Young Atheist’s handbook extract:

I WAS PLAYING football when my mother died. She was in an intensive care unit at Guy’s — the same London hospital in which all of her children, except me, had been born. Kicking a ball around with my friends, I was as oblivious of her as she was of me. At some point, a doctor would have pulled a plug or pushed a button and declared my mother’s life to be finished. At that moment, I would have been filled with life, in the way that only a 13-year-old running around a football pitch can be.

My mother, mum, ‘Amma’, had been in hospital for months, in and out of a coma at least a couple of times. She’d been pregnant with my youngest brother at an age when, given her medical history, she really shouldn’t have been. It probably came as no surprise to the doctors that the pregnancy led to medical complications, the nature of which I never understood beyond the fact that it had something to do with her heart not working properly. When she fell into a coma, my brother was prematurely removed from her womb — it doesn’t seem correct to say that he was ‘born’ when it was so obvious that he was not ready to be separated from his mother. He was so tiny that my father could hold him in the palm of his hand; at least, he could have held him if my brother wasn’t wired up to a bunch of machines and perforated with countless plastic tubes.

My mother suffered from all sorts of medical problems, but it was mental illness that landed her in hospital on what seemed to be a regular basis when we were growing up. My father and the other Bangladeshi adults around us openly described my mother as fagol, which means ‘crazy’; some even said she was possessed. So we children thought of our mum as loony, when in fact she was very, very ill. It was only as an adult that I learned she had suffered from bipolar disorder or, as it used to be known, ‘manic depression’; but putting a name to something that caused her so much suffering has not made it easier to accept what a tortured existence she must have had.

The periods when she was depressed don’t particularly stand out in my memory, except for a vague recollection of incomprehension as to why my mother was so sad. But the trauma of her psychotic episodes is still fresh in my mind, including one incident in which she dangled my newly born brother over the balcony of our flat. When a psychotic episode took hold of her, her behaviour would become increasingly erratic: she would become sexually disinhibited and, eventually, so violent that she would need to be locked up. She once managed to kick down a hospital door and run all the way home, barefoot, in the middle of the night. (I imagine that hospital security has improved since then.) You can imagine how terrifying it was for us to see our mother in this state, but by far the worst thing about it was that she seemed to completely forget who we were: she didn’t recognise the people who loved her most in the world, those whose happiness depended, so very much, on her.

She died before I was mature enough to take an interest in her as a person. I envy all those who get to know their mums and dads as people in their own right — what a privilege, joy, and honour that must be, to be friends with your parents. For many years, I have been consumed with piecing together as much of my mother’s life as I am able to, relying on memories of relatives and friends. I treasure even the smallest anecdote about her, from brief encounters recollected by my childhood friends to stories of her adolescence from those who knew her then. The one person who could have told me most about her, my father, was the only one I never asked; he died before either of us was sensible enough to mend our relationship so that, at the very least, we could have had the only conversation we really should have had.

My mother spent the first few years of her marriage in Bangladesh. By all accounts, she was mostly happy. However, it took her years to get pregnant, far longer than anyone had expected. Her first child died soon after he was born, leaving her ‘mindless’ with grief, according to my aunts and uncles. This may have been the first of the many episodes of severe depression that would plague her for the rest of her life. I was born a couple of years later, slightly premature but healthy nonetheless.

My father left for England soon after, aiming to earn enough money so that we could join him, but this was not such a blow to my mother’s happiness now that she had her much-longed-for child. Inevitably, my mother spoiled me. My aunts teased her about it back then. Today, they reminisce fondly about how she was so loath to put me down or have me out of her sight that she would tie me to her sari. Apparently, rather than have anyone else watch over me, she once tied me to a tree while she bathed herself (there were no baths or showers in our village at the time, so we washed in an outdoor furki, a large pond teeming with plants and fish). While she was washing, I busied myself with covering my body in as much dirt as I could. My aunts ridiculed her for not beating me: how else would I learn? For the record, she did attempt to beat me when I was a bit older — I must have been more than a handful for her — but I remember laughing as she chased me around the kitchen with a wooden spoon. She just could not bring herself to hit me hard enough to make her point.

I was not jealous when my brother was born, a few years after me. He was an adorable, beautiful baby that no one could resist picking up. If anything, he was more spoiled by my mother than I was, but she had enough love to go around; I never felt replaced or less loved or any of those other emotions that first children are said to experience upon the birth of a sibling. Other siblings quickly followed, and by the time my mother died there were five of us: four boys and a girl. As a result of her illness, my siblings and I had a part-time mother. I can’t speak for my brothers or sister, but I resented her for this, even if I didn’t consciously realise it at the time. I was angry at her for leaving us, as things were always better when she was around. I was angry at her for making me miss her. And how I missed her; how awful it was to carry around that emptiness every day at school, pretending that nothing was wrong and nursing the hope that she’d be home when I got back from school. But I got used to it, and so did my siblings, because kids do get used to things.

Dr Robert Buckman, in his book Can We Be Good Without God?, writes that ‘our parents are our first gods’. They are the ‘caring, benign, powerful’ figures who look after our needs when we cannot do this for ourselves.1 When we are children and in trouble or need of comfort, we do not pray to an invisible, imaginary being; we turn to our parents. My mother’s presence in the world was enough to make me feel safe, protected. When she was well, it was evident in everything she did that we were the centre of her universe: it shone through in the way she fed us, bathed us, held us. Even today, relatives comment on how much she adored us. We knew it. And we know it to this day because the knowledge of her love buried itself deep within us, in a place where it has been, and continues to be, an anchor to hold us strong through the troubles of life.

My experiences as a teacher have led me to believe that pretty much all a child needs to grow up okay is at least one parent who really loves them. Being loved can be a source of great strength to a child, but only if he or she knows it. I have met people who have naïvely argued that all parents love their children, but I don’t think that is necessarily true. My siblings and I all work with young people — my sister as a paediatrician, and my brothers and I in schools and youth clubs — and each of us can recount heartbreaking stories of the deliberate neglect and abuse of children. We have all seen evidence that love can make up for whatever other deprivations a child may have to deal with, but pretty much nothing can make up for being deprived of love. I can’t help feeling sorry for my younger siblings because they had even less time with our mother than I did. We share the heartbreaking knowledge that our own children will never know someone who would have been the best grandmother to them.

In many ways, I have been a parent to my siblings, and a large part of my own happiness and sense of fulfilment in life comes from having seen them grow up, without coming to harm, into decent, kind, accomplished adults. The pride I have in them is tinged with a deep sadness that my mother never got to see how they turned out. But my greatest pity is reserved for my youngest brother, because he never experienced for himself what it was liked to be loved by her. I can't remember if my father asked me and my siblings if we wanted to go to the hospital with him the day my mother died. I suspect that he didn't see the point in taking us along. But I knew something was up — that morning, a bunch of relatives had turned up at our house. They clearly knew what my father was about to do. We children were not warned or braced, by our father or anyone else, for what was going to happen. There was certainly no counselling for us, as I expect there would be these days, but I don't blame my father — it would have been outside his experience or education to know that children need preparation for such situations. My father, though cruel in many ways, was not being deliberately cruel on this occasion. By that point, my mother had been in hospital for so long that we had become used to her not being at home, and used to seeing a comatose figure when we did visit. After the first few times, we didn't cry at her bedside, but just sat there thinking about other things, at a loss for what to do or even what to feel. Soon, going to hospital hospital became a chore, and we were pleased when we were left behind to play. We were not bad children; we were just children.

When my father returned from the hospital that day, a relative shouted down from the flat, telling me to come up. I don't remember where my siblings were or what they were doing. I'm sure it's not just self-centredness that means I only remember myself and my experiences on that day; I have never spoken to any of my siblings about that moment when we first found out that she was dead. As I ran up the stairs to our flat, I think part of me guessed what had happened. I remember charging through the door and being pulled aside by a relative, a woman in her twenties, a long-distance aunt or cousin of some sort. I didn't know who she was, or perhaps I just don't remember. What I recall is that she pulled me to her and said, in Bangla, 'Your mother is no more.' That's a precise translation of her words: 'Your mother is no more.' I remember emitting some sort of feral yell, crumpling to the floor, and crying so hard that it hurt. The young woman tried to hold me, but she must have known how futile it was to try to comfort me. I just remember sobbing and sobbing and feeling dizzy, as if I was falling out of space and time, leaving reality. And in a way I was, because in that instant my reality was irrevocably changed. I was inconsolable then, and I am still inconsolable today. Nothing that has happened in my life since that moment, nothing I believe and nothing I know, can provide consolation. This is why I suspect that I am in some way predisposed not to believe in God, because God is the only thing that could have provided any solace.

Death gives birth to gods; without death, there would be fewer gods, if any. The finality of death confronted me at the age of 13 and took away the person whom I loved most. When I touched my mother's cold face at her funeral, there was no comfort for me from any make-believe notion that she would be warm and alive again in some magical heaven. If I had felt that there was an afterlife, believe me, I would have killed myself then and there to join her. The death of a loved one is probably the most emotionally difficult thing that any of us has to deal with. Inventing a god is a coping strategy that has been adopted by people since prehistoric times, and it is understandable: the emotional disturbance that results from the death of someone close is so debilitating that people cannot be blamed for seeking help wherever they can get it. Perhaps the idea that the death of a loved one is part of some plan that God has for all of us, that it is in some way ‘God’s will’, is a consoling one for some people; perhaps the idea that their loved one has gone to ‘be with God’ somehow lets some people accept the unacceptable. But not for me; not for me. No idea about God, no religious belief, has provided me with any comfort. It never has and, I suspect, it never will. Only a few people are so convinced of a life after death that they would do anything to hasten their passage there. Yet many, if not most, adults cling to the idea of some form of afterlife, like children who believe that Narnia is around the corner, waiting for them to stumble into it. But while Narnia is described in glorious detail by C.S. Lewis, I suspect that most adults would struggle to describe the precise nature of the afterlife they believe in.

Ancient cultures used to bury their dead with provisions for the afterlife, indicating that they believed it was in some ways a continuation of this life: a person would need food, clothes, and money. People of these cultures imagined their afterlives as somehow better, grander versions of their current lives, and the appeal of that idea is obvious. It is the kind of afterlife that is portrayed in many films and books; indeed, this is how C.S. Lewis portrays it in The Last Battle, the final book of The Chronicles of Narnia. Today, some people may believe that the afterlife is a physical place where one exists in a human body, but a more widespread belief is that only the soul survives death and somehow goes on to live forever. This idea of an ‘eternal soul’ is central to many modern religions.

The soul is seen as permanent and valuable, whereas the body is seen as temporary and in some sense extrinsic, able to be discarded. In myths and stories, it is always our soul the devil is interested in, not our bodies. It is not necessary to believe in God or to be religious to think that the human soul exists. To an extent, this is an idea that resonates with everyone because we are, by our natures, dualists when it comes to this — our brains work in such a way as to create the feeling that ‘we’ exist as entities beyond our physical selves, and so it is easy for us to believe that our bodies are mere containers for our souls while we are in this material world.

In some sense, this is indeed true: even though our thoughts and feelings may only exist because our bodies exist, they are of course not physical objects that can be touched, observed, or studied in the same way that the cells and organs of our bodies can. Science is making tremendous progress in finding out which bits of the brain are active when we think and feel certain things but, as any good scientist would be quick to point out, that’s not the same as knowing what a thought or a feeling is. There are no special components that make up a human; we are made of the same protons, neutrons, and electrons as every other living thing. It is remarkable that billions of atoms can come together and make a person, but it is somehow jarring or unacceptable to most of us to believe that this is all we are. The evidence suggests that what we think of as our soul is very much the result of physical processes — electrical pulses and chemical reactions — in our brain. Francis Crick, most famous for his work with James Watson in discovering the structure of DNA, puts it like this: ‘You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.’2

This was brought home to me in a dramatic, tragic, and incontrovertible way one morning in 2001. My youngest brother, Shalim, is one of those people who can truly be described as inspirational. His premature birth resulted in complications that left him with physical disabilities and learning difficulties. As a toddler, both his legs were broken, suspiciously, while the rest of us were at school, and he spent months in hospital while they healed. He was in and out of hospital throughout his childhood, undergoing numerous painful operations as doctors tried to fix problems with his leg muscles caused by cerebral palsy. Some time later, a cup of boiling tea was spilled on him, leaving him severely scalded and requiring yet another trip to hospital. Yet despite the endless reasons he had to be miserable, Shalim was constantly cheerful and affectionate, a joy to be around. Of course, my siblings and I worried about his future, but he flourished at the special school he attended, and it soon became evident that he would be far more capable of taking care of himself than we had dared to hope.

But our happiness at his success was to be short-lived. On the morning of 21 February 2001, just after he had turned 16, my brother woke up, locked himself in the bathroom, and refused to come out. When we broke through the door, it was immediately apparent that something was very, very wrong. Shalim had smeared shampoo and shower gel all over the walls and was convinced that we, the people who were committed to taking care of him, were going to harm him. We managed to restrain him and take him to hospital, where we were told that he was having a psychotic breakdown. Shalim spent the best part of the next six months in the most wretched place I have ever been, a place where the absence of God is in stark evidence — a children's mental-health ward. More than one of the patients had been admitted after attempting suicide. Of all the sad children I saw there, though, the saddest was a boy who told us that he wished he was Shalim, because 'you come to visit him'. Shalim's misfortunes were mitigated by the love and care we showed for him — things that came naturally to us, but clearly not to the families of many children in that place.

Initially, my siblings and I visited Shalim every day. When it became evident that he was going to be in hospital indefinitely, we went in pairs, alternating the days on which we came. In the whole six months that he was there, my father only visited a handful of times. For what seemed like ages, Shalim seemed not to recognise us, and often treated our visits with indifference. His love of comic books manifested itself in a cruel way: Shalim seemed to think that he was a superhero and, sometimes, he would confront us with a fighting stance as we entered his room, perhaps imagining that we were the villains he had sworn to defeat. We found this tragically comic at the time, but were more disturbed by the fact that, like my mother had done when she was ill, Shalim had also become sexually disinhibited. This element of his behaviour was particularly unsettling for us, as well as awkward for those around him to deal with. For the first few months, Shalim was nothing like the young, vivacious boy we knew and loved. He had the same body (although he rapidly lost weight), but he was not the same person, and it was easy to see how this sort of illness could be explained by the idea of someone being possessed by another spirit. Of course, Shalim was not possessed; like my mother before him, Shalim was very, very ill. Something had gone wrong with his brain, and it was only by feeding him the right dosages of mood-stabilising and anti-psychotic drugs that the doctors were eventually able to restore him to his 'normal' self. In many ways, he was 'resurrected' by the chemicals in those drugs because, without them, the Shalim we knew and loved simply didn't exist. The scientific, evidence-based treatment used by the doctors was crucial to his recovery, in a way that no exorcism or any amount of praying could ever have been. My brother's breakdown was, for me, striking evidence that there is no mind–brain duality, that there is no soul, and that a 'person' is very much a result of electrical and chemical happenings in the brain.

Seeing Shalim like this brought back horrible memories of my mother's illness. When his breakdown first occurred, I was terrified that something similar could happen to me or another of my siblings. The doctors told us that this was unlikely — we were all old enough that it would have happened already if it was going to. But this doesn't mean I'm safe from losing myself in the way that Shalim did: I could still develop Alzheimer's, or hit my head and injure my brain, both of which would result in damage that would change my personality, perhaps to the point where I would not really be 'myself' anymore.

There are volumes filled with case studies of people who, through some sort of illness or misfortune, have had their neurological function damaged in such a way that their personality has been altered beyond recognition — a fact that genuinely scares me. All the evidence is that our souls, our minds, our ‘selves’, are inseparable from our brains. Humans have long known that ingesting certain chemicals can alter the way we think and feel. In the past, people may have thought that eating, drinking, or even smoking certain things gave them access to a spiritual realm, but scientists today believe that such activities lead to chemical changes in the brain that manifest as mental experiences. As well as analysing chemical changes, scientists can now use equipment to administer electrical voltages or magnetic fields directly to our brains, showing a cause-and-effect relationship between physical events in our brains and how we feel or think. These advances in science leave very little doubt that a large part of who we are is determined by physical phenomena that occur inside our heads; while they may not know precisely what it is that happens in our brains to give us the sensation of having a soul, scientists are confident that something happens in our brains to make us think or feel anything.

Trying to understand how the brain works is one of the most exciting areas of scientific research. New instruments such as fMRI scanners may open up the brain for us in the way that microscopes allowed us to see the world of cells and particle accelerators allowed us to probe the fundamental building blocks of matter. But perhaps we will never know exactly how the brain works, how that lump of meat inside our skulls gives rise to the marvellous, beautiful thing that it is to be human. Perhaps we will never truly understand what it is that makes us sentient, capable of writing poetry, making music, doing science; perhaps we will never know what it is that allows us to truly live while other animals merely exist. In a poem he read out to the National Academy of Sciences in 1955, the great physicist Richard Feynman described humans as ‘atoms with consciousness, matter with curiosity’.3 But we are more than the atoms of which we are made, more than the sum of our parts. We are the experiences we have and the memories, knowledge, and beliefs we hold. We really do transcend the physical origins of our being, and I don’t mean this in a New Age, spiritual sense.

As the writer Kenan Malik put it in his essay ‘In Defence of Human Agency’: To talk of humans as ‘transcendent’ is not to ascribe to them spiritual properties. It is, rather, to recognise that as subjects we have the ability to transform our selves, our natures, our world, an ability denied to any other physical being. In the six million years since the human and chimpanzee lines first diverged on either side of Africa’s Great Rift Valley, the behaviour and lifestyles of chimpanzees have barely changed. Human behaviour and lifestyles clearly have. Humans have learnt to learn from previous generations, to improve upon their work, and to establish a momentum to human life and culture that has taken us from cave art to quantum physics and the conquest of space. It is this capacity for constant innovation that distinguishes humans from all other animals. All animals have an evolutionary past. Only humans make history.4

The thought of being temporary is one that the human mind wants to reject, and there may well be good evolutionary reasons for this. But all of the evidence points to the fact that our minds can only exist for as long as our brains do. A scientific understanding of the world makes it hard to believe in an eternal soul. If you want some consolation, there are some scientists who believe that we may one day be able to ‘download’ ourselves into another type of brain, a more resilient, longer lasting memory- and thought-storage device that will allow us to ‘live’ for much longer, perhaps for as long as the universe exists. But this is wild speculation, and little comfort for those of us who fear death. It is certainly not as comforting a notion as the idea of eternal life that most religions offer.

Despite there not being a shred of evidence for it, the idea of life after death is a key feature of all the major religions. I’ve really got to hand it to the Christians, in particular — they’ve come up with a story in which the hero literally rises from the dead and floats up into the sky. If you can believe that this actually happened — and apparently millions of people do — you can believe that death is not the end, that it is conquerable.

Sadly, even though I knew of this story as a child, and even though I was aware that Muslims also had a heaven, I never bought into the idea. I suspect this is not only because it all seemed too good to be true, but also because the evidence that my mother was gone was too hard to ignore. It’s an insidious idea, this notion that there is life after death. The promise of a reward in the afterlife has been used as an excuse to deny help to the poor, helpless, and oppressed; to explain away human misery rather than deal with it. It is an idea that is used to encourage young men and women to kill themselves, and others, so that they can become martyrs. It allows victims of injustice to be told not to worry because justice will be done in the afterlife. It depresses me to think that so many people on the planet live their lives with this notion. Can we truly fulfil our potential as a species as long as we hold on to, and encourage, the perpetuation of the lie of life after death? People seem to struggle with the notion that this life is all there is. Many seem to think that if they accept that this is it, life has no meaning. A friend once compared this to saying that a cake has no meaning once you’ve eaten it. A cake provides you with a pleasurable experience, a focus for celebration, a memory, and even perhaps a wish. An eaten cake will give you energy. Some of its atoms may literally become part of you through the processes that are continually replacing the billions of cells in your body. Similarly, when you die, your memory and the things you did will live on for a while, but your atoms will live on for a lot longer, becoming part of other objects in the universe. Ultimately, though, ‘you’ cease to exist once your atoms stop doing all those things they need to be doing in order to make you alive.

As a child, I used to be scared of this idea. I would sometimes find myself lying in bed, imagining what it would be like not to exist. I used to picture myself buried underground, and would feel a sense of suffocation at the thought of not being ‘here’ anymore. The concept of nothingness was incredibly frightening to me. But, like most children, I simply grew out of this fear. When my mother died, I knew that I would never see her again, never get to speak to her, never hold her or be held by her. I’ve come to accept that. But every so often, I dream about her. Sometimes I spend entire afternoons with her: we go out for meals, we talk endlessly, we just hang out. Sometimes, despite being a grown man, I am sitting in her lap, being held like a child. It’s only ever just the two of us; we might pass strangers on the streets as we go for a walk, but no one else is involved in these meetings. These dreams feel so real, I start crying when I wake up and realise that they are not. If I were a believer, I might be able to console myself with the notion that my mother is somehow speaking to me from beyond the grave. But I cannot ignore all the evidence to the contrary, and am forced to accept that these dreams are a result of wishful thinking, of my brain doing incredible things to create a virtual reality of infinite verisimilitude. Despite this, I am grateful for these dreams, and live in the hope of having another.

I visited my mother’s grave a number of times in the first few years after she died, mostly out of a sense of duty. I stopped going in my late teens. My siblings and I went to see it a few years ago, soon after my father died. We cried beside it, but felt nothing towards the grave itself — it was just a plot of ground. Today, it is no doubt covered with weeds. For years, the only marker was a cheap wooden board because my father didn’t buy a proper gravestone for it — a final insult to a wife whom he had treated poorly throughout her life. I hated him for this, and swore I would buy a gravestone when I could afford it. But I never bought that stone; instead, years later, I had the Bangla word for mother, ‘amma’, tattooed on my arm. I enjoyed the pain, and it felt like it meant more to permanently scar myself with a reminder of her than to buy a stone. In many respects, it’s silly, I know. But then again, you might say that of all the other ways we choose to deal with this unbearable, unavoidable thing we call death. The death of a parent is a defining moment in the lives of most people, particularly when it occurs in childhood. For me, because of the kind of man my father was, it was the moment when I became an adult, someone for whom no one else was ultimately responsible. It was also the moment when things went from bad to worse for my siblings and me, the point from which we were to become outsiders among the community we had grown up in, and after which we would largely be left to fend for ourselves. It was also perhaps the moment when I first explicitly rejected God. There is a line in the movie The Crow when the hero chastises a drug addict who is neglecting her child by saying, ‘Mother is the name for God on the lips and hearts of all children.’ 5

I cried when I heard that line because when my mum died, God died, too.

Shaha, Alom. The Young Atheist's Handbook: Lessons for Living a Good Life Without God . Biteback Publishing. Kindle Edition.