

OS GUINNESS

SIGNALS
of
TRANSCENDENCE

Listening to the Promptings of Life

EXCERPT



Signals of Transcendence

Listening to the Promptings of Life

March 7, 2023 | \$16, 132 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0439-5

Making sense of our human existence can be difficult, but we may experience particular moments that prompt us to search for something deeper. Os Guinness tells stories of people who experienced these “signals of transcendence” and followed them to find new meaning and purpose in life—and the same can be true for us.

For Those with Ears to Hear

The good news is that life and the world around us, and whoever and whatever may be behind it all, will not allow us to give up on the questions. They do not allow us to rest completely at ease in the cave. It is not that life and the world are personal in the way we humans are but that they do not allow us to be fulfilled by views of ourselves that are actually less than we somehow know we are. Are we no more than toolmakers, “naked apes,” or selfish genes? Somehow, we humans are never fulfilled looking downward like that. There is always a reaching upward. There is too much of us left unsatisfied by such descriptions that do not fit all that we are. (When Plato described the human being as a featherless biped, Diogenes responded by plucking a chicken, throwing it into the assembly, and declaring, “Here is your Platonic man.”) We somehow know we are made of more, and we are made for more, so again and again we are restless because we long for something more. Life and the universe therefore refuse to remain silent, and they trigger a thousand questions in us. For those with ears to hear, and for those who dare to pay attention, the universe is alive with sounds and signals to suggest that outside the cave there is a wider world—a world of warmth, color, and brilliance, lit by the reality of the sun and the author of it all.

We may be sternly intent on suppressing wonder and on leading unexamined lives, but the world around us is alive, and it never stops speaking to us, telling us about itself and questioning us about our own true selves. To be sure, we are always free to stop our ears, to turn up the volume of our diversions, and to refuse to think or care about what life and the universe are saying. If we are determined and insistent, we can be content with our small worlds, our daily rounds, and our too-easily-settled answers. But the universe keeps on speaking, and its myriad signals, clues, and pointers are there for all who have ears to hear.

This book tells the stories of some who have listened to life and pursued the discovery to which the signals pointed, and it is written for all who are open to that possibility. Listening to such signals of transcendence is only one part, but a vital part, of leading an examined life. It is for those who are not content to remain tone-deaf to wider realities, and who have not fallen for what Friedrich Nietzsche called the acoustic illusion—the fallacy that what we ourselves cannot hear is not objectively there to be heard. I am writing for all who are open to signals that the Hebrew sage called eternity in our hearts and that Wordsworth called intimations of immortality—signals, as he put it, from a world not yet realized.

Do you already “know what you see and hear,” in the sense that you have already made up your mind about what there is to be seen and heard, so that you can see and hear nothing else? Or do you “see and hear in order to know,” in the sense that you are open to the surprise of new insight and fresh perception? Seeing and hearing only what you know is thinking shackled by the past. Seeing and hearing in order to know is the way of a mind and a heart that are open to a breakthrough and to a future different from both the past and the present.



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"In his usual erudite clarity, Os Guinness illuminates the dark paths of history's chaos, traumas, and violence with Signals of Transcendence. This book is a gold mine of wisdom, a gift for generations to come. . . . Guinness is a pedagogical North Star that guides to enlarge our imaginations and to give courage for that journey."

—Makoto Fujimura, artist and author of *Art+Faith: A Theology of Making*

That we almost all hear such signals is beyond doubt. The stories that follow bear witness to that truth, and they could be multiplied endlessly. But let me be clear. The signals are pointers, and not proofs, and they can be ignored rather than listened to. Arthur Koestler, the Hungarian writer, was one who heard such a signal but never followed through. Indeed, many years after his experience he and his wife killed themselves together in a suicide pact. Yet he was quite clear about the time when he was young and first experienced such an epiphany.

I was lying on my back under a blue sky on a hill slope in Buda. . . . The paradox of infinity suddenly pierced my brain as if I had been stung by a wasp . . . The idea that infinity would remain an unsolved riddle was unbearable. The thirst for the absolute is a stigma which marks those unable to find satisfaction in the relative world of the here and now. . . . The infinite as a target was replaced by Utopias of one kind or another.

TO EACH, THEIR OWN SIGNAL

The question to ask after each of these stories is not simply whether we ourselves have heard similar signals. Many have done that. The question is how we have each responded—especially when the censors and the scoffers form so loud a chorus and a cordon around us. What do such signals mean? Are they only a will-o'-the-wisp, leading honest seekers astray into the darkness and the bogs of illusion? Are they only a false dawn that ushers in a day no different and no better than today? Or are they signals pointing to solutions that are solid and to satisfactions that are a delight? What is the truth to which the signals point? Does the search show that there is nothing more to life than our caves and our windowless worlds? Or do the signals, and the stories of those who followed them, point the way to the promise and fulfillment of the something more that encourages us to surpass ourselves and make life more richly satisfying than it is now?

