

Is authentic Self dead?



graphic by Kaye Twining

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Introduction

This paper offers my understanding of the nature of authentic Self in the twenty-first century. I launched into this exploration in response to two factors. The first factor relates to a shift in my view of death. My previous view stood within the dominant western cultural/religious view that death was the human predicament. Such a predicament was resolved by a belief in an afterlife; a belief that something of who I was would continue to exist within an elsewhere community of souls. That belief in an afterlife shaped my response to the spiritual question: "where do I go when I die?" That belief also shaped my previous exploration into the nature of authentic Self, because beliefs about death shape beliefs about life.

I now view death as a natural aspect of life. Therefore, death is no longer a predicament to be resolved. Such a shift of viewpoint has reframed the spiritual question about death to: "what becomes of me when I die?" My response to that question is: when I die - when my heart no longer beats - all that I am will cease to be. Within such an understanding I am no longer seeking an afterlife; I am content in the understanding that my Self will cease to be after death; it is enough to know that I have lived. Such a shift in understanding has given rise to the question, "can authentic Self be experienced within the context of the here-and-now?"



death is a natural aspect of life

photo by Kaye Twining

The second factor relates to the reading of Yuval Noah Harari's book entitled *Homo Deus*.ⁱⁱ I was both intrigued and disturbed by what I read in relation to the nature of the Self. My take on his writing in relation to authentic Self is as follows: there can be no enduring authentic Self within the light of the new sciences, including evolutionary theories and brain science; and with the advent of artificial intelligence and where that could possibly go in the future. Also, that the authentic Self was a construct of humanism in the wake of the post modern death of God and deconstruction of the cultural/religious metanarrative from which we had

each sourced our identity, purpose and belonging. In response to such ideas, I noticed a definite sensation of inner disturbance.

As I contemplated the inner disturbance, I came to see that although I was in agreement with Harari in relation to no *enduring* Self, I was reacting strongly to the notion of no authentic Self. Could it be true that we were undergoing a cultural death of authentic Self? If that were so, what would it mean for my work in the area of spiritual practice education which centred on authentic Selfhood? The term *spiritual* here means: the experience of personal wholeness, authentic communal belonging, and joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of being human within an evolving universe. Could my work now be irrelevant?

Furthermore, I was concerned by the idea that we are simply a product of genes, lived experience, and brain chemicals; a product of cause and effect. Such an idea can give rise to a sense of predestination in terms of the ability, or not, to make decisions about the way we will live within, and act upon, our world. Could it be true that our living is so preordained? Is it not possible to make choices about the way we live?

As I contemplated the question of predestination, the words of Madeleine Kelly came to mind. Kelly lives with a mental illness which is now called bipolar disorder. I came across her book *entitled Life on a Roller-Coaster: Living Well with Depression and Manic Depression* when I was researching my Master's Degree. Kelly argues that people living with manic depression were not responsible for having the condition. They were however, responsible for the way they lived with it. Her argument could also apply to predestination, in that yes, we are not responsible for our genetic makeup, for much of our lived experience, and for our brain chemical functioning. At the same time we are responsible for the way we live with them. In light of such an argument, perhaps we humans are more than simply a product of cause and effect?

Harari 's comments on spirituality also caught my attention. He maintains: "spirituality is a journey . . . which usually takes people in mysterious ways towards unknown destinations . . . to follow the big question [Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What is good?] wherever it leads, and not just to places they know well or wish to visit."ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, he contrasts spirituality with religion and academic studies which: "usually take us to a predetermined goal approved by our elders, governments and banks."^{iv} Perhaps because spiritual practice education is my vocation, I received an invitation in those words; an invitation to take the journey and explore the notion of authentic Self in the twenty-first century, without knowing the final destination.

As I continued to contemplate my reaction to Harari's writings, within the light of my shift in view of death, I began to wonder if there was a different framework for understanding authentic Self in the twenty-first century? If so, how would I envisage it?

Note: My reflection does not seek to critique Harari's argument. Rather, this paper offers my response to the questions that arose within me, in

response to reading his book. My questions sit within an overarching question: "what does it mean to be human within an evolving universe?"

Also, I have used a number of metaphors throughout the paper. They are recognizable by way of *italics*.

