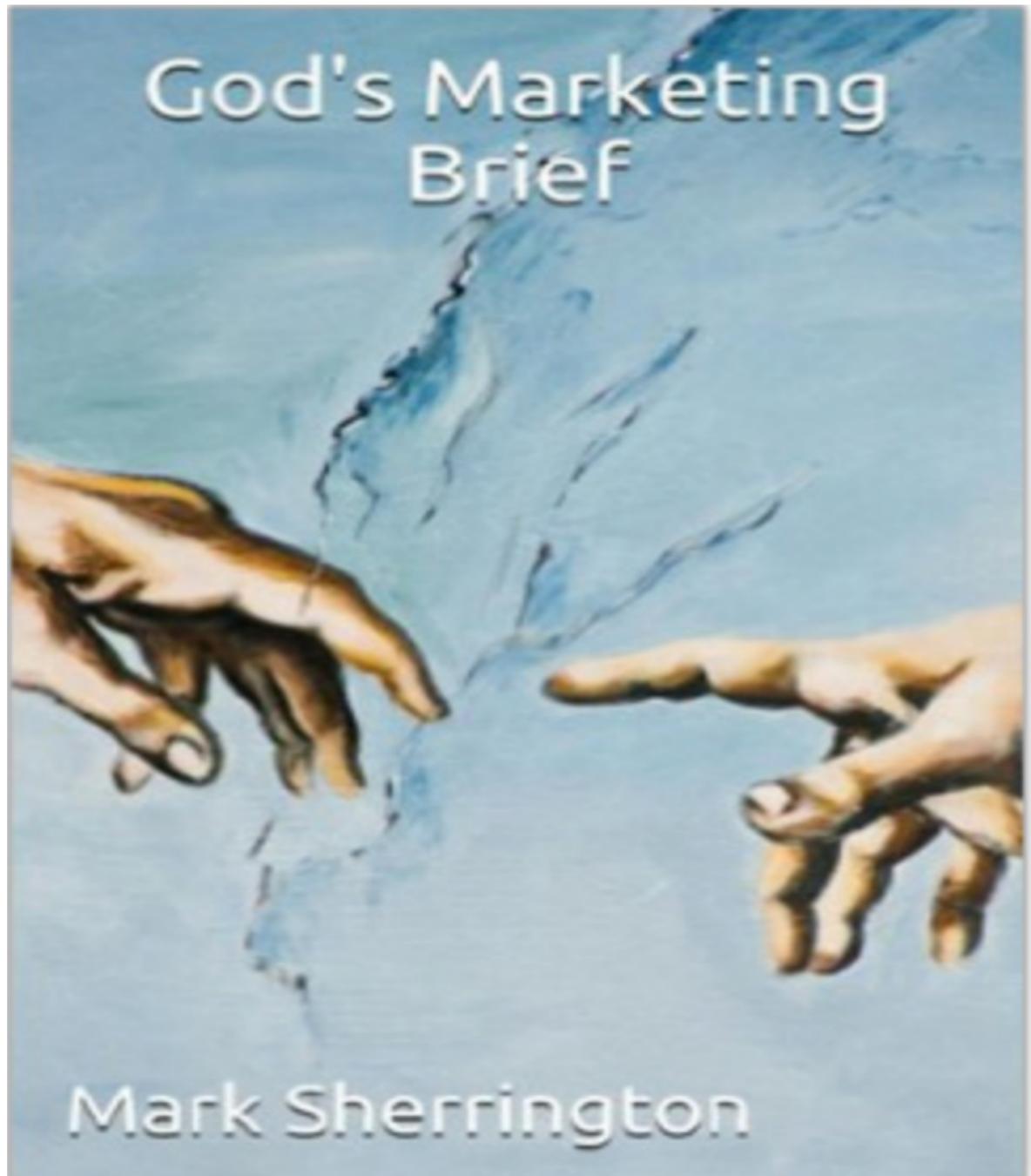


God's Marketing Brief

A strange tale about God, marketing, and the marketing of God.....



Act I

Jonno glanced to his right and found a gap in the traffic. He pulled out slowly on to the roundabout that would take him up to the A3 and back to his home in Wimbledon. He didn't want to go too fast, not yet anyway. It wasn't the fact that he was behind the wheel of a brand new Porsche Carrera, the car he had just collected from the Porsche dealership a few hundred metres behind him. This was his sixth Porsche, he knew the car well and had in fact just left them the previous model as trade-in on his new baby. He wanted to drive slowly so

that he could hit the off-ramp and accelerate hard up to the dual carriageway. This new Carrera was 0.2 seconds quicker than his old car and he wanted to feel that extra grunt. Too many speed cameras on the A3 but on the off-ramp you could floor it and see how fast you got to 60 mph. He wasn't disappointed. In sports mode and with the double clutch system doing its thing the car took off like a stabbed rat, as they'd say on Top Gear, and in a little over four seconds he was hitting the brake to keep it below the limit.

Jonno knew his Porsches. This was his brand, the greatest sports car on the planet, the perfect blend of form and function. A car that, unlike its more flashy rivals, Aston Martin and Ferrari, you could drive every day and yet know that pound for pound it was better than any of them. Jonno knew exactly why he loved Porsche so much. It started with the product – engineering, design and performance, the Holy Trinity of cars. Any car, from hot hatch to family sedan, which looked great, drove well and was utterly reliable was going to be a class leader. In his experience every product category had this kind of Holy Trinity. For supermarkets it was great fresh produce, price and convenience. For washing detergents it was cleaning power, care for clothes and fresh fragrance. Every great brand had to deliver on all three of these core benefits with ideally a slight lead in one of them. In the case of the Porsche it was engineering. It looked good but not better than an Aston. It drove brilliantly but not quite as well as a Ferrari. In both regards it was close enough to parity not to make this a reason not to buy. But where the Porsche scored was on engineering. Ferraris break down more often than a West End Diva and Astons were about as reliable. Jonno knew that, like the last Porsche he'd just left at the dealership, he would do no more than 15,000 miles in this car. But he knew that it could do twice that mileage and feel as tight as a drum.

When Jonno chatted to his mates or colleagues about cars he would draw on all this product information as his justification for being a Porsche loyalist. He would remind them that Porsche is a triumph of engineering over design – a car with the engine mounted stubbornly over the rear wheels rather than the more sensible mid-car or front of car position that rival brands favoured. If someone said they also really rated the 911 (pronounced nine-eleven like the infamous day the Twin Towers were downed and not nine-one-one, like the

emergency number people called when it happened) he would point out that only the first Carrera back in 1970 was actually a 911, each new manifestation of the Carrera had a different model number. Porsche had intended to call their new car the 901 but had failed to spot that Peugeot had trade-marked every three digit number ending in 01 – Jonno understood the importance of trade marks, he would not have made that mistake. So at the last moment Porsche changed it to 911. Porsche is a two syllable word, “por – sher” not a one syllable word, “porsh”, and his new car was in fact the Porsche 991, his previous two cars being the 997 and 993 (he skipped out the 996 - not Porsche’s best car).

If some smart-arse pointed out that Porsche themselves now refer to all Carreras as 911 he would acknowledge this. Eventually they gave in to the fact that everyone called all Carrera models the 911 – you can’t argue with the consumer – but, as Jonno would explain, they included the model number in brackets afterwards. Porsche 911S (Type 991) was what was written on his invoice. Jonno was on the inside of this brand, an owner not an aspirer, and he always made a point of not calling it a 911.

After 30 years of devotion and close to 15 years of ownership Jonno could hold his own in any conversation about Porsches. But unlike most owners he had no problem discussing how the other side of this brand worked for him or even acknowledging that in truth it was this, and not Porsche’s product credentials that made him so committed to what was in truth a pimped up, pumped up VW Beetle. It was what Porsche said about him and how it made him feel, it was the day he saw Steve McQueen drive one in the film Le Mans, it was the years of driving crappy MG’s, all he could afford, and drooling over the Porsche’s he saw in Mayfair. Very few Porsche drivers would admit in public that what Porsche said about you is, “I can afford to drive anything, but I drive Porsche because I know more about cars than you do which probably means I do in fact have a bigger dick, or even if only average size I know how to use it better than you.” It would get a laugh, but they would laugh with him not at him. He might admit, if among close friends, that the only time he felt really successful – which everyone told him he was but which he himself never fully believed – was when he drove his Porsche.

For some reason, Jonno could flaunt his knowledge about Porsche and not come across as a wanker. He could express his true feelings about the brand and what it really meant to him, deep down inside, and not come across as a sad wanker. And that reason was simple – Jonno was regarded as the best Brand marketer in the UK and one of the very best in the world. This was not something Jonno would ever say – only a sad wanker would –he didn't need to. He had been voted by his peers as the UK's Number One marketer of 2009 and 2011 (some CEO of a retail business had won it in 2010 which pleased the marketing community as it linked marketing to big business leadership). Jonno commanded a seven-figure salary package as the Head of Brand Strategy at one the world's biggest management consultancies.

He had ticked every box in marketing and everyone knew it. He never had to give his CV to anyone. At parties he would down play his career. "What do you do?" some off duty civil servant might enquire; the type that thought marketing was synonymous with advertising. "I help sell stuff to people who don't need it for prices they can't afford" he'd reply. But anyone in the 'industry' knew well enough. He had done the three things you have to do working as a marketing executive for one of the world's leading consumer goods businesses – he had successfully relaunched a growing brand, launched a new brand, creating a whole new category in the process, and saved a big brand that was heading for oblivion. That last accomplishment had projected him to the Marketing Director's job at the prodigiously young age of 30 years old. All of these brands had been household products – respectively a toilet soap, Loo cleaner and Washing Powder. Not glamorous but highly competitive markets. To Jonno's credit he had made himself as much an expert in cleaning products as he was about cars - cars in general and Porsche in particular. Marketing started with the product – you can't promote what you don't understand and he'd understood this better than his colleagues. But could he perform in other industries? Oh yes he could – he moved to the newly formed Telco giant and delivered them marketing that drove ARPU (average revenue per user) 10% higher than their more established competitors. Next came a new chain of coffee houses. Everyone at the time thought this was a step down for him but he'd made a fair wedge

from his share options in the Telco and he liked the entrepreneurial coffee shop's owner. Within 3 years it was the fastest growing retail food brand in Europe – everyone loved the coffee and the store vibe and the marketing was widely lauded as nothing short of brilliant. Jonno could have had any marketing job he wanted, so he took the one job that let him do virtually every marketing job he wanted. He joined a very posh firm of management consultants who had a weak marketing practice. The combination of their prestigious brand name and Jonno's reputation meant every decent marketing brief in Europe came through their doors. Jonno became like the Rembrandt of marketing – he never painted in the solutions to the boring bits of the problem - he let his understudies do that. He painted the stuff that everyone noticed. Career-wise he now had it all – he got to work on the best brands, the best briefs. He worked directly with the most senior clients, something he really enjoyed. His seniority afforded him the kind of flexibility that allows you Wednesday off to 'work from home' and collect your new Porsche.

He was so lost in the pure driving pleasure (and ownership) of his new car that the Esher, Surbiton and Raynes Park turn-offs had come and gone and he was nearing the slip road by the petrol station that would take him the back way into Wimbledon, the 'Village'. He checked his speed, less obvious in a Porsche where the rev counter is the dominant dial, another fabulous piece of eccentricity that supported the brand story – "I'm like a racing driver, I don't really care how fast I'm going I just need to know how the engine is revving." His speed, visible in a small digital read-out in the middle of the rev counter, was just OK and just as well as he was passing another bloody speed camera.

"Working from home today" meant he would do some work but not a lot of work. Not that any of his work was hard. He had spent 25 of his 46 years working on brands, hundreds of brands in almost every category and most parts of the world, big brands, emerging brands and troubled brands. He had what was known in the trade as pattern recognition – every brand challenge he saw he recognised from a previous project or case study. He normally had the bones of a solution within 15 minutes of being briefed on the problem. He was, he had to admit, getting a bit bored with brand marketing. He liked the

people he dealt with well enough but he missed the challenge he'd felt in the early years. He still really enjoyed the creative part of the marketing process – it was one thing to have a strategically sound solution but entirely another to have the ideas to bring this alive and make it cut through all the noise out there. But increasingly the marketing briefs that came his way seemed samey. Worse still they seemed worthless. What did it matter that his sharp, experienced marketing brain could help switch people from one brand of beer/car-hire/watch/bank/soup/grocer/fragrance/cell-phone/butter to another? The client benefitted but the world did not feel like a better place. When, years back, he was launching a new loo cleaner he did actually feel like he was making a difference. He found the challenge interesting and nicer smelling germ killing in an easier to use pack did feel, in some small way, like progress. If everything gets that bit better then the world gets a lot better. But everything from loo cleaners to cars to phones had, it seemed to him, got a lot better and the world felt that bit worse for it.

These things increasingly prayed on his mind. That's why, despite everyone telling him how good he was at marketing, he did not feel successful, even behind the wheel of his new Porsche. This prayed on his mind, but not right now. As home got closer his bigger problem loomed into the forefront of his mind. Not an idle musing, but a real *What the fuck am I going to do about this?* That problem was Mary.

Jonno had been married to Mary for nearly 10 years. They'd met at Oxford but lost touch as they pursued their respective careers, his in marketing, hers in the civil service, the foreign office to be precise. Never high-profile she had quietly climbed up through the ranks, one of the behind-the-scenes figures in the hand over of Hong Kong to the Chinese being her most notable achievement. She'd been at Magdalen College, he was at Merton. They'd gone to one varsity fancy dress party as Jonno the Baptist and Mary Magdalen. "We're looking for Jesus," they had giggled to anyone who asked.

They found each other again when they had both almost given up on relationships. By now they were in their mid 30's, a string of fun and not so fun relationships behind each of them. Jonno bumped into Mary by chance. He

hardly recognised her but admired the changes the years had brought. Gone was the slightly gawky, specky look of Oxford, she was now quite beautiful. They agreed to meet up for dinner. 6 months later they were married and 6.1 months later they were trying hard to start a family. It never worked and soon they were having fertility treatment, years of it. But no amount of consultants, semen specimens, carefully timed sex or alternative medicine worked. They were that dreaded thing, a childless couple, successful but childless, so not that successful then. There had been one pregnancy that went almost full term but in the eighth month they lost the child, a boy. The sad, pathetic little funeral for their stillborn son they had to endure nearly killed them. It did kill their relationship. Not quickly, not in 8 months but over the next few years. Bit by bit, they grew away from each other. Sex, which at first had been wild, then became a mission and was now non-existent. They both had the opportunity to fill the diary with work, more work and work travel. When they found themselves on those increasingly rare occasions together, at home in Wimbledon, they could talk about what they had been doing or were about to do, the office politics, the projects, difficult clients or difficult politicians with whom they were dealing. They had a lot to catch up on. But one subject was never discussed – how they were feeling about each other and what they had gone through. The longer it remained untouched the easier it became to avoid. It sat like the elephant in the corner.

Perhaps this could have gone on for a few more years. Jonno could not speak for Mary, but for his part he had no interest in being with anyone else. He could not say he was happy with her, but he was happy to push the issue aside and just get on with things. But recently, Paul, one half of the couple they had been closest to for the longest time, since just after Oxford days, had called Jonno and arranged to meet, just the two of them, over a beer. He had something to discuss. Paul's wife Meredith had been away on a girls weekend with Mary and had returned home on a mission. Mary had drunk a little too much bubbly and broken down. She was deeply unhappy, she felt Jonno no longer cared about her, she was on the point of chucking everything in and just leaving to go to France, India, somewhere, anywhere. Mary had wept for hours with Meredith, cuddling her like a child, trying to give her some words of

comfort but finding nothing much she could really say. Meredith nailed Paul as soon as she got home – he had to take Jonno to one side and ask him what the fuck he was playing at. Did he not realise how unhappy his wife was? What was he going to do about it?

Paul had moderated the message somewhat by the time he met Jonno but the message was clear nonetheless. Jonno could no longer pretend or avoid - he had to deal with it. He had to sit down with Mary and talk – really talk. What did she want, how could he do more to support her and show her he cared? Trouble was he didn't know whether he did. He knew he had loved her, he knew he still liked and respected her, enjoyed her companionship. But did he have the depth of feeling needed to be her soul mate, as he knew he used to be? Could he ever see her as his soul mate as he thought he used to? What was a fucking soul mate anyway? Maybe that was it: a really good mate whom you liked to fuck.

Jonno was slowing down to catch the slip road. He'd left it a bit late to get across to the inside lane but the Porsche could brake fast and tuck in. He looked up and saw the underside of a very large truck moving in slow motion in his direction.

Jimmy was knackered. He'd delivered two skips already that day but he was still behind schedule for the next one to be delivered at some address in New Malden. He'd had a skin-full last night, his head was throbbing. He knew why he was running late. He'd stopped to get a coffee at the garage by Asda. His truck had a sticker on the back "How's my Driving?" with a number to call. Like all the guys he'd got some mud and accidentally smeared out the last few digits. 'Call 911 Who-gives-a-shit' he thought. He was trying to hold his coffee and light a fag, something he'd done many, many times without the lighted tip catching the wheel and knocking a red-hot nub into his lap. Fuck! He looked down. He could see the burning red tip in his crotch. He tried to brush it off but he was trying not to spill the coffee. He looked up as the truck hit the crash barrier and lurched into the air towards the other carriageway. He didn't see the Porsche.

A loud noise, like a big explosion. The smell of grimy diesel. Shock. Darkness.

Act II

Jonno did not wake up. He did not come round. How could he describe it? He sort of, became aware. Aware of a big white space, total silence and a figure forming in the distance. He felt sure he recognised all this. He didn't think he'd been here before but he'd seen it – in a movie perhaps.

The figure stood before him. It was Morgan Freeman. Now he was sure he'd seen this in a movie. Which one was it? Was it more than one?

“Hi there Jonno, how you feeling?” smiled Morgan.

“Am I dead?” asked Jonno.

“Yes.”

“And so you must be...what, God?”

“Actually I’m Morgan Freeman, playing the part of God. Does it work for you?”

“How do you mean does it work for me?” asked Jonno, now totally confused.

“Well you see I am actually God but I can take on any form that works for you if it makes it easier”

“Makes what easier?”

“Talking, discussing, hanging out,” said Morgan. “You see, I can use any memories or fragments from your mind to create a version of me you feel comfortable with. How about this?”

Morgan Freeman had now become Anthony Hopkins.

“I don’t know, how about Neo from The Matrix?” suggested Jonno.

Keanu Reeves looked at him “But I can’t act and Neo wasn’t really God was he?”

“I don’t actually believe in God” Jonno said, but without much conviction.

