This book is an invitation to find out who you really are, beginning with two simple questions. In moments when you feel very happy, do you also watch yourself being happy? When you happen to get angry, is some part of you totally free of anger? If you answer “yes” to both questions, you can stop reading. You have arrived. You have gone beyond everyday awareness, and this going beyond is what it takes to know who you really are. Self-knowledge will unfold for you every day. In time—or perhaps at this very moment—you will see yourself living in the light. Like the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, you can say, “That I exist is a perpetual surprise.”

It would be fascinating to meet you, because your existence no doubt is quite unusual—you might even assume that you are unique. You look around and see that the vast majority of people are simply happy when they are happy and angry when they are angry. But not you. You see beyond.

When I began writing books thirty years ago, there was no question that being happy and getting angry were normal, without the added element of watching yourself. A word like mindfulness wasn’t in the air; meditation was still considered dubious by the average person, and the whole question of higher consciousness was viewed with hard-eyed skepticism. I was a young Boston doctor with a growing family and my days were consumed with work, servicing a large patient roster and traveling every day between two or more hospitals.

When I was happy about a patient with a thyroid condition getting well, did I watch myself being happy? Absolutely not. If the wrong prescription was filled by a careless pharmacist, was a part of me not at all upset, standing by like a silent witness? No. In common with everyone else I knew, I was happy or angry without any mystery about it. But coming from India, I could reach back into my childhood for clues about a different state of being. According to an ancient Upanishad, the human mind is like two birds sitting on a branch. One of the birds is eating the fruit of the tree while the other lovingly looks on. Since I went for some years to a school run by an order of Catholic brothers, there were other clues from a different source, such as Jesus telling his disciples to be “in the world but not of it.” If you Google that phrase, you’ll find a wealth of confusion about what it actually means, but the kernel of the teaching is that there is a difference between buying into worldly life and not buying into it. When you don’t buy into it, Jesus teaches, you are somehow with God.

I wish I could say that these clues about higher consciousness transfixed me and shaped my life. They didn’t. I stored them in the back of my mind, never calling upon them in my busy, stress-filled life. There was no budding awareness of the Truth with a capital T, which is that I, and everyone else in the world, embody the mystery of existence. This is the reason, ultimately, why Tagore found himself perpetually surprised. Once you wake up to reality, you face the mystery of existence intimately and personally: There could be no mystery without you.
In a sentence or two I’ve taken some giant leaps, I know. There’s a yawning gulf between the things a person must do in a day—beginning with waking up, getting dressed, going to work, and so on—and the mystery of existence. A society based on reason and science looks with skepticism on any such notion as being in the world but not of it, or Truth with a capital T. We live together in a reality that obeys the rule of “What you see is what you get.” The physical world confronts us; we come to grips with its many challenges and, as the rational mind probes the dark unknown, what emerges are new facts and data, not a sense of wonder that we even exist.

What first coaxed me into facing the mystery of life—and the mystery of myself as a human being—was medicine. I practiced endocrinology, a specialty that fascinated me because hormones are unique chemicals. They can make you sluggish and dull if you have a thyroid deficiency; they can make you run away or fight when confronted by a threat. A burst of adrenaline is responsible for a common reaction to a street magician levitating before our very eyes as onlookers jump back or run away. We are so used to accepting that these behaviors are chemically induced that almost everyone connects adolescent behavior with “raging hormones.” Even when sexual drive is tamed somewhat, it is never truly tamed, just as falling in love is never rational. If I had been satisfied to accept this commonsense connection between hormones and the effects they cause, there would be no more story.

But there is a fly in the ointment and it disrupts things far beyond hormones—it potentially overturns reality itself. There is a brain hormone called oxytocin that has gained the popular name of the “love hormone,” because the presence of higher levels of this hormone in the brain makes a person more affectionate and trusting. But this one molecule secreted by the pituitary gland is much more complex than that. Higher levels are secreted in the mother during birth and breastfeeding, promoting a close bond with the baby. If you pet your dog for a while, oxytocin goes up in both you and your dog. Oxytocin makes people love their national flag more, while being indifferent to the flags of other countries. During sexual activity, oxytocin rises in women, making them bond with their sexual partners emotionally, but the effect doesn’t seem to happen in men.

Something strange must be going on, and yet these complex findings don’t shake the faith of most endocrinologists. I was different. What bothered me was that oxytocin doesn’t actually do anything it is credited with doing unless the mind goes along with it. A woman won’t have more affection for a sexual partner if she is coerced, frightened, angry, or simply distracted by something more important. Your oxytocin won’t go up if you pet a dog you dislike. You won’t love your country’s flag if you are forced to salute it by an authoritarian regime.

I came to see the explosive effect of the mind-body connection. It was as if we are two creatures, one a robot that can be programmed by chemicals, the other a free agent who thinks, considers, and decides. These two creatures are seemingly incompatible. They have no right to exist together, and yet they do, as reflected in the setup of our nervous system. One part operates automatically, enabling life to go on without your thinking about it. You don’t have to think to keep breathing or have your heart beat. But you can consciously take control, and the voluntary nervous system allows you to alter your breathing and even, with a little practice, slow down your heart rate.

Suddenly, we are on the verge of a mystery, because something must decide whether to take action, or not. That something cannot be the brain, because the brain is indifferent about whether it employs either side of the central nervous system. On the involuntary side, the brain increases your heart rate if you run a marathon, but it was you who decided to run the marathon in the first place.
So who is this “you”?

That niggling question is what disrupts reality. At any given moment you—that is, the self—decide which nervous system to call upon; therefore, you cannot be the creation of either one. When you see this simple fact, you are on the road to self-awareness. You can be happy and watch yourself being happy at the same time; you start to experience yourself completely without anger, even as you are displaying anger.

The reason for this shift is simple: You have gone beyond the mechanical side of life. You have awakened to who you really are, the user of the brain but not the brain, the traveler in a body but not the body, the thinker of thoughts who is far, far more than any thought. As I will show in the following pages, your true self is beyond time and space. When you identify with your true self, you have fulfilled the dictum to be in the world but not of it. The Greek word meta means “beyond,” so I’m using it to describe the reality that lies beyond “What you see is what you get.” When you occupy metareality, you are metahuman.

In fits and starts, everyone is already there. Metareality is the source of all creativity, because without going beyond the old and conventional, there would be no new thoughts, artworks, books, or scientific discoveries. No matter how many thoughts you’ve had in your life, there are infinitely more you can think; no matter how many sentences writers have written, there are infinitely more to write. Words and thoughts are not stored in the brain like information in a computer, to be juggled around mechanically when another thought is needed. Shakespeare wasn’t simply juggling his Elizabethan vocabulary—he employed words in a creative way. Van Gogh didn’t simply combine the standard colors in the spectrum; he used color as a new way of seeing the world around him.

Going beyond is how a person decides if life is meaningful enough. When you want more than your life is giving you, it’s not your brain that craves more meaning, nor is it the everyday person going about the routine business of life. The self, viewing things from a higher perspective, is deciding the matter. The self also decides whom to love, what is truth, whether to trust, and so on. If a mother judges that a cranky three-year-old needs a nap, she has gone beyond a simple assessment of what the child is doing and saying. Cranky children say all kinds of things, and if mothers bought into them, they’d be no better than children.

If going beyond has proven so indispensable, why aren’t we metahuman already? There is no reason to keep repeating the same trite, tired opinions, follow the same outworn social conventions, and surrender to conformist thinking. All pose traps that we fall into, and the result is more of the same strife, war, domestic violence, racial prejudice, and gender inequality that we have been prey to throughout history. We choose to be our own prisoners. This paradox, playing the part of inmate and jailer at the same time, has caused untold suffering for humanity.

To bring the whole sorry mess to an end involves one thing: shifting from human to metahuman. Both states exist here and now. There is nowhere to go to reach metareality. Like the two birds in the tree, you are feasting on life while also looking on. But the looking-on part is being ignored, suppressed, overlooked, and undervalued. The transformation that makes you metahuman is known in the world’s spiritual traditions as “waking up.” Once someone rises to the state of metahuman, it seems as if the old everyday self was a sleepwalker, barely conscious of life’s infinite possibilities.

To be awake is to embrace full self-awareness. Lots of other metaphors come to mind. Metahuman is like tuning in to the whole radio band instead of one narrow channel. It’s like a string vibrating to a higher note. It’s like seeing a world in a grain of sand. But like is a limiting word. The real
thing is indescribable and must be experienced firsthand, just as sight is indescribable to someone born blind and yet revelatory if that person gains sight.

Editors encourage writers to coax readers, using a big promise of something new, fresh, and different. Waking up is as old as being human. It’s impossible to promise something like waking up, which is indescribable in the first place. Looking back on my previous works, I feel that I was inhibited by how peculiar and mysterious it is to wake up. This time, however, I’ve taken a deep breath and gone for broke. I’m trusting that the reader isn’t someone born blind to whom sight is completely unknowable. With a modicum of trust, we can all be shown that we are already metahuman and that metareality is here and now.

I don’t know who will be persuaded and who won’t. In the end, the mystery of being human obeys only itself. But one thing I do have faith in: If in reading this book you connect with what it means to wake up, you will realize the truth in much less time than the thirty years I look back on. The faster that metahuman dawns in our lives, the better.