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The Greatest Midlife Crisis in the History of Islam

By the remembrance of God do hearts find rest.

—Quran 13:28

LEARNING

Over the past several decades the field of positive psychology has noted that the feature of continuous learning is important to satisfaction and fulfillment, on the job, in one's domestic life, and even with hobbies. Yet sometimes learning in these limited areas isn't enough. Sometimes the whole enterprise of life simultaneously feels both inscrutable and unimportant. This happened to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, perhaps the greatest intellectual living during the golden age of Islam. His writings relay descriptions of a dark period, what we would now understand to be a severe episode of anxiety and depression. He needed a reboot, a fundamentally new way of looking at an old world. And so, five hundred years before Descartes, he wiped the slate clean and asked himself the Cartesian questions: What do I really know? What is there really to learn?

Upon discovering a deeper learning and finding a better way, Ghazali dedicated the rest of his life to writing a compendium of the

insights that had gotten him through the terror called The Alchemy of Happiness. He also composed his spiritual autobiography, The Deliverance from Error. For despite all prestige and accoutrement he had gathered as the most important lawyer in the sultanate, in the end the hubris of his former intellectual life was only a barrier to his awareness of God.

THE BLOODBATH

One could tell almost everything about him from his academic robe and mount. He'd paid five hundred pieces of gold for these, or rather the benefactors supporting his deanship at the university had. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali wore exceedingly nice robes and kept an exceedingly nice mount. He'd also achieved everything an intellectual in his civilization could, which was no small feat for someone living in the Golden Age of Islam. This was a time of the greatest convergence of thought, art, literature, architecture, and science since Athens itself, and the good professor sat atop its intellectual hierarchy. Still, he was also human, and at thirty-nine he'd been having a walloping midlife crisis. His existential test had upended every value he'd ever held for himself, which was problematic enough, but he'd also begun to doubt everything he'd ever pronounced as lawful and right in the name of his sultan. So Ghazali did what so many reasonable adults think to do when suffering through a personal collapse. He decided to run away.

Most academics think big thoughts and those ideas are about as connected to reality as a genie bottled up in a lamp. When Ghazali had a thought, it actually mattered. As the dean of the Nizamiyya Madrasa of Baghdad, the top law school in the

sultanate, he altered the lives of millions with short movements of his pen. In his career, those strokes had to this time mostly worked to temper tensions between two great houses, the Seljuq sultanate and the Abbasid caliphate. But then recently Ghazali's job had become all but impossible.

Over a century before, the sultan's ancestor, Seljuq, while dozing in a felt yurt somewhere in the wild northern Eurasian steppe, dreamed himself pissing fire over east and west, like a dog marking a tree.¹ His progeny achieved that end, first taking the fertile Persian plain, then coming to control vast lands and trade routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indus River, including Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Hindu Kush. With the help of a savvy Persian vizier, the Seljuq sultans built a school system, Nizamiyya Madrasa (Nizam University named after vizier Nizam al-Mulk), to train administrators in rational tax collection, land grant procedures and subsidies, postal services, secret intelligence and reconnaissance networks—all the markings of a modern empire even by much later standards. The first such university went up in Nishapur in Persia, where Ghazali himself trained as a boy. Schools also rose in Balkh, Herat, Basra, Marv, Amul, Masil, Tabaristan, and, finally, the jewel of the system in Baghdad itself, all precursors to later European universities. Ghazali quickly proved himself to be the preeminent student among a new generation of Islamic scholar-jurists coming up in these Seljuq schools under the eye of the sultan and his cultured Persian vizier Nizam al-Mulk—quite pointedly *not* under the auspices of the Abbasid caliphate.

Yet Caliph al-Muqtadi remained the recognized authority on all matters of Islamic law. The Abbasid caliphate, an old household hailing from Mesopotamia, in these latter days functioned something like the papacy, and the Round City in Baghdad worked something like Vatican City in Rome. Once upon a time,

Abbasid caliphs ruled with armies and territories, but that hadn't been the case since the Seljuq domination. The Seljuqs had in fact placed Ghazali in the Baghdad law school to make sure that the rival Abbasid caliph and his theologians in the Round City continued to interpret Islamic law in a manner beneficial to the Seljuq empire. So, at age thirty-five, Ghazali became the sultan's attorney in Baghdad and thus the most important lawyer in the Islamic world.²

From time to time the sultan and his vizier traveled out from the Seljuq capital city of Isfahan on the Persian plain to make imperial visits to the Round City in Baghdad. Shockingly, during the last such excursion, on the tenth day of Ramadan in 485 AH (October 14, 1092 ACE), the unthinkable occurred. It happened on the road just outside Baghdad. What appeared to be a harmless panhandler and Sufi mendicant was not. A sparkle of polished metal in the sunlight, the briefest flash of silver and steel, and the mighty vizier Nizam al-Mulk slumped over like meat peeled off the shoulder of a slaughtered calf. Some said a radical Shiite enclave from near Teheran was responsible for the assassination. Others suspected the sultan himself. ("My ink-bottle and the crown are linked together," the vizier had to remind his sultan in the midst of a recent unfortunate spat.)³ Of course many noticed that the Abbasid caliph may also have benefited from the clever vizier's demise.

Then only weeks after the vizier's death, the sultan himself took ill during a hunting expedition in the lush Mesopotamian wilderness north of Baghdad. These sorts of imperial vacations were characterized by excessive eating and drinking, so it was not entirely unexpected that the sultan wasn't well after a few evenings of indulgence. But his fever persisted and finally forced him to return to Baghdad. The fever never broke. Sultan Malikshah died just a month after the murder of his

vizier. Everyone in Baghdad noted the coincidence, including Ghazali.

Soon after the deaths of vizier and sultan, Caliph al-Muqtadi summoned Ghazali to the Round City. An interesting legal question had come up. The caliph trusted he could count on Ghazali's support in the matter.

As Ghazali dressed himself for the visit, he must have felt the weight of the gold threads holding together his academic robes. The Seljuq sultans had paid for these. As chief muderris and dean of the Baghdad Nizamiyya—top legal intellectual at the most prestigious university in the sultanate—Ghazali indeed had been the Seljuqs' attorney in Baghdad. He explained the sultan's legal positions to the caliph, often forcefully so. Though the caliphate technically made rulings, it could hardly do so without intellectual support from the dean of the law school. "The ink of a scholar is more holy than the blood of a martyr." That hadith uttered by the Prophet was the very motto of the Abbasid house. The caliph simply could not ignore Ghazali's opinions. Yet with sultan and vizier now deceased, political circumstances had changed.

Predictably the caliph wished to discuss sultanic succession. He claimed for himself sole authority to choose the next sultan, even over the dying instructions of the last sultan. On his deathbed, Sultan Malikshah had declared that his oldest son Berk Yaruq, then thirteen years old, would succeed him. Yet the caliph planned to ignore that directive and, rather, wished to appoint an even younger son of the sultan, Muhammad, just five years old. Given the boy's age, of course the caliph would also need to appoint the boy's cabinet. That would include both a new vizier and an amir of the army. The caliph wanted Ghazali's confirmation and support on the succession issue.

Ghazali considered the caliph's wily move. Through this swift exchange of chess pieces the caliph would dominate the new sultan's entire administration. With such influence in the sultan's court, the Abbasid caliphate could rally and perhaps even regain its lost empire. But was the plan legal? According to sharia, could the caliph cross and upend all division of powers, even against the dying wish of the sultan?

The caliph said he could. If anyone should believe otherwise, the law dean of the Nizamiyya school in Baghdad—our good scholar Ghazali—would confirm that the caliph's appointments were consistent with Islamic law.

Ghazali considered some more. The caliph's plan did sound a little unusual. There had never been a sultan so weak as to have his cabinet appointed *for* him. Ghazali ran through all the possible ways this political game could play out. Who were Ghazali's own friends and benefactors? Vizier Nizam al-Mulk: dead. Sultan Malikshah: dead. All of his protectors were dead. Ghazali could possibly support the dead sultan's own choice, the older son Berk Yaruq, but the boy was only thirteen. Did the adolescent really have any chance going up against a savvy politician like Caliph al-Muqtadi? Besides, the only politician left from the old days with whom Ghazali had any relationship was the caliph.

So that was it. Politically speaking there had been no real decision to make. Whatever the caliph said had to be. Ghazali pronounced exactly this: "Allowed is only that which the caliph says." Nicely done. A lawyer couldn't get in too much trouble with a statement like that.⁴

In less than a year, by the end of 1093, the child sultan Muhammad and his mother were both dead of the same strange and unnamed disease. How mysterious! The caliph had no choice but to summon the adolescent Berk Yaruq to Baghdad. He would

finally pronounce Malikshah's first choice and eldest son to be sultan, which he did on February 3, 1094. The following day it was announced that Caliph al-Muqtadi himself had keeled over at the dinner table and died of natural causes. What grief! The good caliph was only thirty-seven years old!⁵

What had happened here? It appears that every serious politician in the Seljuq sultanate and Abbasid caliphate had gotten themselves killed. A later chronicler would write of these strange days: "The affairs of the realm were thrown into disorder and confusion; there was chaos in the provinces . . . and turmoil and uproar in the kingdom."⁶ Of course disorder, confusion, chaos, turmoil, and uproar are all euphemisms for violence and death. That would be the new state of the Seljuq empire until the teenage sultan Berk Yaruq could gain some control over his sultanate. The crown itself really meant nothing without sufficient displays of violence. Berk Yaruq would have to demonstrate *ad nauseam* that his threats really did imply disproportionate actions. Generations of Seljuq sultans had taught him that political edicts meant nothing until inscribed on the bodies of corpses. Berk Yaruq needed to frighten people viscerally, in their bones. He needed to be the bloodiest maniac in the empire. That's how rulers were forged; law would come later. So the next few years would not be a time of talk or lawyerly maneuvers. Until Berk Yaruq could prove himself in violent fashion, he would have what is antiseptically called a power vacuum, though people from Anatolia to India would know it as a bloody mess.

THE ERROR

According to Ghazali, nothing but "treachery and discord" characterized the following years.⁷ In the aftermath of the deluge of

assassinations, the politics of Ghazali's workplace became a knot of intrigue and nastiness with no apparent point or direction. People in the Nizamiyya law school spent all moments trying to figure out what the new adolescent sultan might suddenly demand of the judiciary. Ghazali himself likely thought about this question obsessively, spending his days attempting to forecast and then argue cases for any potential political scenarios that might arise. Yet Ghazali also knew full well that the young sultan couldn't care less about law while he battled in blood to regain control of the Seljuq empire.⁸

Then again, what good had been the rule of law anyway? Look what had happened to Ghazali's own rulings once the protectors of his integrity could no longer protect him. Ghazali had allowed holy sharia law itself to become a mouthpiece for the vain earthly pursuits of the caliph. What business could it have been of the caliph to appoint army generals and viziers? And yet in weakness Ghazali had supported it! Worse, he'd given blanket affirmation to the caliph: *You're in power now, so you command and I'll justify*. Had Ghazali's sacred office really devolved into nothing but the blanket legitimization of earthly interest? And with the caliph dead, would Ghazali simply tack in the direction of the next gust?⁹

The privilege of the academy is in having the time to follow a thought to the end of the mind. Learn all the necessary techniques and languages, read all the extant formulae and literatures, and then track an idea to the final point humanity has taken it. Who in the real world gets to do this? Done rightly, the privilege entails peeling back the scabs of accepted knowledge or, perhaps to use a better metaphor, pointing out cracks in society's foundation. Having followed a thought to the end of

the mind, one becomes familiar with a surreal world where human knowledge simply stops. Here what William James called “the unseen order of the universe” unfurls out beyond the grasp of sensation or reason and ripples into infinity. It’s only at the soft border of knowing that one recognizes the normative truths and scientific axioms for what they are: the educated hunches of others who have been to this limit before us.

Surreal exploration just beyond the border of knowledge is the purpose, privilege, and responsibility of scholarship. People in the real world are too busy solving real and immediate problems to spend time pondering the ways in which the normative approximations stop making sense. Yet it’s only from these surreal outskirts where the best guesses of past generations can even be seen, let alone improved upon, and the cracks in the foundation of our collective edifice can perhaps be better set to carry the human load.

Sometimes the load crumbles, and sometimes it’s the scholars who are most to blame for the failure. Despite the appearance of ivy surrounding the towers, universities do find themselves competing with worldly pressures to build up yet another floor on the accepted edifice of knowledge, money, and power and not worry too much about how the foundation is handling the weight. Ghazali knew the temptation, though he hadn’t recognized it at the time. As a professional in the academy, he’d come to master every aspect of normative Islam, the way the world was *supposed* to work. Normative law pronounced society’s ideal rules; normative scripture declared its ideal canon; normative hermeneutics proclaimed the proper interpretation of that canon; normative devotion set down the official rituals; normative epistemology set forth what human beings could investigate; finally normative theology announced the official description

of the unseen universe. Normative! The way things were *supposed* to happen! *But what if they didn't?*

What happens when the world falls apart?

Ghazali had spent his professional life mastering the rules and defending them, always proceeding as though the foundation were sound, so don't look down, build up! For twenty years in the vizier's service it had seemed as though he'd really been building something. Then a single dagger stroke along the road to Baghdad brought the civilized world crumbling to the sand, and Ghazali saw his life of pronouncements and legal decisions at the Nizamiyya for what they were: rationalizations of an untenable system. What had happened? Had something gone wrong in the building up of the edifice? Or were the normative foundations themselves to blame?

Amidst this bloody devolution of civilization, Ghazali began to notice the weight of the gold threads holding together his academic robes. These apparent privileges of wealth and stature again began feeling contemptible to him, as they once had seemed when as a boy he'd been driven to investigate the essential questions out of the childhood purity of simple human curiosity. How long it had been since then. The professional expertise he'd since built up now felt far less essential than those initial childhood questions about God and the order of the universe. Certainly the world of power and violence Ghazali had come to serve couldn't be the best way to know God. Ghazali had realized this for quite a while. Of course jihad remained holy, and the world did need to submit to Allah. Such was the very meaning of Islam, submission. But Islam also meant peace; it meant safety; it meant security and wholeness; and Ghazali now wondered whether he would ever know Islam in these senses of the word. *What is real peace? What is true submission? How can I come to know God's will?* These simple questions no longer seemed so childish.¹⁰

TASTE

For years Ghazali had known about the existence of an intriguing manuscript, although he'd never found time to look at it carefully. It was by a doctor by the name of Ibn Sina who had lived up in Teheran about fifty years before. The Latin Christians in Europe came to know him as Avicenna. The writings of Ibn Sina had become the basis of a promising new way of thinking in Islam, one that Ghazali had trifled with since his own student days but had never made any systematic effort to understand: *falsafa*, philosophy.

Perhaps Ghazali hadn't yet addressed philosophy because it was not much of a path to worldly success. For instance, there was no chair of philosophy at the Nizamiyya. There were no emergency summons by viziers and caliphs for crucial philosophic rulings: *Professor, we really need to know the truth about our position*. That never happened.

The philosophers had, however, made some interesting advances, especially in the physical sciences. Medicine, biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, architecture—for all of these physical questions the philosophers of Islam had turned to the Greek writings preserved mostly at the library in Alexandria, and these had proven to be helpful starting points for the Islamic renaissance in science. Young people were attracted to philosophy as well, as they saw philosophy as something radical, an intellectual movement bypassing the declarations of the authoritarian theologians and assuming egalitarian access to truth by mere thinking. Anybody could do it. Ghazali had no problem with this radicalism; he was as disgusted with authoritarian theology as he was with politics.¹¹

The best of these Greek writings attempted to think about thinking itself. These included discussions of reason, logic, and

mathematics and also more abstract discussions of what it even means to know something. Epistemology. Now *that* was an interesting subject to Ghazali. "I must inquire into just what the true meaning of knowledge is," he recalled in his autobiography. If one were truly interested in securing foundations, then this had to be the very first stone one would inspect. *How do I know anything?*

So first he tried to achieve an acceptable definition for what it means *to know*:

"Sure and certain knowledge is that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception, nor the mind even suppose such a possibility."¹²

Sure and certain knowledge. No possibility of error. Ghazali would accept nothing but manifest clarity as the litmus test for what it could mean to *know* anything.

His next question: Did the philosophers really *know* anything? They may have been achieving very fine things in medicine and the physical sciences. They may seem to have been building up fascinating and apparently solid edifices. But so had Ghazali in his own disciplines of law and theology, until an assassination fractured his foundations. So Ghazali wouldn't tolerate shifting sand no matter how wondrous its castles. He'd seen too much go wrong.

For about a year Ghazali pondered epistemology and the possibility of attaining "sure and certain knowledge . . . so manifest that no doubt clings to it." He studied whatever philosophical proofs he could find to determine if any actually proved that philosophical reason could ever meet such a high epistemological standard. He decided that none actually could. He then published twenty refutations of philosophical epistemology in a book he called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which he published

in January of 1095. His most brutal rebuttal, of causal necessity, preceded Scottish philosopher David Hume's identical argument by seven hundred years.¹³

At first, the collapse of philosophy and human reason actually threw Ghazali into a funk he couldn't shake. For two months he became "a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine."¹⁴ It was not an era that took agnosticism lightly. Few had been to this shadowy border before. His skepticism seems to have brought with it a dark mood. Though Ghazali still went about teaching and making legal pronouncements that affected every level of Seljuq society, inwardly he doubted the very possibility of knowing either divine truth or simple fact.

I'm a fraud. Everybody is a fraud. Nobody knows anything.

Despite this pessimism, the sermons of an old Sufi teacher came returning to Ghazali's mind from the storehouse of memory. As a much younger man, back in his hometown of Tus in Persia, Ghazali knew Abu 'Ali al-Faramadhi as the local Sufi master, an aged ascetic who like those in his sect wore the blue tunic of rough wool. He'd talk to students on street corners and in his tiny convent, but to Ghazali the master's sermons all seemed to repeat the same nonsensical point. There existed a state beyond the intellect, a suprarational "knowledge" that couldn't quite be called knowledge (*'ilm*), but rather was awareness (*ma'rifah*). Awareness differed from knowledge in that it skipped clear over the intermediary step of thinking and allowed a direct experience of reality. The Sufi master used to call this taste (*dhawq*).¹⁵

At the time, Ghazali didn't know what to make of the sermons. He couldn't understand back then what the Sufi master meant when he distinguished between knowledge and awareness. It sounded like semantic games. *Awareness. Taste.* What did

the words even mean? What would it be like to experience something directly without the intermediary of thinking? Didn't people think about *everything*?

Besides this conceptual objection, Ghazali still believed in the power of thought. He had believed then that, with sufficient raw intelligence and cultivated patience, the human mind could untangle even the greatest mysteries and come to stand more or less before the truth. Perhaps a person of thought wouldn't have the clarity of a prophet such as Abraham, Jesus, or Muhammad, but his reason could put him rather far along the same path. Yet after his world of legal learning totally devolved, and since he'd dismantled all proofs from philosophy as well, he was no longer sure where any of his education had gotten him. So those inscrutable Sufi teachings of his youth came bubbling back up.¹⁶

Specifically, the voice of Faramadhi returned as Ghazali composed the twentieth and ultimate refutation of philosophic certainty in his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In the final chapter of the book, Ghazali considered the question of analogy, the comparison of a strange phenomenon with a familiar one, which is the method of all reasoning. Only by comparison can one transfer information about a known scenario to a strange scenario that one is trying to understand.

To demonstrate the limit of analogy, Ghazali asked a rather bawdy question. How could anyone explain the pleasure of sex to a prepubescent boy or to an impotent man? Sex is pleasurable, certainly. So by analogy we might tell the boy that sex is something like the pleasure he experiences during playtime. Likewise for the impotent man we might compare sex to the pleasure of eating. But then, of course, after we've made these helpful comparisons, we would also have to inform the boy and the impotent man "that what he understood by the example does not convey the reality of the pleasure of sexual intercourse and that this is only apprehended through taste."¹⁷

That word *taste* is what had repeated in Ghazali's inner ear as he finished the final refutation of *The Incoherence*. Direct *experience*—that's what the Sufis meant by taste. One can't tell an impotent man what sex is *like*. Nothing compares to the direct experience of sex. Just as nothing compares to the taste of sugar. If we want to experience sugar, we don't memorize its chemical formula. We don't explain the process by which it is reduced from cane plants. We don't compare its texture and color to salt. We *taste* the sugar. We direct our senses toward the sugar and then we have experiences of it. That's how people actually come to know sugar, sex, and all things.

Actually Faramadhi would have said that's how we become *aware* of things. There's no *knowing* involved, no thinking, no rational processing, no intellectual chain linking P and Q. Taste is unmediated by cognition. Rather it is experienced and felt. That's what his Sufi master had meant by distinguishing knowledge and awareness. As Abu Talib al-Makki had defined these things over two centuries before in his classic handbook of Sufi epistemology, awareness is the "knowledge (*ilm*) of inward realities."¹⁸ These Sufi masters had thus articulated the distinction between *cognition* and *affect* that cognitive scientists and neuro-anatomists would only name and locate a millennium later.¹⁹

By denying the technique of comparison by analogy, Ghazali's final critique of philosophy had closed the door on the rational path of knowledge. So he completed *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and ended his explorations of rational and philosophical epistemology. Yet the same stroke also suggested a way out of the bog of total skepticism, by considering the Sufi concept of taste. *Experience itself is a kind of reality*. Maybe it's the only reality we can ever really come to know.

One might object that experiences may be filtered through complicated and sometimes even faulty sense data. That's of course true; any reader of Descartes (or fan of *The Matrix*, for

that matter) understands as much. Nevertheless, in the end the experience *itself* stands on its own as a phenomenon. *I feel what I feel, and nobody can tell me otherwise.* My experience is *mine*. I know what sex feels like *to me*. I know what sugar tastes like *to me*. The reality of these direct experiences have a certainty that I simply can't doubt. I may not know what they mean or signify. I may never know how my experience correlates with "external reality" or the perspectives of other people. I may never be able to construct useful comparisons or analogies with these experiences. As in *The Matrix*, I may be a brain floating haplessly in a jar. But my experience *itself* can't honestly be doubted. It's my experience; I can *taste* it. It's real to me. Thus it passes Ghazali's test of *sure and certain knowledge*. Awareness, in the end, constitutes what I know. Maybe Faramadhi and the Sufis really did have something coherent to say. Perhaps taste could be a kind of foundation.

Certainty now came to mean something different to Ghazali. He now realized that it "was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument." In his autobiography he put down a remarkable new formulation for what constituted for him certain knowledge. The new certainty that had allowed him to go on living was "the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. *And that light is the key to most knowledge.*"²⁰

When I first read that sentence from Ghazali's autobiography, a light turned on in my own mind. How many matters in my own life have really felt certain by means of rational proof alone? I don't think very many. Of course I've studied and thought and applied a good deal of logic and reason during my studies. I spend a lot of time thinking, pondering, and reasoning. Sometimes I've even come up with logical "proofs" during these intellectual processes. But the moments culminating in certainty for me seem

to be more aesthetic, a *feeling*—a taste. I think, ponder, and reason, and then from out of nowhere a light comes on. Suddenly I *know*. I just know.

I think of Yale's motto: *lux et veritas*, light and truth. An idea is often described as a light having been turned on. Why is this? It isn't quite random. It's not an arbitrary pairing of one sensation (light) with another experience (knowing). Rather, something like light flooding in seems like *part* of the experience of knowing. How does it feel when I add together a string of numbers and the answer checks out? It *feels* right. What is the *experience* when the path to completing a complicated project suddenly dawns on me, seemingly out of nowhere? A *light* goes on. Even in the mathematical example, which seems so determined by logic and reason, in the end it's often an affective experience, passive and received, a *feeling*—something akin to light—which convinces me that I have been made privy to something true.

Why is that? Nobody really knows. It's still a question hotly contested by neurologists.²¹ Nevertheless, I do know that *to me* the experience of knowing feels like a light having been suddenly turned on. The light indicates *personal* certainty. The light brings certainty *enough*. Perhaps most important, I realize that I concur with Ghazali regarding the therapeutic affect accompanying this light; it signals a profoundly personal orientation. I know that coming to this minor certainty and having my chest flooded by light, this all *feels* right. It feels significant. It also feels edifying, as though I've achieved something. And I realize that I may well be addicted to this edifying feeling. That's what I've been doing all of this time in the academy, trying to foster moments of sudden illumination, the *ah ha!* experience. Although that experience is there for me to pursue and to try to cultivate, in the end it's never quite under my control to make happen. Finally, after a good deal of preparatory thought and rumination, it just

comes. I look and I search and I think, and then flashes suddenly occur amid a cloud of unknowing. The cloud brightens for just a little while, making my general state of darkness more tolerable, maybe even meaningful.

Thus Ghazali had discovered for himself the taste of learning.

LAKE OF FIRE

Ghazali then found himself alone with his direct experiences and the light which God Most High sometimes cast into his breast. That light as well as its accompanying *ah-ha!* he now understood to be the taste of learning, comprising his only certain epistemological test. Having the experience of the light, he'd learned something sure and certain.

This was not radical subjectivism, since Ghazali claimed no control of when the light would shine in. Would that he were in control. Unfortunately the inherited knowledge of theology, which had been the foundation of his worldly position and spiritual security, no longer lit his heart. That demotion hadn't been his choice. His former hubris simply fell away from him. And he'd learned that philosophic reasoning could only end up disproving its own certainty.

On the other hand, the taste of skepticism had also left his life, replaced by the possibility of *awareness*. Feelings and experiences themselves constituted their own reality and justified their own certainty. Ghazali now realized that Abu Talib al-Makki had been right: "Certitude is found uniquely in the hearts of those endowed with experiential knowledge."²² For Ghazali, the world was no longer a vacuum of doubt, but had become full again with the reality of taste. Discovery of the light of awareness had proven to be knowledge enough. But having found the bedrock of phenomenal experience, it did tease

Ghazali's intelligence with a lingering question which came to take up increasing amounts of his interior dialogue and energy.

Can you taste God?

Of course that was a Sufi question. Over the past several centuries Sufi masters had put forth a great number of answers to this question. Some had built monasteries in which they tried to cultivate experiences of God. Some wrote down their experiences as best they could, invoking whatever analogy most closely reflected what were likely incomparable and even ineffable tastes. They used any language available to suit this purpose—theological, philosophical, technical, poetic, erotic, sometimes all in the same verse. Ghazali now poured over these writings as he had once taken to theology and philosophy. Only this time his studies did not convince him to abandon the avenue. What he read pushed him to probe even more deeply.

"I brought my mind to bear on the way of the Sufis," he recounted in his autobiography. "Theory was easier for me than practice. Therefore I began to learn their lore from the perusal of their books."²³

What he read, however, consistently told him that reading about Sufi taste was derivative and insufficient. The theory of Sufism, spelled out with language, only brought one to the same epistemological limit Ghazali had already found in his refutation of philosophy. Going past those limits could not be achieved in theory but only by practice. *He needed to have direct experiences themselves.* There could be no other way.

Words were not the problem per se. Indeed, Sufis surrounded themselves with words in their poetry, manuals, prayers, lectures, and especially in their ecstatic practices of sacred remembrance and invocation of God's name and attributes. But it was how they experienced these words—the manner in which they directed their attention and senses toward them—that made all

the difference between mere intellectual knowing, which always came up short of certainty, and the *feeling* of awareness that, according to the legendary Sufi master al-Nuri, finally entailed “the annihilation of the invoker in the invoked.”²⁴

What could *that* mean?

The ecstatic experience of words was *exactly* what Ghazali could not cultivate by mere reading and thinking, or even through his regular ritual of praying, despite the fact that he’d dedicated his life to words of this kind. Although he was certainly one of the most literate men in the world, as he read the masterpieces of Abu Talib al-Makki and al-Harith al-Muhasibi, he realized that his way of approaching words intellectually had simply failed him. “I knew with certainty that the Sufis were masters of states, not purveyors of words,” he remembered, “and that I had learned all I could by way of theory. There remained, then, only what was attainable, not by hearing and study, but by taste and by actually engaging in the way.”²⁵

Then one day Ghazali got up to lecture at the Nizamiyya before his three hundred law students. It was June of 1095, three years after the murder of Nizam al-Mulk. A new sultan presided over the Seljuq empire, along with a new vizier, while a new caliph inhabited the Round City in Baghdad. At age thirty-nine, Ghazali looked about and saw he was the last standing of the old guard. He’d weathered the storm of intrigue and assassination and had become the most revered authority in Islam. Sultan and caliph alike sought his opinion to bolster their own frail authorities. As Ghazali ascended his lectern that day to deliver a lecture on jurisprudence, the sort of lecture he had now given a thousand times before, stray thoughts penetrated his mind regarding what he’d been doing with his life. He said:

I saw that I was immersed in attachments which had encompassed me from all sides. I also considered my activities . . . and saw that

in them I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in this pilgrimage to the hereafter. Then I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated by and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige.

As he looked out over the assemblage of his students, he couldn't quite bring their faces into focus. His inner landscape became dominated by a nightmare image—the Lake of Fire. “I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways.”²⁶

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. The man of words had been struck mute.

“God put a lock on my tongue,” he remembered. “I struggled with myself to teach for a single day, to gratify the hearts of the students who were frequenting my lectures, but my tongue would not utter a single word: I was completely unable to say anything.”

