



One Thing


Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God

Sam Storms



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





About the Author

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Affectionately dedicated to

MIKE BICKLE

A man of one thing, in whose life I've seen a relentless
passion for God that has challenged and encouraged me more
than any other.

Thanks, dear friend!





Psalm 27: 4

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.





'Father in heaven! What is a man without Thee! What is all that he knows, vast accumulation though it be, but a chipped fragment if he does not know Thee! What is all his striving, could it even encompass a world, but a half-finished work if he does not know Thee: Thee the One, who art one thing and who art all! So may Thou give to the intellect, wisdom to comprehend that one thing; to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding; to the will, purity that wills only one thing. In prosperity may Thou grant perseverance to will one thing; amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing; in suffering, patience to will one thing. Oh, Thou that giveth both the beginning and the completion, may Thou early, at the dawn of day, give to the young man the resolution to will one thing. As the day wanes, may Thou give to the old man a renewed remembrance of his first resolution, that the first may be like the last, the last like the first, in possession of a life that has willed only one thing' (Søren Kierkegaard).

Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing, Søren Kierkegaard, translated from the Danish with an Introductory Essay by Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956), p. 31.



Chapter One

A Christian 'Theory of Everything'

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

He was shockingly thin, often wore a powdered wig, and is known to most people for his graphic portrayal of the horrors of hell. But in the summer of 1723, at only nineteen years of age, puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards uttered the words that forever changed my life.

In that short statement he proved yet again that concise, poignant assertions, not long speeches or complex dissertations, have a strange power over the human soul. They inspire acts of remarkable courage. They motivate otherwise selfish people to deeds of indescribable sacrifice. They can turn hate to love, yet tragically, love to hate, as well. Sometimes they even turn the course of history.

I still struggle for words to describe the pervasive impact of Edwards' words. Little, if anything, in my life was left untouched.



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What I thought was pleasing to God and what he wanted of me was forever transformed. Reading the Bible suddenly became a heartwarming adventure rather than a tedious discipline. I had to discard a good bit of what I thought was Christianity and rebuild from the ground up. My value system got turned on its head. I scrapped not only *why* but *how* I used to worship, and started over. The way I view the world and people and life's ultimate purpose experienced a serious and significant overhaul.

It's not the sort of thing you'd read in *People* magazine or hear on an episode of *Seinfeld*. As best I can tell it isn't well known. I don't expect to find it inscribed on a monument or printed on a T-shirt. It's too long for a bumper sticker but too short for a speech. When you first read it you may wonder why I'm so passionate about its truth and its capacity to transform how you think and feel and live and worship and pray and relate with other people. You won't find it in the Bible, but it's thoroughly biblical. Here it is:

Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed? An understanding of the perfections of God, merely, cannot be the end of the creation; for he had as good not understand it, as see it and not be at all moved with joy at the sight. Neither can the highest end of creation be the declaring God's glory to others; for the declaring God's glory is good for nothing otherwise than to raise joy in ourselves and others at what is declared.¹

The style's a bit bumpy at first, but go back and read it again. Don't let the puritan prose throw you. If you're still confused let me unravel it for you with my modern paraphrase:

God is the most God-centered being in the universe. He is consumed with love for himself and has infinite



admiration for his own beauty. This passionate desire to be joyfully celebrated is the reason you and I exist. If all we do is think about God, even if our thoughts are accurate, we're better off not thinking at all. Telling others what we think isn't much better. The reason why we think about God and tell others what we've thought is so that all of us might relish the very idea of Him and rejoice that so great a God is actually ours.

Gladness in God's Glory

I doubt you'd be reading this book if it were not your aim in life to glorify God. We don't always say it in so many words but, if pressed to define the meaning of life or our reason for being, followers of Jesus end up with some version of God's glory as the ultimate explanation for what they do and why. I can't imagine a Christian giving a different answer. If asked for biblical support, we're usually pretty good at citing texts like these:

- So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).
- ... to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:21).
- To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Tim. 1:17).

But for many of these same people, 'glorifying God' is an empty shell. Ask them to describe what it means and you're likely to get a blank and embarrassed stare. Ask them to explain how it's actually *done* and they'll suddenly remember they're late to pick up Johnny from soccer practice and make a hasty exit. Glorifying God has become something of a mantra in the evangelical world. If you can affirm it often enough and with



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apparent spiritual intensity it's supposed to make routine problems disappear.

I'm not saying these people are hypocrites, as if they profess to glorify God without the conscious intent to do so. A hypocrite wants to impress others with an external façade of religious piety that he knows is devoid of internal spiritual substance. However, in most cases, otherwise sincere Christians simply don't know because either they've never been taught or they're rarely challenged to think deeply on what a life that glorifies God is supposed to look like.