“That’s right, you didn’t. You came out, so to speak, as an atheist after you read ‘The God Delusion’.”

This was true but it was the choice of words that unnerved Jonno – “came out.” That was exactly how it had felt. For the first time he had felt not just OK to say he was an atheist but somehow proud of it. He’d remarked to several friends that he reckoned he had come close to how it must feel when a homosexual comes out and declares defiantly, for the first time, that he is gay.

But how did...?

“I know everything about you, Jonno, that’s how. I am God. No need to believe or disbelieve, just get used to it.”

His manner was soft, mild, firm but comforting. “I know everything you’ve ever done or thought, and what you’re thinking right now. You’re not comfortable with Neo are you?”

It was Anthony Hopkins again.

“Yes, I think I feel better with someone older,” Jonno smiled. “But you knew that.”

“Yes, and the Welsh accent helps too. You liked listening to Richard Burton reading *Under Milkwood* as a child didn’t you?” God smiled back at him.

“Am I in Heaven?”

“Not exactly. More like the waiting room to Heaven. I want to talk to you a while, maybe quite a while.” God was now seated in front of Jonno but on what, it was not clear. They were just face-to-face, intimate, chatting.

“I need your help with something. Something quite big.” God interlocked his fingers under his chin and looked, not just at Jonno but, as it seemed to him, *into* Jonno. It was intense.

Jonno squinted his eyes and turned his head away slightly. “My help, why would you need my help or anyone’s help for that matter?” he asked.

“Maybe help is the wrong word. I need your opinion, your advice on something.”

“I don’t understand. Aren’t you supposed to be ...? I mean, you know...”

“Omnipotent and omniscient. Yes, yes, I am but I’ll need to explain all that to you. It doesn’t work quite the way you think. But for now maybe it’s best for me to explain that I have, how can I put this, toned myself down a bit for you. Perhaps the easiest way to explain it is as using a kind of electrical adaptor that allows a 240 volt appliance – you – to connect to a gazillion volt power supply – me. I have, if you like, and I hope you don’t think me immodest, dumbbed myself down a bit, made myself more human, so that we can talk, if not as equals, well then. Let’s just say, we can talk.”

“So you can ask my advice?”

“So that I can ask your advice. Just so.”

“You need my help?”

“I don’t need it, I want it. You might assume I will, as you would say, ‘consult’ with several people, get a range of opinions, establish the common themes and then form a view myself. And it only works if I adapt myself somewhat. I will always know what you thought or said but I will stop myself knowing or affecting what you will think or say. So I hear what you have to say fresh, with no influence or preconceptions on my part.”

“Did you have me killed just so you could ask my advice?” Jonno was suddenly angry. “I’m only 46 years old for God’s sake. I’m married”

“Yes. Mary. Perhaps in return I can help you with that. But no, I did not have you killed. You were killed by Jimmy, a Skip Truck driver. They say smoking kills, well it certainly killed you. He was trying to light a cigarette when he hit the crash barrier and his lorry smashed into you and your new car – the well-engineered one that makes you feel like you’re successful and have a big prick,” God chuckled.

“I’m glad you can see the funny side of this,” said Jonno, starting to feel irritated.

“Sorry that was insensitive of me. You see, there, I can apologise. This must be very strange for you but just go with it, relax. Time has no meaning any more. We can take as long as we want. Do you want to hear what I want your help with?”

Not waiting for Jonno’s reply, God, in Anthony’s relaxed manner and mild welsh voice, continued.

“I want your marketing advice. You are good at marketing aren’t you? I know you are. You are widely regarded as one of the best marketers of your generation. And of course I can tell you that you really were well respected, people meant what they said and wrote. You should have felt more successful than you did. Well then, I need your marketing expertise for a problem I have.”

Flattery works at the best of times, but to be *bigged up* by God, Jonno was now genuinely intrigued. What possible marketing problem could God need his help with?

“Me. I need your help with me. I recall you saying everything is a brand. Not just Nike or Coca Cola, you said David Beckham was a brand. You said James Bond and Madonna were two of the best brands because they managed to reinvent themselves constantly. You would agree then that I am a brand.”

It was true, Jonno had said that. He had used James Bond and Madonna in presentations to clients to show how great brands could evolve to find new audiences by keeping some things the same but bringing other aspects of their brand up to date. Daniel Craig’s Bond was still a man’s man, a tough womaniser with an Aston Martin but he ditched all the gadgets. They would look daft in the context of the iPhone and the Internet, and he took on some of the characteristics of Jason Bourne, the new competing spy franchise. God too was a brand but he would never have said that publically for fear of offending.

“Yes, I suppose so, you are the world’s most famous brand.”

“And how would you say my brand is doing?”

God could see Jonno hesitate. He knew what he was thinking. “Please be honest, Jonno, say what you really think.”

“I’d say you had some challenges,” Jonno offered with what he hoped was some tact in the face of such a question.

“I’d say I’m in the shit. I might even say I’m in a shit sandwich. On the one side more and more people every day see me as a total irrelevance to their lives and on the other side I having a growing army of fanatics who, by association, make me look very bad. I’d say that my brand is in just about the worse shape it’s ever been and getting worse by the minute. What would you say as an atheist, Jonno?”

“You can’t possibly really care what I think? You’re God. If you don’t like it then who else is better than you to fix it?”

“But I don’t want to fix it. I want you to fix it. You’re the marketing genius – relaunch me, give me a great new marketing idea, help me get my brand message across, like you’ve done so many times for tired old brands”

Jonno looked at God. He looked at him hard for the first time. God wasn’t joking.

“Let me get this straight. You are offering me a marketing brief to relaunch God?”

“Pretty good brief I’d say.”

Jonno was struggling to keep a grip on all this. Was this really God, the Great Almighty, asking him to give Him a marketing makeover?

“Why me? Why now? Why?”

“I’ve already explained I just want to get some ideas from someone who is an expert in marketing. I’ll happily explain why now and answer any other questions you have but I take it you will accept this assignment?”

Jonno thought for a moment. “Do I have a choice?”

“Of course you have a choice, you have a free will to do as you like. But I’d have thought the more relevant question is can you resist it? I suppose you might also like to ask what’s in it for you?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“You mean apart from having the chance to work directly with a senior client, a very senior client. Isn’t that what you always said – you really liked to work with the top team on the really big problems? That’s when you do your best work you said. Well I hope you’d agree I am the top team and this a marketing challenge worthy of your talents. As far as incentives or rewards go I can offer you this – I will give you some help with your problem, the last thing that was on your mind before a 2-ton truck hit your head. I will help you work out what to do about Mary. Even when you were alive you’d stopped being motivated

by money or fame. I'd have thought some help with your wife was sufficient payment for your marketing advice."

Jonno felt sadness wash over him. For the first time since his encounter with his Maker he started to think about actually being dead. Game over, no second chances, no time to try anything new or put anything right.

"What use would that help be now? I'm dead to her."

"Yes sadly that is true. But you still want to know, don't you? What went wrong? What should you have done? What would you say to her if you could? As you died you were asking yourself whether she was your soul mate. Well I can help you with that, put your mind at rest, ease your soul."

God stood up.

"I expect you'd like some time to think. It's a lot to take on board, I appreciate. Would you like a coffee, a cigarette perhaps?"

Jonno had given up years ago and was rarely tempted to have a smoke these days but as soon as God mentioned coffee and a cigarette he knew that was exactly what he wanted right now. He looked down and there was a double espresso coffee, his favourite brand, the one he helped build, instantly recognisable by the logo on the mug if not the rich aromatic smell which, in truth, smelled like any other good coffee. 'You drink the brand not just the coffee' he remembered telling his old boss. And next to the coffee the reassuring red chevron on a pack of Marlboro beside an ashtray and a Zippo lighter.

He looked up and saw he was alone. As he settled back, took a sip of coffee and fired up a 'Marlby' he started to think. Relaunch God – it was a pretty good brief. OK he had been an atheist but now he had met God. And without doubt he was sure it was God he had just been talking to. But it didn't matter, he didn't always really believe in the client's product, he just made himself believe so he could tackle the marketing brief as if it were the most important brand in the world because, to its many users, and the new users Jonno

would help create, it should be the most important brand. Marketers, good ones, are born enthusiasts, they always believe the brand can be turned around and revitalised. God, he had to acknowledge, was the most important brand, ever. No argument.

He wanted to know more about the brief but did not need convincing that the God brand was in trouble. There were many happy believers: people who'd found God through many different religions and seemed the better for it. But they felt like the outliers and not very aspirational for a large and growing number of, what, ordinary people? And then there were the religious zealots, ready to commit all kinds of atrocities and cruelties in God's name. The brand was fragmented – people experienced God in lots of different ways. That's normally perfectly fine for a brand. Great brands have lots of facets and idiosyncrasies. They are a rich personality, one that can make themselves essential to peoples' lives in different ways. But there is always one coherent organising thought. Disney is all about family magic, Nike offers self-esteem and self-expression through sport, Persil or OMO understands mums and kids.

When he thought about God no one single idea came into his head, something he suspected was true for many people outside the mainstream religions. Maybe there was one idea about God, the dominant brand association that seemed to lie at the heart of the brand – contradiction. The contradiction between the mighty, vengeful Old Testament God and the loving, caring-sharing New Testament Jesus. The contradiction between the evidence of God in everything beautiful, wonderful and uplifting and the doubt about Him and his real motives in the face of everything base, violent and evil. The conflict between one's moral conscience, what one felt God expected, and the reality of what it really took to cope with the real world - the compromises, temptations and pragmatic choices.

Conflict and contradiction – not a great starting place from which to rebuild the new God brand. God may or may not be omnipresent but he was definitely all over the place in branding terms.

It was at this point that Jonno realised for the first time in a very long time he had absolutely no idea what the solution to the client's marketing brief might be. Normally he knew right at the outset of a project what the eventual solution might look like. Often he had the actual idea. He might develop it a bit or in some cases replace it with an even better idea but he normally had the basis of an idea the moment he heard the brief, or if not then very shortly after.

Like a lot of experts in his field he had developed pattern recognition. He had seen similar problems before and could 'dial up' a relevant solution. He had a 'go-to' set of approaches so that, if the answer was not immediately obvious to him, then at least he knew where to look and was certain he'd find one. Go back to what made the brand famous in the first place and give it a new twist for a new generation. Cut back on all the distracting range extensions of the brand and focus on innovation around the core benefit. Re-segment the market, find new users or occasions the brand could target. Challenge one or two assumptions that every other competing brand makes. Change the rules. Don't try to compete in this market, create a new category. He could trot these out when needed. Tesco versus Sainsbury's (and then the other way around), Miller Beer, Smirnoff Ice, Swatch, iPod/iPad, Google, Honda etc etc etc. He could trot out the case studies that backed up all these proven-to-be-successful approaches to finding the 'big new idea'.

But relaunching God? He had no idea what the answer might be and no real idea where to start. Could he honestly use basic marketing to help solve the biggest challenge in the universe. Could he, trailing in the footsteps of the finest philosophical and theological minds in history, come up with a big new idea for God that would capture the imagination – and devotion – of a whole new generation living in what could only be described as a fucked up world? Just by using basic brand marketing?

"You might be able to, we'll see. And if you don't, what have we lost by trying? Time? We have plenty of that."

God was back.

“Jonno I think you must agree it’s a great brief. A brief where for once you don’t really know the answer before you start working on it. You get to work directly with the senior client who has offered you an incentive more valuable than any you have ever been offered. Help with the most important issue in your life and the chance, perhaps a slim one, to help everyone, everywhere with the most important issue in their lives. What say you give it a go? That’s all I ask. Indulge me, I think the results might be interesting.”

Jonno placed his hands down in front of him. He looked around at this strange but very pleasant space in which he found himself. Great ideas required good ergonomics: somewhere calm but inspiring to work. That is how he felt right now: calm but inspired. Then he looked at God.

“OK, I’ll try. But we need to get some things straight between us. You have to stop reading my mind. I want to be able to ask you questions or suggest things to you without you already knowing what I’m going to say.”

“Of course, I agree, not a problem.” God smiled at him. “What else? You see already I don’t know what you are going to say!”

“Fine, well ... Look, obviously I now believe in you but I’m not going to worship you or treat you with any more respect than I’d treat any client. I will respect you but I want to be free to disagree, to challenge you, to ask questions or put forward ideas you may or may not like.”

“I would want nothing less. What else?”

Jonno thought. “I need to be able to research things, to look at the problem from different angles. How am I going to do that? I need stimulus – I can’t think about a new problem without filling my mind with new ideas. I want to be able to run some ideas past the, what do I call them, followers or potential followers”

God sat back, folded his arms, narrowed his eyes a little and gave Jonno an old fashioned look.

“ I will agree that I will not read your mind but I cannot un-know what you have said or done in the past. I recall you saying to some colleagues that the only

research anyone needed these days was all on the Internet. Very well, you can have access to the Internet. There, look beside you”

Jonno glanced across and saw an Apple iMac with the Google page on full screen.

“I have given you a modified version – it can access the Internet but you cannot communicate with anyone or seek anyone else’s advice. It never helps when the dead try to contact the living. Neither will you be able to use focus groups. No on-line surveys, no consumer research. You will have at your disposal everything anyone has ever said, written and posted on the Internet. It’s all there – you said so yourself. You also said that you found focus groups, and I quote, ‘about as useful as a one legged dwarf in an arse kicking competition.’ Very colourful. People are unreliable witnesses to their own lives you said, they respond unpredictably to new ideas precisely because they are new, you said. You said ...”

“Yes, OK, yes. I know what I said. That’s fine. As long as I get to ask you, my client, anything and as long as I have the Internet I can give it a go. I can try to work with you to get to some possible solutions. I can have a crack at coming up with some ideas. You can decide whether or not you want to try them out.”

“Of course I can. I’m God.” God chuckled to himself, amused at his own humour. “So we have an agreement then. When can you get started?”

“This is very odd,” said Jonno.

“It is what is”. replied God. “So what’s first?”

“I’d like some time to think, to map out a process. I’ll run that by You and if You’re happy then we can start.”

“Magic and Logic,” said God. “The logic of a good marketing process and the magic of a great idea. But whereas logic can come from magic, it can be post-rationalised as you yourself have done so often with your case studies. But can magic come from logic I wonder?”

He's right, thought Jonno. Every brand case study he had ever used to illustrate the brand strategy that had led to a great idea was a distortion of the truth. They ignored the serendipity of what really happened, the influence of the people involved and their own personal agendas, the leftfield events that shaped the outcome in ways that could never have been predicted. You cannot logic your way to an idea – but you can use a logical process to make it more likely you will have an idea. You can make your mind receptive to the magic. A logical process has value, he really believed that. If nothing else how confident can you be about an idea if, with no work or exploration or discussion, it just pops up. You need to work through the process, come up with several ideas from which you can choose. The enthusiasm for an idea lies in having worked hard to get it and from knowing it is better, much better, than any of the alternatives.

“Magic does not come from logic but it comes more often with a thorough, logical approach” Jonno replied. Satisfied with this answer, God stood up and went to leave.

“Let me know when you are ready, Jonno, because I cannot read your mind now. I've left you some paper and a pen. I thought you might want to scribble some stuff down.”

Act III

Jonno sat, pen in hand, staring at the blank paper in front of him. He had done this a thousand times. Just set out a logical step-by-step process, the basis for any client proposal. But this was not any client. It was ... Forget it, he told himself, forget the client. Forget the nature of this brief – it's like a brief for any old brand looking for a big new idea to make itself more relevant to the world and where the world is going. It has to lead to a solution that is a credible yet interesting leap from where the brand is and has come from, one that will work in the here and now but will also be future proof. That is to say, as far as you can ever see into the future, it has to be a solution with legs. Never mind the big idea, it has to be a long idea, a springboard that will open up potential for the brand to grow over time.

Step One, he wrote down, understand the problem and the opportunity posed by the brief. What are the consequences of getting an answer? Why is it important to the brand? Who is the target – who will benefit by the brand being relaunched? Why the urgency? Why now? What are the consequences of failure? These were the big questions but Jonno knew each answer would stimulate more and more questions until the point where he truly felt he had looked at the underlying problem from lots of angles – until he, and most importantly the client, who must make this journey with him, could really say they understood the problem they were trying to solve.

Step Two, understand the market. Who are the competition? How does the market segment? Every market has a current segmentation - who buys what, why and when? It's a kind of map by which, consciously or not, everybody involved in that market navigates. Every market map looks different. The female versus the male segment is of crucial significance in some markets, like personal care brands, but of no interest in others like airlines.

Refreshment might help you choose between a beer or a soft drink but is of no relevance in choosing which whisky. Left-handed versus right-handed matters very little if you make toothpaste but quite a lot if you make golf clubs. Challenging these assumptions could lead to new ideas – an airline for women, a refreshing whisky or a left handed toothpaste. Not necessarily good ideas though.

Some marketing professionals believed that there are a given number of types of people – adventurous and outgoing versus considered and conservative. As Jonno used to joke, “There are two kinds of people in the world: the kind that think there are two kinds of people and the kind that don't!” This way of dividing people up into particular personality types normally came up with 5 or 6 groups and this, some held, could largely explain the kind of brand choices they would make in any market. Jonno did not hold with this – he'd always believed that you change according to the market. He himself was confident and outgoing when it came to buying cars but very conservative and cautious when it came to buying electrical goods. In the case of this brief he was less sure – perhaps basic personality plus the situation in which you find yourself explained most of the choices you make in respect of God. In

any event Step Two would be to explore this – how does who you are, where you are and the particular occasion influence your choice of whether to believe in God and what to believe about God?

Step Three – the most interesting part in any brand project, if he was honest, is the Product Deep Dive. He would throw himself into God, the Universe, the meaning of life. He had to understand not just where God was in the minds of the various segments of the market but how He had come to be there. The answer to reviving a brand often lay in getting back to what made it popular and famous in the first place.

He was excited but also daunted by this. Normally he felt no fear just excitement – he loved getting under the skin of products, fathoming how they work, learning about all the myths and truths surrounding the brand. And if he had to pick just one part of the process where he had more often found great insights about brands it would be in the understanding – and seeing some new dimensions to – the product. It was not, as most people assumed, by talking to ‘consumers’. That was always interesting and occasionally surprising but rarely, in and of itself, gave the key to unlocking the brand potential. “If I’d listened to my consumers I’d have built a faster horse.” as Henry Ford once famously remarked.

Perhaps the most accurate and useful way of describing where an idea for a brand occurs is at the intersection between an insight about how the product works and an insight about how people work. Pampers has special paper technology that keeps the baby drier longer, mums agonize about whether they are a good mum. Pampers gives mums confidence they really are a mums and champions their cause. That sort of thing.

