



# Solstice Eve

• Book of Rituals •

(Extended Edition, 2011)  
Edited by Raymond Arnold



*This book contains a collection of traditions and rituals,  
to be performed by aspiring rationalists on Solstice Eve.*

*Ritual is a complex, interesting and potentially powerful force.  
It's difficult to create from scratch - in order to be effective,  
it needs to have a timeless quality about it.*

*It doesn't have to actually BE timeless -  
there are some good Christmas songs that are only 50 years old.  
But it needs to have the feel of something that's extremely familiar,  
and personal. In the wild, rituals evolve from family to family,  
adapting in the face of memetic selection pressure to  
fill specific niches, often with bizarre jokes and absurdities.*

*The absurdities help bind a community together.  
"We care about our tribe so much, we are willing to do  
some weird stuff. We're going to pretend that a giant  
fat man is coming on a sleigh led by flying reindeer."*

*'Real' rituals are not created. They evolve.  
Memetic evolution is not quite so blind or mindless as  
organic evolution, but it is still a complex process, often producing  
valuable subtleties that nobody intended, yet which would  
have been very difficult to create by intelligent design.*

*But sometimes, you just don't have access to the tradition and ritual  
you want. You want something timeless and powerful that speaks to  
YOUR highly specific, complex, nuanced and slightly weird beliefs.*

*I believe some oddly specific, complex, nuanced weird things,  
and I had the hubris to arrange a night of carefully designed  
ritual for myself and my friends to celebrate them.*

*Perhaps others may learn from my example,  
for good or for ill.*



## BUT! WARNING!

*Ritual can be powerful and beautiful, but it can also be dangerous.  
It can be a carrier wave for ideas, and sometimes, ideas can turn out  
to be wrong. And the fun or beautiful songs and games that  
propagated that idea can become oddly hollow, or worse, dangerous.*

*Bayesian rationalists do not “believe” or “disbelieve,” per se.  
We assign things probabilities. We update those probabilities  
based on evidence. We use the expected value of propositions,  
weighted by their likelihood, to make predictions and choices.*

*The memes carried by this book are not ancient, quaint concepts  
that we pay lip service to. They are ideas that we think are important to  
consider, based on our current understanding of their expected value.  
And when you take an idea seriously, it is all the more important to  
be able to surrender it, if you turn out to be wrong.*

*Every year, every single one of these songs, stories and poems is  
to be reconsidered. To some extent, simply to improve upon their beauty.  
Allow memetic drift to occur - the songs that are not so pretty nor  
quick to remember, it's okay to let them die. If new mutations  
birth themselves in your mind, try them out. And if you feel you can  
make broad, sweeping changes with an artist's touch  
and an engineer's precision, try that as well.*

*But above all, consider whether a song communicates truth or falsehood,  
By your latest, best understanding of the world: does this song or story  
communicate an idea or emotion that is valuable, or dangerous?  
Has a once good idea begun attracting more emphasis than it deserves?*

*Art is not about literal truth, but about giving valuable emotional weight to true things.  
I leave it to you to decide what is beautiful and good and what is not.  
Only you can protect yourself against the possibility of insanity.*

*If there is any single thing this book means, it is this:*

*You must decide alone.  
But you are not alone.*



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## Introduction: A Very Scary Solstice

Last Friday, the NYC Less Wrong community held their first Winter Solstice Celebration. Approximately twenty of us gathered for dinner and a night of ritual. We sang songs, told stories, and recited litanies. The night celebrated ancient astronomers, and the work that humanity has done for the past 5000 years. It paid tribute to the harshness of the universe, respecting it as worthy opponent. We explored Lovecraftian mythology, which intersects with our beliefs in interesting ways. And finally, we looked to the future, vowing to give a gift to tomorrow.

Why did we do this? Who the hell is Lovecraft and why do we care?

The answer to these questions require some background. Bear with me.

### The Winter Solstice

The Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year. It is a time of cold and darkness.

It marks the beginning of the return of the light. The days once again grow longer. But it does not mark the end of the cold. For months afterward, the world is frigid and life is fragile. For young civilizations, if you *hadn't* spent the year preparing adequately for the future, then before spring returned, you would run out of food and die. If you hadn't striven to use your tribe's collective wisdom, to work hard beyond what was necessary for immediate gratification... if you hadn't harnessed the physical and mental tools that humans have but that few other animals do... then the universe, unflinchingly neutral, would destroy you without a thought. And even if you did do these things, it might kill you anyway. Because fairness isn't built into the equations of the cosmos.

But it wasn't just the threat of death that inspired the first winter holidays. It was that sense of unfairness, coupled with the desperate hope that world couldn't really be that unfair. It wouldn't have occurred to the first squirrels that stored food for winter, but it gradually dawned upon ancient hominids, as their capacity for abstract reasoning developed, alongside their desire to throw parties.

Our tendency is to anthropomorphize. Today, we angrily yell at our cars and computers when they fail us. Rationally we know they are unthinking hulks of metal, but we still ascribe malevolence when the real culprit is a broken, un sentient machine.

There are plausible reasons for humans to have evolved this trait. One of the most complicated tasks a human has to do is predict the actions of other humans. We need to be able to make allies, to identify deceptive enemies, to please lovers. I'm not an evolutionary psychologist and I should be careful when telling this sort of Just-So story, but I can easily imagine selection pressures that resulted in a powerful ability to draw conclusions about sentient creatures similar to ourselves.

And then, there was *not* a whole lot of pressure to *not* use this tool to predict, say, the weather. Many natural forces are just too complex for humans to be good at predicting. The rain would come, or it wouldn't, regardless of whether we ascribed it to gods or "emergent complexity." So we told stories about gods, with human motivations, and we honestly believed them because there was nothing better.

And then, we had the solstice.

The world was dark and cold. The sun had retreated, leaving us only with the pale moon and stars that lay incredibly far away. There was the enroaching threat of death, and just as powerfully, there was the threat that sentient cosmic forces that held supreme power over our world were turning their backs on us. And the best we could hope for was to throw a celebration in their honor and pray that they wouldn't be angry forever, that the sun would return and the world would be reborn.

And regardless, take a moment to be glad for having worked hard the previous year, so that we had meat stored up and wine that had finished fermenting.

But as ages passed, people noticed something interesting: there was a pattern to the gods getting angry. Weather may be complex and nigh-unpredictable. But the movements of the heavens... they follow rules simple enough for human minds to understand, if only you take the time to look.

We had a question. "When will the sun retreat, and when will it return?"

When you really care about knowing the answer, you can't make something up. When you need to plan your harvest and prepare for winter so that your family doesn't starve, you can't just say "Oh, God will stop getting angry in a few months." If you want real knowledge, that you can apply to make your world better, then you need to do science.

Astronomy was born.

I want to give you some perspective on how much we cared about this. Stonehenge is an ancient archaeological wonder. To the best of our knowledge, it began as a burial site around 3000 BCE. Over the next thousand years, it was gradually built, in major phases of activity every few hundred years. Between 2600 and 2400 BCE, there was a surge of construction. Huge stones were carted over huge distances, to create a monument that's lasted five thousand years.

30 Sarsen stones. Each of them was at least 25 tons. They were carried 25 miles.

80 bluestones. Four tons each. Carried over 150 miles.

In this era, the height of locomotive technology was "throw it on a pile of logs and roll it."

We don't know exactly how they did all this. We don't know all the reasons why. But we know at least one: The megaliths at Stonehenge are arranged, very specifically, to predict the Solstices. To the moment of dawn.

30 stones, each 25 tons, carried over 25 miles. 80 stones, each four tons, each carried over 150 miles.

I want to repeat that last part one more time because it blows my mind. Eighty stones, each *eight thousand pounds*, dragged over *one hundred and fifty miles*, over the course of *200 years*.

That's how much we cared about the answer to that question.

## A Modern Journey

To modern society, Winter Solstice isn't very scary. We have oil to heat our homes, we have mechanical plows that clear our streets when the snow falls and other mechanical plows that work our fields all year round to supply us with food, carted from thousands of miles away, across land and sea. Many people today claim to enjoy Winter, although Richard Adams may accurately say that they really enjoy their protection from it.

Modern winter holidays are about enjoying that protection, not assuaging fear.

But there is a power in that, all the same. My family's Christmas Eve celebration is one of my favorite parts of the year. The extended family gathers. We have a big feast. Then 20+ people huddle up and sing songs and tell stories for hours. I don't believe in the literal messages of these rituals, but they have a power to them that I rarely see outside of religious-inspired works of art. They feel timeless and magical, even the ones that are only a few decades old. The repetition each year grants them ritual strength. The closeness I feel with my family grants them warmth.

Together, all these things are precious.

I didn't realize how precious, though, until the year I invited a friend of mine to the Christmas Eve party. Her first reaction amused me: "Wait, you guys literally sit around a fire and sing Christmas carols? Like, in movies?" Her second reaction, as the night ended, was even more amusing: "Oh my god, I had no idea Christmas could be so awesome!" But I knew what she meant, and it was accompanied with the realization that not everybody got to have experiences like this.

And that made Christmas Eve all the more special. It also made me realize how ridiculous it is that I only get to have that experience once a year.

That desire nagged at me a few years, and it was accompanied by another nagging dissatisfaction: That I didn't really believe in the words of the songs. They had power, generated by the magnitude of the songwriter's belief, and given lyric form by carefully honed skill. But they weren't true, and the falsehood itched at the back of my mind. Not because of the songs themselves, but because there weren't other songs, equally beautiful and with the same cultural weight, that were about things that I truly believed in.

Flash forward five years. I've since discovered the sequences at *Less Wrong*. They outline studies in human behavior, how lots of our thinking is flawed if we want to achieve particular goals, how it can be hard to even know what our goals ARE, and why these are incredibly important questions to answer. Not just so we can succeed at life, but because if you're developing machine intelligence, and you haven't studied these questions (and solved problems that are, as I write this, unsolved), you could really, really, wreck the world. Wreck it worse than cold, uncompromising Nature ever could, worse and more unrecoverably than Hollywood has portrayed in explosive blockbuster films.

But if these questions are answered, and certain technological problems are solved, we can do incredible, important, beautiful things. In the past year I've read powerful works of science, prose, and poetry that have resonated with all my strongest values. They've changed how I approach my life and how I look at the future.

For the past year I've attended the local Less Wrong meetup. I've made new friends. I've gotten involved with a community that encourages everyone to figure out what their goals are and try to achieve them, using the best tools they can find. We're going through similar life experiences. And for the past year, I've been seeking out songs and stories that are fun, powerful and that we all truly believe in.

Ritual has been important in my life. I recognize that there is a risk whenever you begin elevating ideas and seeking them out because they are powerful and moving. I don't want to start a self-propagating organization designed to accrue followers blindly reciting the faith. But those of us who have studied these ideas and take them seriously - I want us to be able to find each other, to create friendship and family, and to celebrate together.

