

From Cat Stevens to Yusuf Islam

Even though it was terrific to be born in an age where comic-fiction, robots and even shiny white spaceships were coming true, it was odd how the human spirit still seemed as deep and mysterious as the vastly uncharted universe itself – and equally as borderless. So, setting out with great hope to find the secret source of happiness and success, I began my journey to the centre of the unknown. There were certainly lots of puzzles to solve.

Like a lot of kids, I had many questions that could not be easily answered. Looking enquiringly around at this wild new world into which I had landed, the road of life was obviously not without certain pitfalls and dangers; the Second World War had just ended and millions of people had been killed - but for what? Sometimes, staring out of the window into the vastness of the deep black night I would wonder, 'Where does the sky end?' The thought of death frightened me. 'What came afterwards?' My mind could not penetrate beyond the veil of darkness. Was I alone?

Like galaxies, bright and sparkling with life, for me, it was like that being born at the heart of London's Theatre district, the West End, a sort of 'fantasy land' full of coffee bars, shops, theatres and cinemas. Observing the world was like looking through a store window, glittering with stardust. At one end of my road stood Piccadilly's Eros, a symbol of that whirling, colorful scene of vibrant activity. Opportunities were all around me.

Perhaps, like most new-borns starting out in life, I felt I was the centre of the universe. But there were serious problems facing me. My identity was still rather unclear: my Father was from Cyprus, my Mother was from Sweden, and our dominant culture at home was British. To add to that, my mother was originally from a Baptist background, my Father was Greek Orthodox, and I went to a local Roman Catholic School in Drury Lane. So I was forced very early on to be open-minded.

I remember looking at the choices given to me. Religion was constantly making me feel guilty, warning me about immorality and dangers of this fleshly life. These were represented in clear pictorial terms by the Devil, depicted with two horns; the temptation of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit; and Jesus suffering on the Cross, representing the key to salvation. But balancing those kinds of fearful images with the zappy, fun-filled entertainment that was taking place outside the doors of the Church, well...the centre of the universe for me was not in Religion - it was probably closer to the city streets and arcades.

My father was a hard-working man; at the end of every day, he would stand at the café's old baroque till, counting the pounds, pennies and halfpennies. He taught us the value of having enough food on the table and discouraged waste. Dad had come a long way from his native village, Tala, situated on a hill overlooking the ancient coastal city of Paphos in Southern Cyprus. He grew up in a household where even a pair of shoes was considered a luxury, but my father was never ashamed of his humble background. 'Money doesn't grow on trees!' he never tired of reminding us.

Dad gave me a job in the Restaurant after school as a waiter, so I learnt to earn my pocket money from the tips given by customers. It was also here that I first realized - like my father must have done - that serving the public well can often be highly rewarding.

My best friend, Andy, and I would often play together around the bombed ruins that littered parts of the city, frequently strewn with broken glass, mud and smashed bricks. But our favorite escapade was to go out late evenings and dangerously scale the local buildings, climbing high up onto the rooftops. From those heights we'd gaze at the noisy city below, undeclared secret champions of London's skyline.

Everything in this society was geared towards 'making it'. The American image of the good life was projected everywhere: films and television were just flooding in. The emphasis was to be on top: get rich, be young, healthy, wealthy and street-wise. Indeed I was - and roof-wise as well! I wanted to be an artist, a cartoonist. Then I found out that Van Gogh, one of my favorite painters, died poor and earless, and I realized that perhaps this wasn't quite the life for me. There was a need for something a little bit more instant - a fast track.

Suddenly there came the big music boom of Merseyside and the Beatles - British Pop had arrived. Gravity had shifted; it was now in U.K. Suddenly there was a big window of opportunity for us youngsters. So I picked up a guitar, chose the name Cat Stevens, and started writing. It wasn't long before I had my first couple of hit records; my name and photo was splashed all over the media and I was on the road - at the grand old age of eighteen!

I was now supposed to be one of the glamorous elite, cheerfully enjoying the 'high life'. The public expected me to live up to this image so resorting to intoxicants was the only way for me to overcome my insecurity and shyness. I seriously lost control: staying up late, drinking, partying, smoking endless cigarettes. Within a year I found myself in hospital lying on my back sick with Tuberculosis. The pop business was whizzing past me and I was left there to think: 'What happened?'

Soon I became aware of my own mortality and the inevitability of death. Lying there, in a Sussex hospital deep in the country, surrounded by doctors, a lot of important questions came into my mind. That was a very important stage of my life. At that time there was a great interest in things eastern, things transcendental: so I turned towards Peace and Flower Power. Somebody had given me a copy of a Buddhist book called 'The Secret Path'. That was the beginning of my ardent search for answers - clear answers, about the meaning of our existence and where it was all leading.

