

Vivek Palavali

Vivekanand Palavali, MD, is a brain surgeon by profession, an Epicurean in philosophy and a documentary filmmaker by passion. Born in India, he migrated to the United States in 1986, became a US citizen, and has been practicing neurosurgery since 1995 in Flint, Michigan.

I was born in South India into a family with a Hindu mother and a father who was born Hindu but became an atheist as an adult. As a young boy I remember believing in the Hindu myths and practicing the rituals. But when I was fifteen years old I became an atheist—not because of my father but because I was exposed for the first time to the theory of evolution, the structure of the atom, and the big bang theory of the origin of the universe. That exciting new knowledge shattered my indoctrination.

But there were some “spiritual” questions that still required answers: Is there life after death? What exactly are subjective, personal, divine mystical experiences? What is the meaning of life? Is there a purpose to my being born? The next few years of my intellectual and philosophical journey, which included going to medical school and becoming a neurosurgeon, answered all those questions. But first I had to deal with and get over the excruciating fear of my own mortality.

It was in my sixteenth year that I was suddenly overcome by haunting thoughts of inescapable death. Unless I had company or distractions, I was left alone with my own terrified mind. The awareness of the finality of death, that existential predicament unique to humans, made me hope for eternal afterlife. But with a skeptical mind and the scientific knowledge I had at the time, I became convinced that no such thing existed. A major source of liberation from that fear was my reading a short story, “The Law of Life,” from Jack London’s *Children of the Frost* (1902) about his adventures during the Yukon Territory gold rush. I came to realize that the law of life is death, which must be faced boldly and accepted.

A year later, I started medical school, which helped me understand the mechanics of the various organ systems down to the molecular level. I saw these organs, not only when functioning smoothly, but when they deteriorated and failed. With that knowledge birth, growth, and death—incredible as they may be—were mysteries no more.

During my neurosurgery residency, studying the human brain made me profoundly appreciate what makes us human. The 1,500 grams of pinkish yellow tissue that we call the brain, made up of 100 billion neurons, functions as the central processor of the body. This is what produces our personalities, thoughts, feelings, and emotions that manifest as our actions. Our imagination, creativity, aspirations, and even our ideas about God, purpose, and meaning in life are all the byproduct and reflection of our brains.

This soon made me realize that mystical experience, which was attributed to and was thought to be evidence for an external divine being, is nothing but an altered physiology of our brains. Suddenly all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Modern neuroscientific knowledge substantiated my understanding that God, the soul, an afterlife, and heaven are all personal, flexible and ever-changing imaginations that exist internally in the minds of wishful believers who have an emotional need for hope, solace, and comfort.

From that point I became a follower of Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) believed that life is nothing but “particularly fine atoms coming together to form a body and a mind in the form of a single entity, a human being, whose eventual dispersal is inevitable” and that “this dispersal is not to be feared. Such a dissolution of the human being means that the entities that we are cease to exist when we die. Nor is there anyone to whom those terrors, that so many religions threaten people with after their deaths, can happen.” He also proclaimed, “Death is nothing to us,” and said that anyone who genuinely grasps that truth is liberated from fear of death. He aimed at the good life and happiness in this world. His goal and meaning of life stood for pursuit of happiness—but in moderation. Consequently, I now firmly believe that “A multitude of simple pleasures constitutes happiness.” Our days are filled with many simple sources of happiness and acts of kindness, joy, and awe. My subscription to such a secular philosophy actually liberates me from the shackles of religious dogma and gives me a healthy sense of urgency to fully relish this fragile, one and only life. My experiences as a neurosurgeon that profoundly altered my philosophy of life, made me an Epicurean and guide my daily thoughts and actions eventually ended up in a book titled “A mindful life: A brain surgeon’s personal experiences and philosophical reflections on living life fully.”

As far as the question if there is a purpose to my being born, the answer is, no. I quote Dr. Abraham Kovoov, a rationalist from India: “I am an accidental byproduct of momentary biological activity of my parents on which I neither had choice nor control.” My father agreed with that statement and did say that if there was family planning in the village around the time of my birth he would have stopped having children after my three older sisters and a brother. I am glad that there was no family planning but am quite aware and accepting of the accidentally of my birth as well as the possibility that I might not have been born at all. There is no grand plan behind my birth. I was born and I will die. What I do in between those events and how I do it is my meaning of life and the purpose I create for my life. I am responsible for my own actions. I have to take the blame for my mistakes and some credit for my achievements. I have had this outlook since completing my neurosurgery residency in 1995 at the University of Chicago.

After I started practicing medicine in Flint, Michigan (Michael Moore country), I began to develop a passion for documentary filmmaking. Television images of thousands of innocent children and their families being killed frustrated and angered me. Communities were being bombed to dust because of incessant global wars fought for power or “real estate,” as Donald Rumsfeld put it—wars fueled by religious fanaticism. As a man of peace, I wanted to do something about it. So I began to write a book about how humans are killing one another in the name of a god that exists only in our minds as a creation of our brains. Halfway through, I

realized that my thoughts would make for an interesting documentary instead. And I knew where to start. Ten miles from my hometown in India, on a small hill, is a temple where to this day believers sacrifice chickens, sheep, goats, calves, and buffaloes by beheading them in front of a stone statue goddess who loves animal blood—a startling and sickening image that I had to document. So I bought a high-definition camera, learned how to use it, went to eight countries, did my own cinematography, and produced in 2008 *Creator of God: A Brain Surgeon's Story*.

That film was followed in 2013 by my healthcare documentary, *Bitter Pill: America and Healthcare in America; a Brain Surgeon's Dissection and Prescription*. During one and half decades of my neurosurgical practice, I was perplexed by how the greedy “medical industrial complex” is depriving even basic quality healthcare to millions of citizens in the most powerful and one of the wealthiest nations in the world. The negative reaction generated in the country by Obamacare, which is trying to bring healthcare to all Americans, first shocked me, then inspired me to comprehensively analyze the complicated, profit-oriented healthcare delivery system in the United States. I am happy to say that the resulting documentary garnered two Michigan Emmy nominations.

In sum, besides being able to help my patients as a neurosurgeon, I am able to pursue my passion of philosophical activism for secular humanism through documentary filmmaking. My basic humanist conviction is to be a good human being, live an enjoyable as well as fulfilling life, that all people come from one source and are deeply and truly connected. We have the DNA to prove it. When I open the skulls during brain surgery, I can not tell any difference between the brains of patients no matter their race, religious belief or nationality, whether straight or gay. And this profound realization of the oneness of humanity is the culmination of my evolution from a Hindu to a humanist.