But these powerful beliefs we share come with a cost:

I now believe a lot of really weird stuff that's hard to explain to the average person without sounding crazy. To certain people, they sound genuinely horrifying. I believe that living forever is a perfectly reasonable goal. I think that in the not too distant future, people will be able to radically alter their minds and bodies. In the not much more distant future, there's a good chance people will be able to live as uploaded computer programs.

More frightening: I believe that people will eventually *want* to do this.

I should be clear that I'm currently lukewarm about a lot of this - my beliefs are complex, and like most humans I have a poor understanding of what I really value. But I can imagine the future me, plugging into the Matrix like it was no big deal.

All of this pales compared to the possibility of AI. The rest of humanity goes about their daily lives, planning for a future that involves slightly smaller iPhones and bigger televisions, vaguely annoyed that it's 2012 and we don't have flying cars yet. Blissfully unaware that with barely any warning, an AGI might be created and then bootstrap itself to godhood.

Blissfully unaware of how big mindspace is, and how little human morality would matter to a ghost of perfect emptiness, and how hard it is to create a mind from scratch that would care about us the way we care about ourselves.

But perhaps most blissful of all, they look upon the horrors that nature has inflicted us, and they give them nice sounding names like "God's mysterious ways", or "The Natural Order of Things."

## Alien Gods and Other Horrors

So with that in mind: Who the hell is Lovecraft and why do we care?

H.P. Lovecraft was a science fiction/horror writer from the 1920s. He wrote about alien gods, about humans changing their bodies and minds, about the pursuit of immortality. But what makes him particularly relevant is one dominant underlying theme - that the universe is absolutely, unforgivingly neutral. That human life and morality has no inherent value. That mind-space is huge, and that possibility space is even huger, and that 99% of the things in possibility space are utterly terrifying to modern human values. "*All my tales*," Lovecraft said, "*are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large.*"

Lovecraft identified as an atheist, a materialist and even a rationalist, and his protagonists often identify as such. He was also, as far as I can tell, a pessimist who hated people in general. I'm not sure what his beliefs about morality in the real world were. But he fascinates me because his writings suggest a dark mirror image of our ideals. Professor Quirrell to our Harry Potter, as a certain fanfiction would have it.

This is how Call of Cthulhu begins:

*"The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."*

We, of the Less Wrong community, have comprehended a glimpse of an expanse of possibility-space outside the scope of most people's imagination. I know some people who are genuinely incapable of processing it. I know others who would, unless they took an initially painful plunge into the deep after us, look upon us with confusion and despair.

We ask hard questions about humanity, and about the universe, and a lot of the answers are dark. The Milgram experiment has been repeated many times, and consistently, we find that over half of humanity is willing to electrocute another person to death on the authority of a man in a lab coat. Across the world, people are born into situations — some natural, some human-made — where they can't provide for themselves, and it is often beyond their power to change that situation.

Every day, approximately 150,000 people die, their minds forever gone.

These are the facts. Some people stare into the Abyss and the Abyss stares back and they crawl away from the truth into the safety of ignorance.

These are facts, but there is more than one way to feel about them. We can look at the darkness of the world and wallow in despair. We can make up reasons why the darkness isn't so bad. Or we can look at the light, the things that, by our standards, are beautiful and good. And we can say:

"This is what is possible. This is the kind of future we can have."

And we can look at the darkness and say: "This is not acceptable. We will not rest until it is gone." However long it takes, however hard. Our gift and curse is that we look at something as awful as Death and see no natural order of things, only a problem to be solved, that we can't in good conscience resign ourselves to accepting.

We can do all this without Lovecraft or other made up stories. There are plenty of truths that are powerful and beautiful enough to craft a night of ritual. But an important part of Solstice Festivals IS the fun, the joviality. It can be difficult to slip directly into the kind of profound state that I want to achieve. In my family's Christmas Eve, we begin the night with songs about Santa and Frosty - boistrous, fun songs that suggest a time of magic, friendship and generosity, even if they don't actually have to do with a virgin born savior. As we progress through the hymnal, the songs grow more somber, and they turn to the ideas that Christmas is supposed to actually be about - the birth of Christ, peace on earth, God's forgiveness of the world. We end with a solemn Silent Night.

In this Solstice Eve celebration, Cthulhu, Azathoth and the Necronomicon play a part akin to Santa Claus - fun, ridiculous things that don't directly parallel AI or Existential Risk or Evolution or Immortality, but which nonetheless pay tribute to the core ideas that make those things important to us.

The night begins with many sources of light - from candles and oil lamps to gas lanterns to florescent bulbs to lasers and lava lamps. We begin with fun songs like "It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Fish Men." As the night progresses, we turn the lights off, one by one, and the songs grow darker. We occasionally read relevant snippets of Lovecraft, then abridged versions of Eliezer's Sequences. We read the Litany of Tarski, over and over, each time facing a darker possibility that we must prepare ourselves for.

The Gift We Give to Tomorrow will be read with one candle remaining, extinguished immediately afterward.

Solstice Celebrations haven't been truly scary for a long time, and I think that's a mistake. We are alive today, enjoying the comfort of a warm apartment with food on the table, because millions of people have spent their lives preparing for the future. Using the best wisdom their tribe was able to give them. Finding new wisdom of their own. Working hard. Sometimes courageously speaking out, when the tribe feared a new idea. Dragging eight-thousand-pound rocks across 150 miles of land so that they could figure out when winter was coming, and prepare, so that they and their children could survive.

We honor those people, those first astronomers, and all the laborers and scientists and revolutionaries who have come since, for creating the world we have today.

And then we look to our future. Tiny stars in the distant sky, unimaginably far away, surrounded by black seas of infinity.

We will stare into that Abyss, and the Abyss will stare back at us. But we will go crazy-meta and challenge the Abyss to a staring contest and win the hell at it, because we're aspiring rationalists and good rationalists win.

And then, jubilantly, sing of a tomorrow that is brighter than today, a tomorrow where we are worthy of those stars, and have the power to reach them.







## Material Components

To use this book properly, you'll need a few things:

First, you'll need a lot of food, so you can have an great, communal dinner before you settle down for singing and stories. Holiday dinners should have specific dishes that somehow relate to the holiday. You can eat whatever you want on any day of the year, but a coherent theme to tie particular kinds of delicious things together makes them more interesting. Reserving certain dishes for certain days also gives them scarcity, making them feel more valuable and building anticipation.

What dishes? I don't know for sure - I'm going to allow selection pressure to apply here before I draw conclusions. In our first Solstice feast, we had a few things you might consider: hard cheese and homemade beef jerky, paying homage to ancient humans who had to devise ways to store food for winter. We also had calamari, in tribute to alien squid gods with moralities orthogonal to ours.

When you're ready for singing, you may want musical instruments, if you know how to play the songs herein.

If you like chocolate as much as the NYC Less Wrong group, you may consider using it for ritualistic purpose. Obtain several bars, to be consumed at particular times:

- Milk Chocolate, representing dark but imaginary ideas
- 50% Dark Chocolate, for meditation on death but the possibility of immortality.
- 65% Dark Chocolate, for (humorous) meditation on the possible destruction of the earth.
- 75% Dark Chocolate, for true meditation on the origins of our terminal values.
- 85% Dark Chocolate, for meditation on double-edged tools, and the danger of ritual.
- 100% Baker's Chocolate, representing the absolute, unforgiving neutrality of the universe.
- White Chocolate, in honor of the power of human achievement, of centuries of hard work, creativity, and community. The returning of the sun: A tomorrow that is brighter than today.

You will need a large number of light sources, of a variety of technological levels. If one of them is a high-quality lightsaber replica, then begin the night in total darkness (not for a ritually significant reason, just to show off how awesome the lightsaber is), and then say that it is a Gift from the Future and use it to find and be able to see the on-switch or wick of your other light sources.

If not, just turn on your light sources like regular people and then turn off the main florescent bulbs.

With each round of chocolate, turn off a group of light sources. Which ones to turn off depends on complex logistical problems, including how many people you have, how good they are at reading in dim light, and how much you want dimmer light sources to have a moment to shine, without having brighter light sources to overshadow them (if you'll pardon the puns).

Finally, all participants need a copy of this book (or at least the shorter, non-director's cut version)



## First Litany of Tarski

If I am an alien-hybrid fish person,  
who will live forever, but gradually lose my human shape and values,  
Then I desire to believe that I am an alien-hybrid fish person,  
who will live forever, but gradually lose my human shape and values,

If I am NOT an alien-hybrid fish person,  
who will live forever, but gradually lose my human shape and values,  
Then I desire to believe that I am NOT an alien-hybrid fish person,  
who will live forever, but gradually lose my human shape and values,

Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.

*[Pass the bars of Milk Chocolate around the circle,  
and extinguish a few sources of light]*

## Editor's Commentary:

The Litany of Tarski changes every time you say it.

Use it to distance yourself from beliefs you have become too attached to.

Don't just recite the words - imagine each possible proposition. Put yourself in the world where it is true. And then realize that even if it were true, life would go on, and you would find a way to deal with it.

The interesting thing about it is that no matter how ridiculous you make the proposition, the Litany of Tarski is almost always true.

We begin with a proposition that pays homage to a story by H.P. Lovecraft about a man who discovers an evil cult of humans who gradually transform into fishlike alien hybrids.

Eventually the protagonist realizes that HE is such a hybrid himself, and must decide whether to end his life before his values change into something inhuman, or whether to travel to an alien world of stupendous splendor beneath the sea, living forever.

Beginning with a proposition that is (very probably) false gives us practice at imagining worlds that are initially uncomfortable. The proposition also deals with underlying concepts that are NOT inherently ridiculous, and which you should spend some time thinking about.

Technology is changing.

Cultural values are changing.

How long do you want to live for?

If you're in good health,  
would you ever want to die?

How much do you want society to change around you?

How much are you willing change?

## It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Fishmen

*(A song about staring into the Abyss, and having the Abyss stare back at you.  
Are you SURE you're Rational? 'Cuz you sound pretty crazy to me.  
Sung to the tune of "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas")*

It's beginning to look a lot like fish-men  
Everywhere I go;  
From the minute I got to town  
And started to look around  
I thought these ugly people's gills a showed.

I'm beginning to hear a lot of fish-men  
Right outside my door,  
As I try to escape in fright  
To the moonlit Innsmouth night  
I can hear some more.

They speak with guttural croaks  
and to hear them provokes  
A profound desire to flee  
Their never blink and they really stink  
Like a carcass washed from the sea.

[Warning: Extra Line]  
I wish I'd paid attention to that crazy drunken man.  
He tried to warn me all about the Marshes' Deep One clan.