I started meditating; and so the centre of the universe at that time was levitating somewhere around the proximity of my belly button. I covered all the mirrors in my hospital room with paper and tried to forget the outwardness of this world and focus on my inner self. It wasn't long before I had grown a beard.

After that period of convalescence and regaining my health, I came back to writing. A lot of my songs were now much more reflective and deeply personalized - less 'poppy'. I'd left the days of 'Here Comes My Baby' and was now looking for that mystic peace. The kind of songs I was writing about were questions that remained with me and which were persistently knocking at my conscience. I started to design my own album covers, painting mostly in the eastern European style of the naive artists. There were various styles and techniques but essentially, I was more concerned with the painting of words and the messages they were giving out. This was just beginning of my search to discover the conscious self within me. Like a newborn, my soul was thirsty for the primary milk of understanding.

My second career took off in a way we never expected, especially in the States. This happened at a time when there was a broad appreciation for more gentle, reflective songs. These were the blossoming 70's, and the whole thing suddenly skyrocketed. Throughout the whole experience, one of the most important aspects - emphasized in my lyrics, particularly - was a sense of 'journey'.

Religious images were still very strong in my mind. I knew there was a difference between right and wrong, but was passionately opposed to ritual and dogma; I didn't like the idea of being told exactly what to do and I was looking for a more flexible, spiritual way. Then I wrote 'Peace Train'. Where it would actually end up? No one knew. The train was just rolling on 'the edge of darkness'. That was the peace movement; the spiritual track many of my generation and I was on.

I started studying different religions: I looked into Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and other forms of eastern mysticism. As time went on I decided to look back into my Greek heritage and came across Pythagoras. Perhaps, I suspected, he had the right answer and everything can be worked out through some formula; it is all just one amazing mathematical puzzle. After all, scientists always looked for correlations and sequences to explain and predict events in the world of existence.

A simple nomad was once asked, "What is the evidence of the existence of a Supreme Being?" He answered, "Droppings indicate the existence of camels; footprints are evidences of a walker; and yet when a heaven with constellations and an earth with mountain passes is presented before us, is this not evidence of an Exalted and All-Powerful God?" There are indications everywhere; the truth might be screaming out, but the noise of daily life makes it difficult to hear.

I'd looked at Astrology; and threw the I-Ching, everything that you'd expect from those kinds of days and that kind of era. But I still wasn't satisfied; there were still major doubts. Later I came in touch with Sufism and read some poems of the Muslim poet, Rumi.

I was very impressed, but still wasn't there. In a rather strange way, I was trying to find out the truth and shrink my ego whilst still being projected as an icon. That, of course, wasn't easy. But music was clearly illustrating my journey.

One of the most dominant views of man is the material view. The motto of this concept is 'Eat, drink and be merry.' The problem was that I had eaten, I had drunk – but still wasn't merry.

Living a fairly recluse existence; after playing to 40,000 fans in massive sports stadiums, I would return to a hotel room or fly back to my bare, unfurnished flat in Rio. The more success I achieved, the more I tried to hide myself away, frightened of losing that most precious gift, that mysterious lamp that was guiding me along the unseen path.

In Rio I lived alone, unable to even converse with the lady who cooked and kept the place clean; she only spoke Portuguese. I really felt isolated and it hurt for a long time, recalling the loneliness back in the beginning when I was trying to be Cat Stevens – the Star! The guy that was incredibly famous, lucky and wrote smart things. But basically, I still hadn't discovered who I was and my earth-time was running out.

One of the incidents which happened to me turned out to be a major turning point, although I didn't realize it at the time. I was somewhere in Malibu, which is in the Los Angeles area, the famous strip of beach where millionaires live. I was at the house of my record chief, Jerry Moss, and decided to take a dip in the ocean that particular day. Unknown to me, of course, this was a very dangerous time to go for a swim. I didn't realize when I looked out that there was nobody else around in the sea that day. Nevertheless, I went in. After swimming for a while, I'd had enough and tried to return back to the beach. That was when I realized this was the wrong time to go swimming. I felt the current moving me out and away from the shore. My body was absolutely powerless. I saw my manager standing there thinking everything was all right, but I couldn't communicate to him. Finally, in a split second, I realized this may be the end; with no help in sight I shouted out, "O God, if you save me, I'll work for you!" and at that moment, a wave came from behind me and pushed me forward. Suddenly, with all the energy that I needed, I was swimming back to land and within a few minutes, I was there: safe and alive. That was a moment of truth.

