

“If you or someone you know needs wise words to help reflect on life, purpose, meaning and God, look no further—this book is for you. Luke Cawley has carefully woven stories, examples, and questions into a tapestry that will spark fresh thinking on life’s biggest questions. Whether you savour it in small bites on your daily commute or dive into it all at once in your favourite chair, I’m certain you’ll find it an enriching and thought-provoking read.”

TIM ADAMS, General Secretary, IFES

“No doubt all of us at times have an inkling that beyond the material and mundane features of life, perhaps even infused within them, lies something else. For those who are pilgrims on the search for meaning, or who are stumbling after God, *Somethingism* offers an earthy apologetic for taking a second look at the Christian story. Creatively written, and insightfully journeying through the realms of reason, intuition, and desire, *Somethingism* is a must-read for those trying to make sense of life’s deepest questions.”

DAN PATERSON, Founder and Speaker,
Questioning Christianity

“Curious and refreshingly personal, Luke takes us on a journey in this book from our rumbling sense that there might be something more towards the captivating possibility of a ‘Someone’ interested in knowing us.”

BECCA NUNES, Arts Network Coordinator,
UCCF: The Christian Unions

“Luke Cawley’s book—one that needed to be written—points to the reality of a metaphysically haunted universe, and he invites us to explore what that is all about. Human beings commonly report about signs and indicators and their intuitions of an inescapable Something that is ‘out there’, and Cawley reminds us that this Something—the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ—is not far from each one of us.”

PAUL COPAN, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University, FL; Author, *Loving Wisdom: A Guide to Philosophy and Christian Faith*

“Raw. Honest. Real. With unflinching authenticity, Luke Cawley guides readers through his own journey from ‘something’ to ‘Someone’, simultaneously inviting an exploration of God.”

JEFF HOFFMEYER, Adjunct Professor,
Fuller Theological Seminary

“It’s so refreshing to read something by someone who obviously enjoys reading. This is clear throughout Luke’s book—because in order to write well you need to read well, and he certainly writes well. The case being made is solid and clever, non-threatening and intriguing, but I particularly enjoyed rolling and ticking along on the back of the linguistic dexterity. This is a writer who knows his reader, knows himself and knows his métier. Lovely stuff, I’d say.”

ANDY KIND, Comedian; Author, *Hidden in Plain Sight*

> **Somethingism**



+ Exploring Our Sense of More

Luke Cawley

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Somethingism

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*“I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away they
don’t expect to arrive.”*

Jorge Luis Borges

*“He is not unknown because He is too far away, but
because He is too close.”*

Tomáš Halík

*To Whitney,
who is kind, thoughtful, insightful, witty and beautiful,
and for whom I am constantly thankful.*

*I said, "There is definitely some chemistry here,"
and then you, to my great relief, agreed.*

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Preface

This book came to life partly through conversations I've had about our sense that there may be more out there than we can see or touch—not necessarily a God but *something*. This intuition has been described by sociologists and others as “somethingism”.¹ Somethingism is not a posture of commitment but simply of openness.

Some of my conversations about this have been private ones which arose naturally with friends as we each mused aloud. Others have been public—I work with a small non-profit, in a role which includes developing interactive events where participants can explore various big questions about life. These have been on university campuses, in schools, in theatres, and in a range of other locations.

Those present have brought a diverse range of questions and experiences to the room. And I can picture so many occasions when some of us have lingered to chat for hours after official event end times,



or conversation has continued as we decamped to neighbouring pubs or eateries.

This book draws on the thinking these conversations have inspired, as well as my personal experience and some of the things I present at these events. It is offered to you as a way in which you might begin exploring your own sense of more.

And it starts with the story of your life.

A decorative graphic in the top left corner featuring a branch with several leaves of varying shades of gray. The leaves are partially overlapping a large, light gray circle. Scattered around these elements are numerous small, light gray dots of varying sizes.

Chapter One

The Story of Your Life

A decorative graphic on the right side of the page consisting of a vertical column of light gray dots of varying sizes, with a larger light gray circle partially visible at the top right.

Everything comes into focus eventually. To begin with, though, it's just a blur of unfamiliar sound, bright light, and chilling air. We feel the skin of others against ours for the first time, as we are prodded, moved and bundled. Moments previously we were enveloped in darkness, warmth and the rhythmic throbbing of our mother's body. Nestled. Unaware of our own bodies and enshrouded in another's flesh.

Then this. In discomfort our lungs flood involuntarily with air, which we fire back out again in immediate protest—our wordless whimper entering the fray. Around us are faces. But we couldn't name them as such. Our eyes can scarcely settle on them. We've never seen anyone from the outside. Everything we encounter is unfamiliar and confusing.

Over following days, though, patterns emerge. This face, this smell, this voice—they herald sustenance, bring reassurance, relieve our disquiet. We feel settled by their presence. Some of the sounds, it soon emerges, signify

us. Our name. We begin by turning our heads, later smiling, then laughing, as we hear it spoken. Each new mode of response evoking delight from those around us.

Forming the names of others becomes one of our tricks. Mama. Dada. Before long we can use our mouths to describe, identify, request, refuse, decry, appeal, acclaim and affirm. Once we sank teeth into our own toes and cried out in pain, unaware they were attached. Now we not only know they are ours, but we can use them to crawl, to stand, to kick.

Objects around us, previously little more than shapes, progressively assume meaning. Those vibrantly coloured sticks, with their waxy taste, are crayons. They leave marks on paper. And on walls, leading to tears and consequences. These glossy cardboard blocks, with chewed corners—books—open out to display pictures, and stories, and the small black shapes on them are a code we can learn, stuttering out the syllables, pushing forth the words, cracking open the story.

As we read, and interpret, and use words—spoken, read or written—we begin to piece things together. There was a world which preceded us. Kings and queens, empires and wars, exploration and discovery, enslavement and liberation. We exist in a continuum. In musty classrooms we are briefed on past findings—gravity, electricity, combustion, cells, atoms, vaccines. Great artists, writers, and musicians dance into the frame. Passions and interests are inflamed. Tastes refined. Ambitions inaugurated.

We learn to manipulate tools in pursuit of these desires. Not only paintbrushes and pencils but screens

and keyboards. Objects built for communication. Decades later we may wryly reminisce at the items we once considered innovative, just as we now smile as we picture *our* forebears marvelling at the town's first motorcar, or inviting neighbours to watch their colour television, or spinning a dial on their hallway telephones. Our generation's most ubiquitous technologies are glowing pocketable bricks of glass and metal, which travel with us as we login, message, post, share, like and upload.

Content and mode of expression can—we learn—affect others, both on these devices and in person. It can advance our standing in the school, the family, the social network. Friendships can be strengthened or destroyed, made toxic or infused with life, by the choices we make. Through observation and imitation, and by failure and success, we progressively refine the selves we present to the world, and the self we aspire to become.

Guiding us are people like parents and peers, yes, but also ideas. Some are studied at school—“All [people] are created equal”, “The history of all ... society is the history of class struggles”, and the dream “that one day people will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character”.² Others come embedded in our entertainment—“Be true to yourself”, “One day my love will come”, “Follow your heart”.³ Still more arrive on our social-media feed—“Don't cry because it finished, smile because it happened”, “It always seems impossible until it's done”, and “The key to success is failure”.⁴ We rotate them between the fingers of our minds; adopting, adapting and rejecting.

Seeking what works, coheres and helps us navigate our existence.

Until, eventually, we are launched out, no longer living under the supervision of those who raised us—although their imprint is never completely erased. And we continue our unfurling. Moving, communicating, consuming, interpreting, learning, choosing, deliberating. Taking all we have encountered in days past, and reapplying it today, and in days to come. As, slowly, more of our surroundings—and even of ourselves—comes into focus.

How It Started, How It's Going

To become who you are today required all that came before. From your instinctual first breath to everything that has happened over the past year, your capacity to learn, adapt and reskill has been essential. It is to your benefit that you acquired language, became mobile, gained familiarity with the alphabet, encountered the art and stories of others, became adept with technology, refined your ability to relate to others, and developed values to inform your choices.

None of us idealises an incapacity to grow. We don't ordinarily wish we had less understanding or fewer skills, or that we had remained crawling and gurgling, dependent on others to change our underwear. It has served us well to be curious and inquisitive people, open to future discoveries. And we're not done learning yet. Every time you ask a question of someone or search for something online, you are admitting to the existence of the unknown—to the possibility of things outside your current frame of understanding.

Our growth as people can be summarised in two simple words. The first is “experience”. As we have developed over the years, we have encountered new people, situations, and items, increasing how much of reality we have experienced. We all also know that there are aspects of reality that we simply haven’t yet experienced. At the time of writing, for example, I have never explored a coral reef. It lies outside my own frame of lived experience. Some elements of known reality, in fact, don’t just sit beyond the reach of individual people but of humanity as a whole—the surface of Mars, for example, remains for now both real and untouched by human feet.

Alongside “experience”, consider the word “perception”. It is quite possible for a person to *experience* something but not *perceive* it. I was licking books for some time before I perceived the meaning of the words on the page. We often assume that if something is important and real, then it will be obvious to us. But many things can happen without us perceiving them. We might not perceive that the pickpocket on the bus is targeting us. But when we get home and find he has emptied our bank account, we wish we had perceived more clearly.

When speaking to university students on this subject as part of my work, I often ask them to imagine that there is someone in their class who would be their ideal life partner. And “More than this,” I add, “they are already attracted to you. They think about you day and night. A melting sensation crosses their chest whenever they glimpse you; but you haven’t noticed, and they’ve

never said anything. Here is a potentially life-altering experience—spending every day in a lecture hall with a well-suited person who adores you—which remains unperceived.”

To navigate life, then, requires both experiencing the new and also perceiving more clearly those things which are *already* a part of our experience. The scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi, who wrote extensively on how we grow in understanding, described knowledge not as something we receive passively but as the product of us fitting the pieces together, staring at it all until, over time (and probably with the help of others), we begin to perceive the patterns and connections.⁵

One of Polanyi’s interpreters compares this to gazing at a magic-eye picture: those abstract pieces of art which have embedded in them an image not visible from a brief cursory look.⁶ As we attempt to focus our eyes just past the page, a three-dimensional shape, placed there by the artist, becomes so clear that we can now barely avoid it. It was always present, but now it has become visible *to us*.

One of the temptations as we grow older is to cease staring at reality—to operate on the basis of patterns already perceived and experiences already acquired. This, to an extent, is quite reasonable. I expect you can get through tomorrow perfectly competently without any monumental paradigm shifts. You can speak, move and count, and can operate all the technology you need—not to mention handling (most) basic human relationships. And yet, for many of us, there remains a subtle and persistent sense that possibly not *everything* crucial has yet come into focus—that perhaps there’s

something more that lies beyond our current experience or evades our consistent perception.

The Fluttering Wings

Sometimes this sense flutters into the very periphery of our inner vision, faintly flickering there for a moment like the beating wings of a passing bird, providing us with a fleeting impression that there is something more to life. Yet when we turn our heads towards the blur of light, it is gone. So we can neither name what we glimpsed nor deny its passing presence.

Perhaps, for example, you've had that experience of staring up at the stars on a clear night and being doused in an intense awareness of your own smallness, and the great swathes of reality you cannot know. In that moment your current perspectives on life feel more like tentative working theories than settled conclusions. Maybe there really are "more things in heaven and earth," as Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "than are dreamt of in your philosophy".⁷

Gazing into the night sky—at these objects so far away—we become pierced by the possibility that all that it means to be human, to be us, is not found in our immediate surroundings and present experiences.⁸ It stirs in us an urge towards something greater, and for a time anything, even—dare we say it—God, becomes a slightly less outlandish proposition. Not that we would want to necessarily be so specific as to say "God". But at least, perhaps, the transcendent: a *something* or *someone*, more than material, who *is* and whose paths intersect, be it ever so occasionally, with our own.

A friend of mine says she had no real interest in these kinds of questions until she was listening to a piece of music, and she became so overwhelmed by the beauty of it that for the first time she found herself asking, “What if there is a God, or something like that?” Art, literature and film can all at times provoke this sensation. The novelist Iris Murdoch writes that “art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance”.⁹ Perhaps it has had a similar effect for you. It opened you up to something indefinable.

Yet this sense of something more doesn’t necessarily come to us in punctuated moments of acute clarity. For some of us, it can just kind of linger in the background. The astronomer Galileo described it as something he encountered in the process of his scientific endeavours, commenting that mathematics is the language with which God wrote the universe—the order and harmony of the cosmos seemed to him like glimpses of the divine.¹⁰

For others it can be still less specific. Singer-songwriter Regina Spektor, best known for the title song to *Orange Is the New Black*, told an interviewer that this sense is something which “I’ve always had ... like, kind of naturally”.¹¹ Intuition tells her that we can’t reduce reality down to what we can see or touch or measure. We, and our partners, friends and children—each is more than the sum of their biological processes and chemical composition.

Our little world feels awash with the subtlest of whispers in this direction. Philosopher Tomáš Halík says that many of us today subscribe to “somethingism”; we “don’t believe in God ... don’t go to church, but [we]

know there is *something* above us”.¹² Our persistent sense of “*something*” more remains unshakeable, even if we are loathe to attach any particular definition to it.

Others of us, though, are struck less by the *presence* of the transcendent than its perceived *absence*. There seems to be a brutality and darkness to the world that crushes any possibility of God or similar concepts. And yet, strangely, even this sense of God’s absence doesn’t eliminate the question of whether there is more. An atheist friend once told me that he lies in bed every night staring at the ceiling and asks himself, “Is this it?” We can be as haunted by the impression that there is nothing as we can by those recurring intuitions of something. At least if there is a God, you can rail against them for all that’s going on. If, though, we live in a universe which one writer described as having “at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference”, then you really don’t have anyone towards whom to even shake a fist.¹³

The most intriguing moments for many of us are when we come across others who seem to have moved from simply *perceiving* the possibility of something more to consistently embracing it. These are people who would say that the unseen dimension—the transcendent—is an integrated part of their ongoing life story. They might be prominent individuals that we see from a distance or in history lessons—like the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, or educational campaigner Malala Yousafzai—or someone we stumbled across on their social-media channel.

But more likely it is those populating our daily existence who provoke us to ponder: the friends, family members and co-workers who we know firsthand to be intelligent, rational, honest people who, nevertheless, drop hints of a spiritual aspect to their lives. When you're going through a difficult time, they say, "I'll pray for you", and it seems like more than a platitude. Perhaps they even straight-up claim that God is a part of their everyday. They've even told you some of their story and experience in that area. Not that you would buy into their whole system or credit their every explanation. Nor are you exactly sure that their experience is for people like you. But they do seem to have something which you don't. It's, at the very least, good *for them*. There are plenty of people who use religion and spirituality as a pretext to be a jerk, but *this* person isn't in that category, and that raises some questions.

And so, woven into our lives is a sense that more is going on than we perceive. This possibility flutters indefinably around the perimeters of our perception—capturing our attention fully at particular moments while at other times fading almost completely into the shadowy corners of our consciousness. Even when we feel most alone in the world, the question still presses upon us, "Is this it?"—or even more pointedly, "To whom do I direct my frustration and discontent?" Will everything really come into focus eventually?

>Pause and Consider (or Discuss)

1. Do you ever have a sense that there's something more? What has given you that sense?
2. If there is some transcendent aspect of reality, or even a God, do you think you have either (1) experienced or (2) perceived this at that some point? When and how?
3. Do you know anyone who seems to you like a spiritual person, or someone who has "something" you don't? What is it about them that gives you this impression?