From nappies or ‘dypers’ to God. But the principle was the same – the answer probably lay in understanding what happens at the intersection of what makes people tick and what makes the universe tick. In theory you can look at this in any order but Jonno was firmly of the view you went looking for people

insights armed with a depth of knowledge about the product and not the other way around.

Great! But in this case he didn't have to do a deep dive into nappies or whisky or dog food – he had to do a deep dive into the meaning of life and the Universe.

What the hell, he'd dive as far and as deep as he could and see what he found out. He didn't need to know or understand everything he just needed to get inside the product far enough to see some patterns, find some inspiration, harvest a few ideas. What the hell indeed – he grinned and wrote that down as a question under 'understanding the competition.'

Step Four – The consumer. How does the brand relate, or not, to peoples' lives? In many ways this would have been covered under the market segmentation work in Step Two. But at this stage in the process he would be looking with much more focus. With an overall map of the market in his mind and lots of ideas and issues in his head about the product he'd zero in on how people function in society in relation to this brand. And he'd look at how the people in the target market – that particular group of people who will be treated as the creative target for the brand – in particular see the brand or product.

Why do people need or reject God? How do these people in particular see God?

He already had a hunch about who made up the target group. It seemed to Jonno that there was a simple choice. On the one hand you could target committed believers and offer them a new vision for God, one that would renew their commitment but in such a way as to attract the non-believers. The key to reviving a brand was to generate momentum by making it different. So one option was to go to those already loyal to the brand, change the way they saw it and use their newfound enthusiasm to attract others, to create a new bandwagon. This option posed some problems, he felt. Firstly, Jonno knew, the hardest thing in marketing is trying to change entrenched usage behaviour – if that is what people have always done then that is what they will always do

unless they are forced to change. They are very rarely persuaded to change – they need to be forced. You can force them with a new technology, government legislation or massive financial incentive. It can be done but it's hard, demanding and often very slow. In the case of God the odds were really stacked against you since beliefs and behaviour were enshrined and disciplined by religious doctrine, rituals, institutions and leaders or elders.

On the other hand you could go for the non-users and/or agnostics. Target the people who do not believe in God. Less effort needed to change behaviours since there are no behaviours to change – God is irrelevant to their lives. There is no Church of the Unfaithful, no rituals or bishops to contradict. There were some prominent atheists but very few people prepared to fight for their disbeliefs.

Go for the non-user – that was Jonno's instinct. He'd have to see whether his client agreed or whether, like the most irritating of clients, he'd say 'we have to target everyone.' Jonno was prepared for this. "An avalanche starts with the movement of just a few snow flakes. You just have to know which ones and what it takes to move them", he would say.

So he would look at people and God but in particular non-believers and God. Better still he would look at people who really, really believe in God and people who really, really don't believe in God. It was always useful to look at both extremes.

"How are you getting on? God looked down at Jonno's note pad, which had four big headlines and lots of scribbles and arrows.

"I haven't finished yet. I've only mapped out the first four stages."

"Tell me about them."

So Jonno ran God through the first four steps, Understand the Problem, Understand the Market, Dive into the Product and Dive into people in relation to the product or brand.

“Atheists, I want to target Atheists” God said in a very determined tone.

“Those are my snow flakes at the start of the avalanche. Besides I’ve tried the other approach, it doesn’t work.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jonno, intrigued by this.

“I don’t want to create a new religion. I’ve tried that. You get some converts but a great deal of war and strife. I’d have thought that was obvious. I want to go after the committed non-believers, the radical atheists, not even the confused or agnostic. I want the active brand rejecters, as you would put it. If I convert them then I make a statement the whole world will listen to for generations to come, forever. I will have to explain this but just take it from Me that atheism is the door you have to pass through to get the best understanding of God. So come on then, when can we get going?”

It seemed to Jonno that God was in a downbeat mood. He wasn’t just impatient he was somehow depressed.

“You seem different. When we last spoke You were smiling and joking. What has happened to change Your mood? If that’s not too impertinent of me.”

“It is impertinent but relating to you like this, as I must, and having accepted that you will treat me only with a certain amount of respect as ‘the client’ I have to put up with it.”

Jonno was shocked. Seeing God was one thing, seeing God pissed off and tetchy was quite another.

“I’m sorry, forgive me, you’re right I’m not myself. While you have been scribbling down your process I have been doing my omniscient thing, you might say. I’ve been watching the news. It really is very depressing, there are some quite appalling things going on. Disgusting, awful, pointless. I see all of life and I value all of life from the smallest bacteria to my most complex of creatures: you, all of you, people. But like everyone, my heart goes out to the children. I hate to see children suffer. It’s not sentimentality in my case. I don’t know, it’s just that violence towards children is so cruel and so damaging for the future. If there is no love for your Children there is no love.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Jonno said evenly. “You did not see fit to let me have any children.”

‘You do know. You don’t have to have your own children to understand what I’m saying. And with some more understanding you will realise that your being childless was part of no plan of mine. Look, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that in one respect life did not go the way you wanted it to. I’m sorry My mood is not lighter. My mood will improve when we can get started.”

“You seem very sure that this is all going to result in something that’s going to help the human condition. There are no guarantees. I’m just a marketing guy – you’re God. If you can’t...” God cut across him.

“We’ve covered that already. Let me worry about that. You just do your thing. Give me a marketing solution to the God brand. Let’s see if it can’t help the world.”

Jonno looked down at his pad.

“There are a couple of more steps in the process. We need to spend some time looking at trends. We can’t look at everything, we don’t need to, but we need to spend some time just, I don’t know, sniffing the Zeitgeist. What’s out, what’s in, what’s hot what’s not? If you want a solution that is future proof we need to see how it plugs in to where people are heading.”

“Agreed, and then?”

“Well by then we should start to see some things in the cross-hairs. I’m expecting that we will have some themes, some insights, some ideas. I want to get to the stage where we have more than one way forward. I want you to be able to choose, to weigh up pro’s and cons.”

“I want to feel excited. I want to feel like we have something that we can’t wait to get on with. That’s the test of a great idea – you can’t wait to get it out there and you can’t stop building on it.” God was rubbing his hands now and grinning.

Jonno laughed. “You will, you will! But it’s so much better if you are feeling that way having rejected some other perfectly good ideas. You never know, well at least humans never know, if an idea is best, only that it is better. And the surest way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.”

“So, Step five is looking at trends then Step Six is the ideas? Have I got that right?”

“Well, that’s the plan. There is a seventh step. We need to talk about how the idea gets implemented, how we bring it alive for the target audience – the activity plan.”

“On the Seventh day I normally rest. You’re saying on the Seventh Step I actually have to act?”

Jonno picked up his pencil and looked into the face of the Great Redeemer. He’d always liked Anthony Hopkins. He liked him a lot as God.

“So, let’s talk about the problem.”

“Step One?” Asked God.

Step One” replied Jonno.

Act IV

“So you say you want me to help relaunch God . By relaunch I presume you mean create some new vision for the brand, is that right?” It felt strange but the only way Jonno could handle this was to treat it like any other marketing brief. He had to get the client to talk about his problem, his challenge. He would encourage God to explain it both as a problem and an opportunity. He would try to get Him to look at it from different angles and he fully expected that the final brief would be clearer and tighter than the original brief of “Help me relaunch my brand.”

“Yes, I want to come up with a new idea about what God is and what role I have in people’s lives. I want people to believe in me, God, not because they have to or need to but because they want to.”

“Why is that important” asked Jonno.

“What do you mean? Why is it important that they believe in me or why is it important that they want to believe in me?”

“Both”

“Quite simply, I not only help make the world a better place but I also help guide it to a better place. It’s important to believe in me. I would imagine we will get to this in the Second Step when we look at the market, but I see an evolution in people’s faith in Me. The God of the Old Testament is an all-powerful God. People had to believe in God to avoid the consequences of not believing in Me: my wrath and an after-life of eternal damnation. In the New Testament I am a god of love, a choice people can make and one they make because they need to feel the love of God. I am using the construct you will be most familiar with, the Bible, but you should look at this in respect of the many other faiths and religions. My point, however, is that up to now I am presented as a God one either has no choice but to believe in or a God that people need. You have a choice but only one good choice. In a world where people are trying to make sense of war and oppression or trying to cope with life’s mysteries, temptations and challenges is it better to have a God you have to obey, a God you feel you need or a God you want because He makes the world a better place? The world continues to change. I think I have to change with it. I want to be wanted.”

That’s why I like working with senior clients, thought Jonno. They’re smart and they know what they want. Perhaps it is not going to be too hard to reframe the brief in a tighter more actionable way.

“What do you mean by better? You said you make the world a better place. In what way better?”

“Good question. Sadly not one I can answer succinctly until you spend a bit more time on My, as you would put it, product, and perhaps not even then. Better can mean many different things and these vary according to who we are talking about and their particular situation. For now can I just say happier and more harmonious. Or to put it another way, more moral. Atheists have pointed out that morality, knowing the difference between right and wrong and having a preference for making the right choices, is not the exclusive preserve of the God-Fearing. Atheists understand morality just as well as Believers. So all the world, with the exception of the truly evil, would accept that higher morality is better. The most important commandment is “Do unto others” and so on. People would rather live in a world, find it easier to live in a world, of higher moral behaviour.”

Fair enough, thought Jonno. He’d read Dawkins’s ‘The God Delusion’. It had been the catalyst for his own proclaimed atheism but even Dawkins would agree with what God had just said. The difference was that Dawkins put his faith entirely in science to achieve this and saw religious faith as the enemy of a better world.

“Why now? Why ask me to work on this brief now? What’s the urgency? What are the consequences of not solving the brief?”

“There is never a bad time to discover a love of God, but you’re right, there is an urgency. I know what you are trying to do so I’m not going to make this too complicated. Stress, over-crowding and the Internet. They’re all connected, but let me start with stress. The world is reaching unacceptable levels of stress. There are now more than 6 billion people. Do you know how many there were 100 years ago? 1.6 billion. 2,000 years ago there were roughly 300,000 – smaller than Guildford. You can see that the growth is exponential but it has not always been like that. In the past war and pestilence occasionally caused declines. It also caused a lot of pain. That was the time of faith in the all-powerful vision of Me. Understandable really. Anyway, back to my point, at current rates we’ll top 10 billion by 2050. As the Americans would say, you do the math. Things are going to have change radically –

either to curb the population or make leaps in technology to support such a large population. People increasingly sense this. Paradoxically, as the world gets exponentially bigger it is feeling exponentially smaller thanks to media and the Internet. If you measure it in terms of bad things – wars, genocides, child mortality, crime, that kind of stuff – the world is a much better place because relatively speaking there are less bad things.”

Jonno was struggling to keep up with this.

“Think of it as shark attacks. There are more shark attacks now than at any time in history. There are no more sharks but there are lots more people in the water. And every time someone is killed by a shark everyone on the planet gets to hear about it thanks to 24-hour rolling news and the Internet. So although the world is, relatively speaking, a much better place it feels much worse and it feels like it is getting worse still. If you told someone 2000 years ago that there were going to be 2000 times the number of people on the planet they would have run screaming into the streets. But they didn’t know and they couldn’t envisage the advances in technology that would make 6 billion people perfectly sustainable. Your generation knows that the population is heading for nearly double its current size in their lifetime and they cannot envisage the circumstances by which this can be possible. The world is getting much, much bigger, it feels much, much smaller and much more dangerous, even though it is not. Stress and overcrowding.”

“And the Internet, why single out the Internet?” asked Jonno.

“Again I want to make this simple, that’s what you want isn’t it, to see the big picture?”

Without waiting for Jonno’s reply God continued.

“The Internet is, as you would put it, a game changer, a discontinuity. It isn’t, of course, discontinuous and will not seem so when mankind looks backwards, it’s part of a progression. But for now think of the Internet like the wheel, the discovery of fire, the printing press or electricity. It will change everything. If we just go back to the last apparent discontinuity, electricity. Ancient Greeks and Egyptians observed electricity in nature but William

Gilbert coined the phrase electricity in 1600 and Benjamin Franklin used his kite and key 200 years later to show that lightning was electrical. None of them envisaged where electricity would take mankind. Without electricity there would be no Internet. But the Internet will take mankind much further still, it is a bigger game-changer than electricity or any of the others.”

This struck a chord with Jonno.

“I think I know where you are going with this” he said. “Everything that has ever been thought or written is now on the Internet, every idea and every piece of information. More and more people are uploading everything they think and do. Search engines are getting better and better at connecting all this together”

“Precisely,” said God. “We are on the cusp of the creation of one global brain, one global consciousness. It won’t be faultless any more than the human brain is faultless. But like the human brain it will be unpredictable, if not to Me, then certainly to the 6 billion or more people on earth.”

“Stress, overcrowding and the Internet” Jonno wrote these words in capital on his pad. He looked up, “We could be heading for disaster.”

“Absolute nonsense” said God. “You are heading for paradise and it’s my job to help you get there and help you appreciate what it means. And it’s your job to help me.”

“So let me get me try to summarise.” With a growing sense of responsibility Jonno tried to get a grip on things by reverting to his role as marketing consultant.

“You want to create a new vision for God, one that people will want to believe in rather than feel they are forced or pressurised to believe, and the main benefit is to help them make moral choices in an otherwise stressful, over-crowded, interconnected world that’s heading for the rocks.”

“In a world they think is over-crowded, stressful, increasingly violent and headed for disaster. My job is to reassure them that they can make it so that it is none of those things. Have you walked in Brooklyn, New York recently,

been to Canada or South Africa, have you ever looked into space? The world is getting better and there is plenty of room out there.”

“And when you say ‘reassure them’ who are they? Everyone?”

God smiled. “If I have understood your process I can only make everyone believe if I make some people believe. Every avalanche starts with the movement of a few snowflakes – the question is which snowflakes? Who should I target for this new Divinity? Shall we move on to Step Two and would you like another coffee. I see you’ve smoked all the Marlboros”

Act V

Jonno put his coffee cup down. That coffee was divine – great line, wish he’d thought of it before. He’d been spending some time on the Internet, Wikipedia mostly. He didn’t care whether it was 100% right or subject to abuse, nothing is ever 100% right. He could not imagine working without Wiki. In just a few minutes he’d whizzed through the headlines of all the major religions. There was a very useful summary of the Bible, how it was constructed, who was believed to have written which bits of the New Testament, the key messages. He would not pass any theology exam but he had gleaned some useful stuff. That’s marketers for you, he thought, a mile wide and an inch deep, not

always an inch. He didn't need to get bogged down, he just needed enough insight to be able to start to map out the market for God. He wasn't relying totally on Wiki. He'd had a decent education and had attended Sunday school as a kid. He'd seen countless movies, golden oldies like 'Ben Hur' or 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' and more recent classics like 'The Matrix'. He'd not just read 'The God Delusion' but many other books, novels mostly, that dealt directly or indirectly with God and religion. Voltaire, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Conrad, Dickens. CS Lewis, he'd read pretty widely over the years. He had a lot of thoughts and ideas floating around in his head. The challenge was to get this down as a working model that would be useful in understanding who believes in God, why they believe, what they believe and how all this varies over time or place.

Where he had to admit he was light was philosophy and comparative religion. He'd done a little at university but not much, so one of the most useful searches he did on Wiki was "The meaning of life." It gave a very succinct summary of all the great philosophers and religions.

He was looking for patterns, shapes in the mist of all this wisdom and doctrine. Some marketers liked to depict a market on two axes. They would take a market like mobile phones and try to explain people's choice of product or brand according to where they fell on just two dimensions. For example did they see a mobile phone as essential to their lives at one extreme or just a useful tool on the other? On the other axis they'd map people by age or social class. In this way they would explain that this kind of smart phone or this brand attracts younger less affluent people who see their phone as essential to their lives, whereas this kind of phone or brand appealed to people who were older, less affluent and saw these new devices as a mere mobile telephone. Useful up to point. But as Jonno would explain this kind of segmentation is misleading – there are more than two dimensions, each quadrant is not equal in size and so on. They work well because they work on a two-dimensional PowerPoint slide.

Jonno liked to see a market as circles and clusters, often overlapping like a Venn diagram, with the circles being different sizes to show how important, big or profitable each segment was.

This is what he was trying to do with the market for God.

He focused on the various religions from Zoroaster, to Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and many more. The first pattern he saw, albeit in the ridiculously short summaries on Wiki, was how similar they all were. Many of the values, if not the specific beliefs, were the same. Making better moral choices, respect for your fellow man, your community and nature, living a good life in order to earn a better life in the hereafter.

Those were the first two big circles he drew. One circle – a very big one – contained everyone who felt there was some kind of life after death. The other circle, smaller but still important and, he guessed, growing, contained all the people who felt this life is the only life you get.

He focused on the life after death group. He drew three more circles inside it. One he labelled 'Fear and Devotion', the second, 'Faith and Solace', the third, 'Community Values'. They did not correlate exactly with individual religions and they overlapped, especially the second and third. He drew a line dissecting all three, at the 'Faith and Devotion' end he wrote 'Fundamental, Immutable' at the Community Values he wrote 'Adaptive, Relative'.

It seemed to Jonno that this helped explain people's relationship with God. Life is brutal, the only comfort is an all powerful, all seeing God who has a plan for all of us but will hold each of us fully accountable for our actions with dire consequences for sinners. Fear and Devotion to God, a god who must be worshipped, who demands our obedience seemed to be the main themes of this segment of the market. Moving down the line you find the group who share some of those beliefs, hence the overlap but where the stronger themes were of using faith in a Higher Being to find solace or merely to cope, not just with life's trials and tribulations, but also with the mysteries of life and the universe. The Third Group overlapped with the second but not the first. Faith

in God was important to make sense of a world they could not fully comprehend but there was a big emphasis on community, balance, harmony.

He then turned to the Non-believers. He found this much easier – there were two very distinct groups – Hedonists and Scientists. He drew a line through them. At one end he wrote ‘Care’ and at the other he wrote ‘Don’t Care’. Hedonists just don’t care about God, they care about having a good time, enjoying this life. They were not necessarily immoral, Jonno thought, but they were greedy, materialistic and fairly shallow. The Scientists, who were not all literally scientists, were not shallow, they did care but they believed only in what could be proved. What they did not understand they assumed one day someone would and they refused to fill in gaps in knowledge with faith.

So now he had three big groups and five subgroups. Jonno then turned to ‘Occasion’. Some marketers would call this ‘Needstates’. Jonno hated this jargonese. He did not always succeed but he always tried to use vocabulary that anyone could understand - not just marketers. So he would try as hard as he could to say ‘people’ not ‘consumers’. He’d explain that ‘brand values’ were another way of saying ‘reputation’ and he never used ‘Needstates’ when what was meant was ‘circumstances’ or ‘occasion’.

So what were the circumstances or occasions that changed how you saw, whether you saw, God?

This took a little time – he had no neat summary in Wiki to help him see the patterns. He had to trawl his own experiences, what he had seen or read to find some meaningful patterns. He was looking for the ‘Pareto’ – not the occasions that governed every attitude or choice but the fewest number that explained 80% - the vast majority.

“How’re you getting on?” God was behind him looking over his shoulder at all the circles and lines and labels on the pad.

“How long have you been there? With all due respect do you mind not reading over my shoulder” said Jonno with mild irritation.

“Sorry, sorry, so sorry. In this more human form, for your benefit I might point out, I can’t contain my impatience. By the way, I’m always here. We really must get on so you can get the hang of this omni thing. But what about this, what do you call it, market map?”

“No problem, I understand.” Jonno stretched out his arms and gave a tired shudder, then shook his head to wake himself up. “I’m just working on different occasions or circumstances and looking at which ones explain people’s relationship to You, whether they believe, what they believe or want to believe. And your more human form is for your benefit as much as mine – I can’t work with a celestial being but I can cope with impatient senior clients. You might as well help me with this.”

“I’d love to. Can I begin by adding something to all your circles and lines? Tolerance: the degree to which believers tolerate other people’s beliefs or disbeliefs. There is a correlation to some of the religions but much more importantly there are examples of it among almost all cultures across time. A lot of people right now are focused on a minority of intolerant, fundamentalist Islamists but they forget the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition – which, the way I look at things, was just a moment ago and involved Christians. A predominantly Lutheran culture killed 6 million Jews. Not all Jews are very tolerant of Palestinians. You get my point. I know a lot of this is cultural intolerance rather than purely religious intolerance but it fascinates Me and depresses Me in equal measure. People were intolerant of homosexuals, now some homosexuals are intolerant of people who believe in heterosexuality. It all goes around but there is a lot of intolerance about”

“So why didn’t you put in an extra commandment that explained that you should love God but let other people make their own choices about whether they do and how they do?”

“I thought I’d got it covered in the “Do unto others” but I take your point. Anyway, go on, add it to your market map”

Jonno started to draw another line, Tolerant versus Intolerant but he wasn’t quite sure where to start or end it.

“Don’t worry, just make a note of it in the margin” God suggested helpfully.
“Now, occasions. I’d say the most important is Lifeboats. There are very few, who when faced with death, proclaim their atheism.”

Jonno wrote down “Lifeboats’ but added next to it “Mortality, fear of death.”
Everyone experiences it sometimes and a lot of people worry about it all the time depending on their circumstances.”

“The opposite of that is celebration and moments of great joy. That often prompts people to want to give thanks to someone or something bigger than themselves.”

‘You’re right Jonno agreed. “And what about wonderment – it can have a scary side, our sense of insignificance when confronted by the power of nature or the scale of the universe, but it can also be awe inspiring. The feeling we get when we see the beauty of nature or listen to great music. Maybe it makes you want to worship God or maybe it makes you just want to give thanks to something or someone.”

“Self-esteem” said God. “When people find themselves in a situation where their self-esteem is questioned or undermined, they look for a higher person, for unconditional love. It’s no wonder that I am often referred to as “Our Father’.”

“I’d add responsibility to that”, said Jonno. “Self-esteem can run away with you. The more power and responsibility you have the more you feel the need for superior guidance and accountability.”

“The best leaders are believers, you’re right. Look at the Queen.”

Jonno wrote all these down next to every one of the five sub-groups and he added anything from no tick to three ticks according to how relevant he thought they were for that group.

“Mortality and fear of death; celebration and joy; wonderment/coping with mystery; self-esteem and responsibility – I think that works well.”

Jonno's market map was by now a bit messy but all the important themes were captured. He could tidy it up later.

"So where on this map do you want to focus for the new You?" Jonno asked.

"I've told you – Atheists. In terms of occasions I'd go for a mixture of when you feel the need for self-esteem, want to celebrate, feel a positive sense of wonderment. And I want the message to encourage tolerance – strong beliefs but a tolerance of debate."

"And if I pushed You to pick one of the occasions or circumstances?"

God thought for a moment. "Self-esteem with responsibility and humility."

Jonno wrote this down, "Key target = Atheists looking for enhanced self-esteem but with a sense of responsibility and humility"

God stood up so Jonno did likewise. God gripped his shoulders. It was a good feeling. "I like this, we're a good team, you and Me don't you think?"

"Yes, so far so good" agreed Jonno. "I feel we have a tighter grip on the problem we're trying to solve, and the challenge we face. I'm not sure I understand the market if I'm honest. I guess I need to get a better understanding of the product but we have a useful map about how people come to make the choices they do. And I agree with the target. Convert the Atheists to God for the right reasons, the reasons most relevant to them. If You can pull that off it would create a big noise in the market. It would make people sit up and take notice, it would give You fresh momentum."

"We, Jonno, we. If we can pull it off. So what do you want to know about the product?"

"Not much really. What is the meaning of life? Did you create the universe and how does it work? I want you to explain this 'omni' thing to me. We're finite creatures in an infinite universe, how does that work? What was there before there was You? What came before the Big Bang? How can you be real if you cannot be proved? Just the basics really."

"You know Jonno I am really beginning to like you"

Jonno was taken aback by this.

“I thought you loved me?”

“We always love our children Jonno, but we don’t always like them.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Jonno. “ I only know about loving and liking my wife, they go hand in hand.”

“Yes, Jonno I will help you with that, I promise. You want to know about the “God” product and how that can be consistent with all the pain and suffering in the world, the death of an unborn child, the death of love”

“Yes. I want to know about that probably most of all”

God turned to go.

“And I want to know about the competition, I need to know about the competition.” Jonno called after Him, clicking back into marketing consultant mode, a welcome retreat from sad, dead and unfulfilled.

“False Gods, Jonno, the competition is false Gods. Hasn’t changed since Moses.” And then God was gone – or rather he was gone from sight.

Act VI

It felt to Jonno that he had been sat staring at the Apple iMac for hours and was just getting more and more confused. He’d dropped Physics and Chemistry in Grade 9 to concentrate on his strong subjects at school. He’d always been interested in science but he was no scientist. A copy of Stephen Hawking’s ‘A Brief History of Time’ had sat on his coffee table, he hadn’t got

past the first 20 pages. Bill Bryson's book, which he'd listened to on his iPod during long business flights, was easier going but even that sent him to sleep.

Philosophy was a different matter. He had studied that a bit. He couldn't have explained the history of philosophy or reliably have attributed the right ideas to the right philosopher but he had read a bit of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Nietzsche even (alright, he'd read a critique of Nietzsche). He'd never really got to grips with Wittgenstein, logical positivism or existentialism for that matter but he was trying to get to grips with them now and relate it all to a very shaky understanding of the Big Bang, quantum physics, general relativity and string theory, which apparently reconciled Planck and Einstein by postulating the existence of not 3 but 10 dimensions, or something like that.

He felt he had made some progress with the first two steps of his process, understanding the brief and understanding the market but now that he'd taken a deep dive into the product, the meaning of life and the universe, his head was spinning.

"Can I be of any help?"

Jonno looked up and over the iMac screen. It wasn't God, which is to say it wasn't Anthony Hopkins, that he saw. It was George Clooney.

George raised his hands up his body to his face in a 'Look at me, what do you think?' kind of way.

"We thought this might work for you."

"We?" Asked Jonno.

"God and I."

"Who exactly are you?"

"I go by many names. You might be most familiar with the 'Holy Ghost'.

"The Holy Ghost?"

“Yes, the spirit of God. He never intervenes directly but if he feels the need to put shape to ideas or give them impetus he turns to me. I am, how, can I put this, a source of inspiration for the great thinkers and prophets and scientists. I had a hand in everything you are reading. So we, God and I, thought I might be able to help you with extracting what you need from over 2000 years of science and philosophy, physics and meta-physics, ontology and theology, The Big Bang, that sort of thing.”

Jonno vaguely understood the difference between science and philosophy, he even knew that ‘meta’ came from the Greek word meaning ‘beyond’. Metaphysics was the study of being and existence beyond what could be explained by physics and evidential proof. Metaphysics lay at the heart of philosophy. He knew this because he’d just now read it on Wiki and he’d been reading it to try to understand the meaning of life and the relevance of God. Ontology was news to him.

“Ontology, what’s ontology for Gods...?”

“For God’s sake, what were you going to say?” Asked George. “No that is theology, the aspect of Meta-Physics that deals with the existence of God. Ontology is to do with being and existence of anything, of you for example. You look confused.”

Jonno realised his mouth was open. He shut it.

“You understand I’m a marketing guy?”

“Yes, I know, a mile wide and an inch deep, not always an inch. You don’t need to – let’s face it you can’t – understand precisely how a client’s ‘product’ works, you just need to know enough to get some ideas. So where would you like to start? How deep do you want to dive?”

“Could I get some kind of overview, maybe starting with the Big Bang?”

Jonno thought this would be as good a place to start as any.

George began to sing:-

“Our Whole Universe was in a hot dense state

Then 14 billion years ago expansion started – wait!

The earth began to cool, the autotrophs began to drool

Neanderthals developed tools,

We built a wall, we built the pyramids

Math, science, history, unravelling the mystery

That all started with the Big Bang – Hey!”

Jonno recognised it immediately. It was the theme tune to the comedy show, The Big Bang Theory.

“How is that supposed to help me?”

“You asked for an overview.”

“Great. Actually I don’t know what an autotroph is.”

“Autotrophs are the first link in the evolutionary chain. They’re organisms like bacteria that can produce organic compounds from light, water or inorganic chemicals. The source of life as we know it Jim. Really quite simple but very, very clever if you think about it.”

George continued – Jonno had come to see Anthony Hopkins as God but for now George was George. He couldn’t see him as the Holy Ghost. He didn’t even understand what or who the Holy ghost was meant to be – inspiration, what’s all that about?

“The other thing you can take from this little song is expansion. The Big Bang was not an explosion, it was a moment in time when expansion began and has continued ever since. Life, the universe, is all about expansion and progress in the space-time continuum”

“You’re losing me again,” Jonno almost bleated.

George, AKA The Holy Ghost, paused.

“OK, I know you’re not a scientist and you are not looking to become one. You’re a marketing man, you are looking for ideas and insights, patterns and themes, things you can throw into the pot, mix it all together and come up with an idea. So let’s just look at the big picture. On the one side, you have the theory of general relativity. Galileo discovered that objects that fall in a vacuum fall at the same speed. Newton figured out that this had to do with gravity and that the force of gravity between two objects like the sun and the earth or the moon and the earth changed according to their relative size and weight. But Newton thought space was three-dimensional. Einstein then came along and figured out that not only is gravity a relative thing, so is time. If you are travelling at the speed of light then time appears to move slower. Big objects flying through space can curve time. Are you with me?”

“Just,” said Jonno. “So basically Einstein came up with the idea of time as the fourth dimension”

“Exactly. Now then, all that stuff, the Theory of General Relativity worked really well in explaining the physics of big stuff but it did not explain the physics of really little things, say, smaller than molecules. That’s where the quantum physics comes in.”

Jonno had been reading up on this.

“That’s all the stuff about atomic and sub-atomic particles, waves, quarks, bosons and photons, the Big Bang”

“Right again. But there are a couple of problems. Firstly, and I will try to keep this simple, Quantum Mechanics can only explain what happened from a moment, the smallest fraction of time, after the Big Bang started. In order to know what came before the Big Bang you’d need the theory of relativity to help you go back in time. Got that?”

Jonno nodded.

“The other problem is that they couldn’t reconcile the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. That’s where string theory comes in. It tries to bring the two together to give one unified set of laws that explain everything.”

“No, you’re losing me again.”

Jonno had read something about String Theory, the idea of particles in lines not dots or points, and these lines vibrating, joining and splitting but he didn’t really get it.

“String Theory is a bit a stretch for a marketing guy, I know, but I think there are a couple of things you should take out of all this. String Theory only makes any sense to anyone if you assume there are more than four dimensions. They can’t prove it but many scientists, lots of them atheists I might add, believe it.”

“So String Theory is just an idea. It would explain everything but it’s just an idea.”

“It’s just an idea. A lot of science is just an idea and even the things that have been proven started with an idea. In order to be a scientist you gotta have faith.”

Jonno wrote some things on his pad and put big circles round them. “Life is expansion,” and “Science is ideas.”

“Have you heard about the God Particle?” asked

Jonno did know about this, it had something to do with the Hadron Collider.

“Peter Higgs, one of the a bunch of scientists working on particle physics came up with the theory of it back in 1964. I won’t bore you with the details but its existence is meant to be the key that will explain everything – hence the label, ‘God Particle’ although it is actually the Higgs Boson particle to give it its full name.”

“Does it explain everything?” asked Jonno.

“No of course not but it will provide a big leap forward. They discover it next year. It has taken them 10 years and billions of dollars to build the Hadron Collider. That’s what has been required to be able to crash two particles together and see what happens – to see if they can confirm the existence of the Higgs Boson. And they will succeed, Peter Higgs will be proved to be

correct in his theory – he will even live to see it happen. Can you imagine how that must feel? And it all started with an idea he had – one that might explain the mysteries of the universe.”

George looked off into the distance, a faint smile on his face, pondering the magnitude of all this. Then he snapped back into the conversation

“So, what other questions about life, the universe or God do you have?” The Holy Ghost asked helpfully.

“Infinity, I don’t get infinity.”

“Well, let’s face it Jonno, there are a lot of things you don’t get, a lot of things the smartest scientists in the world don’t get. But their knowledge is expanding all the time. But what don’t you get about infinity? All those billions of stars, the universe expanding all the time, that kind of thing?”

“Yes.”

“It’s interesting that when people talk about infinity they look up and out to the stars. Only very few look in. Did you know there are more atoms in a glass of water than there are glasses in the world, many times more? Can you imagine how many atoms there are in the ocean?”

Jonno did know this, he’d heard Richard Dawkins talk about on TED.com. It was a lecture called “Queerer than we can suppose.” He recalled Dawkins talking about the limitations of the world we see or are able to see, Middle Earth or something he called it. His basic message was that not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is far stranger than we are *able* to imagine. But just because we did not understand something or were not capable of understanding it does not mean there is a God. That was Dawkins’s message

“So is infinity a real thing or is it just that we can’t, our brains, can’t, comprehend it?”

“Or your brains don’t want to comprehend it. You think you are finite.”

“I know I’m finite. I’m dead.”

“And yet you are here, and before you say it, wherever here is. But think of it this way, you are a bunch of atoms, so those atoms came from somewhere and are going somewhere. The ‘you’ we are talking about is the ‘you’ that is conscious of being you. But here is another thought for you. Time is the fourth dimension. Everyone has their time. What if you could travel through time? You could go back to 1974 and your grandfather would still be there, he’d always be there, in 1974.”

“But I can’t travel thought time, only Doctor Who can travel through time.”

“So he can travel through time to a time when people have figured out how to travel time and come back through time to explain it to everyone. I never saw that episode. Anyway, big picture stuff, that’s what you want.”

“What is the meaning of life?.” Jonno decided he had to stick to his agenda and ask his questions, even if the answers left him more confused than enlightened. He had to trust the process, just keep going, keep digging, the ideas will start to come, they always do.

“Ah, philosophy. We like philosophy. Well, you tell me, Jonno, what is the meaning of life?”

“People like Camus thought there was no meaning.”

“And Wittegenstein, and others, thought there was no meaning in the question. Listen, you can drive yourself crazy with this kind of naval gazing. Let’s stick with the big picture. Firstly the vast majority of philosophers, and ordinary people for that matter, want life to have meaning, perhaps purpose would be a better word. Most recognise that it is a struggle between good and evil but that with the right values and hard work you can ensure your life has meaning and purpose. And the vast majority, over the ages, including philosophers and a few scientists, have found that a belief in God makes the discipline and the struggle easier. What does that tell you?”

“Well it could tell me that we invented God to give our life meaning. But it still does not tell me what that purpose is.”

“OK, Jonno, you’re a marketing guy, what’s the purpose of a brand manager? You know, the people in charge of the brand, whatever you want to call them”

“The purpose of the brand manager is to grow the brand.”

“Sorry to go all Wittgenstein, logical positive on you. But what do you mean by grow?”

Jonno thought for a moment. He’d trotted out his answer because he’d used it many times before to great effect. He’d got the idea from Peter Doyle, a professor of marketing who had talked about the purpose of marketing as being to create revenue and profit growth. Most non-marketers thought the purpose of marketing was to spend money and make ads. A lot of the top marketing gurus had talked about marketing as being ‘consumer-focused’ as if the marketing department were the only people in the company who were.

Jonno liked the idea that the higher purpose of marketing was to create high quality growth. He’d scored a lot of points in meetings with this line. Now the Holy Ghost was asking what he meant by growth and given the context of the debate, he suspected he didn’t need educating about the various ways of measuring growth, revenue, profit, value share, volume share and so on.

“Well I suppose the purpose of a brand manager is to pass the brand on in better shape than they took it on,” he ventured.

“Bingo! You got it. In an infinite and ever expanding universe where time is relative and other dimensions exist but cannot yet be seen the purpose of any living organism is to pass things on in better shape than they received them” the Holy Ghost rattled this out like a machine gun.

“God exists to help us do that.”

“Bingo again”

“But that still doesn’t prove he is real, that he exists.”

“You just met Him. What do you think? If you are real then He must be real. If you and all of this is just a dream then He is just a dream.”

“I think, therefore I am according to Descartes” Jonno felt quite chuffed for remembering this

“Not quite, at least not in my opinion. You have ideas, therefore you are. I’ll let that one settle for a while. How are we doing” the Holy Ghost slapped his hands on his thighs and seemed very keen to crack on.

“OK’ said Jonno. ”Let’s get all the questions out on the table. Is God omnipotent? If so how can He be a loving God and tolerate all the vile cruelty and pain in the world. How can He bear to watch while people’s lives are ruined? Does He have some kind of plan? Is all this part of it?”

“How could He let your unborn son die?”

“That is not my question!.” Jonno was suddenly very angry. They had been having what he thought was a good discussion. He didn’t need these constant reminders of his own personal tragedy. Much worse happened in the world. He had a job to do; he had to get on with things. That’s the only way to cope with the crap life throws you. Get on with things. He took a few moments and calmed himself.

“OK maybe it is, maybe I do want to understand.”

“No, I think you want an apology.”

