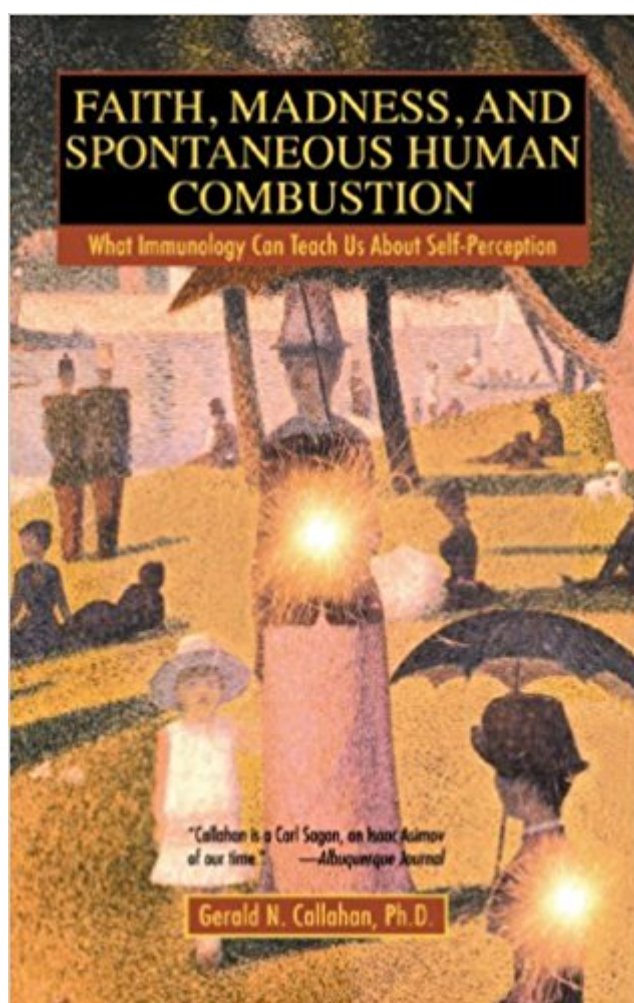


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# Faith, Madness, And Spontaneous Human Combustion: What Immunology Can Teach Us About Self-Perception



## Synopsis

Intensely personal and brilliantly scientific, *Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion* reveals the startling ways in which science—especially immunology and pathology—shapes our destinies, and how something as intimate as our own identities can be connected to the intricate workings of the machines known as our bodies. “Each of the dozen essays in this far-ranging collection could be expanded into a book...Analogizing to striking effect, Callahan conveys both science and sympathy. It is hard to think of a type of reader who wouldn’t be intrigued by this fascinating book.” —Booklist “Callahan is a Carl Sagan, an Isaac Asimov of our times.” —Albuquerque Journal

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Combining science and personal anecdote is no easy task, and Callahan’s ambitious look at the relationship between immunology and selfhood falls somewhat short of the mark. Callahan a poet, essayist and Colorado State University professor of immunology aims to show how the immune system literally and metaphorically forms the basis for our identity. Weaving together bits of memoir, case studies of unusual incidents like human combustion and virally transmitted insanity, and basic explanations of immunology, Callahan shows how the immune system’s main function to distinguish between self and nonself, to defend the body from invaders not only determines the boundaries of the basic biological “self” but can metaphorically be applied to our psychological selves as well. Discussing the concept of immunological memory, for instance, Callahan writes, “Enveloped viruses... are so named because they carry with them an ‘envelope’ of lipids and proteins taken

from the host cell.... Each time we give the flu to our wives or our cold sores to our husbands, we also give them a little bit of ourselves." These metaphors unfortunately tend to be simplistic and pat. Those reading the book for straightforward scientific information or Oliver Sacks-style medical curiosities will probably be frustrated by the impressionistic prose and meandering narrative. While there are fascinating facts here, as well as some genuinely engaging recollections from Callahan's life, these are interspersed with self-indulgent whimsy. An unusual attempt at genre crossing, the book would have been better off as a traditional memoir without the popular science conceit. (Jan.)Forecast: Callahan is being marketed as a successor to Oliver Sacks, but he lacks Sacks's gift for engaging narrative. Not a comfortable fit in any category and unlikely to be a crossover hit.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Each of the dozen essays in this far-ranging collection could be expanded into a book. With one degree in protein chemistry and another in pathology, Callahan is an imaginative scientist, remarkably able to see connections between seemingly unrelated things and events. Uniting the intriguing life journey he traces is the theme encapsulated in his early observation, "We are individuals because we have immune systems." Each immune system works slightly differently from any other, which makes for individual uniqueness in body and emotions. Callahan explores historical and recent variations among individuals and cultures in life, disease, and death. "Watermarks" investigates the uses of water in humans and animals, for instance, while "The Flame Within" is virtually a detective story about the best-documented instance of human spontaneous combustion, which occurred in Florida in 1951. Analogizing to striking effect, Callahan conveys both science and sympathy. It is hard to think of a type of reader who wouldn't be intrigued by this fascinating book. William BeattyCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Wonderful and entertaining with fascinating observations and facts!

