

Photo courtesy of Aaron Freeman



My inner particle

A lot of us physics groupies look to quantum physics as the coolest theory. We believe the physicists who say classical ideas don't cut it when you go nuclear. We get that quantum stuff is so weird the only way you can convince anyone you've really studied it is to endlessly repeat, "I don't know." We, the civilians, accept that a rock is really a cloud composed mostly of empty space and sprinkles of tiny particles.

But what exactly are we supposed to do with the knowledge that everything we know from everyday life is different at the subatomic level? How should evidence of extra six or seven dimensions inform our days? Where in my head and worldview am I supposed to put antimatter?

I want to get in touch with my inner particle and let it point the way.

Particle logic—mysterious, counterintuitive, seemingly insane—pretty much describes life as I live it. And since we are so mind-numbingly small compared to the rest of the universe it makes sense to me to think of individuals as particles.

I want to reason like an electron, to be all over any task from every direction at once. I want to philosophize like a meson, yin and yang, opposites contained in a unified whole. I want to dream like a neutrino, limitless, unstoppable.

As individuals we display a kind of wave-particle duality. While the positions of our bodies are measurable with a high degree of accuracy at any given time our images—audio, video and photographic—spread out around the world via the Internet, existing everywhere at once. For millions of people appearing on TV, broadcast television images spread out, wave-like, across the galaxy in all directions at the speed of light.

Like quarks we are attracted to one another by a strong force: love. We are kept within our social shells by weaker but still potent bonds of commerce and culture. Geography attracts us, like gravity, in ways that are destiny-producing across the vastness of time. Civilizations reared amid bountiful and fertile soil are destined for one kind of history. Peoples arising on land that

happens to contain oil will chase another fate. But like gravity acting on a gluon, the effect of geography on individuals is difficult to measure.

Race is an artificial and misleading social construct. My skin is not actually black nor is my wife's genuinely white. Physics might help us categorize populations more usefully. Maybe we'd be well served by a Standard Model of Particle Humans. Top humans, for example, are the leaders of the industrial west. They're certainly massive in terms of their ability to warp global resources. Tops are produced by powerful collisions and often decay quickly. Bottom humans would be the other ninety-nine percent of us.

Charm humans include athletes, politicians, performers—folks who make us believe. The strange ones are artists, academics and scientists—those who sit alone pursuing queer gods.

Folks in uniforms and guns certainly are the equivalent of force carriers. Though we may have to check whether some cops are more bozos than bosons.

My late father and sister have gone off to join our ancestors among the neutrinos. It's unlikely that I will see them again in the visible particle world.

We humans are perhaps most particle-like in our slavish submission to the principle of uncertainty. Everyone who's ever sat down to write a letter knows you can form in your mind precisely what you want to say, yet still be surprised by what you ultimately write. Uncertainty is what makes every day an adventure.

I believe accessing my inner particle will help me deal with the uncertainty of my life. My inner particle does not know how the world should be and is thus untroubled by how it is. It desires neither certainty nor comprehension. Thus my inner particle is far wiser than I.

Perhaps my inner particle will grant insights into all manner of human phenomena. Maybe I'll be a faster cyclist by embracing my photon self. Maybe I'll start to see the womb as a human Higgs field wherein eggs, like particles, acquire mass.

Then again, if the string theorists are right, maybe all I'll get from my inner particle are some good vibrations.

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