“Yes, that would be nice. But get back to my question. I am trying to help God, at His request I might add, to come up with a new idea to market what he has to sell. Belief in him makes the world a better place, it makes you a better person. I need to ask about one of the biggest stumbling blocks that gets in the way of all that. How can He be an all powerful, loving, positive force in your life and yet tolerate all this cruelty?”

“Thanks, HG. I think it’s best if I take over now. Good job, well done, thank you”

God had appeared behind the Holy Ghost and put his hand on his shoulder. George Clooney got to his feet, smiled at Jonno and walked off. Anthony Hopkins sat down and took his place.

“The omni thing, good and evil. Yes I think it’s time we talked about that. I hope you will agree that it is better done after your little chat with HG.”

“Who exactly is He” Jonno asked.

“He is the Me that touches people’s lives. Part of the Holy Trinity. He is, as he said, inspiration, My means of inspiring ideas and thoughts. You can think of him as the Holy Ghost writer. A lot of writers and artists talk about their feeling that the inspiration for their work passes through them. They’re not a genius, genius is given to them for a while. There’s a terrific talk about this on TED.com given by Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of.....

“‘Eat, Pray, Love’, yes I saw it last year. Very good. Can we get back to the question?” Jonno didn’t want to shoot the breeze. He wanted answers.

“Very well. Omnipotence. I have it but I can’t use it, at least not in the way you might think or want. It’s complicated and simple. Everything is connected. I have the power to change everything but cannot change anything, for to do so has, if not unexpected consequences, then lets just say consequences. A child is being cruelly abused by a drunken father. He is beating the child so badly he is at the point of killing him. I step in, I intervene, the child, whose name is Jimmy by the way, is saved. He grows up and thirty years later he’s behind the wheel of a lorry that jumps the central reservation on the A3 just outside Wimbledon and kills you. You change something, you change everything. But OK let’s say we decide we value Jimmy’s life more than we value yours. He survived the accident by the way but he’s now an alcoholic. No job, no family, no hope. But even so, maybe we decide to help Jimmy the child. How would we do that? Send an angel accompanied by the celestial choir. Parting clouds, bright lights, she floats in to the room and stays the cruel hand of the father before he smites the defenceless child with a final, fatal blow. Or do we inspire the woman next door to ring Social Services as she should have done weeks ago? Or the teacher at Jimmy’s school? Or Jimmy’s mother for that matter? Inspire any or all of them to make the right moral choice? You tell me.”

“But how can you just sit back and watch so much senseless violence, so much fear, hurt and disappointment in the world?”

“What do you mean Jonno, sit back and not care? Is that what you mean? Of course I care. You feel the loss of your unborn son, the disappointment of a failing marriage. I feel everything, everything,” God was out of his seat and shouting. “Every pain, every fear, every loss, every day, everywhere. I feel everything.”

God collected himself, tilted his head backwards a little and shook his arms to loosen them. He sat down.

“I just sit back do I? I have the power to make it better and it is getting better. There is less war, lower child mortality. I could go on. But there are more of you. Don't you see? I could create a different universe, one without evil if that is what you want, but it would be another universe, none of you would be here. My power lies in inspiring you to make the world a better place. Can you imagine how frustrating it is watching all this? Can you imagine how angry I get seeing the mistakes, the set-backs, the cruelty to children, especially the suffering of children? Seeing all that potential being damaged and wasted? You have the Internet, something that has the potential do so much good in the world, to accelerate the process of moral enlightenment. What does it get used for? Child pornography. I would like nothing better than to reach out and smite them all. But all I can do is inspire you all to do better.”

Jonno had sat motionless through all this. He could see the point being made and were it not God losing his cool he would have been entirely comfortable. He loved it when a CEO let all the defences slip and really let rip about what pissed them off. That was often when the breakthroughs came.

“If I take on more of a human form I take on the emotions. Please forgive Me.”

“No, no, that's fine. I understand or I think I understand. Can I ask You a question?”

“Of course,” said God, quite calm and composed now.

“I get that you cannot intervene everywhere to stop all the bad stuff. I get that. But in the Bible you helped people believe in you and believe in your message with miracles. Is this not the simplest solution?”

“Evidential proof. The reason to believe as you marketing people call it. Every brand has to have a unique benefit and a reason to believe. Part the Red Sea, turn the water into wine, send prophets, send my son. What do I send now? An iPad? On Star Trek people thought the phaser was brilliant. Now every member of the family has an iPad and everyone wants to know when the next one is coming out. What would it take? And what would I have proved? If something is proven then you have no choice but to believe. I thought we had agreed that your brief is to make atheists want to believe.”

“But this good/evil issue, the difficulty in grasping infinity, extra dimensions we don’t understand, there are some real challenges here,” said Jonno.

“I thought you liked a challenge. Look, atheists are not dumb. Surely you can help them see a pattern to all of this. Everything has a positive and a negative, everything from an atom to a moral choice. The patterns are everywhere. Atomic structures and the universe have the same pattern. Scientists used to think the world is flat, they now believe there are curves in space and time. Is it such a leap to see that everything curves back in on itself? A circle has no beginning or end, it is both finite and infinite.”

Jonno made a note of that on his pad. “Life expands and progresses in a circle.”

“So far I’ve not offered much help on your Mary problem, have I?”

“That’s Ok,” said Jonno. “Shit happens. Isn’t it as simple as that?”

“Shit, as you say, happens. What’s important is how you react to it. Did you know someone did a study on luck, a quasi-scientific study? They took two matched samples of people, matched that is in every sense but one. The first group, in answer to the question, ‘Do you think you are a fortunate person?’ said yes, the second group said no. Do you know what they discovered? “ Not waiting for a reply God continued. ”I’ll tell you. The first thing they discovered

was that there was no measurable difference in terms of the good or bad fortune each group enjoyed. The second thing they discovered was the difference in how each group reacted to their fortune. The first group, the one's who saw themselves as lucky, treated misfortune as misfortunate. They did not let it get to them, they counted their other blessings and got on with life. The second group, the 'unlucky ones' saw misfortune as confirmation that life was against them and wallowed in their self-pity."

This again struck a chord with Jonno.

"I've seen that in business. Radiators and Drains we called them. Radiators, when things go wrong, accept the blame but work on doing something about it. Drains are all gloom and doom, everything that goes wrong is always someone else's fault. I only liked working with teams of radiators."

"Exactly. Shit happens sure enough, the question is how you react to it, how you take responsibility, not just for your part in for what happened but most importantly for the choices you can now make now about how to deal with it."

"So what are you saying?" asked Jonno.

"When your son died it was tragic. Tragic not just for you but for your family and friends, the doctors and nurses at the hospital, everyone involved. You know this kind of tragedy happens to many other couples. The issue is how you reacted to it. You curved away from Mary and allowed it to affect your relationship"

"Well it wasn't just me, she also..."

"I thought you said you liked radiators who take responsibility for their actions and don't blame others. You can't really change what other people do. You can only change what you do. You could have circled back to her."

Circle back to her, Jonno thought, that's an interesting turn of phrase.

"Jonno, do you remember how you behaved towards all your friends at the funeral or the doctors and nurses at the hospital the terrible day it happened?"

Jonno did remember but had never spoken about it. The day at the hospital was awful. Mary was broken. She had had to go through childbirth and then the loss of her child. She was physically and mentally shattered. The medical team, too, were really upset. They had fought hard for hours to save the child before finally losing him just when they thought he had won his fight for life. The midwife tried to be professional and hold herself together but Jonno saw that she was crying too. He remembered putting his arm around her and comforting her. He remembered, and this he had never told anyone, he remembered that showing her some kindness made him feel better. It was the only thing that got him through that awful day. And it continued at the funeral. Like all funerals, everyone was trying to put as brave a face on it as possible. It was an inappropriately sunny day in February, unseasonably warm. But it was cold in the church. They all kept up their brave faces until the moment the tiny, pathetic little coffin was carried in. Jonno, standing at the front, could hear the sobs behind him. He turned and started hugging the friends nearest him. He comforted them, told them it would be OK. He got through it by being kind to others. That's all that got him through it. Then in the months that followed he just shut his mind off to everyone and anything that reminded him of the pain, the loss, he simply could not bear to think or talk about it.

Everyone, including Mary.

"Yes, I remember."

"You don't have to explain any of it to Me." God came round and put his arms round Jonno's shoulders. "I saw it all, I felt it all. I am so very, very sorry for you."

The tears were now streaming down Jonno's face.

"So where were you?"

"I was there Jonno, you just didn't see Me. You just didn't recognise me."

Jonno collected himself. Get back to the job, he thought. He sniffed back the tears and switched into to his God-given role as God's marketing consultant.

“So explain it to me. Explain to me why, in my dark hours, I felt better by being nicer to other people?”

“It’s human nature. You either react with anger and violence or you react with goodness.”

“Would you say Godliness?”

“I would but atheists wouldn’t. They would say goodness and the biologists would say it’s a genetic response.”

Jonno jotted something down on his pad.

“I don’t think I’m going to get much more out of this stage. I want to move on.”

“Step Four, the consumer. Human nature. How I, God, relate to people’s lives.”

“You want to talk about the brand loyalists and the brand rejecters. Why do some people feel they need me in their lives, even though they cannot give evidential proof of my existence and why a growing number do not, even though they are surrounded by the wonders of the universe? That sort of thing?”

“That sort of thing,” confirmed Jonno.

“Absolutely,” said God. “But first I want to show you something. I think you’ll like it.”

How, Jonno had no idea, but he was now standing on a beach. He thought he recognised it as a beach in Mauritius, or was it Greece, or Australia? It was somewhere he’d been on holiday. No it was definitely Mauritius, the Indian Ocean light was very distinctive. The sun was setting, there was a soft warm breeze that comes in at evening time, a few wispy clouds in the sky and a swirl of the most beautiful colours - colours he could barely give names to. Orange, red, purple did not do them justice. The sun was now touching the sea at the horizon, melting into it and sending a yellow brick road to the shore, widening all the way.

He looked up the beach, something caught his eye. A figure, dressed in white linen, walking towards him. He had long hair, a beard and wore small glasses. It was John Lennon.

John approached silently and stood by Jonno, looking out at the ocean and the sunset.

“Beautiful, isn’t it Jonno? We need moments like this. We need this beauty,” John said. Without waiting for Jonno’s reply, “But here’s a question for you, Jonno. We need the sunset to feed our soul but does the sunset need us in order to be beautiful. The beauty exists but is it real?”

“You’re Jesus aren’t you”

“I go by that name and others. God sent me to talk to you about people. He says you think of them as His consumers, His buyers or non-buyers”

“No!” protested Jonno. “I always think about them as people”

“Good,” said Jesus. “I don’t know much about marketing or consumers but I know a bit about people. I’ve lived a bit. Let’s sit down and talk a while. What do you want to know?”

Jonno looked around to see where might be a nice place to sit down with Jesus. As he did so the scenery changed back to where he had been working before. There was his iMac and his note pad, two cups of coffee and another pack of Marlboro.

They sat. Jonno offered the pack to Jesus, it seemed polite, but Jesus smiled and shook his head.

“I don’t use them”

“No of course not” said Jonno. “Neither do I normally I but I find it easier to think with a cigarette.”

“You don’t, you’ve just convinced yourself you do. Like everyone you are a creature of habit. You are smoking now because this experience takes you back to student days and the early years in your career. The time when you

found work really hard and you had to struggle and think. You want to smoke now because this situation has triggered your old habit of smoking while you studied hard or when you tried to write some difficult report or presentation. If you really want to expand your mind I can suggest some other drugs that will do the trick.”

Was this Jesus talking or John Lennon?

“Thank you no, that’s fine” Jonno stubbed out the cigarette. He would not smoke again. He flicked through his pad until he got to the relevant notes.

“I want to talk about people and God. I thought it would be helpful to look at people who really believe and people who really don’t, the extremes of the market. The brief is to convert atheists but I think we need to look not just at this group but their exact opposites.”

Jesus smiled. “Yin Yang, dark and light, positive and negative, good and evil – the eternal pattern. You’ve read up a bit about the various religions, haven’t you?”

“Yes I have.”

“Ok then, here’s what I want you to do. I want you to read up about the hippie movement in the 1960’s. Many of them were believers in something, a lot of them got off on Asian religions and mysticism, but they were all about peace and love not because they were trying to buy a better life after death or because some preacher told them so, but because it felt right. Check it out. I’ll be back later.”

Jesus got up and left Jonno to his homework.

Act VII

Jonno went straight to Wiki and immediately found what he was looking for: The History of the hippie Movement. It was all there from Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and their acid fuelled trip across America, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the Beatniks, 1967, the Summer of Love, Dylan and of course John Lennon and Yoko, the last true hippies.

He made the surprising discovery that the hippie movement had its roots in Germany with Der Wandervogels or wandering birds, a group of young people who reacted against industrialisation and rejected the rigid German society in favour of getting back to nature. German immigrants brought these ideas over to California, opened the first health food shops and were rebranded 'Nature Boys.'

This developed into the hippie movement whose main ideas were to live communally and in harmony with nature, expression through art, poetry and music - and lots and lots of drugs.

Jonno had been born the year before the Summer of Love so he'd grown up in the afterglow of the hippie movement. His generation were more punk and new romantics but he knew a little about the hippie era. It seemed obvious to him that the attraction of a hippie lifestyle lay in the rejection of an American society that whilst affluent was also stiff and scared. This was the time of post-McCarthyism and the Bay of Pigs, the war in Vietnam and the threat of communism.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for. The hippies weren't all atheists, they had strong beliefs. They lacked any coherent leadership or consistent credo, they were fragmented, a bit chaotic and of course stoned most of the time. But there sure was a lot of love. And it was love, not just sex, although there was a lot of that too, but what's new? People felt connected – that had been Allen Ginsberg's epiphany, one he maintained had come before he'd tried LSD although that was a dubious claim. It took place while he was reciting a poem by William Blake. He said he had a vision in which the whole interconnectedness of the universe was revealed to him. Who knows? Whether

through the influence of drugs or not hippies felt connected to their fellow man and that made them tolerant, peace-loving and willing to share their shelter and their food at rock concerts – just like Jesus and His followers at the Sermon on the Mount.

“Can you imagine what might have happened to the hippie movement if they’d had the Internet?” Jesus had returned.

“Yes but they had a lot of mass media coverage.”

“And by 1970 there were nearly a million hippies in America alone. That’s pretty amazing don’t you think?”

Jonno still wasn’t sure what lessons he was supposed to take out of this.

“I’m not sure it was quite as many as that, not true hippies but I take your point. So went wrong?”

Jesus sat back with his hands behind his head, looking up.

“It made me so happy to see them. It took me back to my time. We were a hippie movement in the face of oppression. We had music and dance and wine. And we talked about love, harmony, peace, forgiveness. When I looked at the hippies I thought for one brief moment that it would all take off again.”

He sat forward with a jolt, placed his hands firmly on his knees and stared intently at Jonno. “Look at Ghandi, Mandela – OK, Mandela only after a bit of a shaky start – peaceful movements that changed the world for the better.”

“So what went wrong with the hippies?” Jonno had done his homework, he was now impatient to know what relevance all this had.

“Well what went wrong with the hippies started just four months after Woodstock with the deaths at Altamont. The Rolling Stones were playing on stage and the Hell’s Angels were doing security. Recipe for disaster. That girl got stabbed and some others died. And of course all this right after the Charles Manson murders. That’s what they say, anyway, this was the start of the end. Yoko and Lennon tried to keep things going but no-one took them seriously. Dylan found God, it all changed.”

Jesus continued. “Do you know there was one of your British politicians, David Steele, OK a Liberal but a stiff really, he was asked what his favourite song was and he said ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon. Can you believe that? Do you think he ever listened to the lyrics?

Jesus, who looked like John Lennon started to sing softly. This was weird, really weird.

“Imagine there’s no heaven, it’s easy if you try,

No Hell below us, above us only sky,

Imagine all the people, living for today.

Imagine there’s no countries, it isn’t hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too,

Imagine all the people living life in peace.

You may say that I’m a dreamer,

But I’m not the only one.

I hope some day you’ll join us,

And the world will be as one”

“He was certainly dreaming if he reckoned anyone would vote for him if they thought he really believed all that. No Heaven or Hell, no after-life, no religion, no supporting the Union Jack - not a winning ticket is it? Oh and that great line – ‘it isn’t hard to do’. Oh yes it is!”

Jonno laughed, “Good point.”

“You see, Jonno, it’s all in the tension between nature and technology and by nature I mean human nature. The universe expands, forget whether it’s progress, it moves forwards not backwards. It’s fine to see things as connected but they’re not likely to be harmonious, not for long anyway. Humans are social apes, they have evolved to survive in a natural world that makes it safer to live in groups. In the case of humans these groups can run

into the millions but they are still groups, clans. Living with others requires some sense of order, some structure, rules learned the hard way, rules and behaviours that are genetically programmed.”

“You’re beginning to sound like Richard Dawkins. He says that believing in God is a genetic misfire, like moths that are attracted to a flame. It’s the unhappy side-effect of an animal behaviour that in other respects is necessary for their survival.”

“And he’s right, he’s absolutely right. You said that you want to look at the extremes, not just atheists but the devout believers. So let’s get back to the ape-like behaviour that makes people partisan. They will herd together and treat other herds as competition. You can look at Jews or Christians versus Muslims, Catholics versus Protestants but you might as well look at rival football fans. I’ve even seen a Beatles fan get into a fight with a Rolling Stones fan. Elvis dies and suddenly he is reborn. People gather at Graceland every year to pay homage. People make themselves believe they have seen him risen from the dead. It is all a genetic misfire. Humankind’s natural instinct is to group together, to copy, to follow, an instinct developed over centuries of evolution as a survive-and-prosper reflex. It largely, but not entirely, explains the religious fervour. Sadly, it can lead to regressive, uncivilised behaviour in a world that slowly and stutteringly is becoming more civilised”

“What do you mean by civilised?” Asked Jonno.

“Very simple, it means able to live together. To do that you have to fight against some of your natural instincts, like being greedy. Animals are naturally greedy, they will fight for more than their fair share because they can’t be certain where the next meal is coming from. But animals in groups learn to co-operate. It makes life better. In order to get along you have to go along. Society has its rules, the rules get refined, life gets better unless people fall back into animal behaviour in a civilised society. If they do, that’s when it can go pear-shaped.”

“So what makes it go pear-shaped? What went wrong with the hippies.”

“The tension between nature and technology. Short cuts. False Gods. Greed. It’s so much easier to make yourself feel good with drugs but it’s temporary, it has no roots. You can make yourself feel better about yourself by buying lots of toys and trinkets. You’d know all about that Mr. Porsche man. And all that’s OK in moderation, but when they become your Gods...”

