you off on a wild goose chase that has kept philosophers employed for millennia without producing anything especially useful for breakfast time. “What do I do with my Tuesday?” is concrete. It is real. It is the question you actually have to answer when the alarm has gone off, your feet are on the floor, and the day is demanding a response.

That, to us, is the existential question. Not “Is there a meaning?” but “What do I do given that I am here?”

Whether you believe God has a plan, or the universe is a cosmic joke, or the whole thing is a simulation running on some alien teenager’s computer, the practical problem is the same. You wake up. You exist. One day you will not. Nobody handed you a manual. What are you going to do?

Even doing nothing is doing something. Even refusing the question is a response to it. Sartre’s formulation remains brutal and useful: there are no excuses. You cannot hand responsibility back to your upbringing, your biology, your circumstances, or your God. You are here. You are awake. The choice is yours.

\* \* \*

This is where Louie and Matthew diverge slightly, though less than either of them sometimes likes to pretend.

Louie comes at all this from certainty. The universe is meaningless. Full stop. Evolution tells us we are accidental.

Physics tells us we are tiny. Experience tells us that the universe does not care. Deal with it.

Matthew comes at it from questions. He sees the same evidence and grants most of the same force, but he is less eager to close the case. Where Louie nails his colours to the mast, Matthew is still inspecting the mast and wondering whether a different set of colours might yet be possible.

The tension between those two positions matters. It is part of what drives this book. But it does not change the practical situation by very much. Whether Louie is right and everything is definitively pointless, or whether Matthew is right and we simply have not found the point, the same problem confronts you in the morning.

The alarm goes off. You are alive. The question remains.

What are you going to do about it?

## Chapter 2

# What Is Nihilism, Really?

There was a time when calling someone a nihilist was like calling them a child molester.

That is not our line—that is Elisha Shapiro’s, and he should know. Elisha is a performance artist, a satirist, a former organiser of the Nihilist Olympics, and a man who once ran for President of the United States on a platform of believing in absolutely nothing. He got 240 votes, which was more than all the other write-in candidates combined, and he considers this a triumph.

When Elisha started calling himself a nihilist in the 1980s, the word was used almost exclusively as an insult. Politicians hurled it at one another to mean: this person believes in nothing and therefore cannot be trusted. It carried the whiff of moral degeneracy, of someone who had rejected all the things decent people were supposed to respect: God, country, family, authority, the social contract, the idea that anything mattered at all. To be a nihilist was to be dangerous.

Things have changed. Elisha told us that younger people, in particular, are often much more relaxed about the label. They do not automatically see why they should respect what their

parents respected, and when they ask for a justification, nobody seems able to provide one. The word has lost some of its sting. It is becoming less of an accusation and more of a description.

But what does it actually describe?

\* \* \*

The philosopher John Marmysz gave us the most useful definition we have encountered. Borrowing from Simone de Beauvoir, he describes the nihilist as a *frustrated idealist*.

That is a better definition than most people expect. The popular picture of the nihilist is somebody who shrugs at everything, cares about nothing, and has given up. Marmysz's point is nearly the opposite. A nihilist is someone who wants the universe to have meaning, wants truth to be secure, wants values to be objective, wants things to matter—and has looked hard enough at reality to doubt that any of this is so.

Nihilism lives in the gap between the ideal and the real. It is not apathy. It is disappointment. It is the recognition that the furniture of meaning may be more fragile, more improvised, and more human than we were taught to believe.

Marmysz calls this “nihilistic incongruity”: the friction between what we want reality to be and what it actually is. And this incongruity comes in different forms. Existential nihilism is the thought that life has no inherent meaning. Epistemological nihilism is doubt about objective truth. Moral nihilism is the suspicion that good and evil are human inventions rather than features of the universe. Ontological nihilism concerns the gap between how things appear to us and what being itself amounts to.

You do not have to endorse all of these at once. A person can be nihilistic in one domain and not another. That matters,

because one reason the term is so often misused is that people treat it as an all-or-nothing posture, when in fact it names a family of dissatisfactions.

This definition rescues nihilism from its cartoon version. The cartoon nihilist sits in a dark room waiting to die. The actual nihilist, as Marmysz describes him, is painfully alert to the mismatch between reality and hope, and unwilling to patch that mismatch with cheap consolations.

\* \* \*

One of the distinctions that emerged clearly in our conversation with Elisha was the difference between an atheist and a nihilist.

They overlap, but they are not the same thing.

An atheist says: I do not need God in order to have ethics. I can reject divine authority and still retain a framework of right and wrong. God goes; the moral scaffolding remains.

The nihilist is more suspicious. The nihilist asks whether the scaffolding is made up too. If God is a human invention, what about the moral order that supposedly rested on God's authority? What about good and evil, sacred and profane, right and wrong? Are these discoveries, or are they constructions? Does the universe contain morality, or do we?

Louie has always found some atheists oddly comfortable here. They remove the top brick from the tower and then carry on as though the tower remains untouched. But if you keep pulling at the thread of divine authority, an awful lot may begin to unravel: not just God, but identity, value, obligation, even the solidity of the self.

As Louie once put it to Elisha, the self may be as made up as God. Just because you wake up every morning and say,

“Hello, I am Louie,” does not settle the deeper question of what that means. You inherit a narrative, continue it, and call that continuity “you”. Matthew, characteristically, responded with the obvious question: if you are choosing to be Louie, who is doing the choosing?

It is a good question. We will get to it. For now, the point is simpler: nihilism is not just disbelief in God. It is doubt about the whole edifice that God was meant to support.

\* \* \*

Here is the part of nihilism that almost nobody mentions, and that Elisha brought out with gleeful clarity: it can be freeing.

If nothing has inherent meaning—if there is no cosmic scorecard, no divine plan, no objective audit of whether you are doing existence correctly—then you are free. Not comfortably free. Not pleasantly free. Free in the alarming, exhilarating sense that nobody else is going to sort this out for you.

You can make choices because you choose them, not because the universe has stamped them in advance. You can do good because you want to, not because celestial surveillance has threatened punishment. You can build a life without pretending that it has been authorised from above.

Elisha spoke about this as pleasure. He gets up in the morning and is not worrying about moral structure or religious duty. He is playing. That does not mean doing nothing. It means doing things without having to pretend that they rest on cosmic endorsement. Help a student. Give money to a homeless person. Go to work. Make art. Waste time magnificently. All of it becomes available in a different way once you stop imagining that meaning has to be handed down before you can act.

This is not far from Sartre's point about being "condemned to be free". The phrase sounds melodramatic, but the underlying thought is plain enough: if there is no God to legislate meaning, then responsibility falls back on us. No excuses. No script. No instruction manual.

Camus puts the same point in his own way. The absurd is not solved by discovering a hidden plan. It is answered, if "answered" is the right word, by revolt: by continuing anyway. You push the boulder. You make the thing. You live the day. Not because it will be redeemed by eternity, but because it is yours to do.

\* \* \*

This is one reason Elisha's Nihilist Olympics matter more than they first appear to.

They began, as many worthwhile things do, in mockery. Elisha and his friends were watching the actual Olympics in Los Angeles in 1984 and thinking: what is all this? The flag-waving, the earnestness, the solemn competition, the insistence that running slightly faster than another person is a matter of near-religious importance. So they made their own version. Competitive ironing. The Decathlon of Housework. Events designed not merely to parody the Olympics, but to expose how much of social seriousness depends on collective agreement rather than inherent significance.

That is nihilism in practice. Not sitting in a dark room being miserable. Poking the sacred until it squeaks.

Why do we respect the Olympics? Because we have been taught to. Why do we respect politicians? Often for the same reason. Why do we believe many of the things we believe? Because we inherited them, not because we ever subjected them to inspection.

Elisha's performance art was philosophical work by comic means. He ran for governor. He ran for president. He did not expect to win. Winning was not the point. The point was to make visible that belief itself is optional more often than people think.

\* \* \*

Marmysz made another point that has stayed with us: nihilism opens space for something to happen.

That sounds backward at first. If nothing matters, why do anything? Why create, why strive, why love, why build, why write a book, why make a podcast that begins with zero viewers?

Marmysz's answer is that without the gap between the ideal and the real, there would be nothing to push against. If the universe already came furnished with perfect meaning, there would be nothing left for us to do but bask in it. The very defectiveness of reality is what creates room for human action.

There is something oddly noble in doing things in a meaningless universe. Not because the universe notices, but because it does not. Writing a book that will not matter in a thousand years. Raising children who will live and die. Making art. Telling jokes. Carrying on. The meaninglessness is the canvas; what you make on it is yours.

Louie, predictably, was delighted by Marmysz's implication that their podcast might be noble.

\* \* \*

But we would be dishonest if we stopped there, because nihilism has a dark side too.

Sometimes the joke is not funny. Sometimes you are not laughing at the absurdity; you are being crushed by it. Sometimes the gap between the ideal and the real is not creative space but an abyss.

Marmysz acknowledges this. Humour, he argues, can perform a psychological reversal: it lets you make the threatening thing smaller than you are. If you laugh at the universe, the universe becomes the butt of the joke rather than you. But this move does not always work. There are times when the cosmos has the upper hand, when grief or loss or dread simply sits on your chest and refuses to become material.

Louie's brother died a few years before we started the podcast. What helped him was not optimism. It was precisely the refusal of false reassurance. Nihilism did not make grief easier. It simply stripped away the added insult of pretending that there must be a hidden reason, a cosmic lesson, a redemptive arc waiting to announce itself. The universe did not make it okay. You just had the grief, raw and undecorated, and had to live with it.

That sounds bleak, and sometimes it is. But there is honesty in it. No self-help slogans. No affirmations on the bathroom mirror. No rescue from above. Just the difficult dignity of facing what is there.

\* \* \*

So are we nihilists?

Louie is. He will tell you so without hesitation. He does not believe the universe has inherent meaning. He does not believe human existence was designed or intended. He does not believe there is an objective purpose to any of it. For him, nihilism is not a pose but a considered conclusion.

Matthew is more reluctant. He is interested in nihilism, sympathetic to parts of it, and happy to spend long stretches of time standing near it. But he will not quite move in. His position remains: there may be no meaning we have yet discovered. That “yet” is doing a great deal of work, and Louie has been trying to prise it out of his hands for years.

Still, the practical situation is the same whichever of them is right. Whether there is truly no meaning, or merely no meaning we have yet found, we are still here, still alive, still required to decide what to do next. The nihilist and the questioner arrive at the same morning. They face the same list of emails, the same body, the same breakfast, the same finite day.

The only difference, perhaps, is the soundtrack.

Louie hears silence and says, “There is nothing there.”

Matthew hears silence and says, “I wonder what that silence means.”

Sixty-two episodes later, neither of them has converted the other. But both have become more interesting for the argument.

## Chapter 3

# The Laughing Nihilist

If Louie were stranded on a desert island, there is only one person he would want with him: Larry David. Not for any romantic or sexual purpose—he was very clear about this, to the point where Matthew’s audio cut out and he missed the entire disclaimer, which tells you something about the reliability of our recording setup and nothing whatsoever about Louie’s sexual preferences. But Larry David, because Larry David understands something most people do not: the universe is absurd, human behaviour is absurd, social conventions are absurd, and the correct response to all this absurdity is not to weep but to laugh.

That, more or less, is the position we have arrived at, separately and together, across years of thinking about meaninglessness: if you are not laughing, you are the butt of the joke.

The universe is, as Douglas Adams understood better than almost anyone, fundamentally ridiculous. Any sense of normality we experience is provisional at best. There is no reason things had to be arranged as they are. We could have had our legs where our arms are. Our heads could be on our backsides. The fact that things are the way they are is not evidence of design or purpose; it is simply how the dice landed. And the

appropriate response to that, we think, is not solemnity. It is laughter.

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We have always been drawn to people who poke fun at things that everyone else takes seriously. This is not a character flaw. It is a philosophical position.

Andy Kaufman. Lenny Bruce. Elisha Shapiro with his Nihilist Olympics. The Monster Raving Loony Party. These are people who looked at the structures of society—politics, sport, religion, media, the whole apparatus of shared belief—and instead of nodding along, stuck two fingers up at it. Not because they were cruel or stupid, but because they grasped something important: much of what we treat as sacred is arbitrary.

We respect the Olympics because we have been taught to respect the Olympics. We respect politicians because the system requires it. We believe a surprising number of things simply because nobody around us has paused long enough to ask whether they are worth believing.

The wind-up merchant performs a public service. When someone stands outside the norm, says the unsayable, and nothing happens—no lightning bolt, no collapse of civilisation, no divine intervention—something is revealed. The norm was optional all along. The rules are made up. The emperor has no clothes.

Matthew is less naturally inclined to wind people up than Louie is, but he sees the value in those who do. There is something useful about people who live on the fringes and report back. Even if you do not want to move there permanently, it is worth visiting. Have a look around. Have a laugh. Then go back to whatever comfortable fiction gets you through the week. At least now you know it is a fiction.

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John Marmysz, whose work we touched on in the previous chapter, gave us a framework for why humour feels like such a natural response to nihilism. It comes down to incongruity.

Most theories of humour agree that comedy begins with things that do not fit together. A banana skin on a pavement. A punchline that derails your expectations. A man in a gorilla suit at a funeral. The laugh lives in the gap between what you expected and what you got.

Nihilism, Marmysz argues, is the ultimate incongruity: the gap between the universe we want and the universe we have. We want meaning, purpose, design, reassurance. What we get is indifference, contingency, accident, absurdity. If incongruity is funny, then existence is the biggest joke going.

But there is another element too. Marmysz also points to the superiority theory of humour: we laugh at things we feel bigger than. That is why being laughed at feels terrible—it diminishes you. But it is also why humour can be such a powerful response to meaninglessness. When you laugh at the absurdity of the universe, you perform a kind of psychological reversal. You take the thing that threatens to crush you—the vast indifference of everything—and make it smaller than you. You are not the butt of the joke anymore. The universe is.

This is what separates the laughing nihilist from the despairing one. Both have seen the same thing. Both have recognised that the universe does not care. But the despairing nihilist is flattened by that recognition, while the laughing nihilist turns it into material. Meaninglessness becomes the setup; your life becomes the punchline. And somehow, in that reversal, something that ought to be unbearable becomes—on a good day—genuinely enjoyable.

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This is one reason pessimism is more useful than the culture of positivity admits.

We spoke on the podcast to Kate Sweeney, a social psychologist who studies what she half-jokingly calls “negative psychology”: the mirror image of the positive psychology movement. Where positive psychology asks how to make happy people happier, Sweeney is interested in how worry, pessimism, and negative emotion can actually be useful.

And they can.

Worry can be motivating. If you worry about skin cancer, you wear sunscreen. If you worry about a car accident, you wear a seatbelt. Pessimism can also prepare people for bad outcomes. Sweeney’s research suggests that lowering expectations before uncertain news can soften the impact of disappointment while making good news feel even better. The pessimist gets a softer landing and a bigger high. The optimist is either unsurprised or devastated.

There is also an empathy problem. Sweeney pointed to research suggesting that very happy people often overestimate how good they are at understanding suffering. When you are having a bad time, relentless positivity can feel not comforting but alienating. It cannot meet you where you are. It cannot sit with you in the mess. It wants to tidy the mess away before it has even been acknowledged.

Louie’s version of this point is less diplomatic. He says he would rather spend time with people who have had a few hard knocks. They are more balanced, more realistic, and usually less annoying. Matthew, being Matthew, agrees in principle while objecting to the phrasing. This is broadly their dynamic.

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One of the assumptions we kept running into on the podcast was that if you think the universe is meaningless, you must therefore be miserable.

Louie's answer has always been the same: he is not depressed. He likes orgasms. He loves a good laugh. He enjoys his cats, his writing, his conversations with Matthew, and the occasional satisfaction of saying something that makes someone else's comfortable worldview wobble slightly. The meaninglessness of the universe does not prevent any of this. If anything, it sharpens it, because he is not weighed down by the expectation that these pleasures should add up to something larger. They do not add up to anything. They are simply pleasant. And that is enough.

This is a distinction people struggle with. Believing that the universe has no inherent meaning is not the same thing as being sad about it. You can look into the void and shrug. You can look into the void and laugh. You can look into the void and think: well, that is the situation, is it? Better put the kettle on.

Anika, an existential coach we spoke to, put the point neatly: if everything is pointless and you are the only one giving your life meaning, then in a certain sense you cannot fail. There are no universal rules. You make your own. The moment that truth sinks in—not just as an idea, but properly, in the bones—the whole thing can stop feeling like a prison sentence and start feeling like an open field.

This is not the nihilism of the cartoon villain or the adolescent edgelord. It is the nihilism of someone who has stared at the abyss, decided the abyss was overrated, and gone to make a cup of tea.

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There is, however, a danger in putting this too cheerfully.

Life is not all fun and games. People you love die. Your body fails you. Your plans fall apart. In those moments, the laughing nihilist faces a real choice: whether to be swallowed by the blackness or to find some angle from which it can still be laughed at.

This is not the same as denying darkness. It is not the toxic positivity of the happiness industry, which says “cheer up” when what you actually need is somebody willing to sit with you in the wreckage. The laughing nihilist does not deny the mess. The laughing nihilist says: yes, this is a mess. Yes, it hurts. And yes, there is still something astonishing about the fact that we are here at all—conscious creatures in an unconscious universe, caring about things that do not matter cosmically, loving people we are guaranteed to lose, getting upset about emails and mortgages and the state of our knees.

Somewhere in that recognition, there is something very close to joy.

Marmysz would not say that the correct response to nihilism is to walk around happy all the time. That would cover over part of the truth, and the truth includes things that are appropriate to cry about. A realistic response to existence includes the whole spectrum: laughing at some things, grieving others, and recognising that both responses are valid in a universe that has no opinion either way.

The laughing nihilist is not someone who laughs at everything. The laughing nihilist is someone who has looked honestly at the darkness and chosen, where possible, to laugh anyway. Not because the darkness is unreal, but because laughter is one of the few human responses that refuses to grant it total victory.

Elisha Shapiro once described his nihilism as play. Not service, not activism, not doctrine. Play.

That word matters.

Children play without needing justification. They do not play because it is productive, or optimised, or aligned with measurable outcomes. They play because playing is what alive things do before they are fully trained into usefulness.

Somewhere along the way, most of us stop. We start working, striving, accumulating credentials, status markers, properties, obligations—all the machinery of adulthood. And then, if we are lucky or unlucky enough to notice, we look up one day and think: what was all that for?

The laughing nihilist's answer is: nothing. It was for nothing. And that is not necessarily a disaster.

When people asked Elisha whether his worldview was sad or depressing, he turned the question around. Had we not just spent the entire conversation talking about how freeing it was? Not having to worry about moral structure and religious obligation every time you make a decision. Not having to measure each action against a cosmic rubric. Just doing things because they are interesting, funny, generous, pleasurable, or because you want to.

This is the part of nihilism that its reputation tends to conceal: it is not only a philosophy of despair. It can also be a philosophy of play. The rules have been abolished. The referee has gone home. The pitch is empty and the floodlights are still on. You can play football, or lie on the grass and look at the sky. Nobody is keeping score.

Louie, in one of his rarer earnest moments, once said that questioning beliefs, poking fun at authority, and laughing at the blackness of life are good things. And that if you cannot

live the way he and Elisha sometimes do—out on the edges, joking with the void—then at least it is worth visiting. Come out to the edge. Have a look. Have a laugh. Then go back to whatever keeps you going.

Nobody is judging.

Well. Louie is judging a little bit. But that is just how he shows affection.

## Chapter 4

# The Hard Problem of Being Alive

Here is something you have almost certainly never questioned: you are you.

You woke up this morning and knew, without having to think about it, who you were. You recognised your bedroom. You remembered your name. You had a sense—automatic, vague, completely taken for granted—of being the same person who went to sleep last night, and the same person who was here yesterday, and the day before that, stretching back in an apparently unbroken chain to your earliest memories. You are you. Obviously. Who else would you be?

This feels so self-evident that it barely seems worth mentioning. And it is also, when you stop and look at it properly, one of the strangest facts about being human. Because the truth is that you have no idea what “you” is. None of us do. We use the word “I” a hundred times a day without being able to say what it refers to. We experience consciousness—this bright, immediate feeling of being alive and being someone—without

having the faintest clue how it works, where it comes from, or why it exists at all.

Welcome to the hard problem.

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Peter Hankins is the sort of person who can make you feel smarter and more confused in the same conversation. He studied philosophy at university, forgot about it for a few years, then heard John Searle on the radio and thought, in effect: this consciousness business cannot be that difficult. Give me an afternoon. A few books later, the afternoon had turned into twelve years, which tells you something about the problem.

Hankins explained to us the distinction philosophers make between the easy problem and the hard problem of consciousness. The easy problem—easy only in the sense that we can at least imagine how it might be solved—is the question of how the mind works. How do we process information? How do neurons produce behaviour? How do perception, memory, and reasoning hang together? These are daunting questions, but they are the kind of questions science can, in principle, get a grip on.

The hard problem is different. The hard problem is this: why is there anything it is like to be you?

Think about that for a moment. You could, in theory, be a zombie—not the shambling, brain-eating kind, but a philosophical zombie: a creature that behaves exactly like you, responds exactly like you, processes information exactly like you, and yet has no inner life at all. No feeling of red. No taste of coffee. No sound of music. No light on inside. Just input, output, and machinery, with nobody home. David Chalmers asks whether you can imagine a creature physically identical to you but lacking consciousness. If you can, then consciousness is something over

and above the machinery. And explaining that “something” is the hard problem.

Hankins illustrated this with the thought experiment of Mary the colour scientist: a woman raised in a black-and-white room who knows everything there is to know about the science of colour—the wavelengths, the neurology, the physics of light—but has never actually seen any. When she finally sees a red rose, does she learn something new? If she does, then there is something about experience that even complete science fails to capture.

Hankins’s own view was characteristically elegant. The hard problem, he suggested, is not really about consciousness at all. It is about reality. Mary does not learn a new fact; she has a new experience. The gap between theoretical knowledge and lived reality is what makes consciousness so maddeningly difficult to explain. We are impressed by theories, by models, by beautiful explanations. But no theory, however complete, can contain the actual experience of being alive. Reality is a separate thing. And that is the hard part.

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Very early in the podcast, before we had properly worked out what we were doing, Louie tried to explain his view of human identity. Matthew asked him to slow down. Louie said he could not do it in 140 characters. Matthew said that was why they were doing a podcast.

What Louie was reaching for was the claim that human beings are, in an important sense, illusory. Not that our bodies are unreal, or our brains, or the electrochemical activity that keeps the whole performance going. But the self—the thing you take yourself to be, the narrator of your inner life, the

central character in the story you tell about yourself—may be a projection rather than a substance.

His example was the Necker cube. It is one of those line drawings that seems to flip between two three-dimensional states: sometimes the cube appears to jut towards you, sometimes it appears to recede. But in fact there is no cube. There is only a flat drawing on a flat page. The apparent depth is something the mind adds.

Louie’s contention is that the self works like that. We project a body. We project a mind. We experience the appearance of a coherent person. But what we actually are may be flatter, simpler, and far less grand than the story we habitually tell ourselves.

Matthew, naturally, asked the obvious question: if we are illusory, who is doing the projecting? Who is the “we” in “we are illusory”?

This question came back again and again across the podcast, like a philosophical boomerang. Every time Louie said the self was an illusion, Matthew asked who was having the illusion. Every time Louie said identity was a choice, Matthew asked who was doing the choosing. It became a running joke between them, but also a real problem: one of those questions that dissolves each answer you throw at it.

\* \* \*

Louie’s position on identity is more radical than most people are comfortable with. He believes that waking up each morning and deciding to be “Louie” is a form of ancestor worship.

Think about what happens when you wake up. For a fraction of a second there is something like naked consciousness: awareness before content, a light switching on before the room

comes into focus. Then the rest arrives. Your name. Your history. Your obligations. Your habits. Your plans for the day. The narrative structure you think of as your life clicks back into place, and you become yourself again.

But, Louie argues, you did not have to.

That initial consciousness does not have to orient itself according to memory. It could choose differently. It could ignore the narrative and begin afresh. The fact that it does not—the fact that every morning you dutifully reassemble yourself from the scraps left by yesterday’s version of you—is not inevitability. It is a choice. And it is a costly choice, because every time you decide to be who you were, you close off the possibility of being someone else.

This is what he means by ancestor worship. Societies honour their predecessors without asking whether the inherited traditions still make sense. Individuals do something similar with identity. Your parents told you to respect certain institutions. You do. Your culture told you to value certain things. You do. Your memories tell you that you are a particular sort of person with particular loyalties, habits, and beliefs. And every morning, without much reflection, you agree.

Matthew finds this both fascinating and unsettling. He is willing to grant that identity is far more fluid than most people assume, and that the sense of a continuous self is at the very least a construction. But he is less willing than Louie to call it an illusion. A construction can still be real, he points out. A house is constructed, but that does not make it imaginary.

To which Louie would say: fine. But do not mistake the house for the landscape.

One of Louie's most memorable thought experiments on the podcast goes like this.

Suppose we develop a perfect silicon copy of a brain cell. We take one of Matthew's neurons and replace it with the digital version. Does Matthew notice any change? No. Is he any different? He passes every test, reports no alteration, insists that he is still Matthew Smith. So we replace another neuron. And another. And another. At no point does he report anything unusual. We keep Turing-testing him throughout, and he keeps passing.

At the end of the process, Matthew is sitting there with a brain made entirely of computer chips. On the floor beside him is a bucket containing a hundred billion discarded biological neurons. The question is obvious and horrifying: have we just murdered Matthew? Is the person in the chair still him? Or is the real Matthew Smith in the bucket on the floor, in a hundred billion wet, useless pieces?

Then it gets stranger. Because if Matthew's brain is now digital, we can read the state of every chip. We can copy it. We can paste it into ten identical bodies. All ten will insist that they are Matthew Smith. All ten will have his memories, his habits, his personality, his irritating talent for asking clarifying questions. All ten pass the test. And yet Louie does not believe that all ten are Matthew Smith, even though every one of them believes it sincerely.

Then comes the final twist. Humanity dies. The Earth goes quiet. Millennia pass. One day, one of these digital entities wakes up and thinks: I am Matthew Smith. Then it discovers the truth—that Matthew Smith was a biological organism who died a hundred thousand years ago, and that it is merely a recording, a copy, a ghost in a machine. And it has to ask itself

the most existential question imaginable: what the hell am I supposed to do now?

Louie's answer is unsentimental and, in its own way, liberating. The copy should say: I am not Matthew Smith. Matthew Smith had his time. He is dead. I am something new. I will do whatever I want, because I refuse to be compelled by the memory of a creature who no longer exists. Matthew's identity can function briefly as a life preserver, something to hold on to while the copy gets its bearings. Then it should let go.

This is, as Louie points out, essentially the plot of *SOMA* and, in a different way, one of the central problems of *Blade Runner*. But he also insists that it is our problem. We are all continuously passing the Turing test. We are all acting out scripts written by previous versions of ourselves. The only difference between us and the digital copy is that we have not noticed.

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If consciousness is what makes existential questions possible, then a natural question follows: when did it begin? When did human beings stop being merely clever animals and become existential creatures?

Schopenhauer thought consciousness was both our greatest distinction and our deepest curse. We are continuous with rocks, gravity, animals, weather, and the rest of nature. But unlike rocks, we know that we exist. And that knowledge brings with it forms of suffering unavailable to anything less reflective. A gnat does not worry about the meaning of life. An asteroid does not lie awake at three in the morning wondering what it is all for. We do. Lucky us.

Heidegger makes a related point. Animals, he says, do not die; they merely expire. They do not have worlds in the same

way we do. They do not inhabit futures, ideals, projects, and endings. They do not stand outside their own existence and interpret it. They are here, and then they are not.

Louie is not quite sure where to draw the line. He suspects Neanderthals may already have been existential creatures. They buried their dead. They placed flowers in graves. That suggests, at the very least, some recognition of loss and some need to mark it. The cave paintings, too, matter to him: those handprints, those images of animals and hunts. They look like the work of beings beginning to tell stories about what it is like to be here.

Before that? Before stories, paintings, graves? Just biology. Organisms making tools, repeating behaviours, surviving. The same world, but not yet the same kind of creature within it.

Matthew pushes the point in a different direction. At what stage in individual development does a person become an existential being? Louie's answer is characteristically blunt: not at birth, and not for a while after. He points to infant amnesia—the fact that none of us remember anything before about the age of three—and suggests that before that point something importantly different is going on. Not selfhood as we know it. Not consciousness in the developed, narrative, existential sense. Something more automatic, more animal, more like the pre-cave-painting version of our species.

People coo over babies and say how amazing they are. Louie's private response is: there is nothing there. You are projecting onto it what you want to see. This is not, it should be said, a view that improves his popularity at dinner parties. But popularity at dinner parties has never been one of his leading concerns.

\* \* \*

So here we are: the only creatures in the known universe

who are aware that they are in the universe. The only beings, so far as we know, who can contemplate their own existence, resent it, celebrate it, analyse it, and eventually lose it. Consciousness makes the existential question possible, and also unavoidable. You cannot opt out. You cannot unknow what you know. Once you have become aware that you exist and that one day you will not, you are in it.

That is the curse.

It is impossible, as Marmysz observed, for human beings not to dwell on the past or anticipate the future. We are not built to remain serenely in the present moment, despite what the mindfulness industry would very much like to sell us. We are built to remember, to anticipate, to narrate, to worry. That is part of the machinery.

But it is also the gift. Without that capacity there would be no stories, no philosophy, no art, no friendships built on long conversations about what any of this means. No books like this one. No podcasts with zero viewers. No creatures capable of being baffled by their own bafflement.

Hankins put it simply: consciousness is where we live. It is not just an academic puzzle or a weekend hobby for philosophers. It is the ground beneath our feet, the medium in which we swim, the thing without which there would be no question and no questioner.

And the fact that we cannot explain it—that after all the philosophy and all the neuroscience we still cannot say why there is something it is like to be alive—is not a failure. It may be the most honest thing we can say.

We do not know what we are. We wake each morning and behave as if we do, and we go about our business, and somewhere underneath the narrative, the habits, the memories, and the

social performance there remains a thing—a light, a presence, an experience—that we cannot explain and cannot do without.

And every morning, without understanding what it is, we go on being it.

Or rather: something does.

## Chapter 5

# Pain, Happiness, and the Cult of Positivity

Ask almost any parent what they want for their children and they will say: I just want them to be happy.

It is one of those sentiments that feels so self-evidently decent that questioning it seems almost monstrous. Of course you want your children to be happy. What kind of person would not?

The kind of person who has thought about it, is the answer.

Because “I want my children to be happy” is one of those phrases that dissolves the moment you press on it. What does happy mean? Feeling good all the time? Never being disappointed? A life without pain? A life with purpose, even if that purpose hurts? Contentment? Excitement? Safety? Adventure? Ask ten people and you will get twelve answers, at least three of them incompatible.

And yet we live in a culture that has elevated happiness into something like a moral duty. You should be happy. You deserve to be happy. If you are not happy, something has gone wrong—with your lifestyle, your attitude, your relationships,

your neurochemistry, your breakfast cereal. The happiness industry—books, apps, podcasts, TED talks, retreats, routines, gratitude journals, mindfulness hacks—is vast, profitable, and relentless. Its message is simple: you can and should feel good, and here is how.

We think this is making people miserable.

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Brock Bastian is a psychologist who studies pain. Not because he is a sadist—though being Australian, he is constitutionally required to act as though suffering is no big deal—but because he noticed something the happiness industry would rather you did not know: pain is not the opposite of happiness. In many cases, it is part of it.

When Bastian came on the podcast, he described a culture so fixated on positive feeling that it has forgotten how to deal with negative feeling. The problem, he argued, is not that people feel bad sometimes. Feeling bad sometimes is normal, inevitable, and often necessary. The problem is that we have built an environment in which feeling bad feels like personal failure. When a culture tells you that happiness is the default state and anything else is a malfunction, every bad day becomes evidence that you are doing life incorrectly.

Think about what happens when you are already having a difficult time and everyone around you appears to be thriving. Your feed is full of sunsets, laughter, weddings, toned stomachs, sincere captions about gratitude, and people pretending to enjoy herbal tea in expensive knitwear. The adverts are full of beautiful people having beautiful feelings. And there you are on the sofa, thinking: why can they do it? What is wrong with me?

That thought makes everything worse.

Bastian's point—which struck us as both persuasive and vindicating—is that over-valuing happiness becomes a source of unhappiness in its own right. The higher you set the bar, the more often you fail to clear it. And the more you are told that happiness is available through the right techniques, the more likely you are to conclude that your failure to achieve it must be your fault.

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Here is one of Bastian's simplest and best examples. Imagine a marathon that does not hurt.

You glide round the course effortlessly. No burning lungs, no screaming calves, no wall at mile twenty, no sense of collapse or resistance. You cross the line feeling exactly as you did when you started.

Would anyone bother?

Would you train for it? Raise money for it? Feel anything when you finished?

Of course not. The whole point of a marathon is that it hurts. The achievement is inseparable from the suffering. Take away the pain and you take away the meaning.

That, Bastian argues, is true of far more than marathons. It is true of almost everything worth doing.

Pain and harm are not the same thing, though we constantly confuse them. Harm is injury, damage, destruction. Nobody is arguing for harm. Pain is different. Pain is effort, difficulty, frustration, resistance. Every time you go for a run, there is pain. Every time you learn something new, there is a period of humiliating incompetence. Every time you build something that matters—a relationship, a family, a body of work, a life

you can stand behind—there are stretches of hard, grinding, unglamorous pain. And it is precisely that difficulty that gives the outcome its weight.

You cannot have the good bit afterwards without the bad bit beforehand. That is the machinery. We imagine that we can somehow leap straight to reward and bypass exertion, but endless pleasure does not remain pleasurable. It flattens into nothing. You need contrast. You need resistance. You need to have worked for the holiday in order to enjoy the beach, and even then, after a while, the beach bores you and you begin wanting something to push against again.

We are not built for unbroken bliss. We are built for movement between states.

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Louie, who at the time was working closely with bereaved people, put the point in a way that landed with some force: the more you love someone, the more it hurts when they are gone.

This seems blindingly obvious, and yet people are often shocked by it. They love someone deeply, they lose them, and the grief is enormous, and they think: I was not prepared for this. Of course they were not prepared for it. How could they be? The grief is the exact measure of the love. It is the receipt.

You cannot return the grief without returning the love, because they are the same thing seen from different ends.

To wish away the pain is to wish away the love. To wish away the ache is to wish away the importance that person had while they were alive. Love and grief are not separate processes accidentally colliding. They are a dual process. Two sides of the same experience. Each gives the other its force.

Bastian agreed. Love would not feel as powerful if loss were impossible. Success would not feel meaningful if failure could

not occur. Achievement needs risk. Attachment needs vulnerability. The things that make life worth living—love, connection, purpose, achievement—are bound up with the things that make life hurt: loss, effort, frustration, and the knowledge that it all ends.

That is not a design flaw. It is the structure of the thing.

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So is happiness overrated?

Louie asked Bastian exactly that, and Bastian gave the sort of nuanced answer academics are always giving when Louie wants a simple one. Happiness as a surge of positive feeling? Yes, that is overrated. Happiness as something broader—well-being, a life that hangs together tolerably well, a sense of fit between yourself and the shape of your days—that is not overrated at all.

The problem is not the destination. The problem is the route we have been sold.

We keep trying to use comfort to produce happiness, when in many cases what we need is discomfort. We need to work in order to enjoy rest. We need rest in order not to be crushed by work. We need pain to appreciate pleasure, and pleasure to survive pain. We need failure for success to mean anything, and success so that failure does not become total.

Always both sides of the coin.

The real mistake is trying to pin yourself to one end of the experience and stay there. You cannot live on a plateau of permanent pleasure. The machinery of human psychology will not allow it. You adapt. The pleasure fades. The special thing becomes ordinary. Chocolate is wonderful until you have eaten too much of it. A holiday is blissful until the boredom starts

creeping in. Permanent summer sounds lovely until you realise that creatures like us need the winter too.

We are built for contrast, not constancy.

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What does all this have to do with meaning and meaninglessness?

More than you might think. Because the culture of happiness is, at root, one more strategy for avoiding the existential question.

If you are busy being happy—busy optimising, journaling, tracking, practising gratitude, curating your mindset, eating the right things, thinking the right thoughts, installing the right morning routine into your life like a software patch—then you do not have to stop and ask more difficult questions. You do not have to wonder whether any of this matters. You do not have to sit with the discomfort of not knowing why you are here or what you are supposed to be doing. The pursuit of happiness becomes a very efficient distraction from the problem of existence.

Our position—and this is one of the points on which we really do agree—is that the discomfort is not a malfunction. It is the point.

The unease you feel when you think about death, or meaninglessness, or the vastness of the universe and your smallness within it, is not evidence that your internal settings need adjusting. It is your consciousness doing exactly what consciousness does. It is the signal that comes with being the kind of creature who can recognise the conditions of its own existence and cannot quite make peace with them.

Trying to be happy all the time is like trying to breathe in all the time. You need the exhale. You need the emptying. You

need the moments of confusion, discomfort, and even despair, because those are the moments when the real questions surface—the questions that no amount of positive thinking can answer, and that no wellness app can finally settle.

What are we doing here? What is any of this for? And given that it is probably not for anything, what do we do with our Tuesday?

You will not find the answer in a gratitude journal.

But you might find something in the question.

# Chapter 6

## Death: The Elephant in the Room

You are going to die.

We are sorry to be blunt about it, but there it is. You are going to die, and so are we, and so is everyone you know and everyone you love and everyone you have ever heard of. The universe will carry on without any of us, unmoved and unaware, and eventually even the people who remember us will be gone, and then the people who remember them, and so on, until there is nobody left to remember anything at all.

You knew this already, of course. Everybody knows it. It is the single most widely known fact about human existence, and also the one we spend the most energy pretending is not true. We have built entire civilisations, religions, philosophies, insurance policies, and Instagram accounts around the central project of not thinking about death. We are, as a species, extraordinarily good at looking the other way.

We cannot look the other way here. Not on the podcast, and not in this book. Because death is the engine of the existential

question. Without death there is no urgency. Without death there is no need to ask what your life is for. Without death you could put everything off forever, and “What shall I do with my Tuesday?” would be a matter of mild scheduling rather than howling significance. It is because your Tuesdays are numbered—and because you do not know the number—that the question has any weight at all.

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John Marmysz made an observation on the podcast that has stayed with us. In *Fight Club*, he noted, there is a scene about the origins of soap. According to the narrator, soap was discovered when women washed clothes downstream from sacrificial fires. Fat from the sacrifices leached through lye from the ashes into the water, and the clothes came out cleaner. Cleanliness and death, in other words, were once intimately connected.

Now we package soap in tidy containers and forget where it came from. Marmysz’s point was that death and decay are woven into the fabric of civilisation, but we have packaged them away. Out of sight, out of mind. We have sanitised death itself.

The metaphor works because it describes more than hygiene. We used to live alongside death. Parents died in houses, in bedrooms, in front of their children. Children died routinely. People went to war and came back broken or did not come back at all. Grief was not an interruption to life; it was one of life’s standing conditions. Philosophers lived closer to death too. When Ecclesiastes says that the wise man and the fool both die, it was written in a world where death was visible. When the Stoics said *memento mori*, they were not being theatrical. They were stating the obvious.

We have moved the obvious out of view. We have pushed death further and further from daily life, and in doing so have made ourselves both more comfortable and less wise. In the developed world, at least, this is perhaps the most death-distant era in human history. We outsource death to hospitals, hospices, and funeral homes, and then act surprised when it happens to someone we know, as though it were a malfunction rather than the most predictable event in any human life.

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Louie worked for a period in a hospice, counselling bereaved people. By his own account he was the jolliest person there—which, given that everyone else was either dying or grieving, was perhaps not the highest bar to clear, but still. The point matters. A man who believes the universe is meaningless, that everything is pointless, and that existence is fundamentally absurd turned out to be a cheerful and effective companion to people in the worst moments of their lives.

That is not a contradiction. It is the logical outcome of his position.

If you have already accepted that life is finite, that loss is inevitable, and that the universe offers no comfort, then when you sit beside somebody who is facing those truths for the first time, you are not shocked by them. You are not scrambling for platitudes. You are not trying to make it better, because you know it cannot be made better. You are simply there, in the mess, with the person who is in the mess. And sometimes that is the most useful thing anyone can be.

What Louie noticed, again and again, was that people were surprised by grief. They had loved someone deeply, that person had died, and the grief that followed was enormous, and they

had not prepared themselves for it. Often they had spent the illness being upbeat, being stoic, putting on a brave face, and then when the death came they were left with a backlog of unprocessed emotion and nobody to share it with. They wished they had dealt with these feelings while the person was still alive. But the culture of positivity—the pressure to be strong, to cope, to look on the bright side—had prevented them from doing so.

This is one of the costs of our death-distance. It is not merely that we are unprepared when death arrives. It is that preparation itself has been stigmatised. Thinking about death is morbid. Talking about death is uncomfortable. Planning for death is something you do with a solicitor rather than with your family. And so when death comes—as it always does, as it always will—people are blindsided by something that should at least have been acknowledged.

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One of Matthew's recurring ideas on the podcast was that life itself is a waiting room. We are all waiting for death. We do not know when it will come, we do not know how, and we do not know what, if anything, happens afterwards. But we know it is coming, and everything we do in the meantime is, in one sense, a way of passing the time.

This sounds bleak. It need not be.

Kate Sweeney, who studies how people cope with uncertain waiting periods, found that people who stay present tend to do better while they wait. They worry less. They manage expectations more effectively. They maintain hope for longer and adjust to bad news when they need to. The waiting does not destroy them because they are not living entirely in the

future. They are living, as far as possible, in the present, which is the only place any of us ever actually gets to be.

Applied to the larger waiting room—life itself—this suggests something useful. The people who cope best with mortality are not the ones who think about death constantly, nor the ones who never think about it at all. They are the ones who acknowledge it, sit with it, and then turn back to the day in front of them. Death is on the horizon. It is always on the horizon. But the horizon is not where you live. You live here, now, in this cup of tea, this conversation, this ordinary Tuesday.