So we'll assume there is at least a verbal consensus among Christians that creation exists for God's glory. But that's only step one. We're now faced with an even more important question: *How* is he most glorified in us? *Where and in what way* is God's glory most clearly revealed? *Through what mechanism or means* do we bring him the honor that we all agree he deserves? I believe the consistent answer of Scripture is that God is most glorified in us when our knowledge and experience of him ignite a forest fire of joy that consumes all competing pleasures and he alone becomes the treasure that we prize. Here's how Edwards puts it:

God is glorified not only by his glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. God made the world that he might communicate, and the creature receive, his glory . . . both [with] the mind and the heart. He that testifies his having an idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation [i.e., his heartfelt commendation or praise] of it and his delight in it.²

I'm not suggesting that understanding the nature of God isn't essential. Of course it is! Theological ignorance won't take



us very far, at least not in the right direction. Excitement uninformed by truth invariably leads either to idolatry or fanaticism. If we don't know the God we enjoy, we may end up enjoying the wrong god! But knowledge alone isn't enough. Declaring God's glory to others is also important but, again, there's something even more fundamental to our existence. For evangelicals who've been raised to believe that theological precision is an end in itself, this may be a hard pill to swallow. For others who've reduced Christianity to obedience, it may sound self-indulgent.

My point is simply that *passionate and joyful admiration of God, and not merely intellectual apprehension, is the aim of our existence*. If God is to be supremely glorified in us it's critically essential that we be supremely glad in him and in what he has done for us in Jesus. So, here's why you are: to *relish and rejoice in the revelation of divine beauty*.

Created for Happiness

Let me begin to unpack this by appealing once again to something Edwards said. In a sermon entitled 'Nothing upon Earth can Represent the Glories of Heaven,' he makes another breathtaking assertion. 'God,' said Edwards, 'created man for nothing else but happiness. He created him only that he might communicate happiness to him.'³ This seems to run against the grain of everything we've been taught. How can God have created us for *our* happiness if he created us for *his* glory? The two ideas appear to conflict at every turn. Don't liberals affirm the former and fundamentalists the latter? But who in their right mind would dare affirm both?

In fact, these are not different aims or mutually exclusive assertions. God created us to glorify himself by enriching us with the joy that flows from a saving encounter with the splendor



of his Son. So the goal of our creation was not simply that we might be happy, but happy in beholding God's own eternal excellencies. Not in beholding our own accomplishments. Not in the enjoyment of our own sensual appetites. Not in the development of a healthy self-esteem or in the acquisition of a four-bedroom home with a three-car garage. *God* is the fountain of all felicity⁴ and bids us come and drink!

Many Christians today are horribly out of touch with this truth. They aren't resistant to joy, but they're more than a little suspicious of it. The problem is that they are oblivious to the beauty of God. Worse than that, they're bored. God is real to them. They're not atheists. He just isn't relevant. Far less is he cause for celebration. That's why when life is hard and disillusionment sets in, God isn't the first thing to enter their minds (if they think of him at all). Many instinctively turn to whatever will anesthetize their pain or bring a spark to their souls.

The reason for this isn't hard to see. The human soul wasn't created for boredom. We were shaped by God for the excitement that the revelation of his glory induces. We were fashioned for the fascination that the display of his goodness evokes. We were made for the happiness that the sweetness of Christ's tender mercies alone can impart. That doesn't sound boring to me!

An Important Definition

Happiness is an explosive and dangerous word. If I don't define it carefully I risk losing a lot of my readers who will mistake this book for countless others on the market that exchange the offense of the cross for shallow self-fulfillment.

When I speak of human happiness I'm not talking about physical comfort or a six-figure salary or emotional stability or the absence of conflict or sexual gratification or any such earthly



or temporal achievement. That's not to say such things are inherently wrong. In their proper place they may well be expressions of divine benevolence. But we greatly err if they become foundational to human happiness. We should be grateful for them, but happiness is still within our grasp despite their absence.

The happiness for which we are eternally destined is a state of soul in which we experience and express optimum ecstasy in God. Happiness is the whole soul resting in God and rejoicing that so beautiful and glorious a Being is ours. Happiness is the privilege of being enabled by God's grace to enjoy making much of him forever. I'm talking about the ineffable and unending pleasure of blissful union with and the joyful celebration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a joy of such transcendent quality that no persecution or pain or deprivation can diminish, nor wealth or success or prosperity can enhance. It's what Paul had in mind in Philippians 4:11 when he spoke of a satisfaction in Christ that was beyond the reach of either adversity or abundance.