“So why can’t we live in harmony with nature?”

Jesus stood and started to walk around, thinking, talking.

“It’s complex but the headlines are expansion and technology. Things move forward, you develop opposable thumbs, tools, electricity, computers. They make it so that more and more people can live together but it’s not a smooth line. Just like the atomic waves, particles, bundles of energy and oscillations, The Big Bang stuff you talked to HG about, they cause disruptions. It is getting better, if better means more people enjoying more things, but it doesn’t feel like that for all the people all the time. But you can’t go back, you just cannot go back. Nature pushes you forwards, technology makes it possible and technology fighting nature makes it hard.”

“And the solution is?”

“42,” said Jesus.

“42?” asked Jonno then he remembered Douglas Adams. The answer to the meaning of life and the universe in the Hitch-hikers’ Guide to the Galaxy was 42.

“The answer is God. Or maybe I should say the answer is the right vision of God, the right relationship with God depending on who you are, where you are and when you are.”

Jesus went on.

“For some people that means an Old Testament God, for others a New Testament God. For some it’s lots of Gods. Some people need clear rules, others need a spiritual journey. The natural tendency for people is to personify things. People even give their car or boat a name and talk to it, her normally,

their mother. For many God is our Father. They make sense of things by relating them to them as humans. They tell stories to understand and explain. I know all this is making sense to you.”

“Why?” asked Jonno. “Why would it make sense to me?”

“Because you are a marketing guy. You love brands. You talk about brand personality, the need for brands to relate to some aspect of the human condition. You tell your clients that a brand needs to tell a story”

“I thought you said you didn’t know much about marketing.”

“Me, Son of God,” Jesus pointed at himself. “I know everything.”

This mention of marketing reminded Jonno that he had a job to do and he wasn’t sure he was making much progress.

“Douglas Adams was an atheist,” he said to try to get them back on track.

“Why did someone as smart as that not believe in God. Or was it because he was so smart?”

“I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they pass you by.”

Jesus laughed. “That was one of his best lines. So let’s think about that.

Deadlines. Death. Are you so sure Douglas was an atheist in the moment just before he died?”

“What are you saying? That we are all believers when faced with death?”

“No, but most people are. You can explain the fanaticism of many God-believers as a natural human attraction to herds and clans and their animosity to any other herd or clan they feel are a threat or their desire to attract more people to their herd to make them feel stronger, or if you want, to make them feel vindicated. But what gives rise to most religions is either a desire to make sense of death or a need to cope with the wonders and challenges and opportunities of nature, a nature in which everything is born and everything dies. Or of course I should say, everything that humans can see is born and dies. You can’t see atoms, let alone sub-atomic particles and you can’t see to the end or the beginning of the universe.”

This was all getting a bit philosophical again. He trusted that Jesus was trying to take him on a journey, a Socratic journey of discovery with questions and answers designed to make him think. But he wasn't getting any ideas to help solve the brief.

"Look, Jesus, please don't think me rude but if I'm honest I think all I'm hearing is why we need God, why we follow God, why bad stuff happens, why good stuff happens, how God helps us cope with all this. I did think the bit about the tension between nature and technology was fascinating. However, my brief as you know, is very specific. I have to help God convince people, people who are quite sure he does not exist, to want to believe in him and his message."

"You keep saying 'Him'. Why is God a 'Him' and not, say, a 'She' or an 'It'?"

"Well because I've met Him of course."

"You mean he has revealed 'Himself' to you as a man. In fact he has revealed Himself as Anthony Hopkins. I'm John Lennon. HG was George Clooney. So is God Anthony Hopkins, am I John...?"

"No, no of course not."

"I'm not a marketing guy but perhaps you should think of your brief as to find a way of getting atheists to see the God they want to see. And another thing. Why atheists? And don't say because that's what the client wants. That hasn't stopped you changing the brief in the past. Why not agnostics, the persuadable? Wouldn't they be easier targets?"

This was a very good question. Jonno felt irritated that he had not thought of this himself. He had just accepted what God said on the basis that persuading atheists to turn to God would make a bigger impact in the market than persuading a bunch of don't know/don't cares. In marketing terms it did not necessarily make sense. It was cheaper and quicker to switch the switchable than go after the active rejecters of a brand.

"Well I suppose that the conversion of atheists would make a bigger impact..."

“Yeah, yeah. I can give the marketing post-rationalisation just as well as you. In fact I can build on it. In order to create momentum behind the brand you need a big statement. You would need millions of agnostics to convert very publicly for it not to be written off by the atheists as a short-term reaction to all the social and economic unrest in the world. But get just a few atheists, get just one, Richard Dawkins, to say privately that he believes God is real, that he is sure he exists and with a few tweets on Twitter you’d have a world-wide movement. Atheists then go on record and start saying, “Yes, we believe in God, our lives are better for it, we think it is an essential part of human progress. We accept that different people see God in many different ways but we all share the same commitment to his fundamental message – live with a moral purpose, treat others the way you want to be treated, lets listen to each other and learn to be tolerant etc.”

Jonno was furiously trying to write all this down.

“You’re the marketing guy. With that kind of event you’d earn more media coverage than any brand could ever buy. And that’s the new game isn’t it – earned media? Better than paid-for media like television ads. Cheaper, faster and more effective. Get the media writing about it, get it on the Internet. But there’s another reason you want to focus on the atheists, the reason no self-respecting marketing guy would admit. You were an atheist – you find it easier to relate to the brief. You want to be converted – you’re more interested in the solution than anyone. And why is that Jonno?”

Jonno stopped writing and looked at Jesus.

“God said something that I did not understand,” Jonno said, “Well He’s said a lot of things actually, but this thing about atheism being the door you have to pass through. I admit that interests me personally as someone who was an atheist...”

“...But who has now met God,” said Jesus.

“As you say, but God was quite specific about that. He doesn’t want to make people believe through stunts and revelations, he wants them to want to believe.”

“I know, but you’re ducking the point. Mary believes in God. Her faith was shaken by the death of your son but she still believes. You were an atheist. Do you think things might have been better if you had shared her faith – especially since now you know she’s right and you were wrong?”

Jesus drove the point home.

“Or maybe you believe things would have worked out just fine if you had both been atheists? You would both have been able to rationalise what happened. Your son was just a bunch atoms. But you don’t believe that do you?”

Jonno could feel the tears welling up. He wanted Jesus to stop but He wasn’t about to.

“God said that if you helped him with this brief - this brief to convert atheists - in return he’d help you with understanding what went wrong between you and Mary. Don’t you see? By working on this brief you are getting the help you need. Your son died. It was tragic. Without God you were not able to cope. You let it affect the rest of your life adversely. That was your choice. Maybe you and Mary were not right for each other, that’s not the point. You have never got over the loss of your son. You followed false gods my friend. False gods..”

Jesus sat and looked at Jonno. Jonno, shoulders slumped, stared down. Yet again the whole issue of Mary and his son had been thrown in his face unexpectedly. Jonno sniffed and pulled back his shoulders. He looked back at Jesus.

“The motivation for solving the brief doesn’t matter. All that matters is that we do. We’re looking for ideas. Can we go on please?”

Jonno the professional had come to the rescue. Just keep working, keep going, keep moving forward. The pain, the sense of loss, will fade. Just keep going.

Jonno looked through his notes. “Let’s talk about atheists. As you say, I feel on slightly firmer ground here. No need to look things up on the Internet. I’ve

read 'The God Delusion'. Why do you think that is a doorway to a new belief in God?"

"One of the central messages of "The God Delusion" is that you cannot bridge gaps in knowledge with faith in the Almighty. An unquestioning devotion to God is the enemy of scientific progress. Scientists ask questions. Questions like, 'What if the world was not flat?', 'What if instead of the Sun orbiting the earth it was the other way round?' That kind of thing. I was talking just now about deadlines. If you think there is an after-life then you are less motivated to deal with the problems of this life. Don't worry, don't question, God has a plan, you'll get your reward in the next life. None of that helps with dealing with the issues of today. It's human nature to want to personify things, to make up stories to explain the unexplainable but it is also human nature to want to progress, to ask questions, to discover. We have to break out of the shackles of our natural, genetic code and get stuck in to science and technology. But yet everyone agrees that it would be easier to get along and work together to solve all these problems if we felt we were in some way answerable to a loving God, some kind of higher order. Well, almost everyone. So how can we summarise that – your heart says yes and your head says no?"

"I suppose that's one way of putting it," Jonno agreed. "But here is the challenge God gave me. We have to convince rational atheists who only accept evidential proof that there is a God but we cannot give them incontrovertible proof. And unless they can see all this yin-yang human condition stuff they will only see a lot of evidence that there is no God. Atheists believe they cannot rely on faith, only science."

"Bullshit!"

First he sings, now he curses. Jonno wasn't ready for that.

"Pardon my French but who says rational atheists, scientists, Richard Dawkins for that matter, don't live their lives based on faith? Humans cannot exist without faith. Every day, every hour, people make decisions based on faith not proof. They put their faith in anything and everything. Humans are

natural believers, all of them, atheists included. Someone who believes in nothing, has faith in nothing, someone who will only act if they are 100% certain of everything, well, they never get out of bed. Or is it a bed? What if someone has disguised their bed as a box of snakes”?

“That’s just fanciful. Atheists are rational.”

“Yes but not 100% rational. Let’s look at a growing religion.”

“You mean like Islam?”

“No I mean like environmentalism, the new religion for the chattering classes. Sorting all their rubbish into neat piles for recycling, going back to tap water – the same people who made Evian and Perrier rich now making choosing tap water some kind of badge of honour– buying a Toyota Prius – whose parts, by the way, have been shipped at great cost from all four corners of the world by ships belching out greenhouse gases - planting trees while reading about saving the planet in their Sunday papers that are now so thick with supplements it took several trees to print them. Governments committing billions to environmental projects while children starve in the streets they drove through to get to whatever symposium or conference that agrees all these protocols. Why?”

Jonno had gone a bit green himself. He’d even debated buying the Porsche Cayenne Hybrid instead of the Carrera – maybe if he had he’d still be alive.

“I don’t think that’s fair. There is evidence that we have to stop the planet over-heating or...”

“Is there? Hard evidence? Incontrovertible? Who knows? Maybe the planet is actually cooling down. Maybe it’s the cows belching out greenhouse gases. At the turn of the last century the papers declared that if something wasn’t done then, by the calculation of the scientists, the streets of London would be 12 feet deep in horse shit. Didn’t spot the car coming did they?”

Jonno wanted to say something but there was no stopping Jesus.

“And health, what about the devotion to health. Do people think they will live forever? Do they really want to? Do they think that today’s medical scare will not turn out to be tomorrow’s miracle cure. I’m waiting for the report that says smoking cigarettes if you are over 50 years old is positively good for you, because there is ‘evidence’,” Jesus motioned the quotation marks with his fingers, and what Jonno was sure was a sneer. “ That it is you know.”

“People believe because they have a disposition to believe, to put their faith in people who seem to know better, even though there’s lots of evidence that more often than not they don’t. I’m not saying that environmentalism is a bad thing but let me give you a better reason. The meaning of life – pass things, things like the planet or your own backyard, pass them on in better shape than you received them, clean up your own shit.”

This was getting very scatological, Jonno thought.

“Scientists work with ideas. They back a hunch. It may be a well-reasoned hunch but it’s a hunch. They commit lots of time and work and money based on a faith that their idea is right.”

Jonno agreed with this, scientists were creative in the truest sense of the word. His delve into quantum physics and string theory had revealed that most of it was based on ideas that whilst possible or even likely could not be proved. The example of the Higgs Boson, the so-called God Particle, came back to him from his conversation with HG. An idea that began in 1964 and gets proved nearly 40 years and literally millions of man hours and billions of dollars later in the Hadron Collider.

A quote came to mind, one he had used in marketing presentations to support the love of ideas and the need for passion and tenacity in innovation.

“The difference between something that is created and something that is constructed is precisely this. That which is constructed is loved only after it is constructed but that which is created is loved before ever it is born.”

“Good quote. Chesterton wasn’t it?” Said Jesus. ‘So, your task is to get atheists to love the idea of loving God.’”

“How are you two getting on?” God had joined them.

“Good, yes, good I think,” said Jonno. “We’ve covered a lot of ground. Jesus has helped me see the brief in a more focused way. We’ve talked about hippies and atheists and environmentalism and people’s obsession with health.”

“I thought we had covered the brief in the first Step?” asked God standing behind a still seated Jesus.

“It’s often like that. It’s a process but it’s a messy process, kind of iterative.” Jonno had lots of experience of that but to be honest this one felt very messy. He wasn’t sure exactly where he was in the process. Maybe it didn’t matter.

“The point about the hippies” said Jesus, “ is that it made an impact because, in a world that had never felt so affluent to their parents, young people were rejecting all that affluence to hang out in fields, listen to music and be nice to one another. They didn’t go to church, there were no rules, just this idea of peace, love, a life well-lived.”

“But no roots and no purpose,” added God.

“We were also focusing in on the atheists” Jonno could see Jesus was about to add something so he said it. “People like me. I wanted to ask you what you meant by atheism being a door through which we had to pass to get to a true understanding of God?”

“Roots. I want to have roots. I want followers – everyone eventually but atheists for now – who believe in Me not because they are scared, or they are partisan, or they haven’t really thought about it. I want them to be unafraid, to have really thought about it, to have lived for a while with no belief in God despite having lots of beliefs about many other things which cannot be proved beyond doubt. I want them to believe in me rationally and emotionally. That way the roots go deeper. I seem to remember, Jonno, you saying...”

Jonno knew, for the first time, exactly what was God was going to say. So he finished the sentence for him.

“That the best brands are when rational and irrational belief in the brand work coherently and symbiotically to create total commitment”

“Like Porsche?”

“Like Porsche” said Jonno. He almost said Touche.

Jesus got up. “I’ll leave you two to it.” With that he left and Jonno felt a moment of sadness. John Lennon had always been his favourite Beatle.

Act VIII

God and Jonno sat across from each other. Neither of them spoke for a while.

Eventually God broke the silence.

“Future trends. You said something about future trends. Aren’t we supposed to look at them to make sure the solution is future-proofed, or something like that?”

Jonno knew that God knew exactly what he had said. He had to admit he was getting more comfortable with the idea of talking to and even debating with God, the Holy Ghost, Jesus. It was less off-putting than it had been at first and he knew he couldn’t blame being put off by the client for not coming with up with some ideas. God and the other two in the Holy Trinity had been the best of clients. Smart, wise, honest, stimulating, but most of all, really willing him to succeed. Not sceptical or wary like some clients were. The bad clients hired consultants then got suspicious or competitive or arch - how stupid is that? No, it had not been easy but it had been a good process so far. He did have some ideas jotted down already, half-formed, a bit disjointed but at least some ideas, and he trusted that God had not tried to read his mind as he had promised. If you can’t trust God, well then... But when God said, “Aren’t we supposed” or “Something like that” he knew he was playing, but in a nice way, to make it easier for Jonno.

“We are, Sir – we’re supposed to look at the trends,” said Jonno with a broad smile.

“So, fire away!”

“Well I touched on it with Jesus” said Jonno. “There is a whole industry around trend watching. I’ve always believed...”

“Believed?” Asked God. ‘You mean you don’t have proof?’

Jonno let this go and carried on.

“I’ve always believed that the trick is to just pick three. I’m not smart enough, but then I don’t think any human is, to look at every possible trend in all parts

of the globe and spot the zeitgeist. I think you just pick three trends, a good number, the three that strike you as most relevant to your particular challenge and work with those. See if anything triangulates.”

“So which three shall we look at, then?” asked God.

“Can I ask you what you think?”

“I don’t really think, not my thing,” answered God, unhelpfully.

“OK then,” said Jonno. He had some things written down so he might as well give it a go, he thought.

“I have three maybe four, but I think two of them sort of group together. First there is scientific discovery and where that’s going. Secondly there are, as Jesus pointed out, these obsessions with the environment and health. I’d lump them together under wellbeing with kind of a micro and macro angle. Micro is my personal wellbeing and the macro is our collective wellbeing. And then there is the Internet. We talked about the logical conclusion of this exponential growth in uploading everything we know and everything we think and do, plus the growth in search-engines, all of which allow anyone, everyone, to create connections from all of it. We talked about it becoming some kind of global brain or consciousness. That seemed interesting.”

“I agree,” said God. “So what do you make of these trends?”

“Let’s start with science. I don’t know but I’m sure I read somewhere that what we are witnessing is the collision of three strands of science – bio-genetics, quantum physics, or maybe string theory if you believe all that, and computing power. It’s the three working together that will accelerate the rate of technological progress”

“Give me an example of what you mean?” asked God. Jonno could not help thinking, “Yeah, as if you need me to.”

“I don’t know, what about DNA? Bio-geneticists figured out the theory but needed the advances in computing power to actually crack the code. No amount of human brainpower could have made all the calculations. And they

both need quantum physics to put it into practice.” This last statement was made with little conviction. “Look, you know I’m no scientist, I don’t really understand it all.”

“I don’t think you need to understand it all. What is it telling you?”

Jonno paused. He wasn’t at all certain about this but he did have a hunch.

“I think what it is telling us is that although I don’t think we know everything yet, nevertheless we now have the toolkit that means we will know everything, eventually.”

“How close to ‘knowing everything’ do you think mankind is?” asked God.

“I don’t know but I sense we are getting close. If I look at the advances in knowledge over the last 50 years, at the acceleration of scientific advancement, probably because of this collision, this collaboration, of previously separate scientific disciplines, I can’t help thinking that the next 100 years might see us get all the way there.” Jonno added quickly, “Although before You ask I’m not sure exactly what I mean by ‘there’.”

“Have a go, where might there be?” God was not going to let this one drop.

Jonno thought for a moment and looked down at his pad. He was looking for something he’d written back when Jesus was talking about the tension between nature and science. He found it.

“I think ‘there’ might be the Masters of Nature, the ability to control our environment”

“Why not Masters of the Universe?” Jonno took this as a joke to begin with, but then saw God was not smiling.

“Well maybe, yes, I don’t know, I can’t get my mind round that. But if I just focus on this world, our planet, it doesn’t seem to me to be completely crazy that we might, one day soon, be able to, sort of, control things. We might be able to break free of the constraints of nature.”

“Does that scare you?” asked God.

“Yes, it does, it terrifies me. That’s a lot of power. We’d need to get there collectively, as one global community. You only have to look at the trouble that’s been caused by some people having a disproportionate share of oil and energy”

“Hmmm. OK then. What about wellbeing?” God was clearly going to do no more than ask questions, Jonno did feel like he was back at Oxford being grilled by a tutor who knew the answers but wanted to see how hard he’d worked and if he could get close to something original.