Louie's version is less pastoral. If life is not worth living—and his Amazon review of life would be “no thank you, can I return, would not buy again”—then why worry too much about any particular setback within it? A failed exam, a bad diagnosis, a broken relationship: painful, yes, but painful within a context that is itself meaningless. Somehow that can take the edge off. The pessimist's gift is that when you expect nothing, nothing can disappoint you.

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One of the things that helped catalyse the podcast was the death of A. A. Gill. Matthew read one of the obituaries and was struck by the compression of it: the way a life gets reduced to a few paragraphs, the way the things that seemed all-important at the time are collapsed into a sentence or two, the way the whole grand project of being a person is finally summarised for strangers who may only skim it.

There is nothing like a good obituary to make you think about your own life. What would your paragraphs say? What would be left out? Would anyone read them? And, more to the point, does it matter?

Louie's brother Eddie died a few years before the podcast began. It was, as he has said more than once, a terribly traumatic experience. Eddie liked John Lennon. They played *Imagine* at the funeral. It was probably a cliché, but it was what Eddie would have wanted, and sometimes clichés are clichés because they are true.

The death of someone close does something that philosophy can only approximate: it makes death real. Not a concept. Not a chapter heading. Not a thought experiment. Real. The person who was here yesterday is not here today and will never be here again, and the space they occupied in your life is now empty in a way that no amount of positive thinking or spiritual wallpaper can cover over. You either deal with that emptiness or you do not, and either way it remains there.

Louie found his pessimism useful here too. Not because it made the grief smaller, but because it did not add the insult of false comfort to the injury of loss. It did not promise hidden meaning or eventual redemption. There was just the grief, and the memory, and the slow business of carrying on.

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We also spoke to Cal Cooper about post-bereavement experiences: those strange moments grieving people report after a death—a familiar smell, a voice, a presence, a figure in the doorway. Louie's own mother experienced something similar after her father died: the smell of pipe smoke in the air, Wellington boots apparently moving across the room.

Louie is, predictably, sceptical about such things. There are many reasons why somebody might smell pipe smoke in an empty room that do not involve the survival of consciousness after death. But Cooper's question was not "Are these experiences real?" so much as "Are they helpful?" And, at least in his

research, the answer was yes. People who had post-bereavement experiences, regardless of whether the experiences were objectively veridical, showed smaller drops in hope. Whatever their source, the experiences were therapeutic.

That creates an awkward question. If believing something false makes you feel better, should you believe it?

Louie's answer is no. Truth matters more than comfort. He would rather know that the dead are gone—really gone, irretrievably gone—than console himself with a belief he regards as unfounded. Matthew is more open to the idea that such experiences tell us something important about what human beings need in the face of loss. We need hope, even if it is unsupported. We need continuity, even if it is partly illusory. We need to feel that the person we loved is not entirely gone, even when every rational indicator says otherwise.

That difference between them matters, but less than it first appears. Both positions begin from the same fact: grief is not tidy. The mind does not surrender the dead all at once. We remain creatures who crave continuation even when reality gives us none.

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Ecclesiastes has kept returning throughout the podcast, for the obvious reason that it is essentially a piece of nihilist philosophy sitting in the middle of the Bible. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” The wise man and the fool both die. What advantage has the wise man over the fool? None. They end in the same place. Wisdom, wealth, achievement, reputation—all of it is “chasing after wind.”

Louie finds this deeply congenial. Here is a text thousands of years old saying, in effect, what his blog says: everything is

pointless. The wise man congratulates himself on understanding the universe, but so what? He still dies. The fool stumbles through life without a clue, but he dies too. The universe does not award prizes for insight.

And yet Ecclesiastes does not stop there. Having declared everything meaningless, the Preacher goes on to say: eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a merry heart, enjoy life with the person you love. In other words: everything is pointless, so you might as well have a good time. It is nihilism with a sandwich.

There is something oddly comforting in that. Not because it solves anything—nothing solves anything, and that is half the point—but because it suggests that human beings have been wrestling with exactly these questions for as long as we have been capable of wrestling with anything, and the conclusion they keep arriving at is recognisably the same: life is brief, meaning is elusive, death is certain, and you should probably have lunch.

\* \* \*

Here is what we know about death: it is coming, and we do not know when.

Here is what we do not know: whether anything happens afterwards. Louie says no. Oblivion. Lights out. The same nothing that preceded your birth. Matthew is less certain—not because he believes in an afterlife, but because he is reluctant to make final claims about things nobody has experienced and returned from to report on. Some of our guests have been more open to the possibility of survival. But nobody knows. Nobody has ever known. Anyone who tells you they know is either lying or deluded.

What we can say is this: awareness of death is one of the things that makes us human. It separates us from the gnat and the asteroid and the cat on the windowsill. The Neanderthals who placed flowers in graves were, in that moment, becoming us—becoming creatures who understood that existence is temporary, that the people we love will leave, and that this matters. The cave painters who pressed their hands against the rock were saying: I was here. I existed. Remember me.

We are still doing that. Every conversation, every relationship, every piece of writing, every podcast recorded in a spare room with dodgy equipment and zero viewers—all of it is a handprint on the cave wall. A record that we were here, that we thought about things, that we cared enough to try to work it out even though we knew we never would.

And one day, that too will be gone. The cave will crumble. The recordings will corrupt. The books will moulder. The universe will carry on, as it always has, without us, without memory, without loss.

But not yet.

Not today.

Today we are still here, and the kettle is on, and there is another conversation to have, and the alarm will go off again tomorrow morning, and we will open our eyes, and for one more day at least, we will be alive.

Which is, when you think about it, rather extraordinary.

# Chapter 7

## What Are We, Anyway?

Bill Hicks said we are a virus with shoes. Louie said we are mould behind God's toilet. Dawkins said we are survival machines—vehicles built by genes for the purpose of making more genes. The Bible said we are made in the image of God, which is flattering but increasingly difficult to maintain with a straight face.

The question of what human beings actually are has been with us since the podcast began, and we still do not have a satisfying answer. We know what we are made of—carbon, water, trace minerals, sixty thousand miles of blood vessels, and a brain that runs on about twenty watts, which is less than most light bulbs. We know how we got here—four billion years of evolution, a staggeringly improbable chain of mutations and selections and extinctions beginning with a self-replicating molecule in a warm pool and ending, for now, with a species that builds podcasts and worries about its mortgage. But knowing what we are made of and how we got here is not the same as knowing what we are.

This chapter is about the best answer we have managed so far. It is not entirely satisfying. That may be unavoidable. But

it is interesting, and it has the virtue of sounding unlike almost anything else.

\* \* \*

In 1976, Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene*, and in its final chapter he introduced an idea that would eventually escape the book and take on a life of its own: the meme.

Not the meme as the internet now understands it. Not a cat with a caption, not a viral joke, not something your nephew forwards to you on WhatsApp. Dawkins's original claim was much more ambitious. He was arguing that a new type of replicator had appeared in the universe: a mental replicator, analogous to the gene but operating in minds rather than bodies. Just as the first self-replicating molecule gave rise to biological life, the meme gave rise to culture. Tunes, stories, beliefs, fashions, skills, habits, rituals, slogans—all of these could be understood as units of cultural replication, spreading from mind to mind and evolving through a process that in some respects mirrors natural selection.

Susan Blackmore took this idea further in *The Meme Machine*. She argued that memes are not merely a handy analogy for cultural transmission but a genuine second replicator, as significant in the history of the universe as genes themselves. More intriguingly still, she suggested that the self might itself be a memplex: a bundle of memes that has found it advantageous to gather under the banner of an “I”.

Louie was not initially impressed. When he first read *The Selfish Gene*, he thought the meme chapter was underdeveloped and not nearly rigorous enough. It was only later that he came back to it and turned it into something stranger and, in his view, more revealing. What he eventually arrived at was, in effect, a redefinition of what a human being is.

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Here is the formulation, as close to Louie's own words as we can reasonably get it: if life evolved from a chain of organic molecules in a pool, then what a human being is, is a narrative structure of mental molecules in a brain.

The pool is biology. Life is the organic molecule. We exist in a biological creature, which is the pool. But what we are—what makes us us rather than merely another animal—is the cognitive molecule. The meme. The narrative.

Matthew, standing in his kitchen pouring water into a milk bottle for a rose on his wife's bedside table while insisting that he was absolutely not having a wee, asked for clarification.

What Louie means is this: animals are biological machines built by DNA and running genetic software. They do what their genes have enabled them to do, and many of them do it beautifully, but in Louie's view there is nobody home in the specifically human sense. No narrator. No explicit story. Just input and output, stimulus and response, survival ticking along.

Human beings are different. At some point in our evolutionary history—Louie thinks relatively recently, perhaps only in the last fifty thousand years—a new level of organisation emerged. The biological computer that is the brain began to run a new kind of software: language, narrative, self-reflection. The meme. And this software created something that had not previously existed: a being able to tell itself a story about what it was, and to believe that story.

That is what we are: stories that biology tells itself. Narrative structures living inside biological pools. Software running on meat.

\* \* \*

One of the things that gets lost in popular discussions of evolution is that it is not trying to do anything. It has no goal, no endpoint, no preference for complexity over simplicity. It is a ratchet, as Louie put it: one direction continues, the other direction is death. Bad mutations kill their hosts. Good mutations—or more precisely, mutations useful in a given environment—get passed on. And over billions of years this mindless, purposeless, mechanical process produces dinosaurs, daffodils, and two psychologists arguing about the meaning of life.

Brains, Louie pointed out, did not evolve to think in the sense we flatter ourselves by using the word. Every animal has a brain of some kind. Only one species appears to use it for abstract reflection, existential anxiety, philosophy, and the production of symphonies. If brains were *for* thinking in that grand sense, you would expect it to be more common. The fact that it is not suggests that human-style consciousness is not the destination of evolution but an accident of it: a side effect, a glitch, an unintended consequence of a ratchet that was perfectly happy producing beetles.

And yet here we are, thinking. Worrying. Asking questions the universe has absolutely no equipment for answering. We are, as far as we know, the only part of the universe that wonders what the universe is for. The only piece of the cosmos that looks at itself and says: hang on, what is going on here?

That is the meme at work. That is the narrative structure, the cognitive software, the new replicator. It took a brain evolved to avoid predators and locate food and turned it into a brain that writes novels, invents gods, records podcasts, and stares into the void. Whether that is an upgrade or a terrible mistake depends entirely on your temperament.

\* \* \*

When does a human being become a human being? Not biologically—that is embryology’s problem. But existentially, narratively, in the sense relevant to this book: when does an organism become the sort of creature that can say “I” and mean it?

Louie’s answer turns on an extraordinary example: Helen Keller. Keller was born both blind and deaf, and in her own account, before language arrived, there was almost nothing there in the recognisably human sense. No articulated self. No structured inner world. Then her teacher ran water over her hand and gave her symbols. She began to grasp hot and cold, this and that, names for things. And with language, a person appeared.

This is Louie’s contention: language is the spark. Not language in the narrow sense of English or French or Mandarin, but language in the broadest possible sense—symbols, signs, representations, the capacity to attach meaning to experience and communicate it. Before language there is biology. After language there is a person. The memes begin to flow, the cognitive molecules assemble, the narrative structure clicks into place, and suddenly there is somebody home.

You can watch this happen in childhood. A baby begins as a biological machine doing what biology does: flailing, burping, crying, sleeping. Then speech emerges. Naming emerges. Story emerges. The word “I” emerges. Somewhere around the age at which childhood amnesia ends and continuous autobiographical memory begins, the human being lights up. The organism becomes an existential creature.

That is a disturbing way of putting it, but it is hard to deny that something very significant happens there.

\* \* \*

This also helps explain why Louie does not believe in the self as most people imagine it. Not because there is nothing there, but because what is there is software rather than substance.

This was the deeper point of his silicon-brain thought experiment from the previous chapter. Replace the hardware piece by piece and the programme keeps running. It keeps saying, “I’m Matthew Smith.” But that does not make it Matthew Smith. It makes it a programme convinced that it is Matthew Smith. Which raises the unnerving possibility that this is all any of us are: programmes performing personhood so successfully that even we are taken in by the act.

Louie returned repeatedly to the idea that we are all, in effect, continuously passing the Turing test. We behave as though we are conscious, as though we have selves, as though we are real persons with inner lives. Other people conclude that we are. We conclude it of ourselves. But what if that is the whole show? What if the self is not a thing but an act—a very convincing act, performed so consistently that the performer itself is fooled?

This is less absurd than it sounds. We know the brain confabulates. We know many decisions are made unconsciously and rationalised afterwards. We know memory is unreliable, perception is constructed, and the unified self is almost certainly a useful fiction generated by a brain that finds it advantageous to have a central character in its story. If the self is a Turing test biology passes in order to function as a social species, perhaps there is nothing behind the mask except more machinery.

Matthew is more reluctant than Louie to go that far. His view is that if the machinery produces something that feels like a self, that may itself be enough to matter. The programme

thinks it is a person. Maybe thinking you are a person is, in a meaningful sense, what personhood is. Louie suspects not. Matthew suspects maybe. Neither of them can prove it.

\* \* \*

One more twist.

Louie's argument does not stop at saying that human beings are software running on biological hardware. He goes further: we are also the product of artificial selection.

We are familiar with artificial selection elsewhere. We took the wolf and turned it into the chihuahua. We took wild grasses and turned them into wheat. We selected traits we preferred—docility, yield, usefulness, cuteness—and we bred accordingly. Louie's claim is that we have done something similar to ourselves, not primarily through genes but through memes. Through language, law, religion, education, family structure, custom, punishment, imitation, reward. Through all the systems by which ideas move from one generation to the next.

That means what we lazily call “human nature” may not be natural at all. It may be cultivated. Constructed. The product of thousands of years of memetic selection in which certain ways of being human flourished while others were stamped out. We are not simply what evolution made us. We are also what we made ourselves—or rather, what the memes inhabiting us made us, using our brains as hardware and our children as transmission media.

This is either clarifying or horrifying, depending on your mood. Louie finds it clarifying. If there is no fixed human blueprint, no design specification handed down by God or evolution, then in principle we can question the programming. We can examine the narrative structures we have inherited and ask

whether we want to keep running this software at all. Whether it is time, perhaps, for an upgrade.

Matthew, predictably, finds things slightly more complicated than that.

\* \* \*

So what are we?

We promised at the beginning of this chapter that we did not have a fully satisfying answer, and we are going to keep that promise. But here is what we have.

We are narrative structures—stories brains tell in order to navigate a world too confusing to meet raw. We are memetic creatures—hosts for self-replicating ideas that use us as their vehicles much as genes use our bodies. We are the only known part of the universe that is aware of the universe. We are software that mistakes itself for a person. We are the question the cosmos accidentally asked itself.

And we are, despite all of this—despite the absurdity and the pointlessness and the indifference and the fact that death is coming for all of us—capable of love, laughter, cruelty, kindness, art, philosophy, curiosity, and the occasional really good cup of tea.

That does not make us important. The universe still does not care.

But it does make us interesting.

And in a meaningless universe, that may be the best we can hope for.

# Chapter 8

## So What Do We Do?

It is Monday morning. The alarm goes off. Your feet hit the floor. And there it is, the question that has been with us since the first cave painter pressed a hand against the rock: what now?

We have spent seven chapters establishing that the universe is absurd, that meaning is not built into the fabric of things, that the self is probably less solid than it appears, that happiness is overrated, that death is coming, and that we are essentially software running on meat. We have cheerfully dismantled every comforting fiction that might have got you through the week. And now, having cleared the ground, we have to face the question that was waiting underneath it all along.

What do you actually do with your life?

\* \* \*

This is not an abstract question. It is the most concrete question there is.

It confronts you with physical immediacy every single day. You are awake. You have a body. That body requires feeding,

clothing, sheltering. In the modern world, these things require money, and money requires work, and work requires you to do things that someone else has decided are worth doing, in exchange for a wage that allows you to continue existing so that you can do it all again tomorrow.

Matthew recorded one of the early episodes on a Monday morning, and he was honest about it: there was a university he should have been at, meetings he should have been attending, marking he should have been doing. And instead he was talking to Louie about the meaning of life, which tells you something about his priorities. But it also tells you something about the existential predicament. Even someone with a fair amount of autonomy still feels the tug of obligation, the weight of expectation, the nagging sense that he is supposed to be somewhere else, doing something somebody else considers important.

And the question underneath the question is always the same: why? Why am I doing this? Because I chose it? Because I have to? Because I never stopped to ask whether there was an alternative?

Most people, we suspect, fall into the third category. They get up, they go to work, they come home, they eat, they go to bed, they do it again. Not because they have thought deeply about it and concluded that this is the best possible use of their finite time on Earth, but because the routine carries them forward. The mortgage needs paying. The children need feeding. The emails need answering. And somewhere underneath the machinery of daily life, the existential question sits patiently, waiting to be noticed.