Everyone pursues happiness. We're all committed to squeezing out of life maximum pleasure and a minimum of pain. For many, life is little more than a frantic effort to minimize discomfort while holding on to the slim hope that somewhere along the way a measure of joy might be found. The lie we must combat is that money and cocaine and chocolate and a fully equipped SUV can do what God can't. One goal in writing this book is to persuade you that it is eminently reasonable to seek your joy in Jesus, that nothing is more sensible or more conducive to your temporal and eternal welfare than the sweetness of relishing the Son of God above all worldly enticements.

You weren't created to be a lawyer or school teacher or factory worker or football player. That's what you *do to make* a



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living, but it's not the reason for *living*. You were made to rejoice at the display of God's glory in Jesus Christ. In the first formal sermon he ever preached, Edwards put it this way:

*The pleasures of loving and obeying, loving and adoring, blessing and praising the Infinite Being, the Best of Beings, the Eternal Jehovah; the pleasures of trusting in Jesus Christ, in contemplating his beauties, excellencies, and glories; in contemplating his love to mankind and to us, in contemplating his infinite goodness and astonishing loving-kindness; the pleasures of [the] communion of the Holy Ghost in conversing with God, the maker and governor of the world; the pleasure that results from the doing of our duty, in acting worthily and excellently; ... these are the pleasures that are worthy of so noble a creature as a man is.*⁵

This revolutionary concept of Christianity is not unique to Edwards or the Reformed tradition he represents. One other example will suffice to make the point. John Wesley, founder of Methodism and a theological Arminian, came to the same conclusion:

*One design you are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this: love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever you desire or fear, whatever you seek or shun, whatever you think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God,—the sole end, as well as source, of your being.*⁶



Wesley's point is unmistakable. The purpose of existence is the pursuit of enjoyment . . . in God! Our desires, affections, pursuits, all that we say and do, all that we love or hate, are to be measured by this single criterion and subordinated to this one end: happiness in God.

Your choice isn't *whether* to passionately seek pleasure. Trust me, you do (as I hope to make clear in chapter two). Your only option is where you'll look or whom you'll love or whose offer of pleasure you'll accept. I hardly need remind you, or perhaps I do, that the world will do everything in its power and employ whatever means necessary and spare no expense to capture the allegiance of your heart. I saw a perfect illustration of this recently at a local theater.

I arrived about thirty minutes early to view the new film *Luther* (a fairly accurate portrayal of the sixteenth-century reformer, I might add). What flashed before my eyes on the screen was a testimony to the relentless assault launched every day on the souls of unsuspecting men and women. It reminded me that corporate America knows something about the human soul that the church has yet to fully grasp: people are desperate for something, anything, that will bring excitement and energy to their otherwise bored existence, and most of them are willing to pay whatever it takes, no matter how painful or pricey, to get it. Colorful ads, slick announcements, and a half-dozen previews of coming attractions, pummeled the audience with a dizzying array of solutions to their struggles or the promise of an experience certain to satisfy their soul: there were science fiction fantasies, military adventures, the intrigue of Nintendo, sex, horror, a new thrill ride at Disney, more sex, romantic adventures, comedies for both old and young, music videos bizarre beyond words, athletic challenges, sex again, and even the occasional web-site of a church insisting that 'God does it better'; if that



weren't enough, it comes with coke and popcorn and the opportunity to buy on-line your ticket for the next installment.

It was a vivid microcosm of what has become a global conspiracy to seduce the human soul with cheap and empty pleasures.

You weren't created for boredom or burnout or bondage to sexual lust or greed or ambition but for the incomparable pleasure and matchless joy that knowing Jesus alone can bring. Only then, in him, will you encounter the life-changing, thirst-quenching, soul-satisfying delight that God, for his glory, created you to experience.

'Apatheism'

"'Apatheism'? You mean 'atheism', don't you?' No, I mean apatheism. I'd never heard the word either, until a few months ago. But it's important because it expresses an approach to life that is the absolute antithesis of everything this book is about.

I was browsing through Borders' bookstore and picked up the May, 2003, issue of *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. On page 34, Jonathan Rauch, 'an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual' (that's how he describes himself), defines 'apatheism' as 'a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's.' An atheist, says Rauch, cares deeply about religion, but in the opposite direction from an evangelical Christian. An 'apatheist', on the other hand, quite simply couldn't care less about anyone's religion, least of all his own.