“Well, if I’m right about progressing towards the ability to control, to some degree or another, our environment then I’m not worried about the macro stuff, the planet. Seems to me it has always changed and always will. The challenge is to use our collective ingenuity to ensure it is managed in such a way that human life can thrive. Jesus said it well – it’s about pride and self-esteem, passing the planet on in better shape than when we arrived on it, recognising that the world’s population is growing so changes need to be made. I’m less sure about personal wellbeing but here’s what I think. I don’t think we want to live forever, I don’t think that’s what our concern for personal health will be all about. I have this friend, Paul. He’s a great dad, the best, You know that of course.”

What God did know was this was a touchy subject for Jonno with no kids of his own.

“Paul does not believe in the after-life and he doesn’t think he will live forever, but he keeps himself really fit, he eats well, takes care of himself. I asked him about this and he said he wanted to stay as fit as he could, for as long as he could to really enjoy being with his kids. To get the most out of life in his case means being a great dad who can still play sport with his kids, maybe even their kids. This current obsession with beauty and health is narcissistic, I think it might become more a personal responsibility to our families, our community, our society to look after our own health.”

“But what about self-esteem? People want to look good, wear expensive clothes, live in the right houses, drive the right cars. To what, build their self-esteem?”

This felt to Jonno like more than a question. It was a challenge.

“That is very tricky. I’ve always believed that the root of most problems is lack of self-esteem. Lots of people push things too far – they drink too much, they try other drugs, they get greedy about money and possessions, they have a bit of cosmetic surgery to look younger or more beautiful. But the ones for whom this becomes a problem are the ones with low self-esteem. On the other hand, if one’s self-esteem is too high, if you get ahead of yourself, it can be just as bad. Power corrupts and all that.”

“So what’s the answer? Some kind of balance? Just enough self-esteem? Or maybe we need something to help us balance that equation?”

This felt like a suggestion. Jonno paused to let God make it but all he got was another question.

“And where best do people get self-esteem? What helps them strike the right balance?” Yes, just another question, but a good one. Jonno could see where this was going.

“From their family, their parents and their siblings, from their friends. I suppose that part of their community that they care about.”

“Our Father who art in heaven. The Family of the Church. The appreciation of a community that recognises that someone is prepared to make sacrifices for the collective good.”

“If You know all the answers why keep asking me the questions?”

God ignored this and carried on – with another question.

“And the third of your trends – the Internet?” asked God.

“Yes, well, we’ve sort of covered that. It’s a game changer. It connects people. I don’t know about this one global brain thing, one collective consciousness,

but it is breaking down boundaries, it is creating a global community and a global market place.”

“A market place for what – and please don’t say on-line insurance or Viagra.”

“I wasn’t going to. Ideas – the Internet is allowing us to share and use and build on ideas. That was it’s original intention, wasn’t it?”

“Aahh, ideas! Tell me about ideas” God was actually wringing his hands and had a big smile on his face. Had Jonno arrived where he was supposed to arrive? If so he felt a bit more comfortable. Ideas were much more in his comfort zone. Marketing is all about ideas, he’d always believed that. The answer to this marketing brief or any brief was an idea. The idea might be borrowed or adapted, it might just pop up out of nowhere, or at least feel like it did, or it might come from deductive thinking. It might be fresh and original or it might just feel tried and tested, it didn’t matter if it did the job. ‘Ideas are the oxygen of marketing’, that was one of Jonno’s lines. Right up there is his deck of slides alongside ‘Marketing is the oxygen of growth’. Jonno felt a warm glow.

“Do you know about memes?” God pricked his balloon with another question.

“Yes. I do, a bit”, Jonno replied.

As a marketing professional it was Jonno’s job to try to keep up with all the latest marketing thinking. As a consultant it was essential, he had to stay at least one step ahead of his clients, but that was fine, he was naturally curious, another feature of a good marketer or creative thinker. Memes and semiotics had become quite fashionable in marketing for a while, still were with some people but for most others they seemed all a bit too philosophical and pseudo-scientific. And the simple fact was that clients could get great ideas from lots of good agencies who had no apparent understanding or need for either. Jonno had been curious and had read up about meme theory. He’d worked with some very smart semioticians. He’d found the semioticians really helpful and insightful but even he had to acknowledge that non-experts could be just as insightful as the so-called experts.

“So, Jonno, tell me what you know about memes?” asked God.

“Memes were an idea of Richard Dawkins, I think. The notion that ideas get passed on like genes, that ideas behave like genetic mutations, something along those lines. But the scientists didn’t buy into all that because they could not be studied, they didn’t seem to behave in any predictable fashion. Then there were these people who tried to relate all this to how ideas take off in cultures, that’s why the advertising and marketing people got interested. Memes might offer some explanation about why some marketing ideas are better than others, why some are more ‘sticky’ and more likely to get passed on. Memes are all about ideas in culture but semiotics is about signs. Any part of society or culture has signs that have some kind of consistent interpretation – the colour purple, a cross. They form the code by which we make sense of everything and a lot of it comes from popular culture. We see doctors or bank managers or Irish or Italians according to how we’ve seen them portrayed in popular culture like films and books. I did find semiotics quite useful to help see the codes of a market, the signs, symbols, metaphors if you like, and how they differ from market to market. Understand the codes and you can try to use new codes to come up with a new idea.”

“Give me an example? Asked God.

“Oh I don’t know, the way they advertised Tango, a fizzy orange drink, using all the signs and codes of a lager which of course lifted it from being a kiddies drink and made it more appealing to teenagers. Anyway what’s this got to do with the Internet.”

“You said the Internet is a global market place of ideas, maybe even a global brain capable of coming up with new ideas?”

“Well, yes. Ideas are about new connections. The more stimuli you have, the more access to other people, the more likely you are to have ideas. The Internet has transformed the scale and speed of all this.”

“And the only way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.”

“Let Me ask you this. You say the speed at which scientific discovery is going you will understand nature, maybe be able to control it, yes? But knowledge advances in fits and starts, at any one time things lag behind, some things move ahead, yes?”

“Yes”, agreed Jonno. “All these devices we’re using, mobile phones and iPads and the like, they are being held back by batteries. I did a project on that for one of the telcos. We concluded that if they could make an advance in batteries they’d trump the competition. We suggested that while all the other technology people concentrated on apps and screens and all that, they might be better to get ahead in batteries.”

“Very interesting, all very interesting.” Jonno had the feeling God did not think it was. “Tell me Jonno, in all this scientific advance, where might they be falling behind, where are you lagging?”

“Batteries?” Jonno offered weakly.

“No, not batteries. But I’ll give you a clue, it begins with a b.”

The penny dropped.

“The brain, we still don’t really understand how the brain works’, said Jonno.

“You don’t understand how the brain works, you don’t understand how ideas form or get transferred. Memes or signs for that matter get dismissed as pseudo science because they cannot be studied scientifically, they can’t be weighed and measured, they can’t be predicted.”

At last God was not just asking questions, he seemed, for the first time, to be about to offer an answer. Jonno waited. God just looked at him.

“When someone points at the moon, only the fool looks at the finger,” said God. Nothing as easy as an answer, just a quote Jonno had heard before. This was getting frustrating.

“I don’t want to be rude, but why all the questions, why the enigmatic quote? I’ve played along, I’ve worked hard, I’ve thought harder than I have for years. But you obviously know all the answers, just tell me.”

“Tell me and I listen, show me and I understand, involve me...”

“And I might actually do something – yes I know that quote too.”

“And I need you to understand and to act, Jonno. I don’t want to give you answers I want to see what your answer is. I want your ideas.”

“The Internet isn’t just connecting people or accelerating the advance of science, it’s offering us a model that will explain how the brain works, how ideas work. Is that it?”

“It might be. It might just well be. Jonno I have just a couple more questions.”

“To which you know the answers,” said Jonno flatly.

“To which you know the answers,” replied God. He continued.

“What does all this debate about memes and ideas remind you of?”

Jonno thought, he looked down at his pad for inspiration, when he looked up he saw that, standing behind God, one on either side, were Jesus and the Holy Ghost, John and George. It was George, HG, who spoke first.

“It reminds me,” said George/HG, “of the all the debate among scientists about the Earth being round, the Big Bang Theory and strings. Ideas and memes and semiotics – they’re not real because we can’t measure them or study them.”

Then God.

“And why can you not get your mind round being Masters of the Universe yet you can imagine a time when man is Master of the World, a choreographer of nature, no longer the servant?”

“Because the universe is just so big and atomic particles are just so small to your four dimensional brain. You can’t travel through time.” It was John or rather Jesus who said this.

“Unless of course you use your imagination,” said The Holy Ghost.

“I think we’re done with this,” said God. “Jonno, you have what you need. We’ll leave you to it. Let us know when you want to share your ideas and give us an answer to the brief.”

God paused then repeated what he had said earlier.

“I want followers, Jonno - everyone eventually but atheists for now – who believe in Me not because they are scared, or they are partisan, or they haven’t really thought about it. I want them to be unafraid, to have really thought about it, to have lived for a while with no belief in God despite having lots of beliefs about many other things which cannot be proved beyond doubt. I want them to believe in me rationally and emotionally.”

“And the ideas have to be future-proofed for a world where all that needs to be known will be known,” chipped in The Holy Ghost.

“And it has to make sense to you Jonno. It has to be something that you think would have made your life better. Something that would have helped you get over the death of your son. Something that might have helped you see the value in your relationship with Mary, your soul mate, if that’s what she was,” added Jesus.

“I did say I’d help you in return,” said God. He might have added ‘Good Luck’ but he didn’t. Together with Jesus and the Holy Ghost, the three of them, John, George and Anthony, turned and walked away.

Jonno was left alone with his marketing brief, his thoughts and his pad. The Apple iMac had gone. But there was a cold beer, a Heineken, and a packet of Marlboro.

“Yep, I could do with a beer and a smoke,” thought Jonno, and he set to work to find some ideas for God’s Marketing Brief.

Act IX

Jonno sipped his beer, smoked his smokes and looked through all his notes and jottings. He knew that somewhere among all this stuff lay the answer to the brief. In fact, as had promised God, he hoped there would be more than one answer. Strategy is choice. There is never one definitive answer to a brief, only ever the best answer you can come up with from among a choice of options. He studied some of the things he had ringed or asterisked on his pad.

Scientists believe there must be more than the four dimensions we can see.

Scientists start with ideas – they believe before they can prove.

Life and the universe has patterns – positive and negative, circles.

Everything is expanding.

Purpose/meaning - pass things on in better shape than you received them.

Make things better in this life.

Connectedness – global consciousness.

People are social – they live by beliefs.

Tension between nature and technology.

The power of ideas – are ideas real? What does real mean?

What if hippies had the Internet?

Science and art.

This last note caught his attention. Maybe that was the basis for two opposing ideas. The first idea could be a more scientific approach. God is the extra dimension, or dimensions, that resolve the conflict between the general theory of relativity and quantum physics. String theory – the God String – something like that.

The second idea could be around the creative idea of God. He knew that this notion wasn't new but the key seemed to be unlocking the philosophical

debate about whether ideas are real and indeed what does 'real' mean? If you could persuade atheists that ideas are real - as real as a table or the wind - the idea of God makes God real.

He knew straight away that the second solution was the most attractive and he knew why. He was a marketing guy – he believed in brands and he knew, from both experience and data, evidential proof, that brands were real to people, everybody, to some degree or another. A brand is just a product or service – or a person – with a bunch of coherent and not so coherent associations and, ideally, one central idea. Everybody believed in brands whether they chose to admit it or not. If someone said they didn't you could always prove them wrong by finding some products or service category where they made a brand choice. They might not care what brand of car they drove – “I just bought the cheapest one that did the job” – but then they'd be very particular about what brand of chocolate they bought. People paid a premium for brands they knew and trusted for reasons they could not prove, they just believed. Even the most stubborn rationalist could be caught out. He'd done this once to a CEO of a large Footsie Company. His business made good profits out of the brands they sold but he himself maintained that he was immune to brands, he didn't personally believe in them. So Jonno asked, if he was in a plane that was about to crash and he had a chance to buy one of two parachutes, would he buy the more expensive one branded Mercedes or the cheaper one branded Walmart? Point made. But then he'd drive the point home. Can you imagine how long it would take you to do the weekly grocery shop if nothing was branded? Everyone believes in brands, they make choices easier. God might be just an idea but it was a really useful one. If brands are real then God is real.

He then turned his mind back to the idea of God as the 5th Dimension – or 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th dimensions if you believed string theory. To be rigorous about it he had to work though this idea even if it was not the one to which he felt instinctively drawn. The big advantage of this idea was that it had some rational under-pinning that might appeal to the more rational atheists. Scientists, most of them, would agree that there has to be more than we know to explain what we don't know about the life and the universe. That

is only logical. The problem was that it led to the “intelligent design” debate which really amounted to the contention that there has to be a God or Creator. Atheists could easily dismiss this by saying a) no there doesn’t and b) I’ll believe it when I see it.

He remembered the Chesterton quote and what it meant – things that are created (ideas) are loved before they exist, things that are constructed (rational, deductive thinking) is loved only after it is proved to exist.

The more he thought the more he kept coming back to ideas – the idea of God. So he challenged himself – can you make people believe ideas are real given you can’t see them or touch them, you can’t weigh or measure them, you can’t predict them?

He wrote “ideas” in the centre of a page in his note book and with lots of lines and arrows he added connected thoughts.

Ideas are the most powerful force of nature.

Ideas change the world.

Everybody has ideas.

People believe in ideas.

The effects of ideas are real.

“I have ideas, therefore I am.”

Discovery starts with ideas.

Knowledge expands with the oxygen of ideas.

As he filled his page other more random thoughts came to him.

If it’s wrong to think ideas are real then I don’t want to be right!

In the beginning was the word and word was God – God is the communication of ideas.

“Interesting,” he thought, “interesting, but I’m missing something.”

Jonno reflected. Marketing people often talk about the power of an insight although they have never been able to define exactly what they mean by the term. But that doesn't stop them going on about a 'consumer insight' or a 'brand insight' or a 'market insight'. The brand gurus would talk about a brand connecting to some insight about the human condition. Nike connects to an insight about how sport gives people self-esteem; Disney connects to the need for escapism and play; Pampers to a woman's need to be a good mother. When you write them down they always sound a bit trite but they are often the springboard to an idea and even more often the post rationalisation for why an idea excites you or the marketing team. Jonno had tried once to give the criteria for a great insight – it needs to be relevant to the problem you're trying to solve; it must be discerning and perceptive i.e. it goes deeper than anyone has ever gone or else picks up on something obvious yet missed by everyone else; it must excite you, give you an idea and lots of ideas to build on that idea.

Creative people will tell you that when you're working on a tough brief it helps to take a break – do something else, think about something else. That way an idea or at least an insight will come to you.

Jonno realised he only had one cigarette left, he'd virtually chain-smoked the previous nineteen. That was why he'd given up and, prior to his encounter with God and the Holy Trinity, never been tempted back to smoking. He was an all or nothing smoker so he had decided to make it nothing. He smiled when he recalled a trip to a hypnotherapist in Harley Street who was going to help him quit. He'd knocked the poor guy right off his stride when he pointed out that whereas he'd paid 400 pounds to be hypnotised into stopping smoking he would have paid 10 times that amount if they could guarantee he would just be a social smoker. "You're missing the really big market opportunity, my friend," he'd told the poor guy. "No smoker wants to quit, they all want to be able to control it." He'd dined out on this story.

That's it, he thought, that's it! God is all or nothing – believe or don't believe. He wrote in capitals on his pad:

“EVERY ATHEIST WANTS TO BELIEVE IN GOD – THE CHALLENGE IS TO GIVE THEM A GOD THEY CAN BELIEVE IN.”

His mind was racing now. Atheists wanted to be religious social smokers. They wanted God in their lives but on their terms. Like any good marketer he was straight away thinking of the benefit of believing in God and he knew he had it written down. He flicked through his pad furiously trying to find the exact words he'd used – there they were...

God helps you get more out of your life and a shared belief in God helps us work together to make the world a better place.

As a headline it read like a platitude, but juxtaposed to his insight it made sense. Atheism does not make you happy, it adds nothing to your life. Atheists know that, and deep down they know they would be happier if they could believe in God (and they believe in lots of other things they can't prove). To them God is just an idea. So the challenge is to make them accept that ideas – at the very least the effect of powerful ideas – are real. And the key is they want to believe this - now more than ever.

The Internet, the progress of technology and advancement of knowledge offer a great future but the world feels more precarious than it ever did. Great brands have great timing – there surely can never have been a better time for God, thought Jonno.

If the world started witnessing the conversion of thousands of atheists to a belief in God as a force for good, this would indeed make a huge impact.

God is Good – just add the extra O. We can all believe in that. Jonno made a note that he would need to work on this idea – it only worked in English. But the idea was exciting.

God is Good – God is a really Good Idea, in a world connected by ideas.

He was getting excited by all this but he forced himself to stress test the idea. How do you deal with life after death, more precisely a better life after death, if you live a good life now? He had to think of something that made the benefits of a belief in God tangible to everyone, not just atheists, in the here and now.

One thing Jonno had been working on just before he died was *gamification* – a typically daft marketing word to describe the increasing attraction of playing games on the Internet. Some people were suggesting this could spread to all aspects of life through brands. He'd been working on a project to create a brand game for range of cooking products. The idea was that certain behaviours – like simply cooking a good meal for your family or uploading recipe tips – would earn points and prizes. The project was in its early stages and Jonno was a bit sceptical if he was honest – which he wasn't entirely because they were being paid a lot of money by the client to develop and help build a prototype to test. Now this idea came back to him. What about an on-line game that allowed people to track their moral choices and measure their happiness and wellbeing. Their social network could award them points and make commendations. Was this crazy? Well, no more crazy than people paying real money to buy things for their virtual avatars. That had been going on for some time now on games like Farmville.

Crazy or not the ideas were really starting to flow now. There was something in this 'completing the circle' – becoming God-like, one global consciousness. He started sketching some symbols with this play on the extra O of God/Good.

He didn't know how long he'd been working or when The Holy Trinity would reappear to check on his progress. He sensed it wouldn't be long. He needed to find a way to capture all this, to present back his ideas.