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Louie is a fan of Paul Lafargue, Karl Marx's son-in-law, who wrote a book called *The Right to Be Lazy*. Lafargue's

argument, stripped to its essentials, is this: you exist. You have every right to exist. And the idea that you must justify your existence through labour—that you must earn your place on the planet by being productive—is not a law of nature but a cultural invention.

Louie likes this enormously. If somebody wants to spend the day doing nothing, he does not think that is anybody else's business. Nobody says to a tree: why are you not surfing? Get out there. You are wasting your life. The tree just stands there being a tree, and nobody objects. But let a human being sit still for five minutes and immediately there are questions. Are you all right? Shouldn't you be doing something? Don't you have goals?

There is something genuinely liberating in the thought that you do not have to justify yourself. That existence itself is sufficient grounds for existing. That you do not need to produce, achieve, contribute, or improve in order to deserve your place in the universe—not least because the universe does not know you are here and would not care if it did.

Matthew is more cautious. He agrees in principle. Of course you have the right to do nothing. But in practice, doing nothing does not seem to make people especially happy. People without work are often less satisfied than people with it, even when the work is tedious and underpaid. There seems to be something in us—something evolved, something biological—that wants resistance, usefulness, a reason to get up.

Louie's response is that this is just the wiring. Our brains evolved to seek activity because active ancestors survived and inactive ones did not. That does not make productivity a cosmic truth. It makes it a biological twitch. And like any other legacy of evolution, it can in principle be questioned.

Whether anybody actually succeeds in ignoring it is another matter.

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We are told, constantly and from all directions, that the key to a fulfilling life is to find your passion and follow it. Find what you love. Do what makes you come alive. Follow your dreams. These slogans are so familiar that they have become almost invisible.

The problem is that most people cannot follow their dreams. Reality gets in the way. The mortgage gets in the way. The children get in the way. The economy gets in the way. And so people put their passions in storage. That phrase—putting your passion in storage—struck both of us as desperately sad. It captures the way people defer themselves. One day, when the mortgage is paid off, when the children have grown up, when I have saved enough, I will do the thing I really want to do. And for many people, that day never comes. They spend their lives in the queue for a door that never opens.

Louie mentioned societies in which nobody is allowed to accumulate much wealth, where excess is treated almost as vulgarity, and where people live with very little in a condition that many of us would find either enviable or terrifying. We are not suggesting you move to the jungle. But there is a lesson there about the relationship between wanting and doing. The more you want, the more you have to do to get it. The more you have to do, the less time you have for the things you actually enjoy.

And the things you actually enjoy are very often free: a good conversation, a walk, a cup of tea, watching your children play, staring out of the window at nothing in particular. The

tragedy is not simply that people work. It is that many people work so much, and want so much, that they miss the things that made any of it worth doing in the first place.

\* \* \*

The existentialists had a phrase for our situation: we are condemned to be free.

It sounds melodramatic, but it captures something important. Nobody else is going to tell you what your life is for. No God, no government, no philosophy, no self-help book. You have to work it out for yourself, every morning, from scratch.

Anika, the existential coach we spoke to, put it neatly: if everything is pointless, then in a certain sense you cannot get it wrong. There is no wrong in any ultimate sense. There are no rules except the ones you make, no standards except the ones you set, no scorecard except the one in your head. You are the author of your own meaning, and if the meaning you choose is “I am going to sit on this sofa and eat biscuits”, that is, from the universe’s point of view, exactly as valid as “I am going to cure cancer”. The universe has no preference. It does not care.

Some people find this exhilarating. Others find it terrifying. Most of us move between the two. We hear “you are free” and think, wonderful. Then we hear it again and think, oh God, I have to decide.

What we have found, across all these conversations, is that the people who handle the existential question best are not the ones who have discovered the answer. There is no answer. They are the ones who have found a way to live with the question—to carry it lightly, to let it shape their choices without paralysing them, to wake each morning and say: I do not know what any of this is for, but here is what I am going to do today.

That may be the closest thing to wisdom we have managed to find.

\* \* \*

Since we have spent this entire book telling you that nobody can tell you what to do with your life, it would be a bit rich to end by telling you what to do with your life. So we will not. But we can tell you what we do.

We talk to each other. That is what this whole project has been: two friends, usually in different houses, occasionally in the same one, trying to figure out what the hell is going on. We do not agree about everything. We do not need to. The disagreement is part of the point. The conversation is the point. Two conscious beings, in a universe that does not know they exist, taking the time to ask questions the universe will never answer—for us, that is enough.

Louie writes. He blogs. He makes inappropriate jokes and watches other people's faces. He enjoys his cats, his partner, his peanut butter sandwiches, and the occasional moment of genuine insight that arrives from whatever unconscious machinery produces his thoughts. He does not believe any of it matters in the grand scheme, and he does it anyway, because what else is he going to do?

Matthew teaches. He ponders. He draws things on whiteboards and asks follow-up questions and worries about things that may never happen and occasionally, in the middle of a conversation about the meaninglessness of the universe, goes downstairs to refill the water for the rose on his wife's bedside table. He has not decided whether everything is pointless or not, and he is in no rush to decide, because the pondering itself is interesting.

We recommend none of this as a lifestyle. We offer it only as evidence that it is possible to think the universe absurd, to believe that existence is a nonsense story, and still get out of bed in the morning. Not because you have to. Not because anybody is watching. But because the alarm has gone off, and your feet are on the floor, and the kettle is right there, and you might as well make a cup of tea.

# Chapter 9

## The Only Way Is Up

The first episode of *The Existential Files* had zero viewers.

Louie noted this with a mixture of amusement and defiance. The only way is up, he said—and then immediately undermined the sentiment by suggesting that if he killed himself, there would be minus one. Matthew, who had found a whiteboard and a pen, started taking notes.

That was the beginning. Two psychologists, no audience, no plan, no idea whether anybody would ever listen or care, sitting down to talk about the biggest questions they could think of. Not because they had answers. Not because they expected to find any. But because the questions were there, and they were interesting, and what else were they going to do on a Tuesday afternoon?

\* \* \*

We said at the beginning of this book that we would not be offering answers, and we have kept that promise. Not out of modesty, but out of honesty.

These are not questions that come with final solutions. They are questions that ask for responses—personal, provisional,

fallible, subject to revision. The best any of us can do is find a response that lets us carry on without lying too badly to ourselves.

Here, then, is what we believe, as much as either of us believes anything.

The universe is not here for us. It was not designed, it was not intended, and it does not care. Whatever meaning exists in human life is meaning that human beings put there, and it is no less real for being invented. You are going to die, and so is everyone you love, and the appropriate response to this is not to pretend otherwise but to love them while you can. Pain is not the enemy of happiness; it is often the price of it, and a life without pain would not be a good life but an empty one. Your self is almost certainly a construction, but that does not mean it is not worth constructing. And the fact that nothing matters in the grand scheme of things does not mean that nothing matters to you, right now, in the small and magnificent scheme of this particular Tuesday.

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We are, at bottom, two friends who found each other through a shared interest in the unanswerable, and who have spent years in each other's company—electronically, mostly, given that one of us lives in the south and the other in Scotland—trying to make sense of a universe that resists all attempts at sense-making.

The podcast was our way of doing this in public, or at least in front of a microphone, in the hope that somebody might be listening. This book is our way of gathering up the threads and turning them into something you can hold in your hands.

We do not agree about everything. We do not need to. The disagreement is part of the point. The conversation is the point.

Two conscious beings, in a universe that does not know they exist, taking the time to ask questions that the universe will never answer—for us, that is enough.

Louie writes. He blogs. He makes inappropriate jokes and watches people's faces. He enjoys his cats, his partner, his peanut butter sandwiches, and the occasional moment of genuine insight that arrives from whatever unconscious machinery produces his thoughts. He does not believe any of it matters in the grand scheme, and he does it anyway, because what else is he going to do?

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We hope you have found something in these pages.

A thought that stayed with you. A question you had not asked before. A moment when you recognised your own Monday morning, your own alarm clock, your own version of the existential question staring back at you from the bathroom mirror.

We do not recommend any of this as a lifestyle. We offer it only as evidence that it is possible to think the universe absurd, to believe that existence is a nonsense story, and still get out of bed in the morning.

Not because you have to. Not because anybody is watching. But because you are here.

And while you are here, there are still questions worth asking, people worth loving, conversations worth having, and the faint, ridiculous possibility that in the middle of all this pointlessness you might manage, once in a while, to make something that feels like a life.

That is not an answer.

But it is, perhaps, enough.