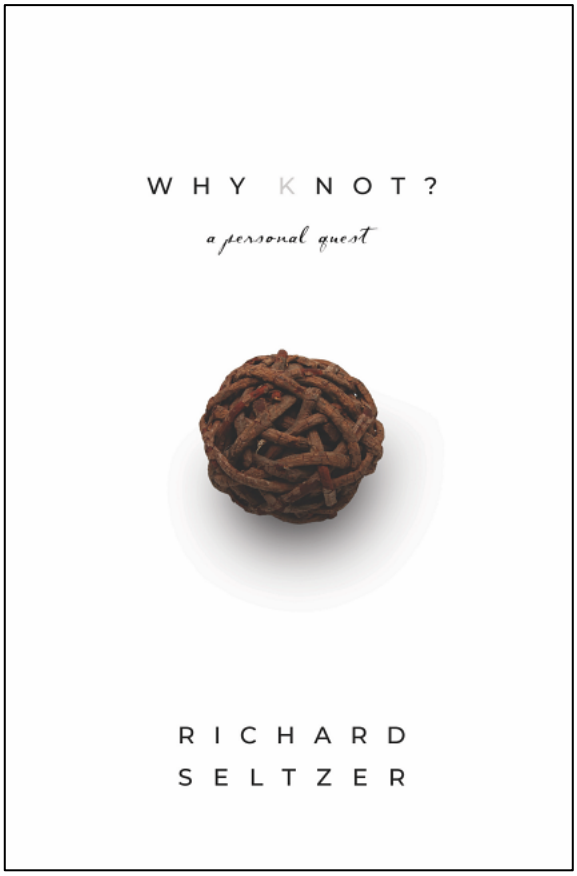

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WHY KNOT?

a personal quest

RICHARD SELTZER

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Part 1:
Big Questions

Toward What Goal?

I need to know who I am, why I am, and how my life might matter. The answers offered by religion feel insufficient. Scientific knowledge has advanced so far that it is beyond the understanding of laymen. I would like to participate in the endeavor of scientific discovery and contribute. But the advancement of science will not end in my lifetime and will probably never end. And I need answers that make sense here and now.

I do not adhere to any organized religion or established set of beliefs. But I am not an agnostic. Rather, I am a *seeker*.

Life has meaning. Perhaps that meaning lies in interconnectedness and relationships, to be discovered by intuition rather than reason, in flashes of insight.

There is Everything We Can Do

One of the major discoveries of the twentieth century was recognition of the limits of human knowledge. That principle, seemingly an admission of weakness, can be a source of strength.

The experiments we perform to understand the world change it, hence limiting to our knowledge, leaving us with an underlying uncertainty. But by that same principle, all of us, regardless of our strength or intelligence or social status, change the world by what we do. If and when people coordinate what they do and act in harmony with one another, they can make major changes.

That realization is important as we face critical issues such as pandemics and global warming. Individually, we are helpless in the face of complex and pressing dangers; we can do nothing. But working together we have enormous power.

What's the *It*?

To the question of life and death, my friend says, "It's over when it's over." She means there's nothing after death. There is no soul. There is no God.

I wonder — what's the *it*?

Descartes' *I think therefore I am* presumes there is an *I* and that we know what *I* is.

Similarly, *It's over* presumes there's an *it* and that we know what *it* is.

I don't expect answers. I read and write in hopes of asking ever more intriguing questions.

Getting Personal

In my reading, I sometimes come across passages that feel right, not as discoveries, but rather as clear and cogent expressions of what I believed before, stimulating me to see my own thoughts from different angles.

For instance, consider a passage from Boethius, who wrote in the sixth century. In prison, awaiting execution at the random whim of King Theodoric of Italy, as he tried to make sense of life, he concluded that infinity, eternity, and chance reduce everything to insignificance.

I am undaunted by such considerations. I hope to arrive at personal answers that help me to deal with day-to-day reality. I strive to find truth and meaning in the context of my everyday life. I'm on a personal quest to try to understand what matters to me as an individual, living here and now.

Science?

Matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed.

But life is both created and destroyed.

Is life neither matter nor energy?

Then, what is it?

Where There's a Will

We equate consciousness with rational thought, and we can correlate thought with brain activity. When there's no brain activity, we presume there is no thought, and we say that person is *brain dead*.

But we often act without thinking. We also can make a conscious decision to do one thing, but do something else, even the opposite, surprising ourselves. In other words, the will, though associated with thought and a subject of thought, is separate from it.

Is the brain necessarily the seat of the will?

Language associates the will with emotion and intuition, and suggests that the will is centered somewhere other than in the brain, for instance, in the heart or gut. Language also associates the will with such concepts as "soul," "self," "spirit," and "life force."

Does the will necessarily cease when thought ceases? Might someone who is declared brain dead still have the will to live?

In language as well as in religion and myth, the soul or spirit is separate from the body and persists even when the body dies. So why presume that soul/self/spirit/will has the same physical location in the body as thought, and that they all end at the same time?

Listening to Life with a Tin Ear

I used to envy people born with perfect pitch. Unlike me, they could appreciate music to its fullest. I couldn't tell if a piano was out of tune, nor distinguish great from mediocre performances. But now I've reached an age when instead of regretting my limitations, I relish them.

Perfect pitch is a curse, a tin ear a blessing. To someone with perfect pitch, anything less than a perfect performance is painful to hear. He or she can appreciate subtleties beyond my ken, but probably can't enjoy what passes for music for the rest of us.

I can appreciate a flawed performance on a piano that's out of tune. I can enjoy sing-alongs and amateur singing and karaoke and informal musical events. I can delight in whistling while I walk. My opportunities for musical pleasure are far greater because of my tin ears.

Similarly, I can savor ideas that aren't fully developed. I can enjoy a story, a book, a movie that is good but not great. I have everyday, non-professional expectations.

I'd rather explore many subjects than devote myself to one narrow field and never arrive at complete knowledge of that field. The world is far too complex to understand in detail.

I know I can never get definitive answers to the big questions, nor can anyone. Instead, I want to arrive at personal answers that make sense on the scale of where and when I live, despite my awareness of the

vastness of infinity and eternity. I need lenses that help me look at the world with a perspective of immediacy, from the context of daily life.

Let's enjoy what we can know. Let's enjoy life as best we can, glorying in the imperfection of our tin ears.

Observations on the Meaning of Meaning from Practicing the Piano

As I was practicing the piano this morning (as a talentless amateur), my eyes focused on the sheet music, only occasionally glimpsing my fingers on the keys. For pieces that I'm familiar with, my fingers seem to have a memory of their own. They remember not the keys but the intervals and the sequences, while my eyes focus on the visual patterns of the notation.

At the beginning of a piece, I look at the sheet music to determine the key (defined by sharps and flats) and at my hands to properly position them for the opening notes. As I play, I compare the sounds I hear with the sounds I expect to hear. And I'm also alert to instances of dissonance, which, independent of my memory of the tune, signal that I've struck a wrong key.

If I'm playing a song, I'm also aware of the words that go with the notes. If I were to recite them without playing the piano, even if I did not sing the words, I'd be conscious of the tune.

This observation reminds me that language can be associated with sound in complex, multilayered ways. I am aware not just of the semantic meaning of the words, but also of the tone, the rhythm, and the patterns of speech that define a local accent or dialect. I can guess the speaker's place of origin and state of mind. And, simply from the sound, I can detect the identity and sincerity of the speaker—whether the words mean what they seem to say or maybe the opposite.

Handwriting, too, conveys more than the semantic meaning of the letters and words. The style can be so unique as to reliably indicate who wrote it. And sometimes, when you know the writer well, you can tell his or her state of mind at the time of writing.

In touch typing, I don't think of the individual letters and don't worry about the spelling. Rather, I think and type complete words and phrases, without looking. My fingers, placed in the right position, remember what they need to do, apart from conscious thought. Only when I proofread do I discover the spelling mistakes my fingers made, often substituting one word for another, rather than jumbling letters mechanically. I expect that the hands and fingers of accomplished pianists remember large chunks of music rather than individual notes.