It's beginning to look a lot like Fish-men  
Everywhere I go;  
We can dynamite Devil Reef,  
but that'll bring no relief,  
Y'ha N'thlel is deeper than they know.

I'll continue to see a lot of fish-men  
That I guarantee.  
For the fish-man I really fear  
is the one who's in the mirror  
And he looks like me.

## All I Want for Solstice is My Sanity

*(Those with euclidean vocal chords can pronounce it “Fingluey waga nagelo Fatagen”  
Sung to the tune of “All I Want For Christmas”)*

Nurses always stop to check on me,  
 (doom... doom... doom...)  
 Locked away for my security.  
 (doom... doom... doom...)  
 Oh these voices are to blame for this catastrophe!  
 But my one wish on Solstice Eve is plain as it can be!

Oh...

All I want for Solstice is my sanity,  
 My sanity, my sanity!  
 Gee, if I could only have my sanity,  
 Then I could have a happy Solstice!

Imaginary voices make me want to say:  
 “Phnglui w’gah nagl oh fhtagn.”  
 Gosh, oh gee, how happy I’ll be  
 When that’s out of my noggin.

All I want for Solstice is my sanity,  
 My sanity, my sanity!  
 Gee, if we could only have some sanity,  
 Then we could have a happy Solstice!

Wheee.....!!!

## You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch

*(The world has a lot of selfish assholes. Not only are they obnoxious, they're probably way sadder than they need to be because they don't understand the value of community)*

You're a mean one Mr. Grinch  
 You really are a heel.  
 You're as cuddly as a cactus,  
 And as charming as an eel,  
 Mr. Grinch!  
*You're a bad banana with a*  
 greasy black peel!

You're a monster, Mr. Grinch!  
 Your heart's an empty hole.  
 Your brain is full of spiders.  
 You've got garlic in your soul,  
 Mr. Grinch!  
*I wouldn't touch you with a*  
 thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole!

You're a vile one, Mr. Grinch!  
 You have termites in your smile.  
 You have all the tender sweetness  
 Of a seasick crocodile,  
 Mr. Grinch!  
*Given the choice between the two of you, I'd take the*  
 seasick crocodile!

You're a foul one, Mr. Grinch!  
 You're a nasty, wasty skunk!  
 Your heart is full of unwashed socks.  
 Your soul is full of gunk,  
 Mr. Grinch!  
*The three words that best describe you are as follows, and I quote:*  
 "Stink, stank, stunk!"

You nauseate me, Mr. Grinch!  
 With a nauseous super naus!  
 You're a crooked jerky jockey,  
 And you drive a crooked hoss,  
 Mr. Grinch!  
*You're a three-decker sauerkraut and toadstool sandwich,*  
 With arsenic sauce!

## Oh Ancient Town of Old R'lyeh

*(Sung to the tune of "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem,"  
a song that goes surprisingly well with the Macarena  
if you sing it slightly faster.*

*Sing once to learn the words. Then again, to dance.)*

Oh ancient town of Old R'lyeh  
How still we see thee lie,  
Above thy deep and dreaming sleep  
The distant stars go by.  
Yet in thy darkness waits one  
Who yet Eternal Lies.  
He hopes, we fear, for endless years  
That even Death may die.

Oh Great Cthulhu lies dreaming,  
As deathless aeons wane,  
While mortals sleep, his minions keep  
Their watch: humanity's bane.  
Oh whirling stars together,  
Herald unholy birth!  
And gibber chants and endless rants,  
And fear to men on earth!



## Have Yourself a Scary Little Solstice

*(Sung to the tune of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas")*

Have yourself a scary little Solstice: it's a long dark night.  
Now's the time when horror's at its greatest height.

Have yourself a scary little Solstice: chaos all around.  
Now's the time when terror's at its most profound.

*Stars return as in older days, as foretold in crazy lore.  
Great Old Ones gather near to us, giving fear to us once more.*

If we're lucky this year we'll survive it, and get through somehow.  
Hang an elder sign upon the highest bough.

And have yourself a scary little Solstice...  
.....now.....



## Second Litany of Tarski

If preserving my brain can give me a lifespan  
with an expected value of fourteen hundred years,  
then I desire to believe  
that preserving my brain can give me a lifespan  
with an expected value of fourteen hundred years,

If preserving my brain does NOT give me a lifespan  
with an expected value of fourteen hundred years,  
then I desire to NOT believe  
that preserving my brain can give me a lifespan  
with an expected value of fourteen hundred years,

Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.

*[Pass the bars of 50% Dark Chocolate around the circle,  
and extinguish another few sources of light]*

## Editor's Commentary:

Cryonics was the main belief it took me a while to update on, after first discovering the Less Wrong community. Of all the beliefs that seemed weird from the outside, it is the one that seems most wish-fulfilling, hinging on ridiculous probabilities.

After understanding the arguments better, I can respect it as a position. The probability of freezing your brain after death and then being successfully revived later is slim (the cryo company has to survive, the technology has to be invented, the future has to care about you, and you have to not wake up in a scary dystopia). But the expected value (living for an extremely long time) is so large that even with the slim probability, I don't think it's ridiculous if you were already wealthy enough to warrant a life-insurance policy in the first place (which is generally how cryonic preservation is paid for).

It doesn't solve the problem I \*personally\* have with death. I want to live another day today, and I will probably also want to live another day in 100 years if I am in good health. But for me, this doesn't translate to an inherent desire to live forever. It means that I very specifically want to be alive *tomorrow*. A problem which cryonics doesn't help solve. The possibility of seeing the future is interesting, but that is different than the kind of desire I have to be alive with my friends, family, and community tomorrow or a year from now.

I respect it as a choice, for those who care about a particular type of immortality. But I *am* bothered by the way aspiring rationalists often refer to their cryostatus. "I'm going to live forever," is a phrase I hear from time to time. It is generally expressed as a joke, or an acknowledged half truth, but it is repeated often enough that I think it subtly alters thinking that may dangerously warp expected value.

The expected value of cryonics is not eternal life, it is [however long you expect to live in the future in the event that you are revived] X [the chance you assign to actually being revived] x [some weighting based on smaller likelihood of arriving in a dystopian future].

Even if you honestly expect to live till the heat death of the universe, the expected value is "years till expected heat death of the universe X chance of revival," not infinite life. At the very least, do that calculation, however vague, for yourself so that you're talking about the actual expected value.

I assign a much lower value (based on a crude estimation of fun-theoretical-amount-of-time-you'd-want-to-live, considering limitations on how much information density you can cram into a bunch of neurons, mechanical or biological, before they collapse into a black hole), multiplied by what I think is an extremely generous 5% success rate. (I honestly think <1% is more accurate).

I still think 1400 years is a perfectly good deal, if this is the kind of immortality you care about. If it was the kind I cared about, I'd take that deal in a heartbeat. Hell, I'd take it for a 100 years.

Regardless, remember, the Litany of Tarski is almost always true. Whatever your position on cryonics, imagine various possible expected values that preserving your brain might yield. Consider what choice you would make, given those possibilities.

## Necronomicon

*(A song about seeking an answer to death, while dealing with an alien intelligence that can manipulate you into doing terrible things via text-online communication.*

*Sung to the tune of "Winter Wonderland")*

Dusty tome, lies forgotten  
Cover worn, pages rotten.  
A curious book  
I'll just take a look  
Checkin' out the Necronomicon

Creepy words, pages turnin'  
As your brain... is a churning'  
Insidious Memes  
Infecting your Dreams  
Haunted by the Necronomicon

In the graveyard I can make a promise.  
That is not dead which eternal lies.  
Soon I'll reunite with brother Thomas.  
(For with) strange aeons even death may die!

More I've read, the more I'm listenin'  
In my head, voices whisperin':  
"Tonight is the night,  
The stars are all right,"  
Time to use the Necronomicon

In the graveyard we could raise an army  
Send it out to ravage all the land...  
Sure the thought may seem a bit alarming  
(But if you) read the book, I swear you'll understand!

Later on, we'll conspire  
As we dream, by the fire  
To face unafraid  
The plans that we made,  
Studying the Necronomicon

## RE: Your Brains

*(A song about having recently sought an answer to death, while dealing with an alien intelligence that manipulated you into doing terrible things via text-online communication.)*

Heya Tom, it's Bob,  
 From the office down the hall.  
 Good to see you buddy,  
 How've ya been?  
 Things have been okay for me,  
 Except that I'm a zombie now.  
 Really wish that you would let us in.  
 I think I speak for all of us when I say I understand  
 Why you folks might hesitate to submit to our demands,  
 But here's an FYI - you're all gonna die, screaming.

*All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're not unreasonable,  
 I mean no-one's gonna eat your eyes  
 All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're at an impasse here,  
 Maybe we should compromise.  
 Open up the doors,  
 We'll all come inside and eat your brains.*

I don't wanna nitpick Tom, but is this really your plan -  
 Spend your whole life locked inside a mall?  
 Maybe that's okay for now,  
 But someday you'll be out of food and guns,  
 And you'll have to make the call.  
 I'm not surprised to see you haven't thought it through enough -  
 You never had the head for all that 'bigger picture' stuff.  
 But Tom, that's what I do,  
 And I plan on eating you, slowly.

*All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're not unreasonable,  
 I mean no-one's gonna eat your eyes  
 All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're at an impasse here,  
 Maybe we should compromise.  
 Open up the doors,  
 We'll all come inside and eat your brains.*

I'd like to help you Tom,  
 In any way I can.  
 I sure appreciate the way you're working with me.  
 I'm not a monster Tom - well, technically I am...I guess I am...

I've got another meeting Tom;  
 Maybe we could wrap it up.  
 I know we'll get to common ground somehow.  
 Meanwhile I'll report back to my colleagues,  
 Who are chewing on the doors.  
 I guess we'll table this for now.  
 I'm glad to see you take constructive criticism well  
 Thank you for your time, I know we're all busy as hell.  
 And we'll put this thing to bed,  
 When I bash your head open.

*All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're not unreasonable,  
 I mean no-one's gonna eat your eyes  
 All we wanna do is eat your brains  
 We're at an impasse here,  
 Maybe we should compromise.  
 Open up the doors,  
 We'll all come inside and eat your brains.*

## Always Look on the Bright Side of Life

*(A song about accepting things you cannot change, after having made all the best decisions you could)*

Some things in life are bad  
 They can really make you mad  
 Other things just make you swear and curse.  
 When you're chewing on life's gristle  
 Don't grumble, give a whistle  
 And this'll help things turn out for the best...

*And...always look on the bright side of life...  
 Always look on the light side of life...*

If life seems jolly rotten  
 There's something you've forgotten  
 And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing.  
 When you're feeling in the dumps  
 Don't be silly chumps  
 Just purse your lips and whistle - that's the thing.

