The Playground

What if You are Holding the Pen?

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What if we have taken the game of life so seriously that we have forgotten it is a game?

We spend enormous amounts of our lives worrying about what might happen, regretting what has already happened, protecting what we have, chasing what we think we need, and attempting to control what comes next. We fear failure and pursue success. We worry about money, health, relationships, reputation, aging, rejection, loss, and death. Along the way, we construct identities around what we have accomplished and what has happened to us, and eventually we begin defending those identities as though they are who we are.

But what if many fears, worries, judgments, expectations, and limiting beliefs dominating our lives belong primarily to the character we are playing rather than to the deeper being experiencing the character? What if much of what we call our reality is the world as interpreted through that character, through our memories, nervous system, conditioning, beliefs, expectations, and mind? And what if remembering that we are more than the character could completely change the way we participate in this extraordinary experience called life?

Perhaps life was never meant to be controlled as tightly as we have tried to control it. Perhaps it was meant to be experienced, explored, created, surrendered to, and played. Perhaps this world is our playground.

Different Languages for the Same Great Mystery

Before exploring that possibility, we need to address something that has divided human beings for thousands of years: terminology. Science, religion, philosophy, mysticism, psychology, and ancient wisdom traditions have all developed different languages for describing existence. Science speaks about matter, energy, fields, forces, information, space, and time. Christianity speaks about God, Spirit, creation, and the Word. Eastern traditions may speak about consciousness, Brahman, prana, chi, or universal

awareness. Modern spiritual language often uses words such as Source, universal intelligence, higher consciousness, or simply energy.

These concepts are not technically identical, and there is no need to pretend that they are. Physics has not scientifically proven God, and ancient spiritual teachings are not simply quantum mechanics written thousands of years ago. Yet beneath these different languages lies a remarkably similar question: What is behind all of this? What is the source from which everything arises?

Consider the Big Bang. Modern cosmology traces the observable universe backward toward an extraordinarily hot, dense early state. As the universe expanded and cooled, the conditions emerged for particles, atoms, stars, galaxies, planets, chemistry, biology, and eventually bodies capable of asking where all of this came from. Einstein's famous relationship between mass and energy helped establish that matter and energy are deeply related rather than belonging to entirely separate worlds. The apparently solid universe we experience today therefore has a history reaching back to a radically different physical state.

Science has become extraordinarily good at describing how the universe developed, but some of the deepest questions remain open. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why do the laws of nature exist? Why is there a universe capable of producing matter, life, consciousness, love, imagination, and beings capable of contemplating their own existence?

At that boundary, our languages begin to change. One person says God. Another says Source. Another says universal intelligence. Another speaks of consciousness. A physicist may simply say that we do not yet know what, if anything, can meaningfully be said about an ultimate cause.

Even the apparent divide between believers and atheist becomes interesting here. An atheist accepting modern cosmology does not therefore secretly believe in God, nor does accepting physical energy make energy synonymous with God. That would go beyond what science can establish. Yet believers and atheists ultimately encounter the same astonishing mystery: existence itself. One may describe creation through God, another through cosmology, and another through Source or universal intelligence. Their explanations differ, sometimes profoundly, but they are standing before the same fundamental fact: somehow, there is something rather than nothing.

Perhaps we create unnecessary division when we become more attached to our terminology than to the mystery the terminology is attempting to describe. Science can investigate mechanisms. Religion can speak about Creator and purpose. Spiritual practice can explore the direct experience of Being. Instead of forcing one language to defeat the others, perhaps we can

occasionally allow them to stand beside one another and illuminate different dimensions of the same enormous question.

And Then Comes “I AM”

Within the biblical tradition, two of the most powerful words imaginable are also two of the words we use most casually every day: **I AM**.

In Exodus, when Moses asks for the name of the God who is sending him, the response is traditionally translated as “I AM WHO I AM.” Centuries later, the Gospel of John repeatedly places the language of “I am” at the center of Jesus’ words: “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the way,” and, most strikingly, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Within Christianity, these statements carry specific theological meaning about God and the identity of Christ. Yet they also invite a fascinating contemplation about our own use of those words.