Rauch believes that apatheism is the answer to the sort of religious zeal that produced 9/11 as well as the religious passion that energized people's response to it. 'Apatheism' doesn't come easily, though. We're not talking about being religiously lazy. 'Apatheism' is the fruit of a disciplined and determined effort



to master one's spiritual passions. 'Atheists' can be atheists, agnostics, or even church-going theists. The important thing is that they 'are neither controlled by godly passions nor concerned about the (nonviolent, noncoercive) religious beliefs of others.' Rauch is ecstatic about what he sees as the growth of atheism in American society.

What you will discover in this book is a concentrated attempt to destroy atheism. I want to arouse spiritual passion. I aim to pour as much gasoline on whatever is left of the lingering spark in your soul as I possibly can. I hope to stoke the fires of concern and zeal and yearning that God first lit in you when he shaped you in his image. I want you to care deeply and doggedly about your religion and to be disturbed and broken-hearted when others thumb their collective noses at Jesus.

Apathy is impossible in the presence of the Son of God. Ineffable beauty compels a response: either passionate devotion or hatred. Middle-of-the-road, straddle-the-fence, you-do-your-thing-and-I'll-do-mine indifference dies when Jesus draws near. Love him or despise him, but abandon the myth that he can be tolerated. Sing for joy or spit in his face. Apathy simply isn't an option.

I do have to give Rauch credit for one thing. He's right when he says that 'even regular churchgoers can, and often do, rank quite high on the atheism scale'. How true, yet how tragic! But God created you for something better, for the heart-pounding joy and mind-bending fascination and white-hot happiness that comes from relishing and rejoicing in the beauty of Jesus Christ.

A Christian 'Theory of Everything'

Physicists and cosmologists are ever in search of what they call 'a theory of everything', or a T.O.E., a hypothesis that is all-



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encompassing in its explanatory power, a theory that can account for both the sub-atomic world of particle physics and the galactic expanse of supernovae and black holes.

Brian Greene, professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia University, is the author of a fascinating book entitled, *The Elegant Universe*. Greene argues that 'for the first time in the history of physics we . . . have a framework with the capacity to explain every fundamental feature upon which the universe is constructed.'⁷ Scientists call it *string theory*, and I talk more about it in chapter six. The idea is that everything in the universe at its most microscopic level consists of combinations of vibrating strings. According to Greene, 'string theory provides a single explanatory framework capable of encompassing all forces and all matter.'⁸

The problem isn't that Greene and others have gone too far in making this claim. The problem is they haven't gone nearly far enough! Greene is clearly drawn to this theory because strings make sense of physical reality in all its manifold dimensions. But what makes sense of strings? Why do *they* exist? Scientists may well be correct about the capacity of strings 'to explain every fundamental feature upon which the universe is constructed'. But why strings? If they explain all forces and all matter, *what explains them*? What accounts for the shape they take and the functions they serve? God does!

This book is about a *Christian* T.O.E. My theory is that everything, what Greene refers to as 'all forces and all matter', exists for the glory of God or, to use words that I will later unpack, *the manifestation of divine beauty*. Let me emphasize the E. in T.O.E. and say again that *everything* from quarks to quasars, from butterflies to baseballs, were created and are sustained so that you and I might delight in the display of divine glory. Only humans are fashioned in the image of God.

We alone have been endowed with the capacity to glorify him by *rejoicing* in the beauty of his creative handiwork and *relishing* the splendor of his self-revelation in the person and redemptive work of his Son.

We're touching here on the most profound question anyone could ever ask: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* Why is there a 'me', a 'you', an 'us'? In an otherwise intriguing book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson tries to answer that question without appealing to God or a grand purpose. There was a time, says Bryson, when 'there were no atoms and no universe for them to float about in. There was nothing—nothing at all anywhere.'⁹ He admits that 'it seems impossible that you could get something from nothing, but the fact that once there was nothing and now there is a universe is evident proof that you can.'¹⁰ For Bryson, it's more reasonable to assert the 'impossible' and logically absurd than to acknowledge the existence of an eternal Creator. Talk about a leap of faith!

And what about you and me? Why are we 'somethings'? I doubt you'll find Bryson's answer encouraging, but here it is: 'Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And when that modest milestone flashes past, or at some other point thereabouts, for reasons unknown your atoms will shut you down, silently disassemble, and go off to be other things. And that's it for you.'¹¹ The best you can hope for is the opportunity to enjoy the short ride of existence while it lasts. You came out of nothing and you are going into nothing. End of story.