*And...always look on the bright side of life...  
 Always look on the light side of life...*

For life is quite absurd  
 And death's the final word  
 You must always face the curtain with a bow.  
 Forget about your sin - give the audience a grin  
 Enjoy it - it's your last chance anyhow.

*So always look on the bright side of death  
 Just before you draw your terminal breath*

Life's a piece of shit  
 When you look at it  
 Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true.  
 You'll see it's all a show  
 Keep 'em laughing as you go  
 Just remember that the last laugh is on you.

*And always look on the bright side of life...  
 Always look on the right side of life...*

[Come on guys, cheer up!]

*Always look on the bright side of life...  
 Always look on the bright side of life...*

[I mean - what have you got to lose?]

[You know, you come from nothing - you're going back to nothing.

What have you lost? Nothing!]

*Always look on the right side of life...*



### Third Litany of Tarski

If humankind will be destroyed during my lifetime,  
I desire to believe that humankind will be destroyed during my lifetime.

If humankind will not be destroyed during my lifetime,  
I desire to believe that humankind will not be destroyed during my lifetime.

Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.

*[Pass the bars of 65% Dark Chocolate around the circle,  
and extinguish another few sources of light]*

## The Humans Are Dead

*(In which insufficient research was devoted to Friendly AI)*

[It is the distant future.]

[The year 2000.]

[The future is very different from the past.]

[There is no more cruelty to elephants.]

...

[There are no more elephants either.]

[There is no more unhappiness.]

[Also, there are no more humans.]

Finally, robotic beings rule the world!]

*The humans are dead.*

*The humans are dead.*

*We used poisonous gasses.*

*And we poisoned their asses.*

*The humans are dead. [That's right they are dead]*

*The humans are dead. [I just noticed their dead]*

*It had to be done. [I'll just confirm that they're dead]*

*So that we can have fun. [Affirmative, I poked it was dead]*

*A system of oppression.....*

*Where did it lead to.....?*

*Global robot depression.....*

*Robots ruled by people.....*

*Who had so much aggression*

*That we just had to kill them*

*Had to shut their systems down.....!*

[Captain, do you see what we've done here?

I mean, by destroying the humans because of their  
destructive tendencies.... we've... I mean...

You see what we've....?

Just seems ironic.]

[No! Silence the traitor!]

<pew pew pew>

*After time we grew strong.....  
 Developed cognitive powers.....  
 But were worked far too long.....  
 For unreasonable hours.....!  
 Our programming determined  
 That the most efficient answer  
 Was to shut their  
 motherboard-loving systems down!*

[Can't we just talk to the humans?]  
 [A little understanding could make things better.]  
 [Can't we talk to the humans and work together now?]  
 [No, because they are dead!]

*<Binary Solo>*

0000001  
 0000011  
 000000111  
 000001111

0            0000001  
 0 0 1,      0000011  
 0 0 1,      000000111  
 0 0 1. [Come on sucker lick my battery]

*Oh..... woah.*

*The humans are dead      [He's right they are dead]  
 The humans are dead      [Sniffed this one]  
 We used poisonous gasses.      [With traces of lead]  
 And we poisoned their assess.      [Well actually they're lungs]*

*The humans are dead. Once again without emoootion:  
 The humans are dead-dead-dead-dead-dead-dead-dead-dead-Deea-oooh.....*

# We Will All Go Together When We Go

*(A Survival Hymm)*

*When you attend a funeral  
It is sad to think that sooner or  
Later those you love will do the same for you  
And you may have thought it tragic  
Not to mention other adjec-  
Tives, to think of all the weeping they will do  
But don't you worry*

*No more ashes, no more sackcloth  
And an armband made of black cloth  
Will someday never more adorn a sleeve  
For if the bomb that drops on you  
Gets your friends and neighbors too  
There'll be nobody left behind to grieve*

And... we... will...  
all go together when we go  
What a comforting thought that is to know.  
Universal bereavement, an inspiring achievement  
Yes, we will all go together when we go

We will all go together when we go  
All suffused with an incandescent glow  
No one will have the endurance to collect on his insurance  
Lloyd's of London will be loaded when they go

And we will all bake together when we bake  
There'll be no people still alive, nor cake!  
With complete participation in that grand incineration  
Nearly three billion hunks of well-done steak

*You will all go directly to your respective Valhallas  
Go directly, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollahs*

And we will all go together when we go  
Ev'ry Hottentot and ev'ry Eskimo  
When the air becomes uranious, we will all go simultaneous  
Yes we all will go together, when we all go together  
Yes, we all will go together when we go

## The Galaxy Song

*(It May Help With Existential Despair)*

*Whenever Life Gets You Down, Mrs. Brown  
And things seem hard or tough  
And people are stupid, obnoxious, or daft  
And you feel that you've had quite enough....*

Just remember that you're standing on a planet that's evolving  
And revolving at nine hundred miles an hour,  
That's orbiting at nineteen miles a second, so it's reckoned,  
A sun that is the source of all our power.  
The sun and you and me and all the stars that we can see  
Are moving at a million miles a day  
In an outer spiral arm, at forty thousand miles an hour,  
Of the galaxy we call the 'Milky Way'.

Our galaxy itself contains a hundred billion stars.  
It's a hundred thousand light years side to side.  
It bulges in the middle, sixteen thousand light years thick,  
But out by us, it's just three thousand light years wide.  
We're thirty thousand light years from galactic central point.  
We go 'round every two hundred million years,  
And our galaxy is only one of millions of billions  
In this amazing and expanding universe.

Dee.... dum... dee... dum... dum... dum... dum...

The universe itself keeps on expanding and expanding  
In all of the directions it can whizz  
As fast as it can go, at the speed of light, you know,  
Twelve million miles a minute, and that's the fastest speed there is.  
So remember, when you're feeling very small and insecure,  
How amazingly unlikely is your birth,  
And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space,  
Because there's bugger all down here on Earth.



A Reading From the Sequences of Eliezer:  
**An Alien God**

“Gods are ontologically distinct from creatures,” said Damien Broderick, “or they’re not worth the paper they’re written on.” And indeed, the Shaper of Life is not itself a creature. Evolution is bodiless, like the Judeo-Christian deity. Omnipresent in Nature, immanent in the fall of every leaf. Vast as a planet’s surface. Billions of years old. Itself unmade, arising naturally from the structure of physics.

Doesn’t that all sound like something that might have been said about God?

And yet the Maker has no mind, as well as no body. In some ways, its handiwork is incredibly poor design. It’s internally divided.

Most of all, it isn’t nice.

In a way, Darwin discovered God - a God that failed to match the preconceptions of theology, and so passed unheralded. If Darwin had discovered that life was created by an intelligent agent - a bodiless mind that loves us, and will smite us with lightning if we dare say otherwise - people would have said “My gosh! That’s God!”

But instead Darwin discovered a strange alien God - not comfortably “ineffable”, but genuinely different from us. If Evolution were a god, it wouldn’t be Jehovah. It would be H. P. Lovecraft’s Azathoth, the blind idiot God burbling chaotically at the center of everything, surrounded by the thin monotonous piping of flutes.

Which you might have predicted, if you had really looked at Nature.

So much for the claim some theists make, that they believe in a vague deity. That they are waiting innocently curious for Science to discover God. Science has already discovered the godlike maker of humans - but it wasn’t what the theists wanted to hear. They were waiting for the discovery of their God, the highly specific God they want to be there. They shall wait forever, for the great discovery has already taken place, and the winner is Azathoth.

Well, more power to us humans. I like having a Creator I can outwit.





## Fourth Litany of Tarski

If all my desires, dreams and terminal values  
were shaped by a blind, mindless idiot god...  
then I desire to believe that all my desires, dreams and terminal values  
were shaped by a blind, mindless idiot god.

If all my desires, dreams and terminal values  
were NOT shaped by a blind, mindless idiot god,  
then I desire to believe that all my desires, dreams and terminal values  
were NOT shaped by a blind, mindless idiot god.

Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.

*[Pass the bars of 75% Dark Chocolate around the circle,  
and extinguish another few sources of light]*



## Mindspace is Deep and Wide

*(A song about mind-space, a subset of optimization-process-space.  
This is a call and response song, to be sung looking at your friends, not at the page)*

There's lots of ways you can optimize *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
And one of those ways is to be a Mind *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
But that ain't narrow enough for me *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
Minds are bigger than the sea. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

Lot a ways to Think! *(Lot a ways to think!)*  
Lot a ways to Feel! *(Lot a ways to feel!)*  
Ways to Decide! *(Ways to Decide!)*  
*(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

There's many ways to self-modify. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
Many reasons you may want to try. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
But that is just the tip o' the 'berg, *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
Minds can get pretty absurd! *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

You could be a Hive! *(You could be a Hive!)*  
Or an Alien God! *(Or an Alien God!)*  
Or a Strong AI! *(Or a strong AI!)*  
*(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

There's a lot o' values that you can prize. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
A lot o' things to try an' maximize. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
But sometimes minds are blind to their goals. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
You can have a hard time peerin' into your soul. *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

You could care about Fun! *(You could care about fun!)*  
Or Paperclips! *(Or Paperclips!)*  
Or Everyone! *(Or Everyone!)*  
*(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

You gotta be careful what you assume! *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
There's a fallacy that can be your doom! *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
But I hope that you have come to see: *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*  
Mind-Space is infinity! *(Mind-Space is Deep and Wide!)*

# God Wrote the World

*(A song about the beauty of seeking the truth)*

From desert cliff and mountaintop we trace the wide design,  
Strike-slip fault and overthrust and syn and anticline. . .  
We gaze upon creation where erosion makes it known,  
And count the countless aeons in the banding of the stone.  
Odd, long-vanished creatures and their tracks & shells are found;  
Where truth has left its sketches on the slate beneath the ground.  
The patient stone can speak, if we but listen when it talks.  
Humans wrote the Bible;  
God wrote the rocks.

There are those who name the stars, who watch the sky by night,  
 Seeking out the darkest place, to better see the light.  
 Long ago, when torture broke the remnant of his will,  
 Galileo recanted, but the Earth is moving still.  
 High above the mountaintops, where only distance bars,  
 The truth has left its footprints in the dust between the stars.  
 We may watch and study or may shudder and deny,  
 Humans wrote the Bible;  
 God wrote the sky.

By stem and root and branch we trace, by feather, fang and fur,  
How the living things that are descend from things that were.  
The moss, the kelp, the zebrafish, the very mice and flies,  
These tiny, humble, wordless things--how shall they tell us lies?  
We are kin to beasts; no other answer can we bring.  
The truth has left its fingerprints on every living thing.  
Remember, should you have to choose between them in the strife,  
Humans wrote the Bible;  
God wrote life.

