

**Steve Paddon**

## **Finding footing in the rubble of deconstruction**

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As my mind contemplates so many things I previously never dared ponder, I keep coming back to a basic filter that keeps me grounded:

### **Believing something to be true doesn't make it true.**

It's such an obvious statement—when applied to others. Especially to those we consider misled or deluded. Yet it's a much harder concept to aim inward, toward ourselves.

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When I was in high school, we hosted a German exchange student. He grew up in Hannover, and his socialistic cultural background stood in sharp contrast to my rural Oregon upbringing. He valued individual human life more deeply than anyone I'd ever known. He was generally appalled by the individualistic, even Darwinian social values that shaped my world. Over time, he challenged nearly every belief I held sacred. Yet he did so with grace. He was kind. He grew to love and respect my parents. He faithfully attended our Sunday morning church services in our home—often still coming down from a cocktail of mind-altering substances from the night before. He attended those services merely to be respectful, he found the content utterly uninteresting.

A few years later, I lived with him and his family in Hannover. The questions he challenged me with only became harder. But I adeptly sidestepped them, holding fast to the comforting belief that “he just didn't see the Truth.”

Fast forward to two years ago: I had finally left the church that had gripped my family for generations. I reached out to him, eager to reconnect. We arranged to meet in Italy, where we'd have a few days to catch up. To my delight, he was the same person I had met 33 years earlier—just older, wiser, and with a bit more tempered idealism.

I unloaded the story of my recent years—the deep betrayals, the spiritual trauma, the painful unwinding of a life built on something that had rapidly turned to sand. He was shocked to hear I'd finally left it all behind. He didn't gloat. No “I told you so,” though I imagine he was tempted. What he did say was:

### **“You've escaped one Matrix. What others are you still inside?”**

I laughed, but it hit me. Relishing in my newfound liberty was met with a douse of cold water: there were still more things to unravel from that I couldn't yet see.

In the time since, I've realized the brutal truth of his challenge. We're all susceptible to cultish environments all around us. They show up in workplaces, in sports fandoms, political ideologies, locales, friendships. Any social construct that leverages our human tendencies for tribalism can shift our values—until we adopt beliefs that aren't truly ours. We wake up one day shaped into something we never meant to become.

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Through the confounding journey of spiritual deconstruction, I've found only one rule to be consistently effective as I navigate the world around me, contemplating the seen and the unseen.

**Whatever I believe to be true must be intellectually honest.**

Upholding that rule means what we believe should hold up when scrutinized by the limited intelligence we possess. We shouldn't make excuses for our beliefs when they conflict with our values. That rule has become my enduring compass. As I've deconstructed old beliefs and attempted to adopt new ones that explain our existence and meaning, little has passed that simple test. Alarming little.

Recently, I asked my daughter—who just arrived at the confident wisdom of 14 years—“What do you think the purpose of life is?”

She answered without hesitation:

**“To live.”**

Her answer humored me with its simplicity. It also struck me with its clarity. And it stood in sharp contrast to the tangle of teachings she'd absorbed over her young years. It came from a place of raw perspective—that our lives are wildly improbable, a staggering stroke of good fortune across a confluence of very improbable events. We didn't earn our existence. We didn't qualify for it. Yet here we are, probabilities defied.

Life is a fragile currency with a relentless withdrawal. This rare gift is made more fleeting by how much of it we must spend ensuring, as much as possible, that it continues comfortably for ourselves and those we love. Our lives already represent winning a lottery against incomprehensibly poor odds. Is a life that fails to honor that not a betrayal of the gift itself? To squander that chasing someone else's definition of meaning now seems folly. To exhaust our precious time seeking passage to a theoretical future where life ceases to be scarce now seems gluttonous.

My daughter's answer passed my ethos test. It is intellectually honest. And it's indisputably true, even if not comprehensive. Perhaps it represents a firm foothold within the rubble of deconstruction.