Listen to yourself throughout an ordinary day. We constantly say, “I am a father,” “I am a doctor,” “I am successful,” “I am 47 years old,” “I am tired,” “I am anxious,” “I am wealthy,” “I am sick,” “I am overwhelmed,” or “I am not good enough.” Almost every attempt to describe ourselves begins with the same declaration, but then we immediately add something to it.

Most of what follows “**I AM”** describes the character. Mother, father, physician, entrepreneur, Christian, atheist, Belgian, American, wealthy, poor, healthy, sick, married, divorced, successful, unsuccessful… these describe roles, circumstances, beliefs, bodies, relationships, conditions, and chapters of our lives. They may be important and beautiful parts of our human experience, but they still do not completely answer the question, “Who am I?”

There was an “I” before many of those descriptions appeared. Our bodies have changed, our thoughts have changed, our opinions have changed, our relationships have changed, and our emotional states may change many times in a single day. We have watched identities arrive and disappear. Yet something is aware that all of this is changing. Something can notice the body, notice an emotion, notice a thought, and even notice the mind thinking about the thought.

This is where the inquiry becomes experiential rather than intellectual. If I can observe fear, fear cannot be the entirety of who I am. If I can observe my thoughts, I cannot be only my thoughts. If I can observe the identities I have accumulated throughout my lifetime, perhaps those identities are experiences of the character rather than the deepest essence of the one experiencing them.

What happens, then, when we temporarily surrender, everything we have placed after those two words? Not "I am successful," "I am afraid," "I am a doctor," "I am spiritual," or even "I am this body." For a moment, we simply stopped adding.

I AM.

Perhaps this is where language itself begins to fail us. Some will call what remains awareness. Some will call it consciousness, soul, Spirit, the observer, the Self, or the presence of God within. Christianity will place important theological distinctions around those terms, while contemplative traditions may frame the experience differently. Yet the invitation is not necessarily to settle the terminology. The invitation is to become quiet enough to experience what remains when the masks temporarily fall away.

When the Character Thinks It Is the Whole Movie

Imagine your life as a movie and imagine that you are somewhere around the middle of it. The first half has already been filmed. It contains childhood, relationships, victories, disappointments, heartbreaks, opportunities, mistakes, losses, accomplishments, and unexpected turns. Some scenes were beautiful, some painful, and some still do not make sense.

Now imagine becoming so absorbed in the movie that you forget you are watching it. You believe you are only the character on the screen. Suddenly life becomes frightening because the character has very limited information. The character knows what happened in previous scenes but has no idea what will happen in the next one, so the mind does what human minds are remarkably good at doing: it predicts.

The mind searches the previous chapters for clues about future ones. If we failed before, it asks whether we will fail again. If someone abandoned us, it wonders whether the next person will leave. If we lose money, it tells us to protect what remains. If vulnerability once led to pain, it warns us against becoming vulnerable again. It imagines sickness, rejection, embarrassment, financial loss, loneliness, death, and dozens of other futures that do not presently exist.

This is where so much fear and worry live, not necessarily in what is happening now, but in what the character imagines could happen next.

Fear, anxiety, worry, comparison, judgment, regret, and limiting beliefs are experiences occurring within the character's psychological world. They often represent the mind attempting to protect us from uncertainty using information gathered from previous chapters. That does not make them bad. The mind is not the enemy. It has helped us survive, learn, plan, protect

ourselves, and navigate an extraordinarily complex world. The problem begins when we mistake every message from the mind for truth and every experience of the character for identity.

The mind says, "You aren't ready," and we stop. It says, "You failed before," and we hesitate. It says, "What will people think?" and we hide. It says, "You need to know how this turns out before you begin," and we call our hesitation wisdom. Gradually, the character's attempt to stay safe becomes the very thing preventing us from creating something new.

But the moment we can observe the character; a little space appears. Fear can still be present, but now we recognize that fear is being experienced. A limiting belief can arise, but we can recognize it as a belief rather than an instruction. The mind can produce a frightening future, but we can see that future as a mental possibility rather than reality.

The movie has not changed. The character has not disappeared. We have simply remembered that there is also an observer in the theater.

