

Love Is the Highest Power

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*The Fall of Awe, the Rule of Fear,
and the Return of Love*

Christopher Louis

Whole Human Publishing

Love Is the Highest Power: The Fall of Awe, the Rule of Fear, and the Return of Love

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For the seekers, who dare to find.

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe ... the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.

—Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason

So potent was religion in persuading to evil deeds.

—Lucretius, De rerum natura

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Introduction

The Cave Painter

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.¹*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*

On December 18, 1994, three French explorers descended into a narrow fissure in the limestone cliffs above the Ardèche River in southern France.² Jean-Marie Chauvet, Éliette Brunel, and Christian Hillaire were experienced spelunkers, accustomed to the disorientation of crawling through passages that often led nowhere. They had felt the cold air escaping from the rocks, indicating hidden chambers, and followed it through a shaft barely wide enough for one person. When they emerged into an unexpectedly vast hall, their headlamps illuminating walls unseen by human eyes for nearly thirty thousand years, they discovered something that would challenge prevailing assumptions about early humans.

The walls were covered with paintings.

Far from crude markings or stick figures scratched into stone, these were sophisticated images, made with anatomical accuracy, dynamic movement, and deliberate artistry. Lions mid-stride, their muscles tensed beneath tawny coats. Horses with manes that seemed to flutter in un-

seen wind. Rhinoceroses, bears, mammoths, and bison, some overlapping across millennia as later artists added to what earlier ones had begun. In one chamber, a pride of lions appears to stalk prey along the rock's curved surface, with the natural contours of the wall incorporated into the composition to suggest depth and motion. In another, a panel of horses seems almost to breathe, their nostrils flared, their eyes alert with an intelligence that transcends species.

The artists who created these images were doing more than practicing or experimenting with a new technology. They were involved in something deliberate and meaningful, requiring planning, coordination, and sustained effort over many generations. The paintings at Chauvet are older than agriculture, older than cities, older than writing.³ They predate the earliest known religious texts by more than twenty-five thousand years. And yet, they display a level of sophistication that makes it clear that the humans who made them were not fundamentally different from us.⁴ They thought. They wondered. They imagined. They felt the need to express something that could not be captured through practical action alone.

We must ask: Why?

Why did humans, long before temples, laws, or priesthood, make their way deep into unstable passages, carrying animal-fat lamps and pigments, to create images likely to be seen only by their group? What need drove this behavior? What purpose did it serve? What does it reveal about the origins of what we call religion?

This book aims to answer that question. Not by defending any specific faith or criticizing any particular tradition, but by exploring the human drive for meaning from its earliest outward signs to its present forms, and questioning whether we might rediscover something vital that has been lost along the way.

The standard historical starting point for understanding religion is misleading. It begins with gods, commandments, temples, scriptures, organized priesthoods, and codified beliefs. These features appeared tens of thousands of years after humans, like the cave painters, first began asking life's big questions.

Whoever descended into darkness to paint at Chauvet was not following a doctrine. There were no scriptures to guide them, no creeds to recite, no orthodoxy to enforce. The act itself was their focus. Whatever motivated the cave painters was older than religion and belief, as we know them. Their fundamental orientation toward the world is what made belief possible.

That orientation can be summed up in one word:

Awe.

Awe is not the same as worship. It requires no god; it is the experience of encountering something so vast, complex, or powerful that ordinary understanding cannot fully grasp it. Modern psychology affirms what the cave painters instinctively knew. Awe reduces the sense of self, increases feelings of connectedness, and broadens the mind toward meaning beyond immediate survival.⁵ In the presence of awe, humans feel both smaller and bigger—smaller in their personal concerns, bigger in their sense of participation in something greater than themselves.

This expansion is what enables love to exist. Fear narrows the self, sharpening boundaries and heightening vigilance against threats. Awe has the opposite effect. It softens the edges of the isolated self and opens it to connection. In that openness, relationships become possible, and, over time, deepen into love. The cave painter descending into darkness was not fleeing the world but moving toward it, seeking encounter rather than escape. This is the action of love. Moving toward the other, toward mystery, and toward connection that transforms both the seeker and what is sought.

The soil from which spirituality grew was the original human capacity to meet mystery with awareness instead of turning away from it. This capacity existed long before fear of punishment, desire for reward, or submission to authority.

The cave paintings at Chauvet, Lascaux, Altamira, and many other sites across Europe and beyond demonstrate this human capacity in action. They are not practical objects made to solve everyday problems, or record transactions. They represent an investment of time, effort, skill, and risk that offered no immediate material benefit. Their existence shows that humans were engaging with questions of meaning, beauty, and significance long before anyone told them they should.

This is important because it reshapes the whole discussion about religion.

If spirituality originated from awe and connection rather than from rules and authority, then dogma is not the core of religion but a later development. It is one of many responses to the questions that awe raises. Recognizing this difference is key for anyone who wants to think clearly about the role of belief in human life, whether they are deeply religious, completely secular, or somewhere in between.

The question that awe inevitably leads to is:

Why?

Why does something exist instead of nothing? Why does the world have beauty, suffering, birth, death, love, and loss? Why do humans, alone among animals as far as we can tell, seem to need meaning? Why do we seek purpose, significance, and a feeling that life matters?

Every human culture throughout recorded history has sought to answer these questions. The responses have taken many forms, including creation myths, philosophical systems, scientific theories, and moral codes. Some answers have been gentle and generous, while others have been brutal and exclusionary. Yet the questions themselves are universal and as old as consciousness.

The cave painters left us with remarkable insight into their response to these questions. Their images were not answers but gestures of wonder. As if to say, “We don’t know why we are here, but we know we are part of something bigger than ourselves.”

Reflect on what this reveals about our ancestors. They lived in a world filled with the immediate threats of predators, harsh weather, disease, and starvation. Spending calories on anything beyond survival was risky. Every hour spent on art was an hour not spent hunting, gathering, or building shelter. Yet they chose to paint. They chose to create beauty in darkness, where no tangible benefit could be gained. This decision reveals something fundamental. Human beings are more than survival machines. We seek meaning, driven by needs that go beyond biology.

The images themselves support this interpretation. They are not random or simple. They display conventions and techniques that must have been learned and passed down through generations. The artists understood perspective, shading, and movement. They chose their subjects carefully, preferring the large animals prominent in their lives, rather than plants, landscapes, or humans. Over the centuries, some images were added to, creating layer upon layer of meaning.

This was culture. This was tradition. It was something more than instinct and less than an institution. It marked the beginning of the long process by which humans make sense of their existence. Every religion, philosophy, and worldview that followed grew from this process.

This orientation toward mystery—a willingness to engage questions without demanding a final answer—defined human spirituality for most of its history. It fostered flexibility, adaptation, and growth. It made room for diverse interpretations and local variations. It kept the sacred experiential rather than institutional. For tens of thousands of years, humans lived within this framework. They developed rich symbolic systems, elaborate rituals, and deep ethical sensibilities, all without sacred texts, formal doctrines, or enforced orthodoxies.

But it did not last.

As human societies grew larger and more complex, the relationship between humans and mystery began to shift. Questions once left open by instinct were answered with certainty. Practices once fluid were standardized. Distributed authority became concentrated. Fear, which has always been present at the margins of human consciousness, was amplified and redirected toward new targets, such as heretics, unbelievers, outsiders, and other threats to the order that belief had come to symbolize.

This change was neither a natural nor a necessary evolution of the spiritual impulse. It was a response to the pressures of population growth, resource competition, social stratification, and the need for coordination and control. It came at a cost. The more belief became fixed, the more it demanded loyalty over inquiry. The more it became tied to identity, the more it required boundaries. The more it was enforced by power, the more it justified exclusion, coercion, and violence.

Spirituality shifted from personal and accessible to institutional and regulated, a change that seems irreversible. Yet discoveries like Chauvet are

traces of an older way, and if we follow them with an open mind, they can lead us back to our first sense of wonder.

The goal of this book is not to label religion as bad or belief as harmful. Many people have found deep meaning, community, and moral guidance through religious traditions. Some of history's greatest acts of compassion, justice, and courage have been inspired by faith. This book does not ask readers to give up something that has sustained them, but it does invite them to look at it deeply and fearlessly.

This book does not belong to any camp. It is not written from within a religious tradition, though historical Christianity plays a prominent role in its arc, for reasons that will become clear. It is not written from a stance of secular triumphalism, though it subjects religious claims to critical scrutiny. It occupies the uncomfortable middle ground where genuine inquiry, evidence, and truth do not capitulate to sectarianism.

In the end, you may have more questions than this book can answer. Hopefully, you will. As the cave painters taught us, we do not need all the answers to leave our mark. Our sense of wonder can leave an impression that lasts for ages.

A word about method.

This book draws on archaeology, anthropology, psychology, history, and philosophy to craft a narrative from fragments spanning tens of thousands of years. That is inherently a speculative endeavor. We cannot definitively know what early humans believed or felt. We cannot interview the cave painter. We can only examine the traces they left behind and develop interpretations that align with the evidence, while honestly acknowledging what we do not and cannot know. The patterns this book explores—the solidification of belief into dogma, the merging of faith with identity, the use of the sacred as a political weapon—occur across religious traditions. They are human tendencies, not exclusive to any one faith.

This limitation itself offers insight. The urge for certainty, a craving for definitive answers to questions that may not have them, is exactly what this book challenges. A book about the risks of rushing to conclusions must itself stay open to change. It must model the intellectual humility it promotes. That said, this book takes stands. The issues it explores are not just theoretical. They influence politics, provoke violence, split families, and determine whether millions can coexist peacefully or tear each other apart over differences of belief. Readers are welcome to disagree. But they should understand from the beginning that this is a moral debate, based on evidence, driven by the belief that how we answer these questions matters—to real people, in real lives, right now.

CHAPTER ONE

Before the Fall

*In the beginning is the relation.*¹

—Martin Buber, I and Thou

I. The First Sanctuary

ELEVEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO, before the first cities along the Tigris and Euphrates, before Egyptians built pyramids, before writing or reading existed, a community of hunter-gatherers in southeastern Anatolia engaged in a seemingly impossible project.²

They built a temple.

Göbekli Tepe sits atop a limestone ridge in what is now Turkey. It overlooks the Harran Plain, where agriculture would later transform human life. When the first T-shaped pillars were cut and erected, some weighing over ten tons, wheat and barley still grew wild on the nearby slopes. No domesticated animals hauled the stones, no wheeled vehicles carried them, and no metal tools shaped them. The builders were nomads, following game, gathering wild plants, living as humans had for thousands of years.

Yet they achieved something unprecedented.

The primary enclosures at Göbekli Tepe are circular. Massive limestone pillars are arranged like rays of the sun, surrounding central pairs of even larger stones. These central pillars stand over five meters tall. They are carved with detailed reliefs of lions, foxes, boars, cranes, snakes, scorpions, and other creatures, rendered with remarkable skill. Some pillars have humanlike arms at their sides and belts around their waists, indicating

they may be anthropomorphic figures. These could represent ancestors, spirits, or something beyond our current understanding. The effort to quarry, transport, carve, and erect these stones was enormous. It would have required hundreds of people working together over long periods. It would have demanded planning, organization, and a sustained collective purpose.

This kind of work required a shared belief.

This is Göbekli Tepe's central challenge. It suggests that religion—or at least communal ritual—may have come before, rather than after, agriculture and settled life. The standard archaeological view holds that farming came first, followed by settlements and surplus, which led to social classes and, only later, monumental sacred architecture. Göbekli Tepe prompts us to reconsider this sequence. If the ritual interpretation is correct, then the desire to build sacred space might have driven the development of civilization, rather than merely being a consequence of it.

Not all scholars agree with this interpretation. Some suggest the site may have served functions we do not yet understand. Our categories of “temple” and “ritual” might not apply. The distinction between sacred and secular may itself be a modern imposition on a world that did not recognize it. The honest answer is that we do not know, and may never know, exactly what Göbekli Tepe meant to its builders. The stones do not speak, and the people who could explain them left no writing.

Klaus Schmidt, the site's lead archaeologist from 1995 until his death in 2014, believed Göbekli Tepe was a pilgrimage center. Scattered hunter-gatherer bands gathered for feasts, rituals, and communal activities, strengthening bonds across kin groups.³ Animal bones found at the site (mostly wild game, such as gazelle) show evidence of butchery and communal meals. People from a broad region visited to eat, work, and create something greater than any band could accomplish alone.

Göbekli Tepe suggests that the origin of religion might lie in the search for shared meaning, rather than merely a reaction to fear, authority, or doctrine. The builders' efforts went beyond survival or practical needs. They created meaning together and, in doing so, left a question carved into stone for eleven thousand years.

Those people are gone. The site they built appears to have been deliberately buried, filled in and covered over, perhaps by the very people who constructed it, for reasons we will never know. They left no inscriptions,

no explanation, no theology. They left only the stones, pressed into the earth for eleven millennia, waiting for someone to ask the right question.

That question is the focus of this chapter.

II. Kinship with the World

For most of human history, perhaps 95 percent of it, our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers.⁴ They moved across landscapes, following game and seasonal vegetation. They lived in small bands, rarely more than a few dozen people, but maintained connections with other groups through trade, intermarriage, and gatherings. They had no writing, no permanent buildings, and no wealth beyond what they could carry. By modern standards, they owned almost nothing.

Yet anthropological studies of surviving hunter-gatherer societies—such as the San of southern Africa, the Hadza of Tanzania, the Pirahã of the Amazon, and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia—reveal a different picture. These societies were not impoverished; they were abundant in time, relationships, and a collective sense of belonging.

That belonging was the spiritual foundation itself: the recognition, woven into daily life, that humans are part of, not separate from, the world they inhabit. In contrast, the modern Western view treats nature as a resource and considers humans as distinct from other animals. For hunter-gatherers, these boundaries were blurred: people, animals, plants, and land were interconnected, and the relationships among them carried moral responsibility.

The San of the Kalahari provide insight into this worldview. They have lived in southern Africa for tens of thousands of years and are one of Earth's oldest populations.⁵ Their traditional practices, although disrupted by colonization and marginalization, are well documented by anthropologists. Whether these practices show deep continuity or recent change is debated. Still, they demonstrate what is possible for humans in small-scale societies without agriculture or centralized authority.

San spirituality does not revolve around gods in the Western way. There is no all-powerful creator giving commands from above. Instead, the San live in a world full of spiritual forces. These forces can be accessed and influenced through communal rituals. The most important of these is the trance dance. Dancers enter altered states through movement, breathing,

and effort. In these states, healers say they visit other realms, speak to spirits, and channel healing energy to the sick or troubled.

The trance dance is not performed for supernatural beings; it is a way to connect. Through it, individuals and communities align with forces greater than themselves. Healing is not just physical but relational. Illness appears as a tear in the web of relationships that sustain life. Healing restores balance among individuals, between the living and the dead, and between humans and the spiritual energies that animate the world.

These rituals demonstrate commitment to reciprocity and interdependence. When San hunters kill an animal, they acknowledge its sacrifice, offer gratitude or an apology, and distribute meat according to fairness rules. These actions are more than just tradition; they show that survival depends on others and that taking from the natural world entails obligations and responsibilities. Rituals acknowledge that debt and help maintain balanced relationships.

Similar patterns appear across distant hunter-gatherer societies. For the Lakota of the Great Plains, the buffalo was more than a resource; it was kin. Its sacrifice guaranteed human survival. The relationship was mutual. Humans honored the buffalo through respectful treatment of remains, gratitude ceremonies, and restraint from overhunting. When white market hunters arrived in the nineteenth century, killing buffalo by the millions for hides and leaving carcasses to rot, the Lakota faced not only economic hardship but also spiritual destruction. This was a moral breach, a rupture in the sacred bond between species.

Among the Sámi of northern Scandinavia, reindeer herding was part of a worldview that believed animals, landscapes, and natural forces had consciousness and agency. The relationship between herder and herd was one of partnership rather than ownership. The reindeer were participants in a shared life, not property. This understanding shaped behavior. Herders talked to the animals, apologized when slaughtering was necessary, and kept practices aimed at maintaining balance in the relationship.

What links these examples is not specific beliefs about spirits or animals but a deeper outlook: a way of being that values relationships as fundamental. Here, humans are not the center of existence but rather part of a web of connections, among other species, landscapes, ancestors, and spiritual forces. To live well is to maintain these connections in proper balance; harming them is equivalent to harming oneself.

This relational worldview has deep ethical stakes. When beings outside the human community are recognized as having moral standing, when animals can be harmed, when land can be damaged, and when the dead continue to be part of the lives of the living, then moral concern cannot be limited to human interests. Ethics becomes ecological in the fullest sense. Responsibility reaches beyond the human self to include the entire web of relationships that make life on Earth possible.

III. The Dreaming

Nowhere is relational spirituality more thoroughly developed than among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. For at least sixty-five thousand years, longer than modern humans have lived in Europe, Aboriginal cultures evolved in relative isolation, creating spiritual systems of remarkable depth and complexity.⁶ These systems, often collectively referred to as the Dreaming, represent perhaps the most sophisticated expression of relational spirituality ever known.

The term “Dreaming” is an inadequate translation of concepts that have no precise English equivalent. It does not primarily refer to sleep or fantasy in the Western sense. Instead, it describes an ongoing reality that underlies and permeates the visible world: a dimension of existence that is simultaneously mythic and real, ancient and modern, spatial and temporal. The Dreaming is not just a past era when creation took place but an ever-present condition that continually influences reality.

To understand Aboriginal perspectives, we need to set aside deeply ingrained, possibly unconscious, assumptions. Western thought tends to organize reality along straight, separate lines of time and space, with time moving from past to future, and space extending in three dimensions from a single point. Events occur once and are over. Objects exist in specific locations apart from the meanings we assign to them. Self and world, subject and object, are fundamentally separate.

Aboriginal worldview dissolves these distinctions. Time is layered rather than linear. The past is not gone but present, accessible through proper attention and practice. Space is storied. Each feature of the landscape bears witness to ancestral actions, embodying a continuous creative force. The self and the world are interconnected; the land itself forms identity. To be severed from Country—the Aboriginal term for the spiritually

significant landscape to which specific groups belong—is not just to be displaced but to be diminished, fractured, and endangered at the very core of existence.

In Aboriginal understanding, the landscape is no passive background for human activity but a living record engraved with meaning by ancestral beings whose journeys shaped the world's features. Every rock formation, waterhole, tree, and hill is a sign of creative action. These signs are more than symbols. They are embodiments of ancestral power that continue to influence the world. Walking across the land means moving through a storied space, encountering at every turn the evidence of creative forces that remain active.

Songlines illustrate this idea very clearly. Bruce Chatwin, whose book *The Songlines* is part travelogue and part invention, tells of an old man in the Australian interior who refused to leave his land to get medical help. It was not stubbornness. The elder explained that leaving Country meant losing the thread of a song that had been sung since before memory began, and without that song, there was nothing left to save. Chatwin could not fully understand what he was hearing. Most Westerners cannot. That incomprehension is precisely the point.⁷

Songlines are paths across the landscape that ancestral beings traveled during the creative era known as the Dreaming. These journeys were accompanied by songs sung by the ancestors as they moved through the land, shaping features along the way. A waterhole might mark where an ancestor rested, while a hill might be the spot where an ancestor buried something or transformed into stone. The songs document these actions, and the land holds their evidence.

But songlines are ongoing responsibilities, not merely records of the past. Traditional landowners are required to know the songs associated with their territory and to perform them at the right times and places. These songs preserve the relationship between people and land. Ignoring them risks damaging that connection, which affects not only spiritual well-being but also practical matters such as food and water supplies. The songs are part of the land, not separate from it.

This understanding has significant ethical importance. If the land is not just soil and stone but the embodied presence of ancestral beings, then the human relationship with it cannot be purely extractive. The land has claims on humans, just as humans have claims on the land. Custodianship

becomes a sacred duty. To damage Country is to do more than harm an ecosystem: it is to wound a living being, dishonor ancestors, and tear the fabric of reality itself.

When Europeans arrived in Australia, they could not understand what they saw. To them, the land seemed empty: *terra nullius*, belonging to no one. It was waiting to be taken. They failed to see the complex web of relationships, obligations, and meanings that Aboriginal peoples had built over sixty-five thousand years. The violence that followed—dispossession, massacre, the forced removal of children, and the systematic destruction of language and culture—went beyond politics and economics. It was a spiritual attack, an assault on a way of life that the invaders could neither understand nor respect.

Aboriginal spirituality also offers a deep understanding of time. Western linear time (the idea that the past is gone, the present is fleeting, and the future is not yet real) loses meaning in the Dreaming. Past, present, and future exist all at once, layered like sheets of translucent fabric. The ancestors remain. They are present in the land, in ceremonies, and in the lives of their descendants. The creative acts that shaped the world are not finished. They continue through every ritual that reenacts them, every song that recalls them, and every generation that carries them forward.

This understanding of time influences identity. In the Aboriginal worldview, individuals are not isolated selves moving through an indifferent universe but expressions of ancestral patterns, continuations of stories that began in the Dreaming and will extend into futures they cannot imagine. Personal identity is relational, defined by connections to land, ancestors, community, and totemic beings with whom particular individuals share essence. The Western idea of the autonomous, self-creating, and self-sufficient individual would be incomprehensible in this framework. Identity is given, not made. It is found in relationships, not created in isolation.

The practical expressions of this worldview were detailed and exact. Aboriginal cultures developed intricate ceremonial systems, complex kinship networks, and advanced land management techniques, all within the framework of the Dreaming. Fire was used to shape landscapes in ways that enhanced biodiversity and ensured reliable food sources: a practice now recognized as advanced ecological management that supported environments for thousands of years. Seasonal rounds were planned to align with

the availability of different resources across regions. Knowledge of water sources, animal behavior, and plant properties was preserved in songs and stories, passed down orally from generation to generation.

None of this required centralized authority. Aboriginal societies were far more egalitarian than later agricultural civilizations. There were no kings, no priests, no standing armies, and no accumulated wealth that could serve as a basis for power. Elders possessed knowledge and led ceremonies, but their authority came from their role in passing down tradition, not from coercive power. Decisions were made through consultation and consensus. Conflict was managed with established procedures aimed at restoring harmony rather than punishing.

This is essential for understanding what spirituality looked like before dogma. The complex ceremonial systems of Aboriginal Australia did not depend on hierarchy or enforcement. They were maintained by a shared commitment to a worldview that made participation meaningful. People took part in ceremonies not because they were forced, but because the ceremonies connected them to something greater than themselves, to ancestors, to Country, to the ongoing creative process that makes existence possible. The motivation was relational, not coercive.

Aboriginal societies were not utopian, of course. Like all human communities, they experienced conflicts, inequalities, and failures. The treatment of women varied among groups and was sometimes very restrictive by today's standards. Violence occurred, sometimes in ritualized forms meant to control it, and other times in ways that inflicted real harm. No human society has been free of cruelty.

But the framework in which these imperfections existed was fundamentally different from what would follow. It was a framework where meaning was participatory, authority was distributed, and belonging was based on relationships rather than belief. It shows that human beings can organize spiritual life without dogma, hierarchy, or the mechanisms of control that would later dominate religious history.

IV. The Living Universe of West Africa

Across the African continent, cultures that largely remained free of centralized religious authority developed sophisticated spiritual systems.

These systems saw the world as alive with presence and organized through relationships rather than hierarchy.

The Yoruba people of present-day Nigeria created one of the most detailed systems.⁸ For centuries before European contact, Yoruba civilization flourished in city-states where religious life did not focus on distant gods demanding sacrifices but rather on àṣẹ. This life force infused everything, and linked the visible and invisible worlds in constant exchange.

The orishas, often mistranslated as “gods,” were not all-powerful beings ruling from above. They represented different facets of àṣẹ (concentrated energies such as creativity, justice, healing, and transformation) that humans could connect with through relationships. Oshun embodied sweet waters, fertility, and love. Ogun carried the power of iron, war, and clearing paths. Yemoja, mother of waters, governed the ocean and all who traveled across it. These were powers to be honored, nourished, and consulted, not masters to be appeased. They were partners in the ongoing effort to maintain balance.

The babalawo, or diviner, was less a priest controlling access to the sacred than a specialist in communication. He trained over many years in the vast collection of Ifá, the oral literature that holds the tradition’s accumulated wisdom. When someone faced a tough decision or an unexplained misfortune, the babalawo would cast palm nuts or cowrie shells and interpret the patterns they formed against the thousands of verses he had memorized. The divination did not determine a fixed fate; it revealed possibilities, clarified options, and suggested offerings or actions that might restore balance. The individual remained the primary agent in their own life.

This agency extended to relationships with the ancestors, the egun, who had not really departed but simply changed form. The dead remained part of the community, accessible through ritual, and invested in the well-being of their descendants. A family shrine was not a monument to the past but a communication device, a place where the living and the dead could continue their conversation. The ancestors could be asked for guidance, thanked for help, and even criticized for neglect. The relationship was reciprocal, just like relationships between the living.

Here again, spirituality was about participation rather than submission. There was no sinful creature begging forgiveness from a judgmental deity. The Yoruba person was a being with her own ori, which was her

destiny, chosen before birth and carried within her like a seed waiting to grow. The spiritual task was not to submit to external authority but to align with her deepest nature and become who she had always been meant to be. Others could help or hinder this process, but the *ori* was hers alone.

Yoruba society was not fully egalitarian. Kings held power, hierarchies existed, and gender roles were sometimes limiting. However, the core spiritual framework was quite different from fear-based traditions. The universe was a living system in which humans participated, contributed, and mattered, not a courtroom where they stood trial. Relationships themselves defined reality, not some authority's decree.

When the slave ships arrived, carrying millions of Yoruba and other West African peoples to the Americas, they could not carry the shrines, sacred groves, or the accumulated ritual objects. But they carried the understanding.⁹ In Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and across the Caribbean, the tradition persisted, adapted, and merged with Catholicism in complex ways, safeguarding its core beneath borrowed forms. Despite the missionaries' attempts to destroy them, the living traditions of Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou carried forward a spirituality rooted in relationship, participation, and presence that has never depended on fear.

V. The Ethic of Reciprocity

At the core of relational spirituality is a moral principle so fundamental that it appears independently across nearly every human culture: reciprocity. This principle is straightforward: what is given must be returned; what is taken creates obligation; and relationships establish responsibility. It predates all formal ethical systems, legal codes, and philosophical debates on morality. It is the original ethic, arising from social and emotional realities rather than divine commands.

Reciprocity shows up in the animal kingdom wherever species live in groups. Vampire bats share blood meals with roostmates who did not feed, expecting future favors when circumstances change. Chimpanzees groom each other in ways that reflect alliances and obligations. Dolphins help injured peers, keeping them at the surface so they can breathe. These behaviors reveal that reciprocity is not just a cultural invention but a biological trait: a strategy that evolution favors because it promotes cooperation, which is vital for survival in social species.

In humans, this biological basis evolves into complex cultural systems. Every known hunter-gatherer society engages in some form of sharing that distributes resources beyond immediate kin. Among the !Kung San, the hunter who kills large game does not own the meat. It is shared according to rules that ensure fair access, starting with the owner of the arrow that made the kill. Arrows are often lent, so the distribution is broad. Similar practices exist among the Hadza, the Mbuti, the Inuit, and many other societies. These are moral commitments. To hoard is shameful. To share is honorable. These values are not enforced through formal punishment, but rather through social sanctions of approval or disapproval from community members whose regard matters.

The psychological mechanisms behind reciprocity are powerful and mostly unconscious.¹⁰ Humans track exchanges with impressive accuracy. We remember who has helped us and who has not. We feel gratitude toward those who benefit us and resentment toward those who take without giving. These feelings run deeper than learned ideas. They are ingrained in social cognition, developed over millions of years of living in groups where reputation affected access to resources, mates, and safety.

Experiments in behavioral economics have precisely documented these mechanisms. The ultimatum game, in which one participant proposes a division of money and the other can accept or reject it, consistently yields results that challenge pure economic rationality. Respondents often reject unfair offers, even when it costs them money. They prefer receiving nothing over accepting what seems like exploitation. This willingness to forgo material gain for fairness shows that reciprocity is not only strategic. It is a deeply held moral intuition.

The concept of reciprocity extends beyond human relationships. In relational worldviews, the nonhuman world is also seen as a partner in exchange. The land provides food. The hunter expresses gratitude. The rain falls. The community performs rituals of thanks. The ancestors offer guidance. The living remember them through ceremonies. At every level, existence is understood as a web of give-and-take where balance must be maintained.

This cosmic reciprocity has real-world implications. When we see the world as a system of exchange, taking without giving back becomes not just thoughtless but dangerous. It disturbs the balance that sustains life. Early agricultural societies understood this naturally. Leaving part of the harvest

for the spirits of the land was ecological wisdom woven into spiritual practice. Apologizing to a tree before cutting it down acknowledged that its existence was not solely for human use.

This understanding greatly influences how humans perceive their role in the world. In the reciprocal worldview, humans are obligated to give back. They are not masters of the world, entitled to take whatever they want. They are participants, connected by relationships that both limit and support them. This is a very humble view, presenting humans as just one form of life among many, dependent on others and accountable to them.

Consider how different this is from the worldview dominant in the modern West. The ideas that nature exists solely to serve human purposes, that resources are inert materials ready to be exploited, and that human well-being is the only morally important form of well-being would be incomprehensible within the reciprocal framework. They would seem not only mistaken but dangerous, a recipe for imbalance that threatens our survival.

Seen from inside the reciprocal framework, the current environmental crisis reads as the predictable result of abandoning reciprocal ethics. For centuries, industrialized nations have exploited the Earth's resources without giving anything back, treating rivers, forests, oceans, and the atmosphere as waste dumps and unlimited sources of materials. The Earth has provided, and humans have consumed, without regard for obligations or boundaries. The resulting imbalances, such as climate change, mass extinction, and ecosystem collapse, are exactly what the reciprocal worldview warned would happen if such violations continued.

This does not imply that early humans were environmental saints. They could have overexploited resources, and some extinctions (the megafauna of the Americas and Australia, for example) may have been sped up by human hunting. The reciprocal ethic was not a shield against harm; it was a framework that highlighted harm and provided tools to fix it. When an imbalance was detected, the framework offered concepts and methods for response. In contrast, the modern worldview often lacks the categories to recognize imbalance until disaster strikes.

The reciprocal ethic opposes this narrow view. If moral standing comes from relationships rather than belonging to a privileged group, then the scope of moral concern cannot be arbitrarily limited. This does not

automatically prevent harm, but it provides a framework in which harm is recognized as harm rather than justified as the natural order.

It is understandable, and worth resisting, to romanticize early human societies. Reciprocity did not prevent violence, oppression, or suffering. It did not guarantee equality as we understand it today. Gender hierarchies existed in many hunter-gatherer societies, and intergroup conflict could be brutal. The relational worldview offered no certainty of justice.

But it offered something that later moral systems often lack: a framework where moral obligations arise naturally from relationships rather than being imposed from above by divine or human authority. In this framework, ethics were woven into the fabric of existence. They did not need to be commanded because they could be perceived. To violate reciprocity was to do more than disobey a rule; it was to tear the web of connection that held the world together. A sanction was not an external punishment but an internal acknowledgment of the harm done, along with an external response from a community that understood what was at stake.

This internalized ethic (morality seen as perception rather than obedience) likely marks the most important difference between relational and dogmatic spirituality. In dogmatic systems, ethics are dictated by rules. Commands are given and enforced through the threat of punishment. The drive for moral behavior comes from fear of punishment or hope for reward. In relational systems, ethics develop from understanding. The motivation is not fear but recognition of connection, dependence, and the consequences of breaking the web of relationships.

Which system leads to more reliable moral behavior? Internalized ethics are likely the stronger of the two, and the reason is simple. When people follow rules only out of fear of punishment, their adherence breaks down when punishment is no longer available. However, when people follow ethical standards because they understand the consequences of violating them, that awareness persists even when no one is watching.

This might explain why relational societies, despite lacking formal enforcement mechanisms, maintained moral order for thousands of years, and why societies with complex systems of law and punishment still struggle with widespread violations. The commands are given. The threats are made. But the sense of connection is missing. Without that sense, ethics stay external, foreign, a burden to avoid when possible.

Restoring reciprocal ethics does not require abandoning modern society or returning to hunter-gatherer life—only an awareness that reciprocity involves connection, dependence, and mutual implication within webs of relationships that extend beyond the human self. This awareness is accessible. It can be practiced. The question is whether we will choose to practice it before the consequences of neglecting it become irreversible.

VI. The Sacred Feminine

The web of reciprocity that bound hunter to land and living to ancestor extended in another direction, one that later religious history would largely suppress. It extended toward the feminine.

The archaeological record of the Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods includes hundreds of female figurines, small sculptures depicting women with exaggerated breasts, bellies, and hips. The most renowned, the Venus of Willendorf, which dates back roughly thirty thousand years, is one of these faceless figures whose entire form emphasizes fertility and abundance.¹¹ Similar figurines have been discovered across Europe, from Spain to Siberia, spanning thousands of years and many cultures.

Interpretation of these figures remains debated. Early scholars called them “Venus figurines” and believed they depicted fertility goddesses worshiped by our ancestors. Later scholars argued that this view applied modern ideas to evidence that could not support such conclusions. Maybe they were dolls, teaching tools, portraits, or something we have no name for. We cannot know for certain.

What we do know is that female forms held symbolic importance for early humans. The continued tradition of figurine-making across extended periods and regions indicates that whatever these objects symbolized, that symbolism was significant. Female bodies, particularly those associated with fertility, were deliberately chosen for symbolic focus. This reflects a conscious decision. It reveals something about the imaginative world of early humans.

The prominence of feminine symbolism persisted into the Neolithic period. At Çatalhöyük, a settlement in Anatolia dating back approximately nine thousand years, excavations have uncovered detailed wall paintings, relief sculptures, and figurines, many depicting female forms.¹² One striking image shows a seated woman flanked by leopards, a pose indicating

authority and power. The settlement shows no signs of significant social hierarchy or centralized political leadership. Ritual practices appear to have been integrated into domestic spaces rather than conducted in separate structures overseen by specialized individuals.

Similar patterns are seen at other Neolithic sites. Feminine imagery is prominent, while explicitly masculine warrior imagery is largely absent. These patterns stand in stark contrast to those of later Bronze Age civilizations, where masculine war gods dominated pantheons and priestly hierarchies controlled access to the sacred. We will examine this transformation and the gradual sidelining of women from spiritual authority in the next chapter.

For now, what matters is that the sacred feminine was present at the beginning, woven into the symbolic life of early humanity in ways that suggest female experience, fertility, birth, and nurture were spiritually central. Whatever the early figurines represented, they point toward a spiritual imagination and sacred experience quite different from the male-dominated traditions that would later claim universal truth. Understanding what was included then helps us see what was later excluded, and why that exclusion mattered.

VII. The Evidence of Burial

The dead have much to tell us about the living.

Among the most revealing insights into early spiritual life are burial practices. Although bodies could simply be discarded with little care or investment of resources, early humans chose to prepare them thoughtfully, position them intentionally, and often include objects with apparent symbolic meaning. They expressed more than practicality; they asserted beliefs about the meaning of death, the nature of personhood, and the relationship between the living and the dead.

The earliest clear burials in the archaeological record are from Qafzeh Cave in Israel, dating to approximately one hundred thousand years ago.¹³ Here, bodies were placed in flexed positions, as if sleeping, with some mixed with red ochre, a pigment with no obvious practical use that appears often in early burial sites worldwide. The presence of ochre indicates preparation, intent, and symbolic meaning. The bodies were not just discarded; they were marked. At Skhul Cave, also in Israel, an adult male was buried

holding the jawbone of a wild boar. This object likely held significance, even though we cannot know its exact meaning.

At Shanidar Cave in Iraq, Neanderthal burials dating back sixty thousand years contain pollen from flowers, suggesting that bodies may have been placed on beds of blooms.¹⁴ Some scholars question this interpretation, arguing that pollen could have arrived naturally; however, other evidence from Shanidar is more difficult to dismiss. One individual, disabled by injuries that would have cost him an arm and an eye, survived for years afterward in an environment where mobility was survival. Someone cared for this man, feeding and protecting him and, in the end, burying him with apparent intention.

What do these practices reveal about early spiritual life?

First, they show that early humans viewed death as a significant transition requiring acknowledgment, not merely the end of biological functions. The consistent presence of grave goods, careful placement of bodies, use of pigments, and other markers all suggest that death was understood as meaningful. The dead were not simply gone; they had entered a different state that required a response.

Second, burial practices reveal concern for relationships. The goods placed with the dead, the care taken in preparation, and the effort spent on interment all suggest that the bonds between the living and the dead persisted beyond death. Relationships continued in a way that required acknowledgment.

Third, the widespread distribution of burial practices indicates they were not isolated inventions. They were reflections of capacities deeply rooted in human psychology. Similar practices emerged independently across continents and cultures, suggesting that the impulses to honor the dead are not merely cultural artifacts but universal to humans.

This does not mean all early humans held the same beliefs about death. They probably did not. The specific meanings attached to burial practices varied widely, and we cannot uncover most of them. What we can say is that the pattern of treating death as meaningful and requiring a symbolic response appears to be part of the basic human toolkit.

These practices became more complex over time. By the Upper Paleolithic, around thirty thousand years ago, burials had become increasingly elaborate. Bodies were decorated with beads, covered in ochre, and accompanied by tools and ornaments that likely required significant effort to

make. The well-known burials at Sungir in Russia, dating to approximately thirty thousand years ago, are particularly striking.¹⁵ Two adolescents were buried with over ten thousand mammoth ivory beads, items that would have taken years of cumulative labor to produce. Whatever these young people were, their community saw them as worth a remarkable investment.

Such burials cannot be simply about the practical disposal of the dead. They serve as statements about value, identity, and the importance of certain individuals within the community. They imply that early humans had developed complex understandings of personhood, status, and meaning. They indicate that spiritual life was already advanced, capable of creating intricate symbolic systems and influencing human behavior in ways that went beyond immediate material interests.

VIII. Art and the Birth of Meaning

The cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic (Chauvet, Lascaux, Altamira, and dozens of other sites) stand as the most remarkable evidence of early symbolic thought, but they are not the only proof. Across Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, early humans left traces of creative activity that collectively reshape our understanding of what these people were capable of.

The Blombos Cave in South Africa has provided some of the oldest evidence of symbolic behavior. Here we find pieces of ochre engraved with geometric patterns dating to approximately seventy thousand years ago.¹⁶ Unlike the representational images of later cave paintings, these are abstract designs, with crosshatched lines and repeated patterns, that suggest a mind capable of creating and recognizing symbols. The patterns are consistent enough to imply shared conventions, raising the possibility that they communicated meaning within their community.

At Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia, stone slabs featuring animal imagery date to roughly thirty thousand years ago, making them among the earliest examples of representational art in Africa. The tradition they represent lasted for thousands of years, culminating in the extensive rock art of the San peoples, which offers insight into the spiritual practices that may have inspired these images.

San rock art is especially important because it was created by societies whose traditional practices have continued into the modern era.

This enables anthropologists to gather interpretations from people who participated in those cultures. These interpretations consistently connect the images to trance states and spiritual experiences. Many images depict therianthropes, which are human-animal hybrid figures that San informants recognize as healers entering the spirit world. Geometric patterns resemble entoptic phenomena—visual experiences caused by altered states of consciousness. The art was more than decoration. It was a record of spiritual journeys.

This interpretation has drawn both support and skepticism from scholars, and it cannot be directly verified for images created tens of thousands of years ago by people with unrecoverable specific beliefs. Still, the general idea (that early art was linked to spiritual experience) is supported by different kinds of evidence. Cave paintings are often located in hard-to-reach chambers where making art would have been difficult and dangerous. The careful craftsmanship suggests they were not casual doodles but deliberate acts. The choice of subjects, often animals of spiritual and practical importance, supports this. The continuation of this tradition over millennia suggests a shared cultural meaning.

Art, like burial practices, reveals minds engaged with questions beyond mere survival. Creating images demands abstraction, the ability to represent three-dimensional reality on two-dimensional surfaces, capturing the essence of animals in pigment and stone. It requires planning, as artists gather materials, prepare surfaces, and execute complex compositions. It requires memory, since techniques and conventions are passed down through generations. And it requires valuation, the judgment that such activity is worth the time, effort, and resources it consumes.

These abilities are central to spiritual life. They form its foundation. Without the capacity to think symbolically, create and interpret meaning, and value significance beyond utility, religion as we know it could not exist. Evidence from early art shows that these abilities existed in our ancestors tens of thousands of years before any doctrines or orthodoxy were defined. The creative impulse came long before institutional religion.

This timeline is significant. If spiritual capacity is ancient but institutional religion is recent, then the forms religion has taken in recorded history are historical developments, not the natural or inevitable expression of that capacity. Shaped by specific circumstances, they could be different from what they are now. The cave painter understood something

about meaning, beauty, and transcendence that had nothing to do with the creeds and conflicts of later religious history. That knowledge is part of our inheritance. It has not disappeared; it has only been obscured.

IX. Awe as Foundation

Modern psychology has long studied the emotion that the cave painter must have known:

Awe.

Researchers describe awe as an emotion elicited by “perceived vastness” (whether physical, conceptual, or social) that challenges one’s understanding of the world and calls for cognitive adjustment. This reaction includes typical physical sensations like goosebumps, chills, and altered breathing, along with psychological effects such as reduced focus on the self, an expanded sense of connection, and increased openness to new information and perspectives.

These effects are not just subjective impressions; they have been confirmed in controlled studies and measured through physiological markers. Awe is associated with lower levels of inflammatory cytokines, a marker of stress at the cellular level. It promotes prosocial behavior, making people more generous and cooperative. It diminishes materialism and enhances life satisfaction. It makes people feel smaller in themselves but more connected to something greater than themselves.¹⁷

What the research suggests, even if it does not explicitly state it, is the connection between awe and love. Fear isolates by sharpening the boundary between self and world, framing everything outside as a threat. Awe dissolves these boundaries, reducing the defended self and opening a sense of connection that creates conditions for love to grow. The active openness awe fosters is about welcoming others, being open to change, and forming relationships. Love cannot flourish if the self is trapped in fear, but it becomes possible when fear relaxes its grip, barriers fall, and connection is viewed as a gift rather than a threat. Awe is the doorway; love is what awaits beyond it.

These effects would have helped early human communities survive because groups facing survival challenges benefit from members who prioritize group welfare, cooperate, and feel connected to something larger. An emotion producing these effects would be favored by natural selection.

In fact, the capacity for awe appears to be universal—found in every culture in which it has been studied.

This indicates awe is not just a side note of human psychology but a core element shaped by millions of years of social evolution. Cave painters did not need to be taught to feel awe; the ability was embedded in the human brain, ready to respond to the world's grandeur and mystery. Figures like cave painters, San healers, Aboriginal elders, and others developed practices to reliably awaken this capacity, directing it toward benefits for individuals and communities.

Ritual exemplifies such a practice. Rhythmic movements, synchronized actions, and altered states of consciousness that define rituals across cultures are powerful triggers of awe. They create conditions that soften the usual sense of bounded selfhood, opening feelings of connection and transcendence. Participants often describe experiences of communion with something greater, whether ancestors, spirits, nature, community, or cosmic significance.

These experiences are important. They influence how people think, feel, and act. While it's uncertain if they reflect metaphysical realities beyond the experience, their impact is undeniable. They are documented, measurable, and consequential features of human mental life. The spiritual life of early humans was an integration of awe with social existence. Awe was a communal experience, invoked in groups and aimed at shared goals. It strengthened bonds between people and their environment, creating shared meanings rather than private ones. Spiritual experience, in this context, laid the foundation for a moral community.

Later religious developments often disrupted this integration. As spirituality became institutionalized, awe-inspiring experiences were increasingly controlled, directed through authorized practices, and interpreted within approved frameworks. Spontaneous encounters with the sacred were viewed with suspicion, and official mediators claimed exclusive access to what was once universally available. The democratization of spiritual experience gave way to hierarchies of spiritual authority. But the capacity for awe persisted; it could be suppressed but not erased. Throughout history, it has reemerged in mystical movements, reform traditions, and personal experiences that go beyond doctrinal limits.

X. What Changed

If relational spirituality served humanity well for tens of thousands of years, what changed? The simple answer is scale. Relational spirituality works when relationships are direct, faces are familiar, and actions have clear consequences within small communities where everyone matters to everyone else. It becomes less effective as villages turn into towns, towns into cities, strangers live close together, and anonymity grows more possible.

The next chapter examines this transformation closely: how agriculture introduced new kinds of uncertainty that required management, how gods became watchful and punishing as communities grew beyond the reach of personal surveillance, and how fear became more scalable than love. For now, it is enough to note that the transformation happened, and that it was not unavoidable. The pressures were real, but different societies responded to them in various ways. The forms religion took as it became institutionalized were responses to real problems, but they were not the only solutions.

What matters for our current inquiry is that relational spirituality existed, functioned, and leaves traces. The capacities it drew upon (awe, connection, reciprocity) still exist. They remain, waiting to be reengaged.

XI. Before the Fall

This chapter is titled “Before the Fall,” a phrase that evokes the Genesis story of paradise lost: a state of original wholeness from which humanity fell into suffering and sin. The parallel is intentional but ironic. The story of the Fall implies that human corruption is necessary, that suffering is justified, and that authority is needed to oversee creatures unable to govern themselves. It is a story that supports hierarchy, control, and distrust of human nature.

The evidence examined in this chapter suggests a different story.

Early humans were clearly not perfect. They experienced violence, conflict, and suffering like anyone else. They did not live in an ideal world. Their lives were hard in ways modern people can hardly imagine, exposed

to predators, disease, and environmental dangers that killed many before they reached what we consider adulthood.

But within these difficult lives, they seem to have developed forms of spiritual expression that stand out for what they lacked. They did not include priesthoods claiming exclusive access to divine truth. They did not have orthodoxies demanding uniformity of belief. They did not have mechanisms for punishing those who thought differently. They did not have narratives justifying violence against outsiders on the grounds that outsiders believed the wrong things.

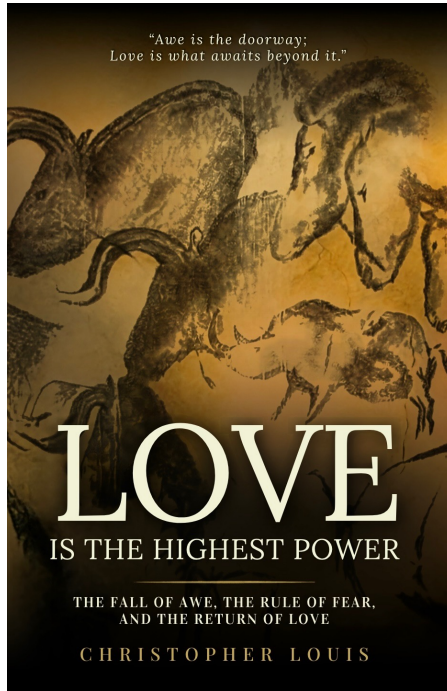
We cannot be certain of this. The inner lives of people who left no writings are ultimately inaccessible. However, the pattern is consistent across enough independent cases, from the San to the Aboriginal Australians to the small-scale peoples of the Americas, that it appears to reflect something real about the possibilities available to small-scale societies without agriculture or centralized authority.

Priesthoods, orthodoxies, and mechanisms of punishment came later. They emerged when scale and complexity put pressure on what relational spirituality could handle. They appeared when fear proved more effective than love for managing large groups. They manifested when belief became part of identity and identity formed boundaries. They responded to real problems, but those solutions led to new issues of their own.

Understanding what existed before this transformation is vital to comprehending the transformation itself. If dogma, hierarchy, and coercion were always present, then there is no alternative but to accept what religion has become. We are limited to what it has turned into. But if these traits are historical developments, dependent on conditions that could have been different, then we can ask what religion might still become. We can wonder whether the capacities that served humanity well for tens of thousands of years can be recovered, redirected, and applied to today's challenges.

The purpose of this book is not to step back into the past, which is neither possible nor desirable, but to learn from it. The cave painter cannot teach us specific doctrines or fix our particular problems. However, the cave painter can remind us of something we have forgotten. The sacred is not a distant realm above or beyond the world, accessible only through authorized channels. It is here, in the world we live in, open to anyone willing to pay attention.

The following chapters explore how this truth was hidden: how fear altered spirituality, how belief was weaponized, and how institutions took hold of the sacred and used it for purposes the cave painter could never have imagined. It is a painful history, filled with cruelty and suffering justified in the name of the sacred. However, it is not the only possible history. The qualities that fostered relational spirituality (such as awe, connection, reciprocity, and meaning-making) still exist. They remain within every human mind, waiting to be awakened.



*The sample ends here.
The book continues with Chapter Two,
"When Fear Became Structural."*

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