He stepped down from the lectern with uncontrollable fear and trembling. When he arrived home, he discovered that he could no longer put down any food; his throat wouldn't even accept broth. The finest doctors of Baghdad ran their tests and soon realized that the ailment was psychological. “This is something which has settled in his heart and crept from it into his humors,” they say. “There is no way to treat it unless his heart be eased of the anxiety which has visited it.”²⁷ The doctors couldn't determine a source for the generalized anxiety. But Ghazali knew. When he saw the Lake of Fire pulsing before him, he understood the problem with the clarity of divine light.

I've been wasting my life.

I'm on the wrong path.

Closing time approaches.

My last chance to change is now.

Outwardly he remained mute, but his interior voice wouldn't be still. "Away! Up and away!" it scolded. "Only a little is left of your life, and a long journey lies before you! All the theory and practice in which you are engrossed is eye service and fakery!"²⁸ Lots of voices come and go from a person's interior dialogue, nobody can heed them all, nor should they. But the accompanying light in Ghazali's breast indicated that this one was sure and certain.

"AWAY! UP AND AWAY!"

After six months of second guesses and ingenious rationalizations about why he should stay the course in his current career, Ghazali finally told associates and family in December of 1095 that he had decided to fulfill a lifelong dream to make pilgrimage to Mecca. But he wasn't actually headed there. Rather, he'd resolved to flee secretly to Damascus. He'd heard that the greatest living Sufi master was affiliated with the main mosque there. Damascus had been beckoning Ghazali since the moment he'd lost his voice. So many masters of insight had come from that sacred city, including the authors of nearly all manuscripts on the subject. With the week of Hajj quickly approaching, which could serve as cover for his escape, Ghazali decided that he'd had enough of lying awake tormented at night. The Lake of Fire. Whatever rationalizations prevented him from leaving already, the period for internal debate was now concluded. A light had been cast into his breast. If the taste of God Most High were possible in this life, then it could be learning's only purpose. Every other knowledge constituted vanity.

Ghazali kept just two confidants in his escapade. One was his younger brother Ahmad, whom Ghazali installed as dean of the

Nizamiyya in his absence. Ghazali handed over his academic robe to Ahmad, and as the weight of its gold threads shifted between the men so must have its burden. In secret and by elaborate legal stratagem, Ghazali put a sliver of his considerable academic estate into a trust for the sustenance of his wife and daughters. He set aside an even smaller portion for his own welfare. The rest he returned to alms for the poor of Baghdad. He told his family, colleagues, and the caliph that he planned to be back shortly after the Hajj. They shouldn't worry if he also decided to tag on some minor touring afterward. Perhaps he would also visit Hebron and the tomb of Abraham. That trip, too, had been a life's dream.

Ghazali took with him his second confidant in this escapade, his best friend from college, Abu Tahir al-Shabbak. Perhaps boyish excitement built up as they mapped out their adventure. After so many jaded years working in government together they now had a purpose and quest. They had a mystery to explore, something new and significant to learn about. Although they could have but an inkling of the coming adventure, already they could likely feel between them a revival of mood. The pursuit of learning itself feels *good* in the edifying and weighty sense of the word. It's therapeutic. It lifts the spirit. Then, taking only light travel chests filled with simple robes and some of their beloved manuscripts, the friends fled Baghdad in search of God Most High.

REMEMBRANCE

It would take two weeks to get to Damascus. We can try to imagine how each mile ratcheted up the anticipation of the traveling friends. As they had no recourse to Sufi techniques just yet, they would have continued to resort to analogies of reason

as they tried to piece together some mental portrait of what their Sufi retreat experiences would be like. Perhaps they passed evenings by lamplight pondering the meanings of their worn Sufi manuscripts. Though Ghazali would have known better than to dissect these writings by reason, how could he have helped himself? These last days and nights of pondering and speculation would constitute the final blooming of his intellectual ego as he tried to understand a divine taste he knew full well to be ineffable. He'd have realized that by the means of mere thought he was about as able to experience God as the impotent man is able to experience sex. He might even have chided himself with his own favorite analogy: "I thought you were just impotent! Now I know that you are impotent *and* stupid!"²⁹ Ghazali, the most authoritative mind in Islam, was left with only a schoolboy's virgin wonder when it came to the experience of God. That's where all of his thinking had gotten him. Ghazali understood this. Yet as he anticipated Damascus he still couldn't help but *think*.

When Ghazali finally arrived in Damascus, current headquarters of the venerable Junayd school of Sufism, he stopped thinking. Awe took over, awe such as he hadn't felt since he first walked into a schoolroom when he was eleven years old.

In Ghazali's writings, he never mentions the name of his Damascus instructor, but it could have been none other than Nasr al-Maqdisi, for here in Damascus Shaikh Nasr presided over Sufism. The elderly shaikh then had a small convent affiliated with the main Umayyad Mosque where he taught Sufi techniques by day and gave sermons most evenings. His stature as the most prominent Sufi master of his day displayed itself in subtle ways, though certainly not by the golden threads of an opulent robe. Shaikh Nasr would take no money for his lessons

to the spiritually curious travelers who passed through his lodge and lived only by income from what he'd published.

In coaching students in the awareness of God, Shaikh Nasr continued a great Damascus tradition, as most of the Sufi masters that Ghazali read came from this ancient place, among the most continuously inhabited cities in the world. Syriac Christian mystics lived here before the advent of Islam, and in Ghazali's time one continued to feel their presence through local devotees of the Eastern Church. Even Paul first realized the reality of God while traveling on the road here, struck clear off his mule and into the Kingdom of Heaven. The shaikh himself was Palestinian, raised in Jerusalem and Gaza. At age eighty, he still maintained a close connection to the Sufi community at the Dome of the Rock, although in old age he had made Damascus his home. He would come to spend his last days here, of course teaching to the very end.

We can only imagine the first meeting between the two men: one middle aged, still embodying hubris despite all efforts to release the habits of worldly stature; one old, forthright with a confidence that comes from having given himself up long ago to annihilation in God.

Did Ghazali announce himself to the shaikh? Did he allow his companion Abu Tahir the customary role of announcing the presence of the great jurist? I try to envision the scene. I see Ghazali entering the lodge with his head properly bowed, even nervous with anticipation. I see him taking his place silently among the riffraff of students and devotees. They are all seekers, young and old alike, unmarried people and householders, retirees—all of them on quests to find their right places in the world. They are similar to one another only in the shared hope that maybe, just *maybe* the unseen mysteries of the universe will be unveiled here. Most are old hands in this hope, having been

disappointed many times before. There may be doubters among them, there may even be skeptics, but there are no cynics in this crowd. These are people who, despite all former disappointments, continue to live in hope. Ghazali also lives in hope. He sits down among them and waits for the master to speak.

After the set of obligatory morning prayers, Shaikh Nasr would have given his instructions to the students. They were to engage in *dhikr*, the “mention” of God. Sometimes the term is translated as “remembrance” since Arabic holds both meanings. The Quran itself refers to the concept 270 times, but never explains how to do it. That was why all of these students were here, including Ghazali. They were to learn a simple technique they had heard about for their entire lives but had not been taught to do, at least not as the Sufis practiced it. It was a technique available to the humblest of supplicants, requiring almost no intelligence and the lightest physical stamina. It began by sitting with one’s mind in open attention, empty of any intentional content. One should then not recite the Quran or think about its meaning. One shouldn’t pray or supplicate oneself or consider any aspect of the hadith tradition. Those things have their place, but not in the remembrance of God. Not now. Ghazali reports:

Then, as one sits in solitude, let him keep on saying continuously with his tongue, “God (Allah), God,” and keep his heart attentive until he comes to a state in which his effort to move his tongue drops off and it looks as if the word flows on his tongue all by itself. Then, let him persevere in this until any trace of motion is removed from his tongue and he finds his heart persevering in the *dhikr*. Then, let him still persevere in this until the image of the word, its letters and its shape are effaced from his heart and

there remains the idea of the word alone in the heart, clinging to it, as if it is glued to the heart, without separating from it.³⁰

And that's it. One mentioned the name of God first physically; then mentally by sound and image; then wordlessly by idea alone. The instructions were simple, especially the first two parts. One was to speak a word and concentrate upon it until the physical act of speaking actually became irrelevant to one's mental concentration upon the word, at which point one could let the speaking fall away. Then one continued the mental repetition until that interior vocalization and imagining also became irrelevant and even distracting to one's concentration on "the idea of the word." But what could it mean to mention "the idea of the word" without actually using the word? Ghazali didn't yet know. The instruction seemed inscrutable, but Ghazali knew there existed certain experiences, certain tastes, that must be *had* and could not be described. So he trusted that these steps would bring him to this inscrutable experience. If he persevered in the first two steps of physical and mental remembrance, maybe the third form of mention of God—"as if glued to the heart, without separating from it"—perhaps this ineffable type of remembrance would come.

To Ghazali's way of thinking, it made a kind of sense. The Quran described God's perfect unity (*tawhid*) as His ultimate essence. This unity in Ghazali's time was generally accepted as the foundational precept of Islam. Perhaps this wordless cleaving to the idea of God would be the taste of God's unity that had eluded Ghazali since he'd first learned of the concept as a child. Then he had pondered the possibility of God's pure unity with wonder and longing, only to find from the vantage point of adulthood that God, insofar as He was around at all, seemed estranged and differentiated from this world. Ghazali of course

didn't know for sure whether the remembrance of cleaving to the idea of God would be an experience of His unity. But the Quran and its commentaries all seemed to point in this direction, and the world sometimes seemed to point this way as well. Ghazali himself, in his memoir and later mystical writings, relayed scores of accounts describing a feeling of fusion with one's surroundings—and simultaneously with something more. He described fleeting experiences of *at onement* that illuminated the breast like lightning and then quickly passed. Could dhikr then have been the remembrance of that unity? Was that sense of fusion a human glimpse of God's own tawhid? Had Ghazali he been tasting God *spontaneously* all this time and simply not understood it?³¹

When Shaikh Nasr concluded his instructions, his senior disciples directed each new student to a room. Ghazali went to a minaret in the southwest corner of the mosque, and there he began his practice. He practiced in that minaret for six months, probably for eight or ten hours a day, interrupted only by the requirements of Muslim rituals and prayers. He took down some notes regarding his experiences as well. Along with the typical student cycle of prayer, ritual observances, and sermon attendance, remembrance took up the bulk of Ghazali's time. He practiced the method of remembrance day and night, sometimes with great concentration and clarity, sometimes less so. Sometimes he needed to mention God's name physically throughout the session because mental mention too quickly receded into distraction. But as the weeks went by he sometimes became able to reach a place of wordless mention and remembrance. With practice, and over time, this state came more quickly and easily. There was progress and regress, and every day always seemed to contain something of a battle with distraction, but most days also brought with them a tiny taste of the unity that had so long escaped him.

He now had an inkling of the Quran's meaning when it said: "By the remembrance of God do hearts find rest," (13:28).

Nevertheless, despite this monumental success, Ghazali soon enough realized that the wordless mention of God was but the gateway to remembering God, and not the totality of that taste. The technique of remembrance might have been a door available to anyone who would persevere, but further states of unity could not be attained by perseverance alone. These came sporadically, like lightning, when one had opened oneself up to the possibility of such an experience.

Indeed, after having done what one can, he lies bare to the breathings of the mercy of God. Nothing remains but to await the mercy which God reveals as He did to the prophets and the saints in this manner. Thereupon, if his aspiration is sincere, his wish is unmixed and his exercises are sound—and furthermore, his lusts do not disturb him and idle thought does not occupy him with worldly ties—then the light of Truth shines out in his heart.³²

So it happened that six months after having arrived in Damascus, in the spring of 1096, Ghazali likely received the light of truth that he had so long coveted. Although Ghazali in his writings typically did not display his own mystical experiences, and preferred rather to describe these matters impersonally, he does claim to have enjoyed some personal taste of the unity he describes. Writing in his autobiography, for instance, he remembered this of his mystical study: "In the course of those periods of solitude things impossible to enumerate or detail in depth were disclosed to me. This much I shall mention, that profit may be derived from it: I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High." And so he left

the lodge of Shaikh Nasr, never to see this Sufi teacher again. Ghazali would never come to mention the shaikh or say a great deal about his own experiences in the minaret, preferring the deflection of the Sufi poet Ibn al-Mu‘tazz:

There was what was, of what I do not mention:

So think well of it, and ask for no account!³³

Ghazali did, however, offer one tantalizing sentence regarding the final state of remembrance. “Its end,” he said, “is being completely annihilated in God.”³⁴

THE HEART’S MEDICINE

Wanderlust finally took Ghazali to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, shutting himself in for another six months next to the mystical Dome of the Rock, where Muhammad was said to have ascended directly to heaven to receive revelation from God and where, a thousand years earlier, ancient Israelite priests entered the Holy of Holies, the nexus of God and earth—whatever these claims may mean. To Ghazali they now meant something more specific than what he’d once imagined, as something like ascension to heaven now seemed possible even for mortals still here on earth when touched by “the breathings of God’s mercy.”

Ghazali now began to interpret all the prophets and saints as masters of awareness. He now spent his time continuing his own practice and writing about the world as it is experienced through Sufi taste. The world itself was of course the same and looked much the same as well. People still were born and then died; they bickered and wept and sometimes smiled. But, through awareness, it all also somehow could feel very different. Ghazali now would portray the world as though it were *new* again. He

described the mystical state as though one were watching creation occur. It's as if awareness allowed one to observe the world being created, moment by moment, while one walked through life. So preferring not to try and describe what he couldn't (meaning annihilation in God), rather Ghazali jotted down as many insights about the created world as he was able to. After years of writing, this became his magnum opus and gift to Islam, his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*). In effect, it interpreted orthodox Islamic practices and claims from the perspective of Sufi taste. For Ghazali, the appeal to direct awareness was quite enough to revive the truth and reality of Islam. Just *live* Islam and be revived. Walk through life with it. *Experience* it. *Taste* it. That's the whole finding of his great *Revival*. So simple.

By sciences (*'ulum*), of course, Ghazali did not mean knowing (*'ilm*) based strictly on philosophy, reason, or cognition, as had been Ibn Sina's goal. Ghazali's revival of science and knowledge was founded on direct affective experiences of taste, and he now defined *'ilm* as such. In this he followed the master Abu Talib al-Makki, who centuries before had defined awareness as "the knowing (*'ilm*) of inward realities."³⁵ It had been only just a few years ago, when the Seljuq empire fell apart and Ghazali retreated into the study of philosophy and, ostensibly, *'ilm*, that Ghazali had had no idea what Abu Talib had meant by "the *'ilm* of inward realities." But now it was the only thing Ghazali knew with perfect certainty. He would finally encapsulate his new epistemology like this: "Knowledge is above faith, and tasting is above knowledge; because tasting is finding, but knowing is a drawing of analogies, and having faith is a mere acceptance through imitation."³⁶

His story from this point forward contained many wanderings on the earth to such places as Mecca, which he finally did visit, and to Hebron, where he swore before the tomb of Abraham never again to subject his heart and teaching to vain interests or

to the aegis of the state. After two years in the Levant, and at the request of his young daughters, who missed their father, he finally returned to Baghdad, taking up residence in a small Sufi convent just across the way from the Nizamiyya. A contemporary witness noted: "When Abu Hamid originally entered Baghdad we estimated the value of his clothing and mount to be 500 gold pieces. After he turned ascetic, traveled, and returned to Baghdad, we valued his clothing to be worth fifteen pieces of copper."³⁷ A short while later, Ghazali returned home to Persia, taking up with the modest faculty of the Nizamiyya at Nishapur where Ghazali himself had earned his legal degree as a boy. Ghazali remained in that humble position for the rest of his life.

The more significant of his wanderings, however, took place in innerspace. "For nearly ten years," he wrote in his autobiography, "I assiduously cultivated seclusion and solitude. During that time several points became clear to me."

What points?

"That man is formed of a body and a heart—and by 'heart' I mean the essence of man's spirit which is the seat of knowledge of God, not the flesh which man has in common with corpse and beast."

"That his body may have a health which will result in its happiness, and malady in which lies its ruin; and that his heart, likewise, may have a health and soundness . . . and it may have a malady which will lead to his everlasting perdition in the next life."³⁸

And so Ghazali became Islam's first therapist, its first advocate of an integrative positive psychology, its first happiness expert, its first doctor of hearts. He dedicated pages upon pages of his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* to this very subject, especially in a volume he named *The Marvels of the Heart*. It remains

salient and well worth investigation by those interested in traditional therapeutics. Its essential prescription for the heart's revival is taste of God's own unity; this is available to those who empty out the hubris of ego and self and submit themselves to the taste and experience of His comprehensive dominion.³⁹

Let me be clear about one important point that some modern readers may find difficult. Ghazali argued lucidly and vociferously for the logical possibility of an afterlife. He did not claim proof, but rather argued for lack of disproof. Lacking demonstrable disproof, he held that Muslims were obliged to hold faith in the literal accuracy of the Quranic position regarding afterlife. More than this, Ghazali justified much of the work of remembrance as preparation for that afterlife and concluded his great *Revival of the Religious Sciences* with thorough arguments for its possibility.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, he also acknowledged that other reputable mystics held Paradise to be the experience *of our own known world*. Ghazali himself often used language of God's unity to describe terrestrial experiences of remembrance, even indicating these to be a taste of Paradise in the here and now. Through the practice of remembrance, the sensory (*al-mulk*) and ideational (*al-malakut*) tastes of our world—the stuff of normal human experience and imagination—could reveal themselves as God's very presence in *this* world, thus turning this world into Paradise.

The material world (*al-mulk*) and the world of spirits (*al-malakut*) taken together under one classification are called the Lordly Presence, for the Lordly Presence encompasses all existing things. For there exists nothing except God, the Exalted, His works, and His Kingdom; and His servants are a part of His works. What appears of this to the heart is, according to some, Paradise itself.⁴¹

Ghazali appears to have been arguing that something of God's Paradise could become available in the here and now by becoming *aware* of our normal sensations and thoughts. Still, to emphasize Ghazali's important position, I must repeat that he understood Quranic orthodoxy and orthopraxy as the very best means to taste God, and he believed this work should be done as preparation for a more important Paradise occurring after death. He took this as a matter of faith. Yet he also held that some portion of a future Paradise is available to us now, as a taste of divine unity. I want then to wrap up discussion of Ghazali's own spiritual adventure with some remarks from his *Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kimiya-yi Sa'adat*) that apply to happiness in *this* world, our world. The book itself is a précis of his *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, redacted and translated into colloquial Persian so that his common countrymen could reap the full benefits of his experiences. In it, Ghazali suggests one can grasp something of the joy of God's unity simply by recognizing the common, daily, perhaps even mundane miracles of creation, which become especially accessible during remembrance, but are also available with plain curiosity about one's experience of everyday surroundings.⁴²

If you go to the abode of a prince that is painted and plastered, you would describe it for a long time and you are amazed; while you always see all these wonders in the House of God Most High and you are not amazed! This physical universe is the House of God Most High. Its carpet is the earth, its roof is the sky, but it is a roof without pillars, and that is more marvelous. Its treasury is the mountains and its storehouse is the seas. Its household goods and utensils are the animals and the plants. Its lamp is the moon and its torch is the sun. Its candles are the stars, and its torchbearers are the angels; yet, you are heedless of the marvels

of this House. The House is very immense and your eye is minuscule and cannot contain it.

You are like the ant that has a hole in the corner of the castle of a king and is unaware of anything save its own nest, its nourishment, and its comrades. It has no knowledge of the beauty of the architecture of the palace, the multitudes of slaves, the king's throne, and his kingship. If you desire to be satisfied with the degree of an ant, do so! But if not, you have been given entrance to wander admiringly in the garden of the spiritual knowledge of God Most High. Come out and open your eyes so as to see its wonders and become astonished and amazed! Peace!⁴³

Thus the jaded jurist and lawyer saw his world revived. When one recognizes the severe limit of human knowledge through cognition, as Ghazali first demonstrated to humanity, and which every good scientist since his time has also realized, we are left with the inescapable fact that each and every experience is both a moment of creation and a miracle. Even a thousand years after Ghazali, *experience* remains a mystery utterly beyond the ken of contemporary neuroscience, which still today has no grasp of the mechanisms by which physical data are translated into the qualitative experiences Ghazali knew as taste. None. This mystery of qualia continues to be what neuroscience calls the "hard problem."⁴⁴ *We don't know how taste happens.* And those experiences comprise the *totality* of our world.⁴⁵ Or at least our "sure and certain" knowledge of it. These mysterious acts of phenomenal translation are the only kinds of creation to which human beings are privy. Which in effect means, despite all advances of mathematics, reason, and science, of which there is no doubt, creation entire is still an utter mystery. That mystery includes the external world, our experiences and interpretations of that world (rational and otherwise), and *especially* the ethereal mechanism

by which we are permitted any experience or interpretation at all.

Ghazali saw this epistemological limit a thousand years ago. Yet by the miracle of our sentience—to use Ghazali’s word, our *taste*—he claimed we are permitted phenomenally to witness existence as it comes into being, moment by moment. From this point of view, Ghazali believed all creation must be allowed the status of revelation.

The masters of insight never see a thing without seeing God along with it.⁴⁶

And in recognizing the miracle of taste and the gift of learning, was our hero finally healed? Had he located for himself an alchemy of happiness? Had he made peace with the universe? A contemporary by the name of ‘Abd al-Ghafir had this to say about Ghazali’s changed, calmed, manner in his later life: “What we initially thought was pretension and an acquired mode was, in fact, his true nature and the realization of what he truly was. This was the sign of the happiness that had been ordained on him by God.”⁴⁷

So it would seem that the good Professor Abu Hamid al-Ghazali finally learned how to submit and assent to the mysteries of cosmos and self.

13. Heraclitus Fragment 54. *Daemon* differs from the idea of a “self,” or a personal animating spirit, which in Greek would be *psyche*, best translated as “soul,” and not what Socrates is talking about here. Socrates does speak extensively of *psyche* in the *Phaedo* when discussing the possibility of an afterlife.
14. *Apology* 31c–d.
15. *Republic* 6 496c.
16. *Apology* 36d.
17. *Apology* 36d–7a.
18. *Apology* 40a–c.
19. *Euthydemus* 279c–280a. There’s a word in Greek for good fortune, *eutuchia*, which is the subject of another Socratic dialogue in which Socrates considers whether good fortune leads to eudaemonia—and concludes that it doesn’t.

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1. Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 18.
2. Massimo Campanini, “In Defense of Sunnism: Ghazali and the Seljuqs,” in *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*, ed. Christian Lange and Songül Mecit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 228–39.
3. Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge*, 78.
4. See Frank Griffel, *Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37–40.
5. Eric J. Hanne, *Putting the Caliph in His Place: Power, Authority, and the Late Abbasid Caliphate* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2007), 118–41.
6. ‘Aṭā-Malik Juvaynī, cited in Griffel, *Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 37.
7. Cited in Griffel, *Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 39.
8. See Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Ghazali’s Path to Sufism: His Deliverance from Error*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000), 53–54. All translations of this source have been adapted from McCarthy.
9. The anonymous reviewer of this book’s manuscript noted that Griffel is more agnostic regarding Ghazali’s motives in leaving Baghdad; see

Griffel, *Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 39–45. See also the interpretations documented in Safi, *Politics of Knowledge*, 107–10. I would also like to thank the same reviewer for suggesting that the theme of conversion (*tarwba*), the turning of one's life toward concern for the after-life, shapes the entirety of Ghazali's interpretation and presentation of his narrative. See Griffel, *Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 43; see also Eric L. Ormsby, "The Taste of Truth: The Structure of Experience in al-Ghazali's *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*," in Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little, eds., *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 147.

10. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 53–54.
11. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 24–28.
12. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 20. Those who wish to follow Ghazali's remarkable experiment in skepticism might keep in mind that it preceded Descartes's "hyperbolic doubt" by five hundred years and, at least to my mind, came to more sustainable conclusions. See Tamara Albertini, "Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) and Descartes (1596–1650)," *Philosophy East and West: A Quarterly of Comparative Philosophy* 55 no. 1 (January 2005): 1–14.
13. "The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and what is habitually believed to be an effect is not necessary, according to us," in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 17:1. Although there is no indication that David Hume read Ghazali, this is exactly Hume's argument against causal necessity in *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1738). Hume there considers the perception of causal necessity to be a kind of human habit, not a fundamental rule of the universe. Kant's reading of Hume, precisely on the troubling issue of causality, led him to compose the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).
14. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 23.
15. 'Abd al-Ghafir al-Farisi, a biographer of Ghazali, said that Ghazali actually started studying with this influential Sufi teacher back in Tus, Abu 'Ali al-Faramadhi (d. in 1084 when Ghazali was twenty-eight). See Griffel, *Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 52.
16. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 51.

17. Adapted from Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Marmura, 20:6. Marmura translates *dhawq* as “direct experience” where I prefer the literal “taste.”
18. John Renard, ed. and trans., *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 196.
19. See Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005).
20. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 23. Compare to another formulation in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*: “A hidden subtlety is understood only by those who have received so much grace from God as to grasp things by a divine light, rather than by the traditional authority.” Cited in Kojiro Nakamura, *Ghazali and Prayer* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001), 29. In the same paragraph, Ghazali calls this the “light of spiritual certainty (*nūr al-yaqīn*).” Summary of idea of light in the works of Ghazali: “Chapter IV: Symbolism of Light in Al-Ghazzālī’s Writings,” in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzālī* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 264–348.
21. Neurologists have since named this the Eureka Effect, consisting of a sudden information exchange between the two brain hemispheres, particularly activating the hippocampus and anterior superior temporal gyrus of the right hemisphere. There are, of course, also evolutionary theories explaining why this response developed in humans over time. WangBing Shen, Jing Luo, Chang Liu, and Yuan Yuan, “New Advances in the Neural Correlates of Insight: A Decade in Review of the Insightful Brain,” *Chinese Science Bulletin* 58, no. 13 (2013): 1497–511.
22. Cited in Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*, 115.
23. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 51.
24. Cited in William C. Chittick, “Dhikr,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 4:343.
25. Adapted from Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 52, substituting “taste” for “fruition experience.”
26. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 53.
27. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 54.
28. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 53–54.
29. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Letter to a Disciple*, ed. and trans. Tobias Mayer (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2010), 24.

30. From book 21 of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, translated in Nakamura, *Ghazali and Prayer*, 71f. A less poetic translation appears in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart: Science of the Spirit*, trans. Walter James Skellie (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 54–56.
31. Ghazali is always exceedingly careful to maintain an orthodox differentiation between God and people, maintaining, for instance, in *The Niche of Lights* (1:45–46) that the gnosis experience “[is] not the reality of unification but [is] similar to unification.” Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. and annotated by David Buchman (Promo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 18. See further book 35 of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, trans. David B. Burrell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001).
32. From book 21 of the *Revival*, translated in Nakamura, *Ghazali and Prayer*, 71–72.
33. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 56f. Also consider the following from *Deliverance* 64–65: “For nearly ten years, I assiduously cultivated seclusion and solitude. During that time several points became clear to me.” No Sufi would have described mere intellectual study as the cultivation of “seclusion and solitude.” In this sentence, Ghazali referred to his own mystical experiences.
34. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 57. In one place Ghazali goes rather far in his description of these states, in his *The Niche of Lights* 1:48: “When this state gets the upper hand, it is called ‘extinction’ in relation to the one who possesses it. Or, rather, it is called ‘extinction from extinction,’ since the possessor of the state is extinct from himself and from his own extinction. For he is conscious neither of himself in that state, nor of his own unconsciousness of himself.” Ghazali, *Niche of Lights*, 18.
35. Cited in Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*, 115. “The knowledge of certitude cannot be found except among those who have certitude. It is among the deeds of those who possess certitude and is found uniquely in the hearts of those endowed with experiential knowledge.”
36. Ghazali, *Niche of Lights*, 38 (2:53).
37. Griffel, *Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology*, 34.
38. Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 64–65.

39. See especially books 21–23 of Ghazali's *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, available in Ghazali, *Marvels*; and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *On Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires*, trans. T. J. Winter (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2017).
40. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *On the Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. T. J. Winter (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016). See an excellent treatment of Ghazali's "psycho-cosmology" in Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Ihya'* (Boston: Brill, 2001).
41. Ghazali, *Marvels*, 41.
42. *Sa'ada* is the "happiness" in *The Alchemy of Happiness*, meaning something akin to "joy." See H. Daiber, "Sa'ada," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 8, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, 2d ed., 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1995 [1960–2005]). I thank William C. Chittick for indulging my emailed questions.
43. Adapted from Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Jay R. Crook (Chicago: Kazi, 2008), 860–62. I have only substituted the archaic second-person familiar ("thee") with the current form ("you").
44. The "hard problem" was named by D. J. Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (1995): 2:200–19. See also Rodolfo R. Llinas, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
45. Ghazali seems to have come to phenomenology seven hundred years before Kant clarified the idea of the synthetic a priori for the West: "The aim of this account is to emphasize that one should be most diligent in seeking the truth until he finally comes to seeking the unseekable. For primary truths are unseekable, because they are present in the mind; and when what is present is sought, it is lost and hides itself." Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, 24.
46. Ghazali, *Niche of Lights*, 23 (1:62).
47. Griffel, *Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 55.

5. QIU CHUJI

1. Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Military System* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2007), 46.

MAKING PEACE
WITH THE
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PERSONAL CRISIS AND
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MICHAEL SCOTT
ALEXANDER



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