The Character Wants Control

The character loves control because control creates the feeling of safety. We decide what we want to happen and what absolutely must not happen. We created Plan A and Plan B. We decide which outcome means success and which outcome means failure, and then we attempt to arrange people, circumstances, timing, and even ourselves so that life produces one of the outcomes we have approved in advance.

We sometimes call this creation, but often it is control.

Control is remarkably limited because it can work only with possibilities the mind can already imagine. The mind searches its existing database: memories, experiences, observations, expectations, successes, failures—and generates a limited number of scenarios. It may see one outcome that feels safe and another that feels tolerable, and then it begins manipulating the present to force the future into one of those possibilities.

Total surrender is fundamentally different.

Surrender says that I can know the direction of my heart without demanding that I know the exact road. I can have an intention without insisting upon the mechanism. I can move toward something wholeheartedly without requiring reality to unfold according to the script my mind has written.

This creates one of the most important distinctions in the entire conversation:

Control sees one or two acceptable outcomes. Surrender opens us to possibilities the mind has never imagined.

That is why surrender initially frightens the character. To the character, surrender feels like losing control. To the deeper observer, surrender may be liberation from the exhausting belief that we were ever capable of controlling everything in the first place.

Total Surrender Is Not Giving Up

We often associate surrender with defeat because our cultural image of surrender is someone waving a white flag. But spiritual surrender does not mean abandoning our dreams, becoming passive, ignoring responsibility, or waiting for the universe to solve our problems.

You can surrender and still work extraordinarily hard. You can surrender and build a business, train for a championship, write a book, pursue healing, fall in love, change careers, make difficult decisions, or pursue an enormous vision. Surrender does not remove action; it removes our insistence that action must produce one predetermined outcome.

We still create intentions. We still choose directions. We still listen to what feels deeply aligned. We still take the next step. What changes is our relationship with the result. Instead of saying, "This must happen exactly this way or I have failed," we begin saying, "This is what I feel called to create. I will show up completely, do the work, and remain open to possibilities I cannot presently see."

This is where surrender becomes expansion rather than resignation. The conditioned mind can only imagine futures assembled from material it already possesses. But what if the greatest possibility available to us is something we have never experienced? What if there are a relationship, opportunity, insight, person, direction, or series of events we could not possibly have planned because we do not yet know they exist?

How could the mind control its way toward something it cannot even imagine?

Total surrender means giving the unknown permission to participate.

Jesus and the Radical Act of Surrender

This idea runs deeply through the teachings of Jesus. Repeatedly, we encounter an invitation away from fear and toward trust. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks directly about worry, pointing toward the birds of

the air and the lilies of the field while asking His followers to reconsider their anxious preoccupation with tomorrow. The teaching is not that human needs are imaginary, but that a life consumed by worry loses contact with trust.

The Lord's Prayer carries the same movement in remarkably few words: "Thy will be done." It is difficult to imagine a more concise expression of surrender. We may have desires, intentions, and prayers, but there is ultimately a willingness to release our demand that reality conform to our limited perspective.

Then comes Gethsemane, perhaps one of the most powerful illustrations of surrender in the Christian story. Jesus does not deny His anguish. He does not pretend the human experience is painless. He asks whether the cup before Him might pass. The fear and suffering of human experience are fully acknowledged, yet the movement ultimately returns to surrender: not my will, but Yours.

There is something extraordinary here for our discussion of the character and the observer. Surrender does not require us to stop feeling fear. It asks us to stop allowing fear to become the author. We can experience uncertainty without making uncertainty our identity. We can acknowledge the character's desire for safety without allowing that desire to determine every future scene.

Perhaps faith, then, is not knowing exactly what will happen. Perhaps faith is being willing to move when we do not know.

From Participant to Creator

When we identify exclusively with the character, life seems to happen to us. Something occurs, we assign meaning to it, and that meaning creates an emotional response. Repeated experiences become beliefs; beliefs influence perception; perception affects choices; choices influence behavior; and behavior contributes to what happens next. Eventually, familiar patterns repeat so consistently that we begin calling them reality.

We say, "That's just how relationships are," "Money has always been difficult," "People can't be trusted," "I've never been able to do that," or simply, "That's who I am." Yet sometimes what we call reality is repetition. The mind recreates what is familiar because familiarity feels safer than the unknown, even when what is familiar causes suffering.