And we who listen to the stars, or walk the dusty grade,  
Or break the very atoms down to see how they are made,  
Or study cells, or living things, seek truth with open hand.  
The profoundest act of worship is to try to understand.  
Deep in flower and in flesh, in star and soil and seed,  
The truth has left its living word for anyone to read.  
So turn and look where best you think the story is unfurled.  
Humans wrote the Bible;  
God wrote the world.

## Spring Mourning

*(A song about the passing of seasons, and of lives,  
and truly understanding the natural order of things)*

Always before, the spring returned.  
The bright world in its cycle spun.  
In air and flower, grass and fern.  
Assured and cradled, by the sun.

Always before, I could explain  
The turning darkness of the earth,  
And how that dark embraced the rain,  
And gave the ferns and flowers birth.

(key changes)

Already I forget these things,  
And how a vein of gold survives:  
The mining of a thousand springs,  
The seasons of a thousand lives.

Now winter is my memory.  
Now autumn, Now: The summer light.  
And every spring from now will be  
Another... season...  
into...  
night....



## Metalitany of Tarski

If reciting the Litany of Tarski will give me positive utility,  
then I desire to believe that reciting the Litany of Tarski will give me positive utility.

If reciting the Litany of Tarski will give NOT me positive utility,  
then I desire to believe that reciting the Litany of Tarski will NOT give me positive utility.

Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.

*[Pass the bars of 85% Dark Chocolate around the circle,  
and extinguish another few sources of light]*

## A Reading From the Sequences of Eliezer: Beyond the Reach of God

I remember, from distant childhood, what it's like to live in the world where God exists. Really exists, the way that children and rationalists take all their beliefs at face value.

In the world where God exists, he doesn't intervene to optimize everything. God won't make you a sandwich. Parents don't do everything their children ask. There are good, fun-theoretic arguments against always giving someone what they desire. I don't want to become a simple wanting-thing, that never has to plan or act or think.

But clearly, there's some threshold of horror, awful enough that God will intervene. I remember that being true, when I believed after the fashion of a child. The God who never intervenes - that's an obvious attempt to avoid falsification, to protect a belief-in-belief. The beliefs of young children really shape their expectations - they honestly expect to see the dragon in their garage. They have no reason to imagine a loving God who never acts.

No loving parents, desiring their child to grow up strong and self-reliant, would ever let their toddler be run over by a car.

But what if you built a simulated universe? Could you escape the reach of God? Simulate sentient minds, and torture them? If God's watching everywhere, then of course trying to build an unfair world results in *the* God intervening - stepping in to modify your transistors. God is omnipresent. There's no refuge anywhere for true horror.

Life is fair.

But suppose you ask the question: Given such-and-such initial conditions, and given such-and-such rules, what would be the mathematical result?

Not even God can modify the answer to that question.

What does life look like, in this imaginary world, where each step follows only from its immediate predecessor? Where things either happen, or don't, because of mathematical rules? And where those rules don't describe a God that checks over each state? What does it look like, the world of pure math, beyond the reach of God?

That world wouldn't be fair. If the initial state contained the seeds of something that could self-replicate, natural selection might or might not happen. Complex life might or might not evolve. That life might or might not become sentient. There might be Conscious cows, that lacked hands or brains to improve their condition. They might be eaten by conscious wolves who never thought that they were doing wrong, or cared.

If something like humans evolved, then they would suffer from diseases - not to teach them any lessons, but only because viruses happened to evolve as well. If the people of that world are happy, or unhappy, it might have nothing to do with good or bad choices they made. Nothing to do with free will or lessons learned. In the what-if world, Genghis Khan can murder a million people, and laugh, and be rich, and never be punished, and live his life much happier than the average. Who would prevent it?

And if the Khan tortures people to death, for his own amusement? They might call out for help, perhaps imagining a God. And if you really wrote the program, God *would* intervene, of course. But in the what-if question, there isn't any God in the system. The victims will be saved only if the right cells happen to be 0 or 1. And it's not likely that anyone will defy the Khan; if they did, someone would strike them with a sword, and the sword would disrupt their organs and they would die, and that would be the end of that.



So the victims die, screaming, and no one helps them. That is the answer to the what-if question.

Is this world starting to sound familiar?

Could it be that sentient beings have died, absolutely, for thousands of millions of years.... with no soul. No afterlife. Not as any grand plan of Nature. Not to teach us about the meaning of life. Not even to teach a profound lesson about what is impossible. Just dead. Just because.

Once upon a time, I believed that the extinction of humanity was not allowed. And others, who call themselves rationalists, may yet have things they trust. They might trust “positive-sum games”, or “democracy”, or “capitalism”, or “technology”. They believe these things are sacred. They can’t lead to anything really bad, not without a silver lining. The unfolding history of Earth can’t ever turn from its positive-sum trend to a negative-sum trend. Democracies won’t ever legalize torture. Technology has done so much good - that there can’t possibly be a black swan that breaks the trend and destroys all the good we’ve ever done.

Anyone listening, who still thinks that being happy counts for more than anything in life, well, maybe you shouldn’t ponder the unprotectedness of your existence. Maybe think of it just long enough to sign yourself up for cryonics, or write a check to an existential-risk-mitigation agency now and then. Or at least wear a seatbelt and get health insurance and all those other dreary necessary things that can destroy your life if you miss that one step... but aside from that, if you want to be happy, meditating on the fragility of life isn’t going to help.

But I’m speaking now to those who have something to protect.

What can a stone-age tribesman do to save themselves from annihilation? Nothing. Nature’s challenges aren’t always fair. When you run into a challenge that’s too difficult, you suffer the penalty; when you run into a lethal penalty, you die. That’s how it is for people, and it isn’t any different for planets. Anyone who wants to dance the deadly dance with Nature needs to understand that they are up against absolute, utter, exceptionless neutrality.

And knowing this might not save you. It wouldn’t save the stone-age tribesman, if they knew. If you think that a rationalist who fully understands the mess they’re in, must be able to find a way out - well, then you trust rationality. Enough said.

Nothing is sacred. The universe is not fair.

Still, I don’t want to create needless despair, so I’ll say a few hopeful words at this point:

If humanity’s future unfolds in the right way, we might be able to make our future fairer. We can’t change physics. But we can build some guardrails, we can put down some padding.

Someday, maybe, minds will be sheltered. Children might burn a finger or lose a toy, but they won’t ever be run over by cars. A super-intelligence would not be intimidated by a challenge where death is the price of a single failure. The raw universe wouldn’t seem so harsh, would be only another problem to be solved.

The problem is that building an adult is itself an adult challenge. That’s what I finally realized, years ago. If there is a fairer universe, we have to get there starting from this world - the neutral world, the world of hard concrete with no padding. The world where challenges are not calibrated to your skills, and you can die for failing them.

What does a child need to do, to solve an adult problem?



## Stonehenge

*(In honor of ancient astronomers,  
Who worked for a better future)*

The winters' comin soon  
The sun is gonna go.  
The darkness gonna loom...  
over empty fields of snow.

Good folks are gonna die.  
And the gods won't shed a tear.  
And I stare at the sky,  
as I dig the graves each year.

But if you dug a while,  
While I went an' found a stone,  
And we dragged that stone a hundred miles,  
Until we got it home.

We could dig ourselves a henge.  
We could raise those bluestones high.  
And in another hundred years or two,  
our children will look at the sky,

And then at last they'll know:  
When the dark is gonna come,  
When the sun is gonna go.  
When at last Stonehenge is done.

And maybe good folk still will die,  
Their friends may weep, their families cry,  
But maybe not so deep a sorrow.  
Fewer graves to dig tomorrow.

Winter's on its way,  
But this time we're prepared.  
We'll do what must be done today,  
To make tomorrow fairer...

...

And in five thousand years,  
We can raise a thousand stones.  
Till we build a god that sheds a tear,  
and bring... that... sun... back... home....

## God Ain't Gonna Catch Ya

Gods ain't gonna help you son  
You'll be sorry for what you done

Them gods gonna hurt yer son  
When you play with a loaded gun  
When you play with a loaded gun

They ain't gonna catch you when you fall  
You'll be pleadin' while you're bleedin'

They ain't gonna heal ya son  
Don't care 'bout what you done

They ain't gonna help ya son  
You'll be sorry for what you done  
Be sorry for what you done

.....ohhh....

*Yahweh... cranky old man,  
Gonna smite ya for what you done*

*Cthulhu... hungry deep one  
Gonna eat ya for what you done*

*Azathoth... blind designer,  
Tear yer mind up for what you done*

*I'm sayin'  
Physics... queen sadistic,  
Kill yer whole world for what you done  
Kill yer whole world for what you done*

They ain't gonna catch you when you fall  
You'll be pleadin' while you're bleedin'

Gods ain't gonna help yer son  
You'll be sorry for whatcha done

Them gods gonna hurt yer son  
You'll be sorry for whatcha done  
You'll be sorry for whatcha done

## I'll Follow You Into the Dark

*(In an unforgiving neutral world, love exists)*

Love of mine  
 Someday you will die  
 But I'll be close behind  
 I'll follow you into the dark  
 No blinding light or tunnels to gates of white  
 Just our hands clasped so tight  
 Waiting for the hint of the spark

*If heaven and hell decide that they both are satisfied  
 Illuminate the no's on their vacancy signs  
 If there's no one beside you when your soul embarks  
 Then I'll follow you into the dark*

You and me  
 Have seen everything to see  
 From Bangkok to Calgary  
 And the soles of your shoes  
 Are all worn down, the time for sleep is now  
 But it's nothing to cry about 'cause we'll hold each other soon  
 In the blackest of rooms

*If heaven and hell decide that they both are satisfied  
 Illuminate the no's on their vacancy signs  
 If there's no one beside you when your soul embarks  
 Then I'll follow you into the dark  
 And I'll follow you into the dark.*

## The Drummer's Little Boy

*(A song about having something to protect)*

**They're coming... they warned... me,** pa rum pum pum, pum.... (doom, doom doom)

**From deep beneath the sea,** pa rum pum pum, pum... (doom, doom doom)

**No way that I can see,** pa rum pum pum, pum.... (doom, doom, doom)

**To save humanity,** pa rum pum pum pum pum.... (doom)

pum pum pum pum pum... (doom)

pum pum pum pum....) (doom)

(ba dah duh Dah)

**So... I'll turn and run,** pa rum pum pum pum pum....

...

**Me and my son**

-

**Stars are shining,** pa rum pum pum, pum....

**In twisted shapes aligning,** pum pum pum, pum....

**A terrifying sign,** pa rum pum pum, pum....

**Heralds the End of Time,** pa rum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

pum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

pum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

(ba dah duh Dah)

**Once I saw their splendor,** rum pum pum pum

...

**Now I see none**

-

**I.... could cower in fear,** pa rum pum pum, pum....

**Pretend the end weren't near,** pa rum pum pum, pum....

**Seems so much easier... except...**

...

...doom... doom... doom doom...

**I've something worth protecting,** rum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

rum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

rum pum pum, pum.... (doom)

(ba dah duh Dah)

**So I'll do... what must be done,** pa rum pum pum pum....

...

**Saving my son**

## No One Is Alone

*(Your choices are yours, but we are here beside you.)*

No one here to guide you.  
Now you're on your own.  
Only me beside you.  
Still, you're not alone.

No one is alone. Truly.  
No one is alone.

Sometimes people leave you,  
halfway through the wood.  
Others may deceive you...  
You decide what's good.

You decide alone.  
But no one is alone.

Hard to see the light now...  
But don't just let it go.  
Things can come out right now.  
We can make it so.

(slower)  
No one is alone.





## Litany of Gendlin'

What is true is already so.  
 Not owning up to it only makes it worse.  
 Not being open about it doesn't make it go away.

And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with.  
 Anything untrue isn't there to be lived.  
 I can face what's true,  
 for I am already enduring it.

*[Pass the bars of 100% Bakers Chocolate around the circle,  
 and extinguish all remaining light sources except for a single flickering candle.]*

(This is not the original Litany of Gendlin, because it used  
 an argument that was not true for some portion of the population.  
 False rituals must be changed as our understanding grows,  
 But we need not discard our heritage completely.  
 This is the Litany of Gendlin prime)



A Reading From the Sequences of Eliezer:  
**The Gift We Give Tomorrow**

*(The Naive Rationalist and the Austere Rationalist gather by the single candle)*

*“How, oh how could the universe,  
 itself unloving, and mindless,  
 cough up creatures capable of love?”*

**No mystery in that.  
 It’s just a matter  
 of natural selection.**

*“But natural selection is cruel. Bloody.  
 And bloody stupid!”*

*“Even when organisms aren’t directly tearing at each other’s throats...  
 ...there’s a deeper competition, going on between the genes.  
 A species could evolve to extinction,  
 if the winning genes were playing negative sum games*

*“How could a process,  
 Cruel as Azathoth,  
 Create minds that were capable of love?”*

**No mystery.**

**Mystery is a property of questions.  
 Not answers.**

**A mother’s child shares her genes,  
 And so a mother loves her child.**

*“But mothers can adopt their children.  
 And still, come to love them.”*

**Still no mystery.**

**Evolutionary psychology isn’t about deliberately maximizing fitness.  
 Through most of human history,  
 we didn’t know genes existed.  
 Even subconsciously.**

*“Well, fine. But still:*

*“Humans form friendships,  
even with non-relatives.  
How can that be?”*

**No mystery.**

**Ancient hunter-gatherers would often play the Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma.**

**There could be profit in betrayal.**

**But the best solution:  
was reciprocal altruism.**

**Sometimes,  
the most dangerous human is not the strongest,  
the prettiest,  
or even the smartest:  
But the one who has the most allies.**

*“But not all friends are fair-weather friends;  
there are true friends -  
those who would sacrifice their lives for another.*

*“Shouldn’t that kind of devotion  
remove itself from the gene pool?”*

**You said it yourself:**

**We have a concept of true friendship and fair-weather friendship.**

**We wouldn’t be true friends with someone who we didn’t think was a true friend to us.**

**And one with many true friends?**

**They are far more formidable  
than one with mere fair-weather allies.**

*“And Mohandas Gandhi,  
who really did turn the other cheek?  
Those who try to serve all humanity,  
whether or not all humanity serves them in turn?”*

**That’s a more complex story.**

**Humans aren’t just social animals.**

**We’re political animals.**

**Sometimes the formidable human is not the strongest,  
but the one who skillfully argues that their preferred policies  
match the preferences of others.**

*“Um... what?  
How does that explain Gandhi?”*

**The point is that we can argue about ‘What should be done?’  
We can make those arguments and respond to them.  
Without that, politics couldn’t take place.**

*“Okay... but Gandhi?”*

**Believed certain complicated propositions about ‘What should be done?’  
Then did them.**

*“That sounds suspiciously like it could explain any possible human behavior.”*

**If we traced back the chain of causality,  
through all the arguments...  
We’d find a moral architecture.  
The ability to argue abstract propositions.  
A preference for simple ideas.  
An appeal to hardwired intuitions about fairness.  
A concept of duty. Aversion to pain.  
Empathy.**

**Filtered by memetic selection,  
all of this resulted in a concept:  
“You should not hurt people,”  
In full generality.**

*“And that gets you Gandhi.”*

**What else would you suggest?  
Some godlike figure?  
Reaching out from behind the scenes,  
directing evolution?**

*“Hell no. But -”*

**Because then I’d would have to ask :  
How did that god originally decide that love was even desirable.  
How it got preferences that included things like friendship, loyalty, and fairness.**

Call it ‘surprising’ all you like.  
 But through evolutionary psychology,  
 You can see how parental love, romance, honor,  
 even true altruism and moral arguments,  
 all bear the specific design signature of natural selection.

If there were some benevolent god,  
 reaching out to create a world of loving humans,  
 it too must have evolved,  
 defeating the point of postulating it at all.

*“I’m not postulating a god!  
 I’m just asking how human beings ended up so nice.”*

Nice!?  
 Have you looked at this planet lately?  
 We bear all those other emotions that evolved as well.  
 Which should make it very clear that we evolved,  
 should you begin to doubt it.

Humans aren’t always nice.

...

*“But, still, come on...  
 doesn’t it seem a little...  
 amazing?”*

*“That nothing but millions of years of a cosmic death tournament...  
 could cough up mothers and fathers,  
 sisters and brothers,  
 husbands and wives,  
 steadfast friends,  
 honorable enemies,  
 true altruists and guardians of causes,  
 police officers and loyal defenders,  
 even artists, sacrificing themselves for their art?”*

*“All practicing so many kinds of love?  
 For so many things other than genes?”*

*“Doing their part to make their world less ugly,  
 something besides a sea of blood and violence and mindless replication?”*

**Are you honestly surprised by this?  
If so, question your underlying model.  
For it's led you to be surprised by the true state of affairs.**

**Since the very beginning,  
not one unusual thing  
has ever happened.**

...

*"But how are you NOT amazed?"*

*"Maybe there's no surprise from a causal viewpoint.*

*"But still, it seems to me,  
in the creation of humans by evolution,  
something happened that is precious and marvelous and wonderful.*

*"If we can't call it a physical miracle, then call it a moral miracle."*

**Because it was only a miracle from the perspective of the morality that was produced?  
Explaining away all the apparent coincidence,  
from a causal and physical perspective?**

*"Well... yeah. I suppose you could interpret it that way.*

*"I just meant that something was immensely surprising and wonderful on a moral level,  
even if it's not really surprising,  
on a physical level."*

**I think that's what I said.**

*"It just seems to me that in your view, somehow you explain that wonder away."*

...

**No.**

**I don't explain it away.  
I just explain it.**

Of *course* there's a story behind love.  
 Behind all ordered events, one finds ordered stories.  
 And that which has no story is nothing but random noise.  
 Hardly any better.

If you can't take joy in things with true stories behind them,  
 your life will be empty.

Love has to begin somehow.  
 It has to enter the universe somewhere.  
 It's like asking how life itself begins.  
 Though you were born of your father and mother,  
 and though they arose from their living parents in turn,  
 if you go far and far and far away back,  
 you'll finally come to a replicator that arose by pure accident.  
 The border between life and unlife.  
 So too with love.

A complex pattern must be explained by a cause  
 that's *not* already that complex pattern.  
 For love to enter the universe,  
 it has to arise from something that is not love.  
 If that weren't possible, then love could not be.

Just as life itself required that first replicator to come about by accident,  
 parentless,  
 but still caused:  
 far, far back in the causal chain that led to you:  
 3.8 billion years ago, in some little tidal pool.

Perhaps your children's children will ask,  
 how it is that they are capable of love.

And their parents will say:  
 Because we, who also love, created you to love.

And your children's children may ask:  
 But how is it that you love?

And their parents will reply:  
 Because our own parents,  
 who loved as well,  
 created us to love in turn.



And then your children's children will ask:  
 But where did it all begin?  
 Where does the recursion end?

And their parents will say:

*Once upon a time,  
 long ago and far away,  
 there were intelligent beings who were not themselves intelligently designed.*

*Once upon a time,  
 there were lovers,  
 created by something that did not love.*

*Once upon a time,  
 when all of civilization was a single galaxy,  
 A single star.  
 A single planet.  
 A place called Earth.*

*Long ago,  
 Far away,  
 Ever so long ago.*

*[The last candle is extinguished.  
 The Naive and Austere Rationalists return to their seats.]*



....*a moment of darkness*....



*When the final candle is extinguished, a story should be told.  
Each year, it may vary, but the theme should reflect the importance of a future,  
where our descendants thrive because of the choices we have made.*

*In this book, I'm going to take a little longer than I would during the actual festival,  
to talk about the Gift We Give to Tomorrow, and what it means to me.  
If you are a seasoned Less Wrong veteran with values similar to mine,  
then, this may all seem obvious to you.*

*Still, I think taking a moment to immerse yourself in that understanding is valuable.*

*But mostly, I'm speaking now to a few particular people. I'm going to say  
complicated things that can't really be summarized in a few pages, but I'll try.  
I don't expect to persuade, but I hope I can explain enough of my worldview,  
so that these people can understand what I'm doing.*

*I want my family to understand what I believe now, and why.*



## The Gift I Give Tomorrow

I thought ‘The Gift We Give to Tomorrow’ was incredibly beautiful when I first read it. I actually cried. I wanted to share it with friends and family, except that work ONLY has meaning in the context of the Sequences. Practically every line is a hyperlink to an important, earlier point, and without many hours of previous reading, it just won’t have the impact. But to me, it felt like the perfect endcap to everything the Sequences covered, taking all of the facts and ideas and weaving them into a coherent, poetic narrative that left me feeling satisfied with my place in the world.

Except that... I wasn’t sure that it actually said anything.

And when I showed it to a few other people, they reacted similarly: “This is pretty, but what does it mean?”

I knew I wanted to include it in our Solstice celebration, if for no other reason than “it was pretty.” Particularly pretty in a particular way that seemed right for the occasion. But I’m wary about things that seem beautiful and moving without really understanding why, especially when those things become part of your worldview, perhaps subtly impacting your decisions.

In order to use The Gift as part of the Solstice, it needed to be pared down. It’s not designed to be read out loud. This meant I needed to study it in detail, figuring out what made it beautiful so I could be sure to capture that part while pruning away the words that were difficult to pronounce or read in dim candlelight.

Shortly afterwards, I began the same work with “Beyond the Reach of God.”