Written by an immunologist, this book draws the reader into an unknown realm of consideration that widens the intellectual and spiritual view of our bodies' defense system. It explores how our minds and environments effect our health, and delves into terrain not normally considered in the doctor's office, but nonetheless, a one we should all be intimately aware of.. It is a stimulating and very interesting read. I had heard of actual cases of spontaneous human combustion so picked up the

book, and was not disappointed!

Callahan is that genre of author I like to describe as "scientifically based mystic." Scientist in that, true to his craft, he primarily uses the scientific method to probe the answers to life in the biological sense. Mystic in that he recognizes that science can provide many wonderful answers and statistics, but seldom the "meta" answers man has yearned for since we can remember. "Who am I?" and "What is my place in the universe?" are questions seldom answered satisfactorily by science, and more comfortably by religion. Using his considerable experience and knowledge in the science of immunology, Callahan tackles these questions in a much different way than most scientists would, yet without an appeal to religiosity. Always with a healthy respect for the unknown, unseen and unknowable, Callahan deftly explores the hidden relationships between ourselves, our parents and every other living thing comprising life. He'll make you think in ways you possibly haven't thought before, and even tug at your heartstrings while recounting intensely personal stories experienced by us all. Highly recommended.

This book should still be in print. Widespread print. I wish everybody could read it. Fascinating and useful.

I really like this book. An interesting take on our immune systems and our belief systems.

Everyone should be required to read this book as well as its companion book, also by Gerald N. Callahan, Ph. D. entitled "Infection The Uninvited Universe"...My wife died of cancer in 2007 which developed because of a disease called Lichen Sclerosis, an immune disorder that effects mostly women in their genitalia area causing lesions that will not heal which then develop into cancer...Many women have this disease without realizing it because most doctors know nothing, or near nothing about it...Nor do they care to know much about it (not enough people have this disease to warrant paying special attention to it...not enough money to be gained!)...Most doctors will treat the symptoms as simple yeast infections prescribing antibiotics and itch relief ointments, or send patients to a skin specialist who will mistake it for Lichen Planus and prescribe steroid ointments, etc. that do nothing to alleviate the actual problem....My AMA Family Medical Guide doesn't even include Lichen Sclerosis in its pages...This is just one example of the kind of knowledge we, the general public, have been so deprived of, in terms that we can comprehend...These two books make that Knowledge available now and the reading is not confined to drab medical scientific

information, Dr. Callahan also includes many short stories about real people who experience the effects of immune disorders and infections in a way that results in very pleasurable reading. I used to think I knew quite a bit about medical science...After reading these books, I realize how much I did NOT know all these 68 years of my life...Had I known more a decade ago, my wife might still be alive with me today...This is indeed VITAL information.

This book, written in a beautiful, almost poetic prose, is engrossing, informative, and covered commonalities of the immune system, human behavior, genetics, family relations, faith, reason and science. I particularly liked the parallels between paranoia and immune system. In paranoia, the mind views almost everything as a threat, and may even inflict damage on innocent parties. In the latter the body attacks itself and other non-threats, causing injury to itself. Also, the details on how the immune system "remembers" and how the various organs police the system was fascinating. Not all of the personal family story snippets tied strongly to the central theme, but all were excellent writing and emotionally powerful. Anyone wanting to expand their horizons and view the world from a unique viewpoint could do well to read Callahan's fine book.

I measure a book by my own reaction to it. When I have finished the last page, if the thoughts within the work compel me to look at the world around me--or within me--in a new and different way, it is a good book. Rare are authors who are capable of opening new doors upon this experience we call life. Gerry Callahan is one such author. Using the immune system as a basis for analogy, he describes the fascinating tasks the human body's immune system must perform in distinguishing "self" from "not self" in order to keep our bodies from being consumed by the microbial world. But this is not a dry text about immunology. It is a personal and philosophical story about the beauty and elegance of life. It is a story about lymphocytes and mitochondria, but it is far more a story about Gerry L. Callahan, his perceptions, his joy, his pain, his truths, and his lies. Equally, it is about all members of the human species. "It isn't nature that abhors a vacuum, it's humans. We humans don't believe in the limits of human knowledge, even temporary limits. We don't accept the spaces between what we know and what is. So we lie. We lie to fill in those spaces and smooth the fabric of reality. Otherwise this universe, this life, would be unmanageable, overpowering, and terrifying. We lie to make it manageable-all of us." This book is about Gerry L. Callahan filling in the spaces to smooth the fabric of reality. For me, it opened another door.

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Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion: What Immunology Can Teach Us About

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