My consciousness seems to act like the conductor of an orchestra, setting the tempo and helping coordinate multiple streams of activity. But my consciousness has less control than a conductor. Many bodily functions, like breathing, operate semi-autonomously; and others, like the beating of the heart, function on their own.

Among all those layers of thought, where am *I*? Who am *I*?

My focus shifts depending on what I am doing and how much attention it requires. Some functions know what to do and how to do it from habit and training. Some, like walking and talking and chewing gum, can go on at the same time without needing my attention. Some skills, like riding a bike, that I may not have used for decades, I can do again without effort or thought. Speaking a foreign language and playing the piano require refresher work, but the initial training makes relearning much easier than learning from scratch.

In other words, we think in layers, and what we call *consciousness* is just one of those many layers.

Highly Unlikely

The chains of events that shaped my life were highly unlikely — one coincidence happening after another. If the chain had not unfolded just the way it did, everything would have turned out differently.

If you ever fell in love, think about the events leading up to that moment. After the fact, the events feel inevitable. It's difficult to imagine how your life could have gone if they had not occurred when and how they did. All the pieces fell into place miraculously.

The more you know about an event, the more unique it seems. To you, the events of your own life seem like the result of an extraordinary series of coincidences. But an outside observer, with far less information, would view those same events separately instead of as a sequence. Separately, they would appear ordinary and expected and not coincidental.

Every time you toss a coin, the probability of heads is 50%, regardless of the results of previous tosses. But a long chain of events, such as heads, heads, tails, heads, tails, tails, tails, defies analysis. Only when you isolate a variable and simplify the context with a generalized perspective do the laws of probability apply.

According to Bernoulli's Law, one of the basic principles of probability, it's possible to accurately predict the average outcome of many similar events, but it's impossible to predict, with certainty, the outcome of any single event. In other words, the more you know about a specific event and the chain of circumstances that led to it, the more unique that event appears. Hence, every moment of your life is miraculous.

The Abraham Effect: The Future of Humanity Depends on You

Just as the entire Jewish people are descended from Abraham, the people who inhabit Earth a thousand years from now may all be descended from you.

You have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents. The number of your ancestors doubles with every generation. Counting backwards 1000 years, about 36 generations ago, you had about 69 billion ancestors. That's two to the power of thirty-six. But at that time, there were only about 50 million people alive in Europe. Everyone of European descent alive today is a cousin of everyone else, and all of us have the genes of a few people who were alive then.

Fast forward a thousand years, taking into account that people are far more mobile today than they were a thousand years ago. In the year 3000, if the human race survives that long, every human being alive on Earth and on other planets will be a descendant of a few people who are alive today. If you are a parent, there's a chance that everyone alive a thousand years from now will have genes that passed through you.

That is an awesome responsibility. Be careful. Be proud. The future of the human race depends on you.

Our Time

You perceive time very differently than today's computers record it. The amount of information your brain stores in an interval of physical time affects the subjective time that you perceive. Under stress, your brain processes and stores far more data, far more quickly than normal. There are limits to what can be stored in short-term memory. In moments of crisis that limit is broken, and short-term spills over to long-term, and the mass of data that is perceived gets imprinted in long-term memory and takes up far more memory capacity than is normal.

In popular wisdom, when you are near death, your entire life flashes before your eyes. In the moments before death, that flash might happen repeatedly, as time subjectively expands, in a variant of Zeno's Paradox. Just as Achilles never catches up with the turtle, you, subjectively, never die. Death is the limit that you approach but never reach.

To anyone else, your timeline ends. But from your perspective, you keep approaching death, forever: you never die.

Time Dilation

In the summer of 2012, driving back to Boston from Cape Cod, I came close to death.

I was alone, driving a van packed tight with stuff we had brought to the Cape for a two-week vacation. My wife, Barb, was cleaning the cabin and would be following in our other car in about an hour.

Three miles from the Sagamore Bridge over the Cape Cod Canal, I realized that my brakes didn't work.

The traffic around me was travelling at 60 miles an hour. The distance between me and the car in front of me was a car length. The car behind me was also a car length away. There were cars to the right of me as far as the eye could see. To the left of me there was a metal barrier.

The car ahead of me slowed. I gently tapped my brakes. Nothing happened. I tapped again quickly. Nothing.

Now I was just a couple feet away from the car in front of me. I stomped down on the brake pedal, and the pedal went all the way to the floor with no resistance, no change in speed.

Fortunately, the car ahead accelerated.

We were going downhill. I was coasting.

Options rushed through my mind.

I tried to downshift, but the gears were locked.

I considered using the emergency parking brake. But if I stopped suddenly, the car behind me would slam into me and I'd end up in a pile-up.

I considered turning off the ignition. But the van I was driving had power steering. If the engine turned off, the power steering would shut off as well.

After what felt like an hour but probably was less than a minute, around a curve, the hill ended, and I found myself on a slight incline. Then, a grass median strip opened up to my left. I turned left onto the grass, and the car started slowing down. In what felt like another hour but was only a few seconds, the car came to a stop, a hundred yards from the bridge.

My heart was racing. I saw the van, the grass, the road, the traffic, the beautiful blue sky with a clarity I had never seen before. My mind was muddled, but I was feeling ever so high, so relieved. I was alive.

I had never felt so alive.

The Time Between Time

A series of still photos or drawings viewed in rapid succession looks like natural movement. The faster the sequence, the smoother and more natural the motion seems.

The human eye and human brain evolved with this ability to convert a sequence of still images into the perception of motion. What was the survival benefit of that?

Perhaps reality is discontinuous, like a series of still shots; and the ability to perceive it as continuous provides practical benefits, as does the ability to perceive matter as solid and continuous rather than as atoms and force fields, mostly empty space.

We might ask if reality consists of smooth, continuous changes or discrete changes. If discrete changes were small enough, we wouldn't perceive them. Our perception isn't fine-tuned enough to resolve this question, any more than it allows us to notice the breaks between frames of a movie.

We can make machines that perceive and record far more accurately than our all-too-human senses and brain. But, today, the machines that we rely on to extend our sensory processing and memory capabilities are all digital — based on discrete choices — yes or no, one or zero. In other words, they have a built-in bias. Hence the resolution of this question is beyond their ability as well.

Is Reality Discontinuous?

When Isaac Newton explained the laws of gravity, he presumed that those laws would apply not just for Earth or our solar system or the observable stars — but everywhere.

A hundred years ago, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, William James came to a different conclusion. He speculated that reality isn't necessarily neat or logical or predictable. Beauty and simplicity are not synonymous with truth. Rather, the world we live in is messy and full of surprises, and the farther from Earth, the more likely the surprises. He believed that scientists should continuously test their assumptions.

Recent books such as *The Elegant Universe* and *The Fabric of the Cosmos* both by Brian Greene, *Warped Passages* by Lisa Randall, and *Parallel Worlds* by Michio Kaku explain the many flavors of string theory, which is a possible successor to quantum theory, which was the successor to relativity, which was the successor to Newtonian physics. These books describe a variety of ways to explain the data that scientists have gathered — multiple universes, multiple dimensions, dark matter, dark energy, and negative gravity. They all presume that we can understand realms of being that are far beyond our normal experience.

But our ability to make sense of the world evolved in this world. Our senses and our reasoning power are adequate for everyday life. But I believe we are not equipped to understand what happens on scales smaller than an atom or larger than a galaxy, much less in multiple universes.

There is no reason to presume that the universe, viewed through our limited and flawed senses, is simple and logical enough for us to understand it. Rather, the universe may be complex and discontinuous. Natural laws that apply in our solar system and in our galaxy may not apply elsewhere or may not be stable; and if natural laws change, they may not change in predictable ways.

For instance, consider Hubble's Law. As Wikipedia explains, "...the redshift in light coming from distant galaxies is proportional to their distance." Our calculations of the distances from Earth to stars and galaxies depend on that principle, presuming that the same natural laws that apply here also apply thousands, millions, and even billions of light years away. That assumption has mind-boggling consequences. If there are, in fact, discontinuities in reality and variations in natural laws beyond our galaxy, then what scientists have concluded about the size and nature and past and future of this universe, much less other universes, is in serious doubt.

We should consider the possibility that reality is messy, and that complex answers may sometimes prove more useful and suggestive than simple ones. Maybe there are two or more realities unfolding in parallel. Blink and you switch to a different life.

The simplest answer may not be the only answer or the most accurate or the most interesting. And the universe is very interesting.

Going Beyond the Limitations of Science

Science progresses by testing educated guesses — hypotheses. But our hypotheses depend on expectations based on our previous knowledge and cultural bias.

We face the same limitations in everyday life. We filter what we see based on what we expect to see. We ignore anything seriously out of the range of our expectations. If we don't ask the right questions, we don't get the right answers. And as human beings, we have a limited range of hypotheses that we are likely to consider plausible. Intuition and thinking-outside-the-box can expand that range, but not by much.

Today, computer simulation is used in conjunction with physical experiments to generate hypotheses and then test them. But such simulation typically stays within the range of human expectations.

To overcome that limitation, we need programs which generate hypotheses that are implausible and would not otherwise be considered; programs that come up with complex and improbable ideas and ways to test them. Such hypotheses could lead to experiments that record and help interpret data that would otherwise be ignored.

In the Middle Ages, the rule of thumb known as *Occam's Razor* was important in setting the stage for scientific advancement. "One should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything." That rule made practical sense because humans have limited time and limited brain power — focus your research on the most likely explanations. In today's vernacular, that's expressed by the acronym *KISS* — "keep it simple stupid."

But today's computers can deal with far more variables than humans can. They can calculate much larger trees of causation and hence can identify multiple explanations for the same event, all valid from different perspectives, and perhaps each leading to different long-term consequences. It's time to move beyond Occam's Razor, to expand the range of our research to deal with the complex, the unlikely, the redundant, and even the totally outlandish, admitting the possibility that truth might be messy rather than systematic and beautiful.

An Ultimate Unit of Space and the Need for a New Calculus

When I was reading *The Fabric of the Cosmos* by Brian Greene, which explains superstring theory for the masses, I was also reading *Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson, an historical novel with Sir Isaac Newton as a character. On p. 670 of *Quicksilver*, one of the characters challenges a basic concept of calculus. He asks, "What happens then if we continue subdividing?... Is it the same all the way down? Or is it the case that something happens eventually, that we reach a place where no further subdivision is possible, where fundamental properties of Creation are brought into play?" The character is contrasting Newton's notion of infinite subdivision, with other concepts of the world in which there is a natural limit to such subdivision.

There appears to be a contradiction between superstring theory, which postulates an ultimate unit of length, and the assumption of calculus that space is infinitely divisible.

I sent an email to Brian Greene, wondering if fundamental concepts and procedures of calculus need to be refined to take this ultimate unit of length into account.

He was kind enough to reply. "In fact," he wrote, "that is just what we are working on today. The notion that the usual procedures of calculus are only relevant on length scales larger than some lower limit — we are trying to piece together the new procedures that take over."

Does Dark Matter?

We're told that dark matter and dark energy account for more than 95% of all there is in the universe. Ordinary matter amounts to less than 5%. The exact numbers change with new scientific advances, but the overwhelming dominance of the dark over the ordinary remains constant.

You can't see dark matter. You can't feel it or smell it or interact with it in any way. In aggregate, dark matter and dark energy account for the gravitational force that is necessary for equations fundamental to our understanding of the physical world. Basically, dark matter and dark energy are a fudge factor. If we want to believe that we understand the physical world and that the physical laws which hold true in our solar system and our galaxy also hold true billions of light years away, and that we can look back 14 billion years and ahead billions of years and understand what was happening and what will happen, then we have to believe in dark matter and dark energy.

But concepts like spirit, soul, and self are matters of mystical speculation.

Defining Action

After World War II, authors like Sartre and Camus reacted against abstract philosophy that neglected the immediacy, emotion, and empathy of everyday life. They blamed abstract, dehumanized thinking for the horrors of the Third Reich. Instead, they harkened back to Dostoyevsky and other writers who believed that we are defined by our actions, regardless of the rationalizations that might justify them. *Action* in that sense means far more than muscle movement. These authors focused on decisive moments when you put your whole self behind what you do, willing to risk everything. Such acts are fraught with meaning due to the context in which they are performed. Such acts, particularly ones involving self-sacrifice, can trigger a tidal wave of consequences. Consider, for example, Moses standing up against Pharaoh, the martyrs of the early Christian church, Sir Thomas More standing up to Henry VIII, Martin Luther rebelling against the Catholic Church, and the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Few of us will ever perform history-changing heroic feats. But we all do affect one another through principled, heartfelt acts that serve as memorable and inspiring examples to those around us. And what, at the time, may seem an insignificant act could, through its influence on others, have major consequences.

Through our genes, we are connected to those who came before us and those who will come after us. Through ideas and chains of teaching and learning, we are connected to those who inspired us and those we inspire. And we are also connected to one another by the consequences of our meaningful acts.

The End-Game Generation Seeks Meaning

In an extended game of chess, there comes a moment when the tree of branching possibilities reverses — you visualize the ideal end position, and instead of planning ahead, you begin to plan backwards, figuring out how to get to that ideal end position.

As those of us in the baby boomer generation retire and start new lives, we find ourselves in a unique position. Previous generations knew that they would die, but, for the most part, had little or no idea of how or when. Advances in medicine and genetics are now making possible early diagnosis of long-term fatal illnesses. New treatments can postpone the onset of such conditions and slow their progress. But it will probably take decades before cures and effective preventive measures are developed. That means that many of our generation who learn that they have a long-term illness will live for years with that knowledge, with everyday reminders of impending disability and death.

How will we meet the challenge of knowing that we are in end game? Will that knowledge change how we choose to live the rest of our lives and how we perceive the meaning of our lives?

I suspect that we can learn something of value from this experience and pass that on to future generations who may not be subject to such illnesses. Then the stories of our lives might provide insights into human relationships and into how we should live and who we can become.

Truth and Consequences

Over time, perspectives change. What we are proud of today, one day we may regret. And what we regret today may one day make us proud.

In many cases, if we knew beforehand the long-term effects of what we were about to do, we wouldn't do it. But further in the future, the effects could be the reverse, and what we now dread might in a new context seem good and necessary.

As Heraclitus observed, you can never cross the same river twice. If you could relive any moment of your life, it wouldn't be the same moment, because your knowledge and your motivation would be different.

When my Dad was 86, he had trouble sleeping. In his dreams, he revisited the decision points in his life and wondered why the consequences of his decisions turned out one way rather than another. He wondered whether he had made the right choices, and what could have happened if he had acted otherwise. He was heavy with regret.

I shared with him my belief that we all have natural proclivities, and that what seem like decisions often aren't decisions at all. In our gut, we know what we have to do because we are who we are. The reasons we give for our actions are often rationalizations we cobble together afterwards. Yes, random events affect our lives. But, in many cases, such events only knock us off track temporarily, and then we continue toward the same goal by a different path.

There's a shape to the landscape in which we live our lives, with mountains and valleys. As we approach a decision-point, if we go in

one direction, everything gets more difficult and painful — we trip over ourselves; we can't find the words; we forget things that we have to remember; we are at odds with ourselves. And in another direction the path feels right. If we go the first way despite the obstacles, we'll face another choice and another. And sooner or later we end up doing what is natural for us.

Hence, we shouldn't judge what we do based on what we believe will be the long-term consequences. Rather, we should do what we feel is best for now and do it to the best of our abilities.

Our lives are not as subject to random occurrences as at first appears, nor are we as much in control as at first appears. There is more to our lives than we are ever likely to realize, and that should inspire wonder, curiosity, and reverence.

Scared to Life

One night, I saw three hoodlums with machetes walk through the outside wall of my second-floor bedroom. I thought I was awake. I screamed.

It took a while for me to realize it was a vision, and for my breathing and heart rate to slow down. In the process, it occurred to me that I had come close to being scared to death. Then I realized that I had been *scared to life*.

A dream like that — not an ordinary dream composed of images from everyday life, and not a recurring dream heavy with symbolism, but one that comes out of nowhere and that you see while semi-awake — must serve a purpose.

That vision was a wakeup call for me, like a near-death experience. It was a reminder of my mortality, a warning that if there was anything I wanted to do, I'd better do it. If the obvious physical signs of illness or aging aren't enough to get me going, then my unconscious will take over and scare me into life.

That dream was an affirmation of a basic belief of mine — that as individuals and as a species, self-regulating mechanisms come into play, pushing us toward balance and reason and compassion.

Trust Your Instinct

A friend of mine was faced with this puzzle in an Ethics class:

- You are in a speeding trolley.
- The trolley can't stop.
- Five people are standing on one track, and one person is standing on another.
- All you can do is switch to a different track.
- If you do nothing, five people die.
- If you switch tracks, one person dies.
- What do you do?

It would be a different moral question if those at risk could influence the outcome — for instance, if one of them could opt to die so the other five might live. You could consider that all people are equal, and hence five people are worth more than one. I am uncomfortable with that approach. I believe that each life has infinite value and that you cannot add to or subtract from infinity. In addition, the real world is messy, and choices that at first seem good may lead to unintended consequences. Sacrificing the one to save the five might be the wrong decision for reasons you could not have anticipated.

You might be tempted to categorize and judge people as more or less valuable by some criterion. But that approach brings to mind Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where the slippery slope leads to such moral nonsense as "All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others."

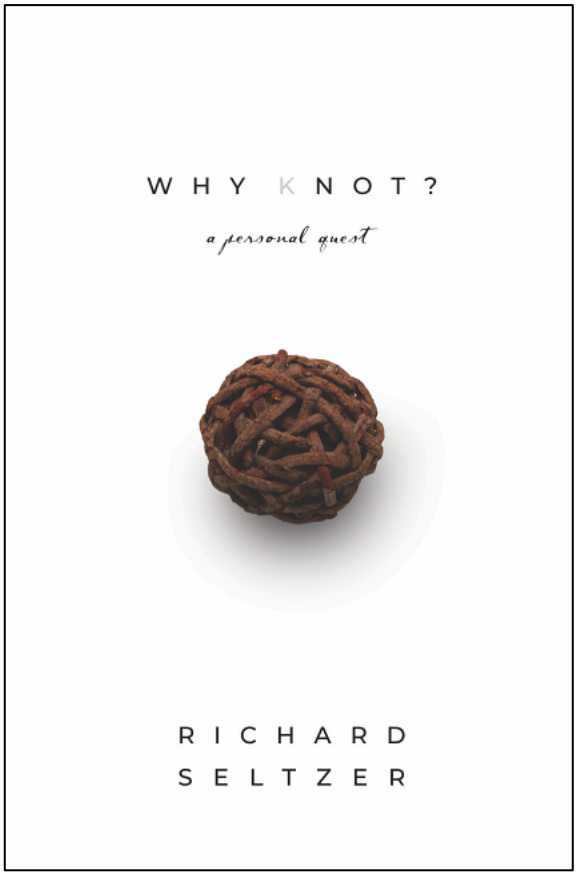
You could also flip a coin or use another random method to decide. But by so doing, you would be abdicating responsibility.

Solution? You should do what spontaneously seems right. Don't overthink. Shoot from the hip. Act immediately. Feel the guilt and responsibility. Don't run from it with rationalizations and calculations. Feel the need for penance, the urge to make up for what you have done.

The decision should have consequences for the decider. You will always be in debt to those who die and those who are dear to them. You will also feel connected to those who survive, and they to you as well.

Guilt is the glue that holds society together. It should be valued, not avoided. You can never be guiltless, and you can never completely atone for guilt. Life is enriched by connections with others by love, guilt, and mutual obligation.

For survival, humans are programmed to act with a minimum of hesitation in such situations. Follow that instinct. Then accept responsibility for what you have done. Don't tell yourself that you had no choice. Those at risk all mattered to you and will still matter to you after the event. You honor them and connect to them by feeling guilt even after they are dead.



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