Creation requires enough distance from the character to recognize that history does not have to become destiny.

Return to the movie. Imagine that half of your life has already been filmed. If you believe you are only the character, then the first half of the movie becomes the primary evidence you use to predict the second half. You hope things improve, fear they will not, and protect yourself against endings you do not want.

But what if you suddenly realize that you are not merely watching the movie unfold? What if you are also participating in writing, what comes next?

The previous chapters do not disappear. They have shaped you, taught you, wounded you, strengthened you, and brought you here. But they become context rather than instructions. You cannot change the scenes that have already been filmed, but you do not have to keep copying them into the next act.

The character asks, "Based on everything that has happened to me, what is probably going to happen next?" The creator asks a completely different question: **"What would I create if fear were no longer holding the pen?"**

Welcome Back to the Playground

Children seem to understand something adults eventually forget. Put children on a playground and within minutes they create an entire universe. A wooden platform becomes a castle. The ground becomes lava. A stick becomes a sword. One child becomes a dragon and another a superhero. For a while the world they have created is completely real, and then someone suddenly announces a new game, and the entire previous universe disappears.

They do not need to defend the imaginary castle for the next twenty years. They do not build an identity around losing the battle near the slide. They do not spend the remainder of childhood proving that they were the best dragon. They simply create another game.

Somewhere along the journey into adulthood, many of us forget how to do this. We accumulate possessions, identities, expectations, responsibilities, titles, accomplishments, reputations, wounds, and beliefs. Then we spend enormous amounts of energy protecting them. The playground slowly becomes a courtroom in which everything is presented as evidence about who we are.

Failure becomes evidence that we are not good enough. Success becomes evidence that we are. Money becomes evidence of our value. Appearance becomes evidence. Relationships become evidence. Other people's opinions



become evidence. We take the game terribly seriously because the character believes every scene says something permanent about its worth.

But what if success and failure are experiences within the game rather than definitions of the player? This does not mean consequences are imaginary. Losing money has real consequences. Hurting someone matters. Illness, grief, separation, injustice, and death are profound human experiences. Awakening should never become an excuse to deny the reality of human suffering or responsibility.

What changes is our interpretation. Failure may simply mean that an experiment produced information. Rejection may redirect us. A closed door may reveal another direction. The collapse of one identity may create the space required for another. Something that looked disastrous in chapter twelve may become the event that made chapter sixteen possible.

The character cannot know because the character has not seen chapter sixteen yet.

And this is precisely why surrender matters.

Creation Is Not Control

Conscious creation is sometimes presented as though we should decide exactly what we want, think positively enough, visualize it correctly, and then expect the universe to deliver the requested outcome. But this can become another form of control wearing spiritual clothing.

Creation can be much more expansive. We become clear about an intention, align ourselves with it, act, pay attention to what appears, adjust when necessary, and surrender the route. We participate fully without pretending we control every variable.

This does not mean that every thought materializes, that suffering is caused by incorrect thinking, or that every external event is produced by individual consciousness. Other people have agency. Bodies have biology. Nature has forces of its own. Societies create systems. Randomness and uncertainty remain part of our experience.

Yet within all of that, we possess an extraordinary creative capacity. We choose where attention goes. We choose meanings. We can question beliefs. We can regulate our state. We can interrupt patterns. We can decide how to respond. We can imagine possibilities that do not yet exist and take actions capable of bringing some of them into existence.

Most importantly, we can surrender the belief that our conditioned mind already knows the best possible outcome.

Control says, "Here is what must happen." Surrender says, "Here is what is in my heart. I will move toward it fully. Show me what I cannot yet see."

Perhaps that is where creation and faith finally meet.

Returning to I AM

Eventually, this entire journey brings us back to the beginning.

I AM.

Before the titles, accomplishments, wounds, fears, relationships, money, reputation, failures, beliefs, and masks, there is the experience of Being. We spend much of our lives adding words after "I AM" and then attempting to improve, defend, prove, or heal whatever we have added. Perhaps part of awakening is learning occasionally to stop adding.

This is also where C.S. Lewis offers a beautiful bridge. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes the Christian journey as becoming "little Christs." His point is not that the human ego declares itself God. Quite the opposite. The

transformation involves surrendering the self-centered life so that something greater can increase life through us. The Christian language is Christ within; another contemplative tradition may use different words, but the movement away from egoic control toward surrender is unmistakable.

Perhaps this is why surrender can feel like both a death and a liberation. Something is dying, but it may not be the deepest Self. What begins to loosen is the constructed identity we have spent decades protecting—the masks, defenses, stories, labels, and compulsive need to control.

The character does not disappear. We still get to be parents, partners, professionals, athletes, entrepreneurs, artists, teachers, seekers, and friends. We still get angry, excited, afraid, inspired, tired, joyful, disappointed, and amazed. The goal is not to stop being human.

The difference is that the character no longer must occupy the throne.

We can play the role wholeheartedly while remembering that the role is not the entirety of who we are.

Start Playing Again

So how do we bring this into ordinary life? Begin by listening to what comes after **I AM**. Notice how often a temporary experience becomes a permanent identity. When you hear yourself say, "I am anxious," consider changing the internal language to, "I notice anxiety." When the mind says, "I am a failure," notice that something you attempted simply produced an outcome you did not want. This is not wordplay. It creates psychological distance between the observer and the character.

Then begin noticing control. When you feel yourself gripping an outcome, ask whether you are truly creating or simply trying to force life into one of the few possibilities your mind currently recognizes. Become clear about what you desire, determine the next aligned action, take it wholeheartedly, and then practice releasing your insistence about how everything must unfold.

Spend a few minutes each day with nothing added after **I AM**. Sit quietly, breathe, and temporarily release your titles, responsibilities, problems, accomplishments, history, and imagined future. There is nothing you need to intellectually solve. Simply notice what remains when, for a few moments, you stop explaining yourself to yourself.

Then play. Take a step the frightened character would normally avoid. Write something. Make that call. Start the project. Have a conversation. Forgive someone. Ask for forgiveness. Travel somewhere. Change direction. Love

more openly. Create something simply because something within you wants to create it.

If it works, enjoy the experience without turning success into identity. If it does not work, learn without turning the outcome into identity. Adjust, surrender, and create again.

This is the playground.

The Movie Is Not Over

Your previous chapters matter, but they do not have to determine the ending. Your fears are real experiences, but they are not necessarily instructions. Your thoughts are real mental events, but they are not automatically truth. Your masks may have protected you, but they are not the entirety of who you are.

Perhaps awakening is not about escaping the movie. Perhaps it is remembering that we are in one and becoming conscious of how we participate in creating what comes next.

We still enter the scene completely. We love completely. We create completely. We laugh, cry, risk, fail, succeed, build, lose, discover, and begin again. But somewhere underneath the experience, we remember the two words that existed before all the labels were added.

I AM.

When fear appears, we can recognize it as an experience of the character rather than automatically handing it the pen. When control appears, we can surrender. When the mind presents us with two possible outcomes, we can remember that there may be hundreds of possibilities beyond the edge of what we can presently imagine.

Perhaps total surrender is not losing our power at all. Perhaps it is surrendering the smallest version of our power, the part that needs to control every detail to become available to something much larger.

We set the intention. We take the step. We do the work. We remain awake. And then we release our grip on the ending.

The playground is still here. The movie is still running, and the next pages have not yet been written. We do not need to know exactly how the story ends to participate fully in the next scene.

Maybe that is faith. Maybe that is creation. Maybe that is freedom.

And maybe it is time to stop trying so hard to control the playground—and start playing again.

References & Further Reading

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The Bible. John 6:35; 8:12; 8:58; 10:9; 10:11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1. These passages contain the major "I am" sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John, including the particularly significant statement, "Before Abraham was, I am."

The Bible. Matthew 6:25–34. Jesus' teaching concerning worry, the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, and anxiety about tomorrow. This passage provides an important biblical connection between surrender, trust, and freedom from excessive concern about future outcomes.

The Bible. Matthew 6:9–13. The Lord's Prayer, including "Thy will be done," one of Christianity's clearest expressions of surrender to divine will.

The Bible. Matthew 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46. The accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane, where anguish, human desire, prayer, and surrender converge in the movement from asking that the cup pass to accepting the Father's will.

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