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¹ I understand that there is supposed to be, ideally, no more than three texts from the Civilizations Sequence. While *The Sparrow* was from the sequence for the class of 2017, it was actually never an assigned book for me from the Honors College. I read it on my own time because I thought it sounded interesting, and I ended up loving it – thus why it has made the list.

Introduction

In hindsight, all the old adages and clichés that you hear about college turn out to be mostly true. Sayings like, “these are the best years of your life” and “it’ll go by faster than you realize” ring loud and clear now that my time at university is approaching its end. To be honest, I’ve had my fair share of really awful moments, but I’ve also had truly great ones. I’ve read, studied, and experienced so much here. And from that myriad of content, I am now tasked with determining which few things define *me* – which works and texts illustrate who I am as a human being, and which thoughts and feelings have been pivotal in shaping my personality. This reading list is my best attempt at doing that.

The initial challenge with such a task is that I enjoy many subjects. I love a good, schlocky horror movie just as much as I like high-art films, and I can just as easily enjoy Bob Dylan as I can Buddy Rich. But when I think back on all of the things that I *like*, for this list I picked those items that are – to me – also *important*. For the most part, I find that most of these works revolve around a common idea: that all of life and existence is connected, and that all experiences, good or bad, are not simply related to one another but are also necessary to the greater network of being. It is that network – that endless soup of coincidences, happenstances, adventures, heartbreaks, and loves – that builds up our universe to be as beautiful and wondrous as it is.

We experience many interactions every day, whether we realize it or not. There are texts out there that attempt to explore this greater interaction and all the greater complexities of life and its little facets. These texts may look at a single human experience or explore the greater meaning of life within the cosmos. These texts can illustrate a journey into the unknown or a journey into oneself. Regardless, they each aim in some way illustrate the many relationships that are pivotal to life. Through doing so, they reveal why life is magnificent.

These works may not always be my favorites within their respected mediums, though some of them certainly are. However, they are all thought provoking on some level. Whether it is through directly exploring the nature of being or by simply being a reminder of why life can be stunning, they all in their own way make me feel connected to a higher level of human creativity and brilliance. These works have been inspirational and insightful. They have helped me to gain perspective despite the brouhaha and anxieties of life, and they have helped me appreciate life’s grandeur and its moments of beautiful simplicity.

The texts here talk about life, they talk about existence, and they talk about adventure, travel, and experience. But they also talk about me, and you, and everyone else. These works evoke a sense of wonder, and it is that wonder that unites us all in this one massive, crazy, fantastic mess.

The Dao De Jing – Laozi

This ancient text – also popularly known as the *Tao Te Ching* – is arguably one of the most formative and influential philosophical texts ever written. Its messages can be felt throughout history and are reflected in many modern religions and personal philosophies. For me, the *Dao* represents the closest thing that I have ever had to a “religion.”

The Dao removes all of the superstition and confusion from religion. In 81 brief verses, the text presents a poetic guidebook that details how to live a peaceful and happy life. It curtails unnecessary ambition and teaches the value in contentment and appreciation for existence and the world around us. It connects us together to both people and nature.

The message of *The Dao* is summarized as “the best way to live one’s life.” It is a means of improving yourself and becoming more connected with the universe around you. For me, it has continually been a source of support and inspiration. *The Dao*’s calming words have proved both cathartic and helpful to me as I’ve dealt with my own personal problems. Whenever life gets crazy and stressful, *The Dao* helps to lend me some perspective. It has taught me how to slow down, and it has taught me how to better appreciate both myself and the natural world around me. All things, both good and bad, are crucial for a full life, and appreciating all of them is part of being alive.

The Dao teaches that the world exists in a state of balance. The balance may be messy and confusing at times, but that is the way it’s supposed to be. It is this mess that makes it beautiful. Trying to control or exert authority on the balance of life is both fruitless and destructive – a message I try to carry with me when I’m not in control of all that is around me.

The Dao is one of the most important books that I have ever read. At the very least, it has helped to cool my anxiety and give me some guidance through life. At most, it has become the closest thing to a faith that I’m ever likely to have. I know that I will never feel very connected to a church community, religion, or anything of that sort. However, through the *Dao De Jing*, I feel that I have become better connected to all of creation as a whole. It is a text that is continually helping me to find my place in this life and world, and it has given me a better appreciation for what exists around me.

***The Sparrow* – Mary Doria Russell**

The Sparrow tells the story of a group of religious missionaries and scientists who travel across the stars to make first contact with intelligent alien life. From the very beginning, the novel lets its readers know that this journey will go horribly wrong. As *The Sparrow* recounts these peoples' voyage into the unknown, it poses questions about the existence of God, the value of life, and the meaning of existence. It shows with heartbreaking detail how a man's spirit can be crushed, but also how the lowest points of our lives offer us the greatest potential for redemption.

Yet, the novel also shows how that same spirit can experience awe-inspiring beauty, compassion, meaning, and even hope – and how stunning hope can be when it grows out of bleak and dark realities. Through parallel story-telling, *The Sparrow* illustrates characters at both their most beautiful and their most horrific. It shows the dark and light together as one, moving forward as a single narrative.

Like many of the texts that I have chosen for this Reading List, *The Sparrow* shows how the highs and lows of life exist together. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather they depend on one another. Existence and humanity, whether in the mind, the heart, or the spirit, is a massive pool of many emotions and experiences. Those experiences can destroy a man's soul, but they can also build one up and give meaning to an entire life. We are defined by our life and our experiences, both good and bad. Would these spacefarers' tales be as engaging were it not for the conflict they encounter? Would their messages be as important or as captivating?

This text is a total knock-out of a novel that left me pondering its messages for days afterwards. As someone who has struggled with his own faith and religion for a long time, to read a similar conflict in such detail and with such crushing consequence truly gave me pause. Never before have I reacted to a book in quite the same way. This text is an immense achievement that shows both the best and the worst that can exist within humanity. Perhaps, more importantly, it shows how we can get up and walk away after we've emerged from the darkness.

The Afterman Albums – Coheed & Cambria

Coheed & Cambria is a progressive-rock band whose songs and albums center on a fictional universe and the characters that live within it. They are a group that has always been important to me, and this double-album project, *The Afterman Albums*, is arguably their greatest work yet.

These two albums tell the story of a space explorer who discovers a passageway through the cosmos, which will allow him to travel to previously unexplored planets. However, Sirius Amory, the astronaut who will undertake this journey, must leave behind his wife and loved ones in the name of science and adventure. On his journey, he encounters strange new lands and hostile life forms, and his family goes through their own personal turmoil. Ultimately, they discover that all of this, all of their lives and experiences, are connected in ways they never could have dreamed, that their universe is literally networked through a shared energy. The album is a space opera told through rock music. As a musical work, its ambition is immense and its execution is impressive.

Coheed & Cambria have always been an inspiration for me. I play multiple instruments, and I have always been drawn to jazz and progressive rock. To me, Coheed & Cambria represents some of the best of the latter genre. They are also the first progressive rock band I really started listening to, and they will therefore always be the most memorable.

However, my interest in this band and these albums extends beyond just me. My brother is also a large fan of this group, and we have gone to see Coheed & Cambria live several times. These experiences with my brother represent some of the best trips I've taken with him. He is also a musician, and we would often rush home from the concerts to play music ourselves. I love my brother very much. He is my best friend, and Coheed & Cambria has created a means for us to become even closer.

The Afterman Albums show how genres, styles, and even mediums of expression can shift and mold to suit a creative vision. These are lessons that I try to incorporate into any pursuit I undertake, be it creative or otherwise. No pursuit has to be entirely singular; it can transcend and combine with other ideas and concepts. Expression and even practical work can cross through many boundaries, creating something truly new and wonderful. Whether it is in their fiction, where whole galaxies are connected together, in their style, which blends numerous genres together, or in their real world impact, giving brothers something to bond over, Coheed & Cambria exemplifies how no experience in this world can go without touching another.

***The Walking Dead* – Telltale Games**

Players in the videogame, *The Walking Dead*, take on the role of Lee, a prior felon who becomes a protective guardian for a young girl named Clementine. Throughout the game, Lee and his friends try to survive the apocalypse while dealing not only with the undead menace, but also with the monsters that the living have become in this new world.

Lee – and thus the player – needs to decide whether he will sacrifice food to protect the weak, burdensome members of the group. The player will also need to decide how much they're willing to personally sacrifice to protect Clementine. Player choices carry throughout the storyline and alter how later plot-points will play out. For example, if you betray a character, then that character will remember. This can lead to drastically different playing experiences. Likewise, acts of compassion may change someone's opinion later on when it matters most. Oftentimes in *The Walking Dead*, no decision is clearly correct – things are not black and white in this world, but rather they are many different shades of dirty grey.

That is why *The Walking Dead* isn't just a game, but is in reality much more. There is no definitive way to win, there is no score, and there is no competition. There is simply a beautiful, dark narrative describing a group of people as they struggle to survive through some very hard times. The experience is incredibly cinematic and far more engrossing than many films and television shows. When playing, I found myself feeling connected to the story and characters on an emotional level. I felt upset when tragedy befell my band of survivors, and I felt elated when success struck.

The Walking Dead creates an emotional connection with its players because it has real and relatable characters, characters whose tragedies magnify the feeling of reward for the player when things go right. Players are not mere observers in an audience, but rather they are active participants. *The Walking Dead* does what any great piece of art should aim to do – it involves its audience, and it gets the audience to think about what its actually doing.

This title shows great potential for the videogame medium. *The Walking Dead* shows that human connection is more important than big-budget action sequences. The many different choices that players can make show how any action made by any person has repercussions throughout life, no matter how seemingly insignificant. We are all people who are connected and related in this world, for better or for worse, and our decisions today will alter our lives tomorrow.

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts and the Communist Manifesto – Karl Marx

Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* got me to think about the morality and ethics behind economics and enterprise far more than many texts. I view this text as playing a pivotal role not just in how I think about economics, but also in how I view humanity. This includes what kind of compassion and patience people deserve.

In his manuscripts, Marx discusses how endless production and gross wealth discrepancies among the classes demoralizes human beings, separating people from their own existence. When a worker's life revolves around a job that is unrewarding, a job in which he or she takes no pride or ownership, then that worker's own life depreciates in value. Marx discusses in detail how a purely capitalist system has the potential to measure the worth of a person by the size of their wallet. I agree with Marx on this one – there is far more to life than just money.

I am quite proud of my college for the fact that Corporate Social Responsibility and the ethics of business are strongly taught and encouraged. Despite this, some people – especially those in the established industrial environment – would still argue that businesses owe no responsibility to society and to their workers. However, after gaining more perspective on the world and getting an introduction to Marx's *Manuscripts*, I feel that businesses do in fact have an ethical responsibility to the people around them.

As someone studying accounting and finance, a lot of my courses examine how to help a firm improve operations and profits. But profit for profit's sake is an endeavor that will do little to further us as people or to actually improve our world. People exist to live and to enjoy life. Yes, we may be connected and defined in part by our professions, but we should take value and pride in what we do. If we must spend our lives working, then that work should be a part of us, something we personally appreciate and do not scorn. Businesses should support their employees and treat them as valuable individuals, not as expendable commodities. We should produce more so that we may lead productive, fulfilling lives, and the morality of a man should be measured by more than just his profitability.

As I move into my career, I know I will look back on this text many times. I know that if I am ever in charge of other people, I will treat them with respect and as human beings. We cannot separate ourselves from our humanity and our compassion in the pursuit of careers and enterprise. All of us are connected together and are part of the same existence. Life, work, profits, and experience – one does not replace the other, and one is not more important than the other.

***Thrown* – Kerry Howley**

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is one of the fastest growing sports in the world. It is a competition where two combatants enter the octagon and battle each other using various techniques and skills from all martial arts disciplines. Kerry Howley's *Thrown* is a pseudo-fictional tale of the narrator, Kit, who follows two real-life fighters throughout their careers. One fighter is as an up-and-coming contender, and the other is a rapidly aging pugilist already past his prime.

Thrown could have gone many ways. It could have devolved into a glorification of machismo and barbarism. But that isn't what *Thrown* is about. What *Thrown* presents is an in-depth, beautifully written, and bitingly funny commentary not only on MMA culture, but also on the philosophical implications of fighting another human being for sport. It has implications not just for the combatants, but also for the spectators. *Thrown* honors the grand heights that a great MMA match can achieve.

Howley describes a moment when everyone involved in the fight – from the warrior to the watcher – enter an out-of-body experience. During that experience there is nothing separating the flesh from the rubber of the mat. Howley argues that MMA has the potential to give us a moment where we can abandon all of our anxieties, our worries, and our materialistic concerns, focusing solely on the pure visceral challenge in front of us. Though we may experience the fight differently based on our own perspectives, we become united together in common appreciation for the human achievement, bravery, and skill on display.

Howley's work seeks to get at what makes human beings feel alive, what gives merit to life. MMA is a natural pathway to find this answer. To be a true prizefighter, one must remove all distractions and materialism. There is naught but focus, will, and power, both in mind and body. It is not only about fighting; it is just as much about living. It is about reconnecting with one's own basic existence and place in this world by pushing back against endless societal restraints and rules. It is to return to a more natural, more primal place.

I find the message of *Thrown* to be important. We can build up complicated philosophical models to explain life, ethics, meaning, and so on. But at the end of the day we are all still just living creatures who exist in this world for but a moment. Through our habits and our environment, we dilute ourselves as people from that very life. We corrupt our beings with jobs and money until we lose sight of the beauty of the world around us. But in the octagon, where there can be no distractions and where there can be no corruption, there is only pure being. The moment that happens in any good fight – where we forget ourselves and find that we are connected as one, unified body of spectators – is an experience that we owe it to ourselves as human beings to have. We should achieve this awareness and this appreciation for life more often, and we should adapt our minds and lives so that we can feel such appreciation without gloved fists.

***Watership Down* – Richard Adams**

When interviewed about his immensely successful adventure novel, *Watership Down*, Richard Adams said that all symbolism was really just accidental, and that it was meant to be a story for his young daughters to enjoy. This isn't entirely unexpected, considering that the novel is about a band of anthropomorphic rabbits on a journey to find a new home. Maybe this is why the end product ultimately ends up being so fantastic. It was inspired by, and for, childhood innocence and wonder, things that exist within us all.

Whether it was intentional or perhaps just a product of pure creative brilliance, it is undeniable that Adams' novel carries within it many classic literary themes, such as exile, heroism, religion, and war. That being said, never do these themes usurp the story itself. The tales of Hazel and his rabbit companions, as they flee their old lives and carve out a new one on the unknown frontier, are always at the forefront. Impressively, what could have easily descended into purely children's literature actually holds up quite well as contemporary adult fiction. The writing is eloquent, the scenario and pacing is expertly crafted, and the novel as a whole is a work of art.

Through *Watership Down* Adams has created a wonderful story of derring-do that, for me, is inspiring and nostalgic. *Watership Down* represents all the glory and adventure that inspired me when I was just a young child, though I didn't read this particular tale until I was in college. The glorious adventures are both exciting and humorous. It is a text that revels in the absolute joy it creates. The novel is quite simply a pleasure to read.

That, I think, is the most important thing about *Watership Down*: it is just so wonderful to experience. It is exciting, entertaining, thought provoking, and many other things, but it is also fun to read in the way we imagine childhood stories to be fun. *Watership Down* allows us, as an audience, to be transported back in time to when materialism, anxiety, and social worries weren't an issue or concern.

Watership Down represents a kind of pure storytelling, where life for the audience exists only in the bubble of the fiction while the story is being told. Because of this, it has the power to unite its readers in the glee of its mythos. It connects us together as fans of the book, and it also reminds us of the pure and simple joys of life. We do not need complications, complexities, and controls to enjoy our world – we just need to be open and appreciative towards it. When the story finally ends and that bubble finally pops, one remembers it fondly and with love, like one recalls the pleasantries of childhood.

***What is the What* – Dave Eggers**

To be completely honest, I never spent much time thinking about African cultures and conflicts before coming to college, but *What is the What* opened up a whole new world to me. It gave me a perspective and appreciation for other people, cultures, and environments that I rarely stopped to consider beforehand. I feel that this should be a goal of all great literature – to cause us to forget ourselves and to think beyond our own lives, if for but a moment.

The novel follows the story of one of the thousands of Lost Boys of Sudan and the trials they faced just trying to survive. I grew up in a small town in Maine – a town that was peaceful, comfortable, almost entirely white. *What is the What* describes childhoods experiences that are so extremely different from anything that I've ever experienced. Although this particular story is somewhat dated, millions of people are still going through a very similar conflict today.

I often deal with a lot of stress and anxiety in my own life. I openly admit that when I am not in control, or when things are not well scheduled, I feel worried and a bit overwhelmed. But the characters in this novel have no certainty or order to their lives at all. Their lives are drowned in chaos, where even the chance of living through the night is dubious at best. Since reading the text, I've done much more research into what's going on in African nations, and a lot of it is heartbreaking. Whenever I start to feel stress from my own problems, I try to think about what other people have to deal with every single day of their lives. That's when I realize how lucky I really have it.

Thankfully, *What is the What* is not all darkness and despair. Within the almost unbelievable tales of struggle are stories of comedy and hope. No matter what the characters are going through, the narrative eventually wraps back around to a lesson in determination, and such lessons are often quite funny too.

Life is a beautiful thing, even its messy parts. And without those messy parts, how would we know which experiences are truly wonderful? *What is the What* has not only given me a new interest in another culture, but it has also helped to show me how brilliant existence can be. That, I think, is the “what” – that life pushes us well past the brink of comfort, but it is mankind's potential for brilliance that inspires us to keep going and to keep having hope.

***The Glass Castle* – Jeannette Walls**

The Glass Castle is an autobiographical novel that tells the life story of its author Jeannette Walls, as she and her siblings grow up in a constant state of flux and poverty living in western United States. Her family moved from town to town every year, because her parents were never responsible enough to hold down a job. Jeannette's father was an alcoholic, and her mother an enabler and a spoiled child at heart. Both of them had unrealistic impressions of reality. Rarely, if ever, did Jeannette know where her next meal was going to come from, where she was going to sleep that night, or what she was going to be able to wear for clothes the next day.

My partner gave me this book to read as a Christmas gift. She said it was the most important book to her that she had ever read (her own life being remarkably similar before coming to college). Within this novel, I found a tale that was heartbreakingly sad, but one that was also lined with the silver of life's humorous and loving moments. Jeannette's upbringing was undeniably filled with both love and tragedy, and the two in juxtaposition brought out the differences in each. Throughout this book, I not only felt compassion and sympathy towards the characters, but also toward the young woman I love and with whom I am spending my life.

The Glass Castle, like many of the other texts that are important to me, opened up my eyes to a new kind of life and a new perspective. I am extremely fortunate to have grown up in a family that loved and supported me. We never had to worry about food, clothes, or even just having a place to sleep at night. But many people do have these worries and concerns, and they face such problems daily. This novel has helped me to consider such people and to view them in a softer, more empathetic light. By expressing the human experience in such an artful manner, the novel connects us together through our mutual appreciation for love, life, and humor, regardless of where we might come from.

This world is a very beautiful and diverse place. The story of Jeannette Walls, though crushingly sad at times, is also very stunning. The novel shows that, like so many things, life exists in a balance. It is the sadness that gives humor value, and likewise it is the darkness that gives accomplishment worth. These things must exist together.

The Glass Castle, if anything, is a tale about life and the many unexpected, crazy, depressing, and wonderful things that can happen. It has helped me broaden my perspective of the world and the people who I love and hold dear. For that reason, I love this book.

***Infinite Jest* – David Foster Wallace**

Infinite Jest, like its author, is hard to pin down. Part science fiction espionage thriller, part family drama, and part tennis commentary, it is a monolith. The novel interweaves tales of redemption, failure, heartbreak, and love. It tells the stories of various characters' lives, which revolve around a murderously hypnotic videotape called "the infinite jest." There's also discussions on suicide, mental health, addiction, and advanced physics. Wallace is arguably my favorite author, and this immense work of art is his magnum opus – it is beautiful, funny, complex, and at times baffling. It is, in short, wonderful.

This novel provides an awe-inspiring look into geo-political conflicts, the entertainment industry, sports-culture, and the messy soul of the man who penned it. It perhaps also peers into our own hearts, or at least the hearts of those willing to confront the reality of who they are. Such an undertaking, like reading this text, is no easy task.

David Foster Wallace is a bit of an inspirational figure for me, which makes his death all the more tragic. Wallace's writing shows what human creativity is capable of. Whenever I try to write something, I think of this text and Wallace's other works. I try to think of how Wallace would approach the subject and how he would phrase his sentences. *Infinite Jest* is a novel to which many modern fiction works have been, and will be, compared. It has shown me what is possible in a novel. I will not pretend that I understood all aspects of this work when I finished it, but I can't deny that *Infinite Jest* is a case-study in literary genius.

Infinite Jest represents the level of excellence that a person can create, if they have enough skill and imagination. It breaks through genre conventions and exists as something utterly unique. Life, like this book, is not easily defined, and I believe that a novel, if it really wishes to approach the subject of life with all its mysticism and grandeur, must itself follow suit. That is why other novels can drown in their own complexities, whereas *Infinite Jest* excels. *Infinite Jest* is a closer expression of what reality is like, with all its absurdities and endless footnotes, than most other dramatic novels that I've read.

This is a book that helped to connect me with some very relatable characters, provided valuable insights into the human condition, and illustrated what people are capable of accomplishing. *Infinite Jest* is an important book, for both me and the literary world. It is a massive tome of a novel that comes as close to expressing the many intricacies, beauties, and tragedies that can exist in a family as any book that I've ever read, and for that alone it deserves recognition.

WTF with Marc Maron

WTF with Marc Maron is a podcast (essentially a radio show on the internet) that usually airs weekly episodes. In each episode comedian Marc Maron interviews a person of interest. Guests have ranged from doctors, to actors, to comics. What makes this show so interesting, and so important to me, is Marc's unabashed humility and self-awareness.

Marc Maron is a recovering addict. He is also a person dealing with many personal difficulties, such as anxiety and depression. The latter are problems I can relate to. He's also extraordinarily funny and is easily my favorite comedian. I too have struggled with anxiety and insecurity for much of my life, and it is extremely comforting to hear someone else discuss the same problems and viewpoints in such an open (and funny) manner. Marc truly pours his heart out and opens up his soul on his show. He makes himself incredibly vulnerable, and I deeply admire that. I wish that I could be so honest and open with myself.

Like the other texts being discussed here, Marc's show illustrates the truth behind the human condition. His own monologues can be hilarious and heart wrenching, and the stories his guests tell can range in topics from domestic abuse and drug addiction to the most innocent discussion on family pets. The world we live in is not an orderly place. Rather, as *The Dao* and others point out, it is a messy one filled with all kinds of people and experiences. It is this great, wonderful mess that gives our lives value and worth. All kinds of people have come through *WTF*, and the collective stories and moments that they've shared illustrate the vast complexities and interworking that occur even in a single lifetime.

Marc Maron's stories and interviews are impressive to say the least. But they have also helped me to feel connected to a person who I consider to be a part of my life (even though that relationship obviously isn't reciprocal). His shows have inspired me, and he has expanded my interests in ways that wouldn't have been possible without his show. *WTF with Marc Maron* has helped me laugh when I needed it most. It has also given me new insights and perspectives into how I view the world, the other people in it, and even myself. The range of guests that have been on the show is staggering, and it has helped expose me to a diverse set of people that I would never have encountered otherwise. And for all that, this radio show is something that I hold near and dear to my heart.

***The God Delusion* – Richard Dawkins**

The God Delusion, by Richard Dawkins, is a discussion of some the fallacies common in modern religion. Through his text, Dawkins makes the argument that, from a logical standpoint, atheism – or at least agnosticism – is the only logical spiritual position to have. This book did not convert me to atheism entirely, but it did help me with the final push. This new opinion on faith has been extremely comforting for me.

When I embraced atheism, I felt almost immediately at peace. During my early childhood, religion-inspired nightmares – terrible images of hellfire and eternal damnation – haunted my nights. But after abandoning religion and confirming myself as an atheist, I feel none of that prior worry or stress. I feel relieved, relaxed, and content. Most importantly, I feel happy.

I have found that the world actually seems more beautiful now than it ever did before. When you remove all notions of superstitious influence or worry from the world, you begin to better appreciate how wonderful and fantastic all the nuances, coincidences, and complexities of existence truly are. The fact that I am here right now, alive and well, is truly marvelous. It also reminds me that this life is all there is. This thought encourages me to try to make every day count and to spend as little time being unhappy as possible. I want to try to experience as much love and kindness as I can during my time here.

I used to constantly stress and worry about what I was doing and whether it was “what was I meant to do.” How would God view my actions? Now I don’t worry about such things. I know that I am not “meant” to do anything. Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* argues that there is no grand being coordinating my actions with some omnipotent strategy. It’s just me, and us, and everyone else in this world acting and working together. Such a realization has made me feel more connected to the people around me and more appreciative of life in general.

Of course, this position also has serious implications: we live and die together on this planet on our own. It is up to us to appreciate each other, to learn about our alternative and even opposing cultures, and to embrace those differences and the beauties inherent within them. We cannot shut out other ideas about our world as wrong, heretical, or evil simply because they are different from our own. We must consider all thought at length and see the merit and value of each perspective, even if it is difficult to do so. We must live by reason and logic, not by blind faith.

After discarding the misconceptions and religious doubts that were once placed in my mind, I feel so much more content. I can enjoy life free of religious guilt and pursue happiness for happiness’ sake. Life is a glorious thing, and I’m so glad I get to appreciate it now for what it really is.

Cosmos – Carl Sagan

Astronomy, though I possess very little formal knowledge on the subject, is immensely fascinating to me, and it is my favorite of the scientific studies. Questions that revolve around our planets and our place in the universe are not just interesting quandaries – they’re studies into our very existence. Our humanly place in the universe is scarily small. We are truly just one tiny part of a bigger, grander, more beautiful reality. To study and understand that is not only rewarding, but also exhilarating.

Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*, a text accompanied by a television series (and later rebooted by Neil Degraesse Tyson), represents an awe-inspiring work of scientific writing. In a fairly short text, Sagan takes his readers from the dawn of creation through the successes of mankind and even questions our own nearly infinitesimal place in the universe. Sagan’s simple, yet eloquent, prose is accompanied by quality photos and paintings, which add a visual element to this cosmic discussion.

Cosmos (both the text and its accompanying material) is a beautiful creation. It provides a gateway into understanding our species – and our planet’s – role in the greater space of existence. To me, the work is immensely important. The word “Cosmos” has its roots in the word “order”. That our own cosmos has gone through so much chaos and coincidence to reach this exact somewhat orderly moment is truly astounding.

The Dao describes the underlying currents and natures of the world as “The Way” and likens it to a dark, convoluted, messy network of related forces. In light of modern science, though, I think this dark mess could just as easily be the grand mixture of stars, planets, and galaxies that are floating in harmony within the echoes of the universe. All life as we know it is born of star-stuff. We are connected to our universe on an existential level.

Sagan’s work isn’t just an introductory astronomy text – it is a revelatory piece of literature that unites all of us; all human beings exist together on this planet and within the cosmos. Human beings are quite small things really, and our lives are very short. But within those lives we have the potential to experience fantastic things and to imagine and create brilliant works of art. *Cosmos* doesn’t show us how fleeting or insignificant our lives are – it illustrates how grand they are. We are born of the stuff of stars, and the great oceanic space that surrounds us also unifies us together in this life. No matter how short our time upon Earth may be, we are connected through our common history, through our potential for brilliance, and through our very matter. Once I accepted these facts, I realized that no one truly walks alone into the dark. We are in this life together, through the good and the bad, through the light and the dark.

Conclusion

I have absolutely no idea where I am going to end up in a few years or what I'm going to be doing. I have a plan of sorts, but I'm not heart-set on following it through to the letter. I'm doing my best to be open to new experiences, new ideas, and new opportunities. Fortunately, life usually presents a lot of those things, and I'm sure something will come along eventually that makes me happy.

What I do know is that regardless of where I personally end up, I'll be living in a world that is beautiful and inspirational. From the simplest individual lives to the endless Cosmos above us, life presents countless chances to study, to connect, to grow, and to engage as human beings and sharers of this planet.

We as people have the potential for great compassion and great success. But we also have the potential to squander and waste these abilities, to control, manipulate, and hurt the world and each other. We institute borders and international threats, disrupting lives and families. We build massive and complex corporate systems, which distract and remove us from our own humanity. It cannot be forgotten why we are here in the first place. That reason is to live, experience, and explore this amazing universe in which we live. All living and non-living things in this existence are related in some way or another, whether it is through the closest of friendships or the very matter that creates us. We should respect that fact and carry it with us through life. We live, die, and exist together, and we should enjoy this reality, not ignore it.

I have tried my best to select a variety of texts that explore this concept – that illustrate how we as people are connected to one another and how this world exists in a state of cosmic and spiritual balance. Marx's *Manuscripts* illustrates how attempting to control and materialize existence can upset this beautiful balance, while *Thrown* provides a discussion on how one can desperately fight one's way back into meaning. I have discussed the inner peace and harmony prescribed by *The Dao* and how those same ideas carry forth to the stars and beyond in *Cosmos*. I have written about how perspectives gained from novels such as *The Glass Castle* and *What is the What* help us become kind and more considerate individuals. Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* and the science-fiction epic *The Sparrow* show the dangers of blind faith and the spoils of reason and science. *Infinite Jest* shows us a glimpse into the brilliance of mankind's genius, and *The Walking Dead* allows us to peek at its capability for horror. I have discussed how individual lives, adventures, and creations, even if they're experienced by rabbits, can unite us and bring us together. These works collectively have helped me to gain an appreciation for others' cultures, experiences, and achievements, and they have even rekindled my memories of childhood and my love towards those close to me.

Each of these texts explores humanity to some degree, be it in our capability for greatness or our place in the universe. We may think we exist as individuals, but we are truly related, both in experience and being. And when we exit this life, we do not perish forever. We return from which we came, to the great stars above, connected with the universe again.