The answer is not for me to spell out here. It is for each reader to decide for herself or himself through search and discovery. Without question, we all hear at times such signals as those we will explore in the coming chapters. But again, the question is what we do with them—our responsibility in responding to them. Are we too shy, too embarrassed to even consider them as signals, to share our experiences with others, and to follow the thrusting logic of their questions, wherever they lead and whatever the cost? Are we afraid of reaching conclusions that might be dismissed as odd, deluded, or out of line with fashionable opinion in our day? In the world of the blind, the one-eyed person always runs the risk of being scoffed at as an idiot.

In Bertolt Brecht's play *Mahagonny*, a brief line has haunted many in his audiences: "something is missing." The question to ask, of course, is whether something is always missing, and life is simply like that—unfulfilling and unfulfillable. Or whether the sense of something missing is an invaluable spur to search for the satisfaction of a longing that needs to be satisfied—and can be.



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In the stories that follow, the emphasis will be on the signals that spur the search, rather than the search itself, let alone the discoveries. The focus on the signals as spurs is deliberate. We live in an age in which the overwhelming majority of people appear to be comfortable with their myopia. They are satisfied with the comforts and conveniences of the cave and the windowless world. Our main challenge is to prompt people to think and care sufficiently to begin to ask questions. In each of the stories shared here, the people who followed the signals would all say they that their discoveries outshone the importance of the signals by far. Once they had arrived, who cared about the signals? Yet without the signals, they would not have arrived, and they might never have set off on the search. Each signal, then, is small and insignificant in itself, yet titanic in its significance for the whole of life.

In the same way, we can say with certainty that those who close their ears to such signals, for whatever reason, are certain to be losers. In terms of Plato's parable, the closed-minded condemn themselves to serve out their life sentences in their various caves and cells, with no chance of discovering whether the light and freedom of the sun outside are real. Lacking all curiosity, they are content to live in the darkness and never know the truth. But it is time for the signals and the stories to speak for themselves and to let each of us decide for ourselves. There are always choices and consequences in life, and the responsibility to decide them and live with them is always ours.

One truth, however, runs like a thread through the stories. Each signal of transcendence sounds out its own special call. No signal is a signal for everyone to hear, so one person's signal is another person's silence. Be ready, then, for the call that will come to you in your life. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.

—Taken from the introduction

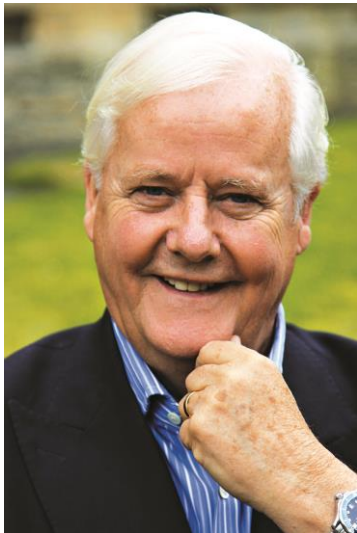


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"A tremendous little book, crackling with challenge, insight, and truth. Essential reading for anyone brave enough to open their mind and think."

—Norman Stone, director of the original *Shadowlands*

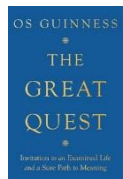
Os Guinness, Prolific Author and Social Critic

"For decades now, Os Guinness has served readers with excellent cultural analysis that helps us to 'read our times.'"

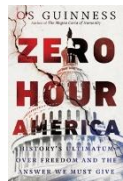
—Trevin Wax, senior vice president of theology and communications at Lifeway Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time*

Os Guinness (DPhil, Oxford) is a frequent speaker and prominent social critic, he has addressed audiences worldwide from the British House of Commons to the US Congress to the St. Petersburg Parliament. He is a senior fellow at the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and was the founder of the Trinity Forum.

Guinness is the author or editor of more than thirty books, including



- *Last Call for Liberty*
- *Impossible People*
- *Fool's Talk*
- *Renaissance*
- *The Global Public Square*
- *A Free People's Suicide*
- *Unspeakable*
- *The Call*
- *Time for Truth*
- *The Great Quest*
- *Zero Hour America*



Born in China to missionary parents, he is the great-great-great-grandson of Arthur Guinness, the Dublin brewer. After witnessing the climax of the Chinese revolution in 1949, he was expelled with many other foreigners in 1951 and returned to England where he was educated and served as a freelance reporter with the BBC. Since coming to the United States in 1984, he has been a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies and a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. He was the lead drafter of the Williamsburg Charter, celebrating the First Amendment, and has also been senior fellow at the EastWest Institute in New York, where he drafted the Charter for Religious Freedom. He also coauthored the public-school curriculum *Living with Our Deepest Differences*.

Guinness has had a lifelong passion to make sense of our extraordinary modern world and to stand between the worlds of scholarship and ordinary life, helping each to understand the other—particularly when advanced modern life touches on the profound issues of faith. He lives with his wife, Jenny, in McLean, Virginia, near Washington, DC.



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