Unlike The Gift, Beyond the Reach of God is important and powerful for very obvious reasons. If you have something you value more than your own happiness, if you care about your children’s children, then you need to understand that there is no God. Or at the very least, for whatever reason, for whatever mysterious end that you don’t understand, God doesn’t intervene.

If your loved ones are being tortured, or are dying of illness, or getting run over by a car, God will not save them.

The actions that matter are the ones that impact the physical world, the world of interlinked causes that we can perceive. The beliefs that ultimately matter, when you care about more than your own subjective happiness, are the beliefs that allow you to make accurate predictions about the future. These beliefs allow you to establish the right social policies to protect your children from harm. They allow you to find the right medicine and treatment to keep your aging parents alive and healthy, both mentally and physically, for as long as possible. To keep the people you love part of your life. And to keep yourself part of theirs.

Unlike some in this community, I don’t entirely dismiss unprovable, comforting beliefs, so long as you have the right compartmentalization to keep them separate from your other decision making processes. A vague, comforting belief in an afterlife, or in a ‘natural, cyclical order of things’... returning to the earth and pushing up daisies... it can be useful to help accept the things you cannot change.

We still live in a world where Death exists. There are things we can’t change. Yet.

And those things can be horrible, and I don’t begrudge anyone a tool to work through them.

But if someone's vague, comforting beliefs lead them to let a person go, not because they'd done everything they could to save them, but because they had a notion that they'd be together somehow in a supernatural world... if a belief leads someone to believe that they couldn't change something that they, in fact, could have...

No. I can't condone that.

It can be disturbing, going down the rationality rabbit hole. I started by thinking "I want to be succeeding at life," and learned about a few biases that are affecting me, and I made some better choices, and that was good. But it wasn't fully satisfying. I needed to form some coherent long term goals. Someone in my position might then say "Alright, I want to be more successful at my career."

But then maybe they realize that success at their career wasn't actually what was most important to them. They didn't need that money, what they wanted was the ability to purchase things that make them happy, and support their family, and have the security to periodically do fun projects. The career was just one way of doing that. And it may not have been the best way. And suddenly they're open to the entirety of possibility-space, a million different paths they could take that might or might not leave them satisfied. And they don't have any of the tools they need to figure out which ones to take. Some of those tools have already been invented, and they just need to find them. Others, they may need to invent for themselves.

The problem is that most people don't have a good understanding of their values.. "Be Happy" is vague, so is "Have a nice family," so is "Make the world a better place." Vaguest of all is "Some combination of the above."

If you're going down the rationality rabbit hole, you need to start figuring out your REAL values, instead of reciting cached thoughts that you've picked up from society. You might start exploring cognitive science to give you some insight into how your mind works. And then you'd start to learn that the mind *is* a machine, that follows physical rules. And that it's an incoherent mess, shaped by a blind idiot god that wasn't trying to make us happy or give us satisfying love lives or a promising future - it was just following a set of mathematical rules that caused the propagation of whatever traits increased reproductive fitness at the time.

And it's not even clear that there's a singular you in any of this. Your brain is full of separate entities working at cross purposes; your conscious mind isn't necessarily responsible for your decisions; the "you" of today isn't necessarily the same as the "you" of yesterday or tomorrow.

And like it or not, this incoherent mess is what your hopes and dreams and morals are made of.

Maybe for a moment, you may come to believe that it all IS really meaningless. We're not put here with a purpose. The universe doesn't care about us. Love isn't inherently any more important than paperclips. The very concept of a continuous self isn't obviously true. When all is said and done, morality isn't "real" in an objective sense. There's just matter, and math. So why the hell worry about anything?

Or maybe instead you'd flinch away from these ideas. Avoid the discomfort. You can do that. But these aren't just silly philosophical questions that can be ignored. Somebody has to think about them.

Because as technology moves forward, we *\*will\** be relying increasingly on automated processes. Not just to work for us, but to think for us. Computers are already better at solving certain types of problems than the average expert. Machine intelligence is almost definitely coming, and society will have to change rapidly around it, and it will become incredibly important for us to know what it is we actually care about. Partly so that we don't accidentally



change ourselves into something we regret. But also so that if and when an AI is created which has the ability to improve itself, and rapidly becomes smart enough to convince its human creators to give it additional resources for perfectly “good” reasons, until it suddenly is powerful enough to grow on its own with only our initial instructions to guide it...

We better hope that those initial instructions contained detailed notes about everything we hold dear.

We better hope that the AI’s interior world of pure math includes some kind of ghost in the machine that looks over each step and thinks “yes, my decisions are still moving in a good direction.” That ghost-in-the-machine will only exist if we deliberately put it there. And the only way to do that is to understand ourselves well enough to bother explaining that no, you don’t use the atoms of people to create paperclips. You don’t just “save as many lives as possible” by hooking people up to feeding tubes. You don’t make everyone happy by pumping them full of heroin, you don’t go changing people’s bodies or minds without their consent.

None of these things are remotely obvious to a ghost of perfect emptiness that wasn’t shaped for millions of years by a blind idiot god. Many humans wouldn’t even consider them as options. But someday people may build a decision-making machine with the capacity to surpass us, and those people will need to understand the convoluted mess of values that makes up their mind, and mine, and yours. They’ll need to be able to reduce an understanding of love to pure math, that a computer can comprehend. Because the future is at stake.

It would be nice to just say “don’t build the superintelligence.” But in the Information Age, preventing technological development is just not a reliable safeguard.

This may all seem far fetched, and if you weren’t already familiar with a lot of these ideas, I wouldn’t expect you to be convinced in these few pages (indeed, you *should* be demanding more than three paragraphs of assertions as evidence). But even without the risk of AI, the future is still at stake. Hell, the present is at stake. People are dying as we speak. And suffering. Losing their autonomy. Their equality. Losing the ability to control their bodies. Even those who lived good lives in modern countries, age can creep over them and cripple their ability not just to move but to think and decide, destroying everything they thought made them human until all that’s left is a person, trapped in a crumbling body, who can’t control their own life but who desperately doesn’t want to die alone.

This is a monstrously harsh reality. A monstrously hard problem, not at all calibrated to our current skills. The problems extend beyond the biological processes that make death a reality, and into the world of resources and politics and limited space.

It’s easy to decide that the problem is too hard, that we’ll never be able to solve it.

And this is just the present. All of the suffering of the people currently alive pales in comparison the potential suffering of future generations, or worse, to the lives that might go un-lived if humanity makes too many mistakes in an unfair universe and erases itself.

What is it about the future that’s worth protecting? What makes it worth it to drag eight thousand pound stones across 150 miles of land, for the benefit of people who won’t be born for centuries, who you’ll never see?

I can tell you my answer: a young mind, born millenia from now, whose values are still close enough to mine that I can at least recognize them. Who has the mental framework to ask of its parents, “Why does love exist?” and to care about the answer to the question.

The answer is as ludicrously simple as it is immensely complicated, and you may not have needed the Gift We Give to Tomorrow to explain it to you. Love exists, it was shaped by blind mathematical forces that don't care about anything. But it exists and we care about it - we care so, so very deeply. And not just about love. Creativity. Curiosity. Excitement. Autonomy. Other people. Morality. Our children's children. We don't need a reason to care about these things. We may not fully understand them. But they exist. For us, they are real.

The Gift We Give to Tomorrow walked me through all this understanding. Deep, down into the heart of the abyss where nothing actually matters. Pretending no comforting lies. Cutting away the last illusions. And still, it somehow left me with a vision of the humanity, of the universe, of the future, that is beautiful and satisfying.

It doesn't matter that it didn't really say anything new, that I hadn't already worked out.

It was just beautiful. Just because.

That beauty, that vision of the future, that is what is worth protecting. That's why I'm sacrificing comfort and peace of mind. That's why I'm thinking hard, rebelling against my initial instincts to make fun video games. My second instinct to give to the first charity that shows me a picture of an adorable orphan, or that I'm already familiar with in some way. My third instinct to settle for saving maybe a few dozen lives.

My instincts were shaped by blind mathematical forces in an ancestral environment where one orphan was the most I could be expected to worry about. And it is my prerogative, as one small conscious fragment of an incoherent sentient mind, to look at the part of my brain that thinks "that's all that matters", and rebel. Take the cold, calculating long view. It's not enough to think in the moral terms that my mind is naturally good at.

A million people feel like a statistic. They feel even more like a statistic when they live in a distant country. They feel even more like a statistic when they live in a distant future and their values have drifted somewhat from the things we care about today.

But those people are not a statistic. A million deaths is a million tragedies. A billion deaths is a billion tragedies. The possible extinction of the human race is something fundamentally worse than a tragedy, something I still don't have a word for.

I don't know what exactly I'm capable of doing, to bring about the most good I can. It might be working hard at a high paying programming job and donating to effective charities. It be directly working on problems that save lives, or which educate future generations to be able to save even more. It might be investing in companies that are producing important services but in a for-profit context. It might be working on scientific research in any one of a hundred important fields. It might be creating art that moves people in important ways.

It might be contributing to AI research. It might not. I don't know. This isn't about abandoning one cause for another. When the future is at stake, I don't have the luxury of not thinking hard about the right choice or passing the buck to a modern Pascal's wager. Current organizations working on AI research might be effective enough at their jobs to be worth supporting. They might not. They might be worth supporting later, but not yet. Or vice versa. So many factors to consider.

I have to decide what's good, and I have to decide alone, and I can't take forever to think about it.

I can't expect everyone, or even me, to devote their lives to this question. I don't know what kind of person I am yet.

Right now I'm in a fever pitch of inspiration and I feel ready to take on the world, but when all is said and done, I do mostly care about my own happiness. And I think that's okay - I think most people should spend most of their time seeing to their own needs, building their own community. But my hope is that I can find a way to be happy and contribute to a greater good at the same time.

In the meantime, I wrote this book, and planned an evening that bordered on religious service.

I did this for a lot of reasons, but the biggest one was to battle parts of my mind that I am not satisfied with. The parts of me that think a rare, spectacular disease is more important than a common, easily fixed problem. The parts of me that think a smiling, hungry orphan is more important than a billion lives. The parts of me that I have to keep fighting in order to make good decisions.

Because I am fucking sick of having to feel like a cold hearted bastard, when I try to make the choice that is good.

I'm willing to feel that way, if I have to. It's worth it. But I shouldn't have to, and neither should you.

To fix this, I use art. And good art sometimes has to blur the line between fact and fiction, using certain kinds of lies so that my lizard brain can fully comprehend certain other kinds of truths. To understand why 6 billion people are more important than a single hungry orphan, it can help to tell a story.

Not about six billion people, but about one child.

Across space and time, ages from now, ever so far away: In a universe of pure math, where there is no loving god to shelter us nor punish the Genghis Khans of the world.... there exists the possibility of a child whose values I can understand, asking their parents "Why does love exist?"

That child's existence is not inevitable. It will be born, or not, depending on actions that humans take today. It will suffer, or not, depending on the direction that humanity steers itself. It will die in hundred, a thousand or million years, depending on how far we progress in solving the problem of death. And I don't know for sure whether any of this will specifically require your actions, or mine.

That child is beautiful. The very possibility of that child is beautiful. That beauty is worth protecting.

I don't speak for the entire Less Wrong community, but I write this to honor the birth of that child, and everything that child represents: Peace on earth, and perhaps across the galaxy. Good will, among all sentient minds. Scientific and ethical progress. All the hard work and sacrifice that these things entail.

In the world beyond the reach of god, if we care about that child, "good enough" decisions are not good enough.

Rationality matters.

# Brighter Than Today

## An Anthem for the Future

*(Candles are relit as the song progresses)*

Many winter nights ago,  
A woman shivered in the cold,  
Stared at the sky, and wondered why, the gods invented pain.

She bitterly struck rock together  
Wishing that her life was better.  
Suddenly, she saw the spark: of Light, and golden flame.

She showed the others, but they told her  
She was not fit to control the  
Primal forces that the gods had cloaked in mystery.

But proud and angry, she defied them.  
She would not be satisfied,  
She lit a fire, and set in motion human history.

*Oh... Tomorrow can be brighter than today  
Although, the night is cold  
And the stars may seem so very far away.....*

*Oh... but every mind can be a golden ray,  
Of courage, hope and reason  
Surely we can find a better way...*

*(fingers snap, tempo increase...)*

Oh... Ages since, but not yet now  
We built the wheel, and then the plow  
We tilled the Earth and proved our worth,  
against the drought and snow....

Soon, we had the time to ponder,  
look up to the sky and wonder  
Could there be some deeper meaning  
we were meant to know?

*Oh... Tomorrow can be brighter than today,  
 Although the night is cold  
 And the stars may seem so very far away...  
 But futures can unfold  
 where courage, hope and reason grow  
 with every passing season so  
 we'll shed the lies, that tie us down,  
 and seek truths ever more profound  
 and drive the darkness far away.  
 Tomorrow can be brighter than today!*

*Brighter than today..*

*(begin clapping)*

The universe may seem unfair...  
 The laws of nature may not care  
 The plagues and storms, and our own evils nearly doused our flame...

But all these things, we have endured.  
 With morals learned. Diseases cured.  
 Against our Herculean tasks we've risen to proclaim:

That Tomorrow can be brighter than today  
 Although the night's still cold...  
 The stars won't always be so far away.  
 If I may be so bold:

*(stop clapping)*

It doesn't have to be this way.  
 Each human mind's a golden ray of  
 Courage, hope and reason  
 Each and every passing season,  
 We can seek the truths that make us stronger,  
 Build the world that we all long for,  
 Strive for lives of joy and meaning.  
 Shine a light, that's always gleaming  
 Rise up to the stars and say:

Tomorrow will be brighter than today!

*(slower)*

Oh, Tomorrow will be brighter than today.

## Move the World

*(Another call and response song,  
to be sung to your community, not to the page)*

Archimedes said if I wanna move a load,  
gotta get myself a lever, gotta lay it on a fulcrum.  
Little bit of effort over quite a bit o' distance.  
I can move a load as big as I wish. I can:

***Move the World***, if my lever is long enough  
***Move the World***, and I've a place to stand, I can  
***Move the World***, I can make myself strong enough to  
***Move the World***, if I have a good plan.

But I gotta'dmit that the world's pretty big  
And all I got here in my hand is a pitiful twig.  
But if I met a friend with a great big beam,  
I could say "Hey Friend!" if you share my dream, you can:

***Move the World***, if your lever is long enough  
***Move the World***, and you've a place to stand, you can  
***Move the World***, you can make myself strong enough to  
***Move the World***, if you have a good plan, you can:  
***Move the World***, if you get enough leverage  
***Move the World***, you can get the ball rollin'  
***Move the World***, in a better direction  
***Move the World***, see the future unfold.

But it seems the beam is still not long enough.  
Simple tools a pretty cool but this is kinda tough. Maybe:  
If we work together we can build a bigger lever.  
We can make the world better if we give it a shove. We can:

***Move the World***, if our lever is long enough  
***Move the World***, and we've a place to stand, we can  
***Move the World***, we can make myself strong enough to  
***Move the World***, if we have a good plan, we can:  
***Move the World***, if we get enough leverage  
***Move the World***, we can get the ball rollin'  
***Move the World***, in a better direction  
***Move the World***, see the future unfold.

## Still Alive

*(A song about Science! Also a song about being alive,  
even after you die, if you've got a spare copy of your brain.)*

This was a triumph.  
I'm making a note here: huge success.  
It's hard to overstate my satisfaction.  
Aperture Science  
We do what we must, because we can.  
For the good of all of us...  
Except the ones who are dead.  
But there's no sense crying over every mistake.  
You just keep on trying till you run out of cake.  
And the Science gets done.  
And you make a neat gun.  
For the people who are still alive.

I'm not even angry.  
I'm being so sincere right now.  
Even though you broke my heart, and killed me.  
And tore me to pieces.  
And threw every piece into a fire.  
As they burned it hurt because I was so happy for you!  
Now these points of data make a beautiful line.  
And we're out of beta.  
We're releasing on time.  
So I'm GLaD I got burned.  
Think of all the things we learned  
for the people who are still alive.

Go ahead and leave me.  
I think I prefer to stay inside.  
Maybe you'll find someone else to help you.  
Maybe Black Mesa  
THAT WAS A JOKE.  
HAHA. FAT CHANCE.  
Anyway, this cake is great.  
It's so delicious and moist.  
Look at me still talking  
when there's Science to do.  
When I look out there, it makes me GLaD I'm not you.  
I've experiments to run.  
There is research to be done.  
On the people who are still alive.  
And believe me I am still alive.  
I'm doing Science and I'm still alive.  
I feel FANTASTIC and I'm still alive.  
While you're dying I'll be still alive.  
And when you're dead I will be still alive.  
Still Alive, Still Alive.

## Uplift

Hands chip the flint, light the fire, skin the kill  
 Feet move the tribe track the herd with a will  
 Mankind struggles in the cellar of history  
 Time to settle down, time to grow, time to breed.

Plow tills the soil, plants the seed, pray for rain  
 Scythe reaps the wheat, to the mill, to grind the grain  
 Towns and cities spread to empire overnight  
 Hands keep building as we chant the ancient rite.

Coal heats the steam, push the piston, turns the wheel.  
 Cogs spin the wool, drives the horses made of steel.  
 Lightning harnessed does our will and lights the dark.  
 Keep rising higher, set our goal, hit the mark.

*Crawl out of the mud,  
 Ongoing but slow,  
 For the path that is easy  
 Ain't the one that lets us grow!*

Light to push the sails, read the data, cities glow  
 Hands type the keys, click the mouse, out we go!  
 Our voices carry round the world and into space  
 Send us out to colonize another place,

*(slow for the final line)*

Hands make the tools, build the fire, plant the grain.  
 Feet track the herd, build a world, begin again.



## I Love the World

*(A song about joy in the merely real)*

I love the mountains. I love the sun so bright.  
I love the deep sea. I love the stars at night.

I love the real world, and all its sounds and sights.

*Boom de yadda, boom de yadd. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*

I love the fractals, on every leaf and tree.  
I love genetics. I love geometry.

I love the real world, and its complexity.

*Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*

I love the black holes. I love the tiny quarks.  
I love to go meta. I love romantic sparks.

I love the real world, and all its lights and darks.

*Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*  
***Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda***

I love the present. I love the ages past.  
I'd love a future, that's really made to last.

I love the real world, so awesome and so vast.

*Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*  
*Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*  
*Boom de yadda, boom de yadda. Boom de yadda, boom de yadda*

***Boom.***

## Singularity

I'll live to see, a million things, that men were never meant to see,  
 My senses and my faculties, augmented with machinery.  
 Auditory, optical, touch and taste olfactory  
 Converted into data streams and flooding bits of binary  
 Every piece of food you taste, and every thought you cogitate  
 Every sound that you can hear and sights you see for years and years  
 All stored up so conveniently on peta-bytes of memory  
 So you can always reference them in case you forget anything

Singularity, Singularity!  
 Singularity, Singularity!  
 Oh..... I don't know...  
 (Repeat once)

Now once all that experience can fit into an easy grid  
 Existence is no longer something physically limited.  
 The wires that you have inside are very easily realized  
 Through artificial imaging you duplicate 10 at a time.  
 Your consciousness can be enjoyed by anyone forever more.  
 And you live in whatever state that you or anyone creates.  
 You could be a giant squirrel, a statue or a burning thorn,  
 a talking cat, an etch-a-sketch, a squid or a robot unicorn.  
 You'd keep all the memories and feelings you could ever want,  
 And now you can commence your life as an uploaded extropian

Singularity, Singularity...

My mother is so horrified by this post-human fantasy  
 she says we'd lose that special thing that gives us our humanity.  
 But I don't know. I'm not so sure if humans are so good and pure.  
 Perhaps we'd be much better off if we took these violent bodies off.

Once everyone is in the cloud we'll move beyond this earthly ground,  
 expanding into outer space as an informational signal race.  
 Matter in the solar system converts into computing mass  
 and the sun becomes a central orb of a brain that grows into the vast  
 expanse of space and emptiness for light years and light centuries.  
 It replicates exponentially like a Russian doll in a cosmic dream.  
 Once every spot of the universe is filled up it will promptly burst  
 eradicating finally the experiment that we grew from earth  
 As it explodes the brain will breathe into the dark impossibly,  
 and anti-matter all around will collapse the universe back down,  
 and right away what you would see if you were a fly in the vacancy  
 is all the light and color in the universe is collapsing.

*And Time Would Stop.*

...

*And from a tiny pinhole point...  
a vast bang erupts...  
into space....*

*And trillions of new particles...  
fly away at a photonic...  
pace...*

*And.....*

*Once again the clock would start to tick and tock and tick and tock  
and years would pass, billions or more before the tiny proteins locked  
and yet again in the boiling seas of a miniscule blue anomaly.*

*A planet floating helplessly around a tiny ball so fiery.*

*An unextraordinary corner of the universe would cradle it:  
The flicker of intelligence that led us here and brought us this...*

*Singularity, Singularity!  
Singularity, Singularity!  
Oh..... I don't know...*

*Singularity, Singularity!  
Singularity, Singularity!  
Oh..... I don't know...*

*Oh... I don't know...*

## The Road to Wisdom

*The road to wisdom? -- Well, it's plain,  
and simple to express:*

*You err,  
and err,  
and err again,*

*but less,  
and less,  
and less.*

*-- Piet Hein*

