



DONALD F. KILBURG III, PH.D.

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Don Kilburg, Ph.D., is an experimental psychologist, author, and founder and CEO of Mind Leap Institute, where he helps leaders navