A Transcendent Experience

**Armand Nicholi**: Is it possible that we all experience what Lewis calls "joy" — these periodic, extraordinarily intense feelings of longing for something or someone and mistake it for something else? For having the perfect career? Or winning the Nobel Prize? Or having the perfect marriage? Do you think that this is universal? Have you experienced it?

**Margaret Klenck**: I certainly think there's a universal human drive for wholeness, for internal unity and unity with the universe, I think it's a religious instinct, if we can call it that way, not an organized religious instinct.

**Armand Nicholi**: Well, how much did that play a role in your own worldview?

**Margaret Klenck**: I think I was encouraged as a child to take stock of all the experiences I was having, and not just the intellectual ones. So I think I was sort of raised to understand that I could make decisions based on things that were not intellectual. So that started the worldview. But as I have grown up, it's deepened my sense that we all have an organic drive towards the Other — capital "O." I mean, we're born into it, we're born as relational creatures. The first things we do is we look at our Mom's faces. We won't survive if we're not in relationship. And I think that's part of how we manifest this religious instinct, this instinct for the Other, that we are not sufficient unto ourselves as creatures and as beings.

**Armand Nicholi**: Are you saying that everyone has this instinctive drive for a relationship with a creator?

**Margaret Klenck**: I think so; yes, I would.

**Armand Nicholi**: Has anyone else experienced anything in their lives that might be categorized by this description that Lewis gives of joy?

**Louis Massiah**: The greatest moments that I've experienced spirituality have been seeing people who make that life commitment to sort of break the momentum of living in a capitalist society; who say, okay, I'm going to try to create order in this
society. I'm going to use my life to try to create peace. That's the transformative moment for me. It's not — it's not in churches for me, it's an active engagement in the world.

**Jeremy Fraiberg:** I agree that giving yourself to others is uplifting and — and actually may make you happier than if you live only for yourself. And I believe that people experience connectedness to the world and to others and have these transcendent emotions. But does that say anything about the existence of the supernatural, or is that just a phenomenon that we as human beings experience?

**Doug Holladay:** See, I think it's that notion that we really have the spark of the divine. Every person you meet, whatever culture, background, when you take the time to listen to the stories, you see where God, the hound of heaven, has really been after that person or has touched that person. And they've never had a chance to share it because they would not even call themselves religious.

**Michael Shermer:** But this, this hound of heaven, this small voice, the spark — these are words trying to describe something.

**Jeremy Fraiberg:** To the extent that people do have these religious or spiritual experiences — whether you call it an oceanic feeling or transcendent experience, or some sense of connectedness — it's not clear, even if you label it spiritual, where that gets you.

**Michael Shermer:** For me, the scientific worldview generates that kind of feeling of transcendence. An early experience, I suppose would be Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. I think Carl, more than anybody else, gave the feeling of the pure, emotional awe and wonder and joy at the miracle of life, and the Cosmos is so big and vast, and grains of sand, and we're just one. And it certainly generates in me a feeling of spirituality. I feel like a spiritual person, without a belief in God.

**Armand Nicholi:** Were you agnostic before, or did you have a spiritual worldview, and change from that to what you might call a scientific or secular worldview?

**Michael Shermer:** My philosophy is that all phenomenon have natural explanations. There is no supernatural, there's just the natural and stuff we can't yet explain.
That's basically my position. Socially, when I moved from theism to atheism, and science as a worldview, I guess, to be honest, I just liked the people in science, and the scientists, and their books, and just the lifestyle, and the way of living. I liked that better than the religious books, the religious people I was hanging out with — just socially. It just felt more comfortable for me.

**Doug Holladay:** Was it a real clear, one day here, one day here?

**Michael Shermer:** No, a couple years.

**Armand Nicholi:** So it was a relationship-driven decision.

**Michael Shermer:** Not solely. The intellectual stuff and all that is part of it, but if you're going to be honest, it's not just reasoning your way to a position.

**Doug Holladay:** Well, how do you make sense of the other, now?

**Michael Shermer:** In reality, I think most of us arrive at most of our beliefs for non-rational reasons, and then we justify them with these reasons after the fact.

**Armand Nicholi:** Well, as a psychiatrist, I think that we are primarily beings of feeling, more than of thought. And I think that most of our decisions are often — are made on the basis of what we feel instinctively. And so, I wonder, in all of us, how much of it we're influenced by people that we meet whom we admire and want to be like.