Essentially the brief required him to reposition God in the minds of atheists. "brand positioning" is a standard tool for marketers - a way of capturing in as small a nutshell as possible what a brand was all about. There had been countless tools developed to help do this, in particular a lot of variations on the brand wheel model. You started with the brand essence in the middle – it could be a word or phrase or two or three words that capture what the brand stood for, like the notes that make up a chord. Levi's was meant to be "Rugged, Sexy and Authentic", Disney is "Family, Magic, Characters." Then you progressed out and added the main benefits of the brand and some words to describe its personality. Jonno had got a bit bored with these brand

positioning models of late. They were useful to force a debate among the marketing team but they could get a bit esoteric and pedantic. He much preferred the old method of simply trying to capture what you would like to hear your target market say about the brand to a friend if they had totally bought into the brand in the way you intended. So he set about doing this for God and a typical atheist, an atheist like himself.

“I believe in God. I believe ideas are real because they can change the world better than any other force of nature. Ideas are what make us human and distinguish us from any other form of life. God is the best idea of all. God can inspire us to live a better life and work together to build a better world. I understand other people see God in different ways and I respect them as long as they respect me. True believers in God acknowledge his reality and his existence in anything that gives us self-respect. They treat other people the way they expect to be treated. They don’t steal or cheat or bully. They are not greedy nor do they take things to excess. They try in whatever way possible to pass things in on in better shape. They have worthwhile purpose in their lives and respect for other people as long as they show tolerance. We have the potential to be good or bad, the world has the potential to be good or bad. God is good – good for us individually and collectively. We all need God in our lives – we make him real.”

Jonno paused there. He wanted to add – ‘we are God or we can be God’ but he knew this would be misconstrued as self-aggrandizing. What he meant was we have the potential to progress to be God-like in the sense of a harmonious, connected force for good.

“But how will you get this off the ground?” God was back and HG and Jesus were with him.

“Where are the snowflakes at the start of this avalanche?” asked Jesus.

“Who’s going to write this down? Where will anyone find this brand manifesto?” Asked HG

“You mean what’s the marketing plan? I know, I haven’t got to that yet,” said Jonno defensively. “But what do You think about the idea?”

“The idea is that I’m an idea. I’ve heard it before.” said God.

“Look, your brief is to convince atheists to believe in you but you refuse to offer any evidence that they will accept. They have rejected the personification of You in all its forms – Roman Gods, Old Testament God, Loving Father of the New Testament. The religious faiths that come anywhere close to making atheists at all interested are the eastern religions like Buddhism. They don’t believe in “intelligent design” or of any kind of deterministic God. But they do want to believe, they’re worried and stressed about where the world is heading and the futility of their own lives, and they do believe in ideas, they do have faith in some things they cannot entirely prove.”

“Like brands?” asked Jesus.

“Yes, like brands but lots of other things as well. They have faith that their football team will win the cup next year. That their loved ones love them. That not all politicians are corrupt and self-serving. The scientists among them have faith in all kinds of ideas they can’t yet prove. We just need to make them believe that an idea is as real as anything else – because it is. And it’s all very well You saying you’ve heard this before. With all due respect you’ve heard everything before. You are not the target market. I am – and I think this idea has legs.”

“So what would you propose we do next – test the idea?” It was HG asking the question. As God’s inspirational go-between it seemed fair enough he should ask this.

“Experiment. I prefer to experiment with a prototype than doing market research with a concept – especially a concept about a concept. Surely it would not be breaking your rules about ‘no miracles or stunts’ to find a few atheists and reveal this to them directly.”

“Reveal it to them – what do you mean? Celestial choirs, clouds parting, angels descending? We’ve tried that”, said God.

“Or do you mean send God or some human manifestation of Him out into the world to spread the word. We tried that too. You get crucified.” Jesus had a point.

“Would it not be better”, said God, “ to let some atheists – maybe just one atheist – figure it out for themselves. I am not, as you rightly say, the target market but if I know one thing about atheists it’s that they have to figure things out for themselves. That’s what I meant when I said atheism is the door you have to pass through to get to Me, God.”

So that is what God had meant, thought Jonno.

Jonno held his head in his hands – this was not going the way he’d wanted. He had hoped they would work with him to develop the idea, not try to shoot it down. It was work in progress. He felt bad – actually he really did feel bad. From the moment he had arrived in wherever this was, God’s waiting room or whatever, he had not felt anything physical. He did not even feel the effects of countless cups of coffee and cigarettes washed down with a beer. But now he was feeling rough. His head really ached and for some reason so did his lower back. He thought he might be about to pass out.

“Are you all right Jonno?” asked Jesus. ‘You look a bit faint.’”

“No, no I’m fine. I just need a moment. I’ll be fine”

“Jonno, relax. We all think you’ve done well. We know it’s a tough marketing brief. You could be on to something. Quick HG – catch him”

The Holy Ghost was standing closest to Jonno but he could not move quickly enough. Jonno fell backwards and landed with a thud that made the pain in his head and his legs and his back much worse. He looked up and saw the three faces he’d come to know so well peering over him anxiously.

“Are you alright Jonno, are you alright?”

Their faces were becoming blurred, he could barely make them out. The pain was getting worse, not a sharp pain but a kind of pulsating ache that came in waves. He blinked several times and his eyes started to clear. He could start

to make out the three faces again, staring at him, but they'd changed. It was a man and two women looking down at him. One of the women was holding his hand. She was crying and saying his name over and over again. It was Mary.

"God is good. It's a good idea. God is good for us."

"Yes, darling God is good. He's brought you back to me. We're the team again, just like always. Jonno the Baptist and Mary Magdalen, looking for Jesus."

The Doctor had told her that when Jonno came round she should try to make some reference to when they first met and not to the accident.

"I've found Jesus. Mary, I've met him, I've talked with him. And God. And the Holy Ghost."

The Nurse had also warned her that people say the strangest things when they come out of a coma.

Act X

“You were in a coma for over a week, darling. The Doctors said your body shuts down to cope with the trauma.”

It was two days now since Jonno had come out the coma and the doctors were pleased with his progress. They’d said to Mary that it was fine to start talking to him about what had happened. He could cope with it.

“Until you come round they never know how bad the damage is going to be, but you have been very lucky. You broke your ankles, your legs and your pelvis but there doesn’t seem to have been any damage to your head. That stupid car of yours turns out to be pretty good in an accident.”

Despite taking 60 kg of weight out the body of the new Carrera to give better performance and fuel efficiency Porsche had maintained the rigidity of the car with a mixture of thin steel, aluminium and magnesium in all key areas, like the roof. It also had a full size driver airbag that had activated the millisecond the lorry made impact. The car had rolled several times and Jonno’s legs, trapped in the tight foot-well, had not taken the impact so well, snapping in five places. But he was alive.

“I don’t remember much about the accident. I was near home wasn’t I? But what I do remember is that you were the last thing I was thinking about. I want to make things right between us. I love you. You are my soul mate. Seeing your face when I came round was the second best thing in my life”

“What was the best thing?”

“Seeing it the first time” smiled Jonno. “We are a team, a good team. We’ve been through a lot. I haven’t always been great at talking about my feelings – at dealing with things, I know that. But I’ve changed. I’ve found God. Life is going to be better.”

“Darling, you’ve been through a lot. It’s great that you’ve found God – met him apparently – but I think you need to take things slowly. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“But you believe in God don’t you?” asked Jonno.

“ I do. I always have. My faith has been shaken a few times. When we lost... well you know that, and then again when I thought I’d lost you. But I believe in faith.”

“So do I, it’s a really good idea.”

“You kept saying that when you came round, God is a good idea.”

“Yes, I want to tell you all about it...”

Mary held his hand to her face.

“In time, darling, you can in time. For now just focus on getting well again.”

Jonno’s recuperation was slow and painful. The company had told him he was to take a full year’s sabbatical; there was no hurry to get back to work. He was very touched that so many colleagues and clients had sent him their best wishes for a speedy recovery - but it wasn’t speedy. Still, it was a nearly full recovery, though he would probably have a slight limp in one leg for the rest of his life.

He’d asked the Doctor if he would be able to play golf. The Doctor said he would. Jonno joked “That’s great because I couldn’t play before.”

He’d set himself a deadline that after six months he and Mary would be able to take a holiday. He had even had her book one of the luxury villas along the beach at Le Paradis in Mauritius. They’d been there once before but had stayed in the main hotel complex. The villas were a lot more expensive but a lot more secluded, with their own private bit of beach away from everyone and a butler on tap to service the guests’ every need.

He’d stopped trying to tell her about his very special Marketing Brief. He could see it worried her – were the Doctors sure there had been no damage to the brain, she asked herself whenever he started talking about Jesus looking like John Lennon or the Holy Ghost being a kind of ghost writer. Jonno decided he’d wait until they were away from it all in Mauritius before having another go

at telling her what he'd experienced and the source of his new found faith in God.

On their second night at Le Paradis, after a beautiful early evening meal in the French restaurant at the end of the beach, they strolled back, hand in hand, towards their very private villa.

They stopped outside and sat down on the beach to watch the final phase of a glorious, rich, warm, multi-coloured sunset, the part when the sun just melts back into the sea and the yellow brick road widens towards the shore.

"It's great to be back here. I'd forgotten how beautiful it is. That lovely breeze in the evening." Mary looked as lovely as he could ever remember her looking.

"I've been here more recently than you" Jonno said and he started to tell her all about what had happened to him.

She hadn't known when this was coming but she knew she had not heard the last of a God that looked like Anthony Hopkins. She didn't want anything to spoil this holiday and if Jonno needed to get all this off his chest then she'd just listen.

He told her everything he could remember, which was less and less as the months had gone by since his resurrection – since he'd returned from working with God. If only he still had his notebook.

"... And then instead of Their faces I saw you and the nurse and the Doctor. But I'm telling you I think I was there. I think I spoke to God."

"And Jesus and the Holy Ghost. And they helped you unravel the mystery of life and the universe." said Mary.

"Darling, I know what you think and I agree that you've come out all this happier than I think I've ever seen you, which is crazy given what you've had to go through. But I promise I've listened and I hate to disillusion you but everything you've talked about was in your head already. You were having a dream. You were talking to yourself. I think dreams are like the brains filing

system – as you sleep, or as you lie in a coma, all the things on your mind get filed away but they sort of collide with each other as they do so. The week before your accident you'd been playing around on Wikipedia – you showed me that piece on “The meaning of life” and the bit on the hippie movement. You'd just come back from a business trip and no doubt you'd been watching some of those TED.com films, Richard Dawkins and the rest of them. You said that I was the last thing on your mind when the accident happened. I think it's lovely you've found some version of God you can believe in. Your atheism was never a wedge between us but some new common ground where God is concerned can bring us closer together. But please, don't tell anyone else this, not Paul, none of our friends and certainly not any of your workmates or clients. Let's just keep this between us. It's fine, believe what you want to believe, but please just talk to me about it.”

Jonno was neither surprised nor crestfallen about this. He'd been listening to himself as well. This was the first time he'd tried to run through the whole experience and as he heard himself recount what had happened to him the more absurd it seemed to him. Mary was right – it must have been a dream. It didn't shake his faith in the idea of God and he was determined he would never again say he was an atheist. He would say he believed in God but maybe he had a different understanding of God. That's fine – people over the ages and all around the world have had a different idea of God. No need to fight about it if we all share the same moral values.

When they got back to Wimbledon after their holiday there was a letter from Porsche in Guildford. They'd sent him a card and some flowers when he was in hospital. Now they were letting him know that if he had any interest they had a model identical to the car he'd lost in the accident. There was a long waiting list but in view of what had happened they wanted him to have first refusal.

“What are you going to do, can you bear to get back in that stupid sports car,” asked Mary, hoping against hope the answer was No. She'd never liked Porsches – too showy and too clichéd.

“I’d be more interested if they still had the last one, the one I traded in. No, it’s a nice offer but I’ve lost my interest in sports cars, Porsche or otherwise.”

Later that evening Mary snuggled up to Jonno on the sofa as he was going through the rest of the mail, some of it from work. “Actually, Jonno, I’ve been meaning to broach the subject of work. You’ve still got several months of your sabbatical left so lot’s of time but I was wondering how you felt about work.”

“How do you mean?”, Jonno looked up from the pile of mail he was wading through.

“Well, do you think perhaps you might not want to go back to marketing and consultancy? I could stop what I’m doing with the Foreign Office, plenty of bright young Oxbridge graduates just waiting for me to move out the way. We could give up work – you know we can afford to – and we could spend more time together. We don’t have to just go on holidays – we could travel, explore the world. We’ve no ties.”

“Or we could stay here, use our imagination and travel through time,” joked Jonno

“Don’t start all that again. Listen I’m serious. What do you think?”

Jonno pretended to think but he had already made up his mind.

“You’re on! Jonno the Baptist and Mary Magdalene. We’ll go looking for...” he paused for dramatic effect, “... life. Maybe when we get tired travelling we’ll drop anchor, so to speak, and I could think about doing some teaching.”

“What, teach marketing?” Mary asked, surprised at this new calling of Jonno’s.

“God no. English literature, philosophy – I always wished I’d studied that at university instead of history. I could do another degree.”

The rest of that month and most of the next they started making plans. They’d rent the house out (not a good time to sell) and they might want a base back in the UK if they got homesick.

Jonno was busy one day, going through the house, marking up what they intended to leave for the tenants, what they'd sell and what they would put into storage. Mary came home. He wasn't sure where she'd been - maybe into the village to get some things.

"Fancy a cup of tea, darling?" Mary asked as she hung her coat on a hat-stand that now had a yellow post-it note saying "Tenants."

"Not right now, I just want to finish this off," replied Jonno, his mind elsewhere. He liked this painting, too good for the tenants – maybe they should keep it and put it into storage.

"Yes, right now. Come into the kitchen I need to talk to you." There was something in Mary's voice that told him he had to stop what he was doing.

They sat across from each other at the kitchen table – it too had a yellow post-it note saying "Tenants."

"Darling, I think we may need to delay our travels for a while – quite a while. At least I hope so"

Jonno was confused at this sudden change of heart. What on earth had brought this on?

"I'm pregnant."

"You can't be." Jonno could hardly breathe he was so taken aback.

"I can and I am – it's very early, but I did a test at home and the doctor has just confirmed it."

"But Mary this is fantastic news, it's brilliant, wonderful – it's a bloody miracle."

"It's also bloody terrifying. I'll be 47 years old when the baby is born, the risks are enormous. And all our plans..."

“Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making plans.” The John Lennon quote was not lost on Mary. “We’ve just got to hope for the best. Have some faith.”

6.1 months later, Mary, with the help of caesarean section, had a healthy baby boy, one month ahead of schedule. He was now officially the number one most beautiful thing Jonno had ever seen. He wouldn’t have cared if it was a girl or a boy – the baby was healthy and Jonno didn’t realise it was possible to love someone so much who you’d only just met.

“What shall we call him?” asked Mary.

“What about Jimmy?” suggested Jonno unable to take his eyes off their child.

“Why Jimmy?”

“We can name him after the guy driving the lorry that hit me. I know it’s weird but I feel I owe him something. That which did not kill me made me stronger and happier.”

“How do you know his name, the driver?” asked Mary.

“I don’t know, you must have told me,” replied Jonno.

“I definitely did not tell you. The Doctors told me not to make any mention of him. I never knew his name was Jimmy – the Police said he was a James somebody or other. A waste of space apparently. They prosecuted him for driving without due care and attention. He got a suspended sentence. The Police called me to tell me. There hadn’t been any need for you to go to court as he pleaded Guilty.”

“Then it must have been in the papers.” Said Jonno still looking adoringly at the beautifully formed ten fingers and ten toes.

“It wasn’t in the papers – I looked out for it but no mention of it was made. You never asked about him so I forgot about it too”

“Well somebody must have told me.,” said Jonno, now looking at Mary who was looking back at him with a very strange expression.

Footnote

I have written a business book (on marketing of course) and a few articles over the years but I have never attempted to write anything like this (and will never do so again!). The idea first came to me many years ago. Someone asked me if I would ever write a book and if so what kind of book. For some reason I cannot recall, I had this idea of having an argument with God in which He loses his cool. That was it. That's all I remember and in fact I did not remember even this until a couple of years ago. I had been thinking of writing another business book but could not get inspired about the prospect. I had a few more war stories to tell about my career in marketing and what I'd learned but I really did not feel the world needed to hear them.

I happened to be in Iguazu Falls, killing some time on my own in between some business commitments I had in Brazil. With nothing else to do apart from look at the wonder of nature, I started to jot down a structure for a business book. I still felt uninspired and by now I had drunk a bit of wine. Suddenly I remembered the idea I had had so many years ago – a discourse with God. Within an hour I had filled two of the little hotel notebooks with the main thoughts for what has become this book (perhaps novella would be a better description). I wrote it a few months later.

I do try to offer some wisdom about marketing, but essentially it is the story of my journey into atheism. Like many others, reading "The God Delusion" by Richard Dawkins had caused me to 'come out' and proudly declare myself to be an atheist. But also, like many others, I have come to realise that atheism does not do much for you. It doesn't make you happy. The main theme of the book is that not believing in God, while arguably sounding intellectual, is not so great. We all want to believe, we all want to see some higher purpose, some future.

I wasn't exactly sure, as I sat down to write "God's Marketing Brief", where it would take me. The denouement – if you can call it a denouement – that marketing is all about ideas and God is a great idea - really only came together as I wrote it. It is not such a new notion but it works for me.

Novice writers are told to write about what they know. Well I know a bit about marketing. The actual storyline is also drawn from my personal experiences. However, and this is a very important point I want to get across, I am not Jonno. In order to create the premise that he is the world's smartest marketer (working on the world's toughest marketing brief) I drew on a few people I know and admire. I won't embarrass them by naming them. Yes, I lost a child in similar circumstances to Jonno (a daughter not a son). In my case my first marriage broke down and I went on to meet the true love of my life to whom I've been married for 20 years and have two more children, boys (as well as a son and daughter from my first marriage). But in very large measure Jonno's story is his story – a fiction that I created for the book. Probably the biggest link between Jonno and me is a love of the Porsche brand, and of course the wrestle with atheism.

I must also point out that all the philosophy and science, the quantum physics and the hippies, were taken from just a few hours spent on the Internet. You'll find it all with the simplest of searches on Wikipedia, TED.com and Howstuffworks.com (really good for the Big Bang and all that).

As well as being the lazy thing to do, this sets up the ending where it has all been a dream based on the kind of stuff Jonno had been looking at on the Internet just before his accident.

Finally, the final part, the ending. I have been very careful – and trust I have succeeded – in not offending anyone of any faith. I don't know whether God exists or what if anything of the main faiths has any 'truth'. They may be right, I and my fellow atheists may be wrong. What I have tried to do is to create an idea of God – of God as a great idea – we can all believe in and be the better for. I wanted to write an ending that leaves people free to believe what they want. It is a little clichéd but I hope it does the trick.

Mark Sherrington

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