Each day mankind nervously discovers a new secret in the structure of material universe: another clue to the ever-enlarging picture of life; yet another confirmation indicating the existence of Unseen Intelligence behind the intricately mysterious worlds and galaxies he observes. Nevertheless, each day man is easily upset by little incidents beyond his control, he still feels hurt if someone pushes him; human weaknesses have not changed in the slightest. The ultimate mystery remains; the question of death evades man's logic and he is left waiting at the station without so much as a timetable.

And then that amazing thing happened. My elder brother visited Jerusalem; he bravely went into the Mosque of Al Aqsa situated at the centre of the Holy City, opposite the Golden Domed Mosque. Inside, he felt something very special.

When my brother came back to UK in 1976 there was a Festival of Islam taking place in London, everywhere were books about Islam. He saw the Qur'an in the bookshop and he

said 'That's the Bible of the Muslims'. So, he decided to buy it and give it to me as a gift.

When I started to read the Qur'an, the first thing that I did was to try and keep an open mind because there were so many preconceived images already built up within me. Many are the times I'd visited my favorite spiritual bookshop in LA, called the Bhodi Tree, but never had I even bothered to look at the Islam bookshelf before. Perhaps that was because my father belonged to a Greek-Cypriot culture and, therefore, anything connected to Muslims was hostile to me.

But the more I read the Qur'an, the more it struck me, deep down. This was not quite that foreign religion which I had come to expect. First and foremost it was talking about belief in God, the Master of the universe; talking about humanity as one family. It mentioned many prophets, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad included, being brothers equally teaching the same message of unity to mankind, and all of us being the offspring of Adam and Eve.

After a while I read the chapter called 'Joseph' (Yusuf). My life seemed to melt into a mirror of this story. Up to then I too, like Joseph, had passed through many stages and been sold in the market. The section of the story that really shook me was when his brothers, who had thrown him down the well, were face to face with him. Unaware that Joseph was in front of them, they were talking badly about him, slandering him. But he kept it within himself. God! Something resonated inside me, perhaps it was those words I wrote in Father and Son: "All the times that I've cried, keeping all the things I knew inside". At that point, I wept. That chapter opened my heart.

On a winter Friday in 1977, I took that dramatic step and walked to the Mosque in London's Regent's Park to declare my faith. Out of the greenery of the trees, there shone this golden dome which was never there before. That was in a way the epitome of everything that I was now discovering: suddenly it was there – where it wasn't there before.

I was still making records but - like Moses and the magicians - the Truth ultimately had to win. Interestingly, there wasn't anything in the Qur'an directly mentioning music; it didn't say music was forbidden. But there were many things that were forbidden or clearly immoral such as fornication, drunkenness, false idols, competition, greed and selfishness among other things. Then I started to analyze. 'Hang-on,' I thought to myself, 'the music business is full of that stuff, how can you really develop and get closer to the Angels if you stay in that kind of an environment?' For me, I found it very difficult. At last, when I got a chance to escape from the limelight - I grabbed it. The only real regret I have, is that the link that existed between those who listened to my songs and me ceased to exist. For a long time I lost that privileged link of communication by cutting myself off from the music business. But it was very difficult to stay on the straight path, firmly on your feet amidst all the commercialism and the hype of rock star existence.

In 1980 I had the privilege to fulfill one of my Islamic obligations, to visit Makkah during the blessed month of Pilgrimage. Lo and Behold! I had come to the Centre of the Universe, where the physical and metaphysical worlds meet. I was floating in that wonderful sea of humanity, turning like stars in a galaxy, around the house of God, built

by Prophet Abraham and his son Ismail - submitters to God - two and a half thousand years ago. The central monolithic structure, the 'Ka'bah', was a sublimely simple cube shaped building made of rough stones. And it was empty. God Almighty can not be fitted into a house! I had at last found that dimension where human existence ceases to be held by the gravitation of sensual and worldly desires, where the soul is freed in an atmosphere of obedience and peaceful submission to the Divine Presence: La Baik, "Here I am O God, Here I am."

I discovered that the human soul does not live only by means of material success and acclaim; it needs contentment, which actually requires a person to be normal sized. Stardom is not normal; everything has to be bigger and be better, you have to be competitive. Getting out of that race, quite frankly, is what I did. I was given a chance to find my own way to happiness; each person must choose whichever road he or she wishes to follow. But if people knew more about this particular path to the Centre of the Universe, then I believe that there would be much more understanding and unity in this world.

-Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens)