

Be A Leaf  
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They are the ultimate questions. *Who Am I? Where Do I Come From? Where Am I Going? What's it all about?* Is there a reason for us being here? A purpose or destiny or some great task that we are meant to fulfill? The answers all depend. If you are a cloud, for instance, it's all about gathering moisture from the air and raining it down to nourish the plants which breathe, releasing water vapor back into the sky. One minute the cloud looks like a camel and the next it may look like a turtle but the cloud's not sorry, it's serene. The cloud is transitory, almost formless. It *lets go* in order to *let be*.

If you're a leaf, on the other hand, it's all about absorbing sunlight and turning those wavelengths into sugars for energy to produce seeds to make more trees to sustain a forest. An apple tree can have a hundred thousand leaves. An elm may produce a million. Each one is a verdant solar panel. Every leaf is a marvel of engineering. But it's just a small part of the whole.  
So who are you, and what's your purpose?

The answer is that you are awesome: older and grander than you realized. Your particular life began 13.7 billion years ago when, inexplicably, things started. Some call this the Great Radiance, others call it the Big Bang, but I prefer the Big Budding. The world leafed out.

And you budded, too. Let me suggest that you didn't just stumble into this scenario entirely by accident. Your being here is not some cosmic fluke or anomaly. Nor were you placed here by any otherworldly or supernatural forces. Rather, you grew, you developed, sprouted rather organically and without artifice, like a melody develops from a single chord, like diamond is formed from eons of perfect conditions of heat and pressure, like a rainbow where you can never quite see where it begins or ends. You are here for reasons that stretch to the firmament and beyond. Years ago, the philosopher Alan Watts observed that "We do not 'come into' this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean 'waves,' the universe 'peoples.' Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe."

So celebrate! From the beginning, your life (and that of countless of others, from stars to starfish) was written into the world-lines of a cosmos predisposed toward the unlikely possibility that *something* should exist (and not *nothing*), that life should evolve (out of seemingly inanimate atoms and molecules), that consciousness and self-awareness would originate (out of apparently dumb minerals and vegetables), and that moral freedom and choice would arise, transcending the leap from *what is* to *what should be*.

Our task here is to fully realize who we are: more than carbon-based egos struggling for survival and top-billing on this astronomically insignificant bit of real estate. That's the worry, the existential dread, that human beings are just glorified feeding tubes, equipped with holes for ingesting and excreting on either end, but doomed to eventually wear out like all mechanical objects. That's the definition of nihilism. No one and nothing means anything or ultimately matters at all, really. Yet I believe otherwise. We are here for a purpose. We have a role to play. We do matter. Because we are meant for each other.

This is not a statement of faith. It's the plainest fact. Years ago, I visited a confirmation class where students were studying the world religions: Christianity, Buddhism, and the rest. Truthfully, it was dry stuff, a Wikipedia tour of global spirituality. Yet it was also springtime and as I looked through the windows of the classroom at the verdant profusion outside, it dawned on me. This was in the Southland, so there were sweetgums and poplars and hickories, all transfused with that iridescent hue where the first little leaves are golden, shimmering like amber. I could almost feel the sap rising in me and I realized. I am not a Jew or a Hindu, I'm not a theist or a deist or an atheist. I'm not a rationalist or a mystic. What I am is a leaf.

I'm a leaf, just here for a very short time upon this Earth, arrived yesterday, gone tomorrow, enjoying my moment in the sun, but here with a job to do. The health of the whole tree, root to crown, depends on me. The flourishing of the entire forest, and all the living creatures who inhabit it, depends on me and on every other little leaf contributing its part. I have an important role to play. But you know what? It would be silly and self-centered for me to suppose that the miracle of spring which sweeps across the northern hemisphere every year because the planet's axis tilts at 23 degrees occurs because of me, or that the twig and limb and branch and trunk are here for my benefit, or that all that sunshine pours down just so that I can absorb its rays. Those countless leaves that fell to form the humus of the forest floor.? That will be my fate, too. As a leaf, I'm just a small part of a much bigger performance and finding my own niche in this world depends on aligning myself with that larger, more lasting life of which I'm just a fragmentary and momentary expression.

That's the way I see it, anyway. A leaf doesn't complain that one of its neighbors may be a little higher in the canopy. It doesn't spend its time worrying "*after the autumn comes, then what?*" It's not boastful or resentful or cynical. Rather, it cooperates, it gathers and it gives away, it unfolds and passes its energy on to another generation of leaves that will come after, and it's beautiful, always reaching toward the light.

It's a joint effort here. Recently I learned that photosynthesis itself began about two billion years ago, when blue green algae and certain cyanobacteria combined forces to form a merged enterprise. The bacteria became chloroplasts, green dynamos,

living inside the cells of larger organisms in a symbiotic community. And all life is a community. Trees in the forest communicate with each other, we're learning, to share nutrients and guard against common foes. They're not stand alones or lonely sentinels. If we can believe the research of Suzanne Simard, a forest ecologist at the University of British Columbia, there are "mother trees" that share water, carbon and nitrogen along their roots and fungal networks with seedlings nearby, propagating and protecting the next generation. So what are we propagating? What are we passing on? Henry David Thoreau once said that a man should compare favorably with a tree. Yet what a high standard. To be as sturdy and unpretentious as a tree, as audacious yet humble as a leaf, as tranquil and untroubled as a cloud.

Every leaf is different, as Jane Goodall writes. "Some leaves are delicate, some are tough and armed with prickles, yet others are long and stiff, like needles." Some are big as umbrellas. The flashy reds of the poinsettia and varied hues of bougainvilleas that look like flowers are really leaves in disguise, embellished to attract pollinators. All varied and tricked out, as but she says each one "a work of art."

At some point in your spiritual development, you come to a realization that in response to the question "*What's it all about?*", the correct answer is, "*It is not all about me!*" So what I am, or want to be, is a leaf. The universe was certainly not designed to perpetuate me, but I may be here to protect and celebrate Nature in all its glory.

So love your neighbor, because your neighbor is your larger self. Love the beauty and intelligence Creation manifests. The great religions and modern science agree. We are sisters and brothers. Whatever your sect or tribe, whether four-legged or two, we Earthlings share a common origin and are sprung from a single womb. We're all in it together. Separateness is an illusion. Interdependence is the reality.

Which brings us back to our original questions. Who are you? What's your purpose here? Do you want a scientific answer? A no-nonsense answer? You are a repository of sunlight. You're not the sun, but a channel for all the brilliance and creativity that suffuses all the world. You're here to gather it all in with gladness and then gift it back to the wider community with generosity.

So go green. Care for the environment because you are the environment. There is no point where you end and the universe begins. Don't forget to breathe, to shine, and follow your own growing edges. Be a leaf.