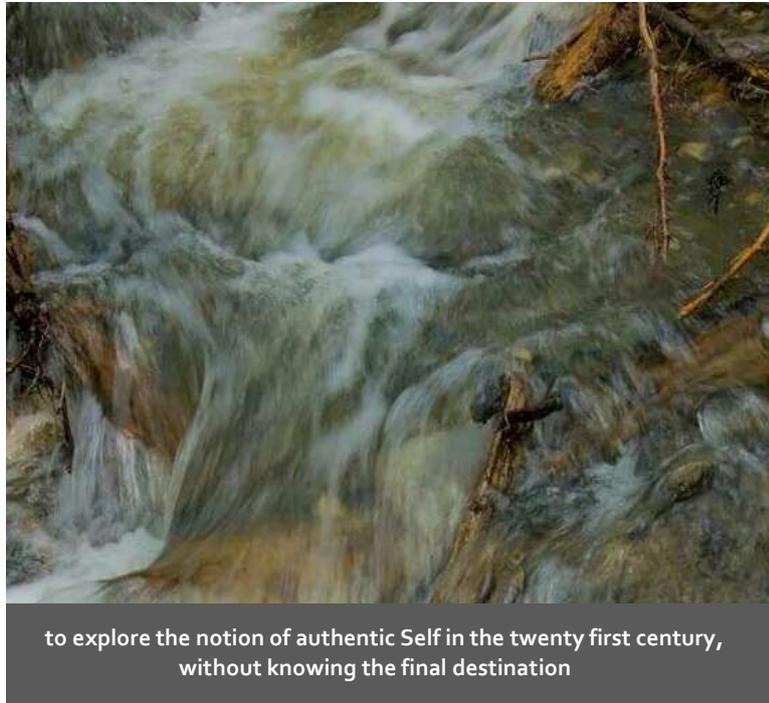


photo by Andrew Twining

Current understandings of Self / authentic Self

In terms of structure, this paper will proceed in the following manner: Firstly, I will outline my starting point for the reflection on the nature of authentic Self. Secondly, I will offer my current understandings on the nature of the Self. Thirdly, I will offer my current understandings on the nature of authentic Self. Finally, I will offer an Afterword in relation to: 1. a *restless voice* within, and 2. returning to the question of my work in the field of spiritual practice education.

The starting point for reflection

In line with Bernard Lonergan's assertion that we can explore self as subject through the transcendental method of conscious intentionality,^v the starting point for the exploration of the nature of authentic Self was mySelf: I know I am alive; I know I have a body which is bound by skin, which means that I know where I end physically; I know I have thoughts, feelings, and sensations in response to lived experience. Also, due to many years of the spiritual practice of meditation and contemplative Self enquiry, I can recognize when I am living in accord with my values and when I am not. Therefore, I can recognize authentic living.

Furthermore, I intentionally engage in the art of transformative living^{vi} which involves the ongoing *dance* between formation and transformation. Formation refers to who I know myself to be within my current knowledge, beliefs and lived experience. Transformation refers to shifts in such a view. As a result, over my sixty-two years of living I have experienced numerous

transformative shifts in my view of mySelf-in-the-world. In response to such transformative shifts, I have known times of disorientation within my inner being when a current view was being broken open. I have also known the arduous and joyful experience of renaming and reclaiming a view of mySelf which is coherent with my current knowledge, beliefs, values, and lived experience. If there is no Self beyond the product of cause and effect, who/what is it that knows? Who or what is the "I" who knows itself and experiences such transformative shifts in view? Perhaps authentic Self is not dead after all?

The nature of the Self

According to the online Oxford dictionary, the definition of Self as a noun is: the quality that constitutes one's individuality; the state of having an individual identity; a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action; one's particular nature or personality; the qualities that make one individual or unique.^{vii} Such a definition emphasizes individuality.^{viii} When the definition sits within the context of western individualism,^{ix} it gives rise to an understanding that each human is a separate, independent being who, in the words of Harari: "possesses an eternal individual [un-divided] essence that remains unchanged throughout life, and can survive even death intact." Within the light of the new sciences however, such a definition of Self has run its course and needs to be laid to rest. The new sciences emphasize the inter-dependence of all life. Hence, there can be no individual, separate, stand alone, essential, enduring Self.

In light of the above understanding, could there be a different way of viewing the Self; a view which is coherent with the new sciences? A different view which coheres with the new sciences is: the Self consists of an inner community of selves^x loosely tethered; animated by an enduring, creative life force, or *pulsing heartbeat*. Such a life force is

the Self: an inner community of selves loosely tethered; animated by an enduring, creative life force, or pulsing heartbeat

experienced within the human community as a call to discover and take up a place of belonging, at any given time and place in history. The call to belong takes places on the levels of: the personal, the cultural, and the human species within the wider Earth community.

Regarding the personal level, the shift is from viewing the individual in terms of a separate in-divisible self, towards viewing each human being as a unique self-system which sits within numerous systems including family, community, culture, religious/spiritual tradition, the species, the wider Earth community, and the universe. The term which could be applied to such an understanding of systems within systems is, *inter-being*. Inter-being, according to Thich Nhat Hanh means: "we are empty of a separate self, but full of the cosmos."^{xi}

If we are empty of a separate self, what does that mean for our unique personhood? Does our unique Self disperse into the whole? No, each system seeks *both* autonomy *and* integration as part of a larger whole.^{xii} Within such a view, we know ourselves to be both unique human beings yearning for the experience of personal wholeness, and that we are intrinsically connected within, and responsible to, a much wider web of relationships. In this regard, Diarmuid O'Murchu argues: "We belong to a greater whole from which we receive our very being and without which we have neither meaning, purpose nor uniqueness in the great cosmic drama." Therefore, the Self is now viewed as Self-in-the-cosmos.



the Self
a community of selves . . . animated by an enduring life force

photo by Kaye Twining

Within a spiritual practice education framework, the community of selves comprises the following: the experiencing self,^{xiii} the narrating self, the unstoried self, the shadow self, the observing self, and the wisdom self. The following is a brief description of each:

The experiencing self is made up of the five traditionally recognized senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. In addition to those five senses, the Buddhist tradition adds *thinking*.^{xiv} Along with the senses are the bodily sensations we experience when we feel anxious, joyful, bored, excited, fearful, awe-filled, angry, or sad. In response to our senses and bodily sensations, are the neurons firing in our brain.

In terms of the place of the brain within the experiencing self, Daniel Siegel^{xv} claims that there are two ways in which we perceive and process information. One way is through the "constructor mind." Siegel contends that the constructor mind involves our: "top-down conceptualizations where prior experience is activated, making it difficult to notice the unique

and vibrant details of what is happening here and now." The second way we perceive and process information is through the "conduit mind." The conduit mind involves: "bottom-up processing, leading to the circuitry in the brain beyond the top-down filters of prior experience. Bottom up perception is experienced as a conduit of sensory experience where we are seeing the unique aspects of what is in front of us." So, we have operating within us both a cause and effect constructor mind and an open-ended conduit mind.

The narrating self involves the Story of meaning we each construct by way of unifying our lived experience in a meaningful way. Meaningful here means a clear sense of identity, purpose, and the experience of belonging in the world. To be human, is to live meaningfully through a particular Story. Our Stories are meaningful when they are coherent with our current knowledge, beliefs, values, and lived experience. Conversely, our Stories lose meaning when they no longer cohere with current life understandings. Redundant Stories of meaning may be transformed by engaging in the art of transformative living, which as mentioned previously, involves the *dance* of formation and transformation.



redundant Stories of meaning may be transformed

photo by Kaye Twining

Our Stories consist of the facts as we currently know them and the interpretation given to such facts. Therefore our Stories are subjective. The interpretation given to the facts does not arise within a vacuum. Our interpretations are both formed and limited by the norms, beliefs, and values of our families of origin, local communities, cultural traditions, religious/spiritual traditions, and ongoing lived experience. Even though our Stories are subjective, we source our identity, purpose, and belonging through them. So, the narrating self is quite potent in the way it shapes who we know ourselves to be. In turn, who we know ourselves to be determines the way we will live within, and act upon, our world.

In light of the brain/mind operations mentioned previously, if we can intentionally unhook from the constructor mind and drop into the conduit mind of sensory experience, we can move beyond a simple cause and effect storyline; we can break through storylines which have become redundant and discover new storylines which now hold meaning.

The unstoried self is indefinable, yet when experienced, we can say: "we know that quality within us." In contrast to the narrating self, the unstoried self is experienced as stillness and silence. One way of describing the unstoried self is, in the words of Richard Moss: "a deep, open state of awareness within us which has no beginning and no end."^{xvi} In response to such a description, the unstoried self is not a goal to be pursued, rather a capacity within us which is grounded in our bodies.

Some people fear the unstoried Self, believing it to be like an *empty void which will swallow them up*. Yet, the unstoried self is not an empty void. Rather the deep, open state of awareness of the unstoried self is experienced as a dynamic, ever flowing presence of loving kindness, creativity, joy, trust, humility, compassion, hope, resilience, forgiveness, and gratitude for the gift of life. As a result, the unstoried self is experienced as a dynamic potential for living authentic Self-in-the-cosmos.

The shadow self is not some deep, dark pathology within us. Rather as Robert Johnson argues, our shadow side is simply: "those aspects of our self that we do not see or know."^{xvii} In a similar manner, Ken Wilber et al claims: "our shadow is the drives and feelings that we have deemed as unacceptable and so have split off from our conscious awareness."^{xviii} It is important to note that our shadow side includes both our unrecognized giftedness, as well as the not so acceptable aspects of our being. Even though we are unaware of our shadow side, it nevertheless shapes our living, in that it expresses itself through distorted and unhealthy means.

The witnessing self is that part of us which observes that we are thinking, feeling, and sensing. The witnessing self, according to Ken Wilber et al: "simply observes the content that is [our] experience."^{xix} We recognize the witnessing self through mindfulness and meditation practices which teach us to notice, yet not engage with, our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Such practices allow us to recognize that while we have a range of affective experiences, we do not have to be totally identified with them. When we are not wholly identified with our affective experiences, we are more open to our wisdom self.

The wisdom self is like a bridge between the narrating self and the unstoried self; a bridge which continues to bear witness to the big picture of Life itself, i.e., the 13.7 billion years of evolutionary history. As such, the wisdom self is not driven by individualist, egocentric drives, or the predetermined constructor mindset. Rather, the wisdom self is experienced more in terms of an open ended conduit mind, in a tone of a *whisper within* calling forth authentic living. As such, the wisdom self both invites and allows us to break through redundant storylines.



the wisdom self continues to bear witness to the big picture

photo by Andrew Twining

The wisdom self is perceived when the *myriad of voices* within the community of selves come to rest. The *myriad of voices* are experienced as thoughts, feeling, sensations which arise in response to daily lived experience. When each of *the voices* have been metaphorically *heard, respected, and healthily responded to*, they can rest. When they are at rest, the wisdom self can be perceived by way of new insights and understandings in the form of images, inklings, bodily sensations, words, colours, phrases, or questions.

As with the unstoried self, the wisdom self is not an end-in-itself to be pursued. Neither is the wisdom self to be equated with authentic Self; they are not one and the same. Rather, the wisdom self is the capacity to discern inner and outer movements towards/or away from authentic Self-in-the-cosmos.

In terms of the wisdom self, I have a wondering. The wondering sits within the context of: 1. a phrase by Anne Hillman: "We are life itself, not separate from it"^{xx} and, 2. that wisdom bears witness to the big picture. My wondering is as follows: if we are a manifestation of life itself, and if wisdom bears witness to evolutionary history, then perhaps the wisdom self holds something of the memory of such history? Perhaps something of the memory continues on; something beyond the physical impact of DNA? Or, could DNA be more than a carrier of genetic information?

Furthermore, in terms of the wisdom self, could the memory of a 13.7 billion year history be where intuition comes from? Intuition here means: "the ability to understand something instinctively, without the need for conscious reasoning."^{xxi} Could intuition be more than personal: "hunches formed out of our past experience and knowledge?"^{xxii} Could intuition also include past experience and knowledge from evolutionary history?

The nature of authentic Self

In light of the understandings of the Self as presented above, how would I now envisage authentic Self? Firstly, what is meant by the term authentic? The online Oxford dictionary defines authentic, within the context of existential philosophy, as follows: "relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive and responsible mode of human life." Such a definition relates predominantly to the act of living. At the same time we cannot act authentically if we are not Self aware.

Drawing from the above definition, I no longer view authentic Self as an enduring essence within each individual, beyond the functioning human body/mind/life. Such an understanding sat within a dualistic notion of body vs spirit. Now, within the context of inter-being, the term *authentic Self* refers to: the act of living daily life in accord with who I know myself to be. Therefore, at the centre of authentic Self is both *our doing* and *our being*; authentic Self involves both action and contemplation.

authentic Self: within the context of inter-being ~ the act of living daily life in accord with who I know myself to be

Relating to action component, the term *authentic* applies to the way I live within, and act upon, my world in accord with my values. Relating to contemplation component, the term *Self* applies to the self knowledge gained through the spiritual practice of meditation and contemplative Self enquiry. So, within this view there is no longer conflict between contemplation and action, as there was for me within former dualistic views of authentic Self. Former views rendered contemplation against action. Now, contemplation and action always go hand in hand.



authentic Self involves *our doing* and *our being*

photo by Kaye Twining

In light of the above, authentic Self is not a static state or stage of development. Authentic Self is dynamic, in that it is continuously changing in response to lived experience and the expansion of our knowledge base. Therefore, to be authentic requires that we both live fully within our current formation and remain open to transformative shifts in our view of ourselves-in-our-world, if and when they emerge within us. As such, authentic Self involves an ongoing dance of being (formation) and becoming (transformative shifts in our view).

How may we continue to engage in the dance of being and becoming? There are two genres of spiritual practice which are helpful. The first is meditation, which as mentioned previously, reveals to us that we can have thoughts, feelings, and sensations without being totally identified with them. Meditation allows us to experience both the witnessing self and the unstoried self. Meditation can take many forms: sitting, walking, centering prayer, mantra prayer, being in bushland, listening to music, yoga, tai chi, creative art . . .

The second genre of practice is contemplative Self enquiry. Contemplative Self enquiry differs from self-analysis. The purpose of contemplative Self enquiry is to listen for the invitation of inner wisdom towards authentic Self-in-the-cosmos, through *tending* our present moment affective experience, i.e., our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. *Tending* involves a receptive attitude of non-judgmental exploration and includes such elements as: noticing; letting be; gently opening up; curiously wondering about; listening to; and asking open-ended questions. Therefore, through the contemplative act of *tending* our present moment affective experience, we no longer live in accord with our feelings.^{xxiii} Neither do we repress our affective experience. Rather, our affective experience becomes the entry point for perceiving inner wisdom's invitation to live in accord with our values.



two genres of practice: meditation and contemplative Self enquiry

photo by Kaye Twining

For more on contemplative Self enquiry see:

[www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative-practices/contemplative Self enquiry](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/contemplative-practices/contemplative-Self-enquiry).

Afterword

1. A restless voice within

As I have been writing this paper, I have noticed a *restless voice* within, which in part, relates to a quotation from Raimon Panikkar. He argues: "life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once a continuance and rupture. Life is creation." Drawing from Panikkar's quotation, death could be equated to the experience of rupture. What could be the experience of continuance? If not authentic self, then what?

As I have continued to contemplate what continuance may encompass, I have come to the following understanding: when my heart no longer beats - all that I am will cease to be. At the same time, because I understand mySelf to be a manifestation of Life itself, something of how I have lived will somehow impact the ongoing evolutionary process; impact in a general way, rather than a specific one. Therefore, whilst my heart will cease beating one day, the *enduring heartbeat* of Life itself will continue on. If I intentionally seek authentic Self-in-the-cosmos while I live, something of that engagement will flow through into the evolutionary process. Conversely, if I were to choose to live in a way that depleted the Earth community's capacity to flourish, that would also flow through into the evolutionary process. As a result, I have both the ability and responsibility to choose how I will live; how I live impacts more than my life and that of my loved ones.

2. Returning to the question of my work in the field of spiritual practice education

Within the overarching theme of *the sacred work of being human*, my work in the field of spiritual practice education relates to offering principles and practices for living meaningfully in today's world. Within such a context, the sacred work of being human requires that we continue to attune ourselves to both the primordial call within Life itself to belong, and the human longing to belong. Responding to such a call/longing draws us into an ever deepening experience of connection in the here and now, while at the same time continuing to participate in the ongoing transformation of the human community within the wider Earth community.

When I read Harari's book *Homo Deus*, I became aware that the next big wave of questions for humanity sat within the overarching question: "What will it mean to be human in response to artificial intelligence?" As I continued to contemplate this question, I once again noticed an inner disturbance. Such an inner disturbance was a reaction to the fact that I was still engaged in the question: "what does it mean to be human within an evolving universe?" Was that question now redundant? Was I so out of touch with what was happening in the now? Was the next wave, i.e., artificial intelligence, already here - and I had missed it?

Then I realized that *the wave* of my question had *already lapped a new shoreline*, in terms of a new Story of meaning in response to a

science based creation story. Even so, there is still much to be explored in this *new territory*. Also, even though *the wave* of artificial intelligence is *visible on the horizon*, the lived implications of artificial intelligence in terms of human meaning making, are not yet in focus. As a result, it is not yet time to repose the spiritual questions around human meaning making^{xxiv} within the light of artificial intelligence.

The reposing of such spiritual questions will be for the next generation and subsequent generations to grapple with; subsequent generations who are natives of the artificial intelligence era; subsequent generations who will be living the spiritual questions and will be required to discover responses which hold truth . . . for them.



photo by Anna Twining

As for me, I will continue to explore *the land I now inhabit*. I will continue to explore the implications of being human within a living universe; narrating a new Story of meaning in line with the new sciences. Perhaps what my work may offer to the next and subsequent generations is not so much of an end point in terms of a Story of meaning. Rather, my work may continue to offer tools, by way of principles and practices, which subsequent generations may utilize as they grapple with their own questions.

RESOURCES

ⁱ Harari is an Israeli historian who has a PhD in history from the University of Oxford and now lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing in World History.

ⁱⁱ From: "About the book: Homo Deus explores the projects, dreams and nightmares that will shape the twenty-first century - from overcoming death to creating artificial life. It asks the fundamental questions: Where do we go from here? And how will we protect this fragile world from our own destructive powers? This is the next stage of evolution. This is Homo Deus." EBook

ⁱⁱⁱ Harari, *Homo Deus*

^{iv} Harari, *Homo Deus*

^v Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. Lonergan argues that there is a foundational pattern to human consciousness which involves four precepts: be attentive to lived experience; be intelligent with rational curiosity; be reasonable

in making rational judgments; be responsible in coming to decisions and carrying them out. Therefore, as we choose to engage in the transcendental method of conscious intentionality, human knowing and self transcendence take place predominantly through the asking of relevant questions and the discovery of truthful responses.

^{vi} For more on the art of transformative living see: www.treeoflife.org.au

^{vii} This definition of the term Self comes from the online Oxford dictionary <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>

^{viii} Harari - "That I am an 'in-dividual' implies that my true self is a holistic entity rather than an assemblage of separate parts. This indivisible essence allegedly endures from one moment to the next without losing or absorbing anything."

^{ix} Individualism: "the pursuit of personal happiness and independence rather than collective goals or interests; the belief that society exists for the benefit of individual people, who must not be constrained by government interventions or made subordinate to collective interests." (Encarta Dictionary)

^x The idea of community of selves is drawn from John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* where he argues: Your body is, in essence, a crowd of different members who work in harmony to make your belonging in the world possible."

^{xi} Thich Nhat Hanh - 1998 Dharma talk entitled: The Island of Self: The Three Dharma Seals, as quoted in Uplift, March 5th, 2016

^{xii} This understanding draws from Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*, where he maintains that the new cultural metaphor is *the holon*. A Holon is a whole made up its own parts, yet itself is part of a larger whole. Each holon has two opposite tendencies: 1. a self-assertive desire to preserve its individual autonomy and 2. an integrative tendency to function as part of the larger whole. Chapter 5

^{xiii} Harari, *Homo Deus*: writing from his context, Harari names both the experiencing self and the narrating self.

^{xiv} The Buddhist notion that thinking is one of our senses, cuts across Descartes' famous philosophical argument of: "I think, therefore I am." The brain sciences are now also cutting across it too.

^{xv} Daniel Siegal, MD, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*

^{xvi} Richard Moss, *The Mandela of Being: Discovering the Power of Awareness*

^{xvii} Robert Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow*

^{xviii} Ken Wilber et al, *Integral Life Practice: a 21-Century Blueprint for Physical Health, Emotional Balance, Mental Clarity and Spiritual Awakening*

^{xix} Ken Wilber et al, *Integral Life Practice*

^{xx} Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love: Discovering Fire for the Second Time*

^{xxi} Online dictionary

^{xxii} Psychology Today www.psychologytoday.com

^{xxiii} Harari argues that humanism has given rise to the belief: "if it feels good, do it."

^{xxiv} Spiritual questions entail: "Where did we come from?" "Why are we here?" "What becomes of us when we die?" Anne Hillman adds to that list: "What is love?"