Samuel Beckett took hold of this perspective and put it on stage in 1969. His thirty-five-second play, *Breath*, is one of the most pointed and undeniably bizarre attempts to express the meaninglessness of life that I know of. There are no human



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participants in this play. No heroes, no villains. No plot, no progression. The curtain is slowly raised, revealing a pile of garbage on the stage, offensive to both sight and smell. No words are spoken. There is only a dim light, accompanied by a baby's shrill cry of pain and an inhaled breath. The light increases somewhat and then recedes into darkness. The play ends as it began, with the loud cry of an aged man and his dying gasp. And the curtain falls. End of story.

Such is life and its 'purpose' (if the word is even appropriate). It emerges out of darkness, is birthed in anguish, lasts for but a breath, and consists of refuse. The end is as the beginning. A transient breath, more pain, and a return to darkness.

Christians have a different (and dare I say more reasonable, not to mention more pleasing) explanation for why there is something rather than nothing. God made us. But why did God choose to create? Certainly not from the anguish born of need, as if creation might supply God what he lacked. God didn't take inventory and suddenly realize there was a shortage that only you and I could fill up. So what prompted God to act?

I hope you like this as much as I do: The source of God's creative energy was the joy of infinite and eternal abundance! *God chose to create from the endless and self-replenishing overflow of delight in himself.* That needs to be said again. *God chose to create from the endless and self-replenishing overflow of delight in himself.*

We have to begin with the recognition that God delights infinitely in his own eternal beauty. When God the Father beholds himself in the Son he is immeasurably happy. He gazes at the Son and sees a perfect reflection of his own holiness. The Father rejoices in the beauty of the Son and Spirit, and the Son revels in the beauty of the Spirit and Father, and the Spirit delights in that of the Father and Son. God is his own fan club!



This benevolent fullness of divine delight overflows in creation so that we might joyfully share, to God's eternal glory, in God's admiration of himself.

God created us so that the joy he has in himself might be ours. God doesn't simply think about himself or talk to himself. He *enjoys* himself! He celebrates with infinite and eternal intensity the beauty of who he is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we've been created to join the party!

My principal aim in this book is to convince you that nothing is more important than understanding this truth. Not simply important for your intellectual development or to satisfy your theological curiosity or to overcome 'apathism' in your soul, but crucial for the quality of your existence now and in the age to come. Bryson's right about one thing: human existence on this earth is terribly brief, a mere 650,000 hours (and somewhat less for a lot of people). But contrary to his prognosis, for 'reasons' made clear in Scripture our atoms, following death, will be supernaturally 'reassembled' as we are resurrected and glorified for an eternity of indescribable bliss! If this T.O.E. is true, we can hardly expect to experience the abundance of life of which Jesus spoke (John 10:10) and died to obtain and rose again to impart if we persist in ignorance of God's creative design and how it touches every fiber and fabric of our being.

To relish and rejoice in the beauty of God alone accounts for why we exist. It's also the solution to our struggle with sin. Enjoying God is the catalyst for substantive and lasting change. And enjoying God is the soul's sole satisfaction, with which no rival pleasure can hope to compete. Glorifying God by enjoying him forever. It's the Christian Theory of Everything.



A Preview

Let me provide a brief preview of where we're going. I can hardly expect you to embrace pleasure in God as a legitimate ambition, much less as a cogent T.O.E., if you are suspicious of pleasure itself. In chapter two I briefly articulate a philosophy of life known as Christian Hedonism in which not merely the *discovery* of God but *delight* in him is foundational to our very existence and thus crucial to all decision-making.

In chapters three through six my focus is God, not as you've come to expect him, but God in the manifold display of his ineffable beauty, both in creation and redemption. I then turn, in chapters seven and eight, to the practical payoff. These are the 'so what' chapters in which I explain the catalytic power of our encounter with divine beauty. I conclude in chapter nine with a description of the consummation of our gladness in God as it will unfold in ever-increasing intensity in heaven.

We live in a different world since 9/11. Patriotism energized us for a while. There was even a momentary increase in church attendance. But honest folk will admit that cynicism and fear now often dictate how they live, and they're terrified to think that it's not going to change anytime soon. Our only hope is to synchronize our souls to harmonize with God's ultimate creative design. To this end we must enjoy him. But to enjoy him we must know him. So let's begin.

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, I-500)*, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume I3*. Edited by Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), no. 3, p. 200.

² *Ibid.*, no. 448, p. 495.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*,

The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 14. Edited by Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 145-46.

⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, ‘Christian Happiness’ in *Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 10. Edited by Wilson H. Kimnach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 305-06.

⁶ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Peterborough, U.K.: Epworth Press, 1997), pp. 7-8.

⁷ Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999) p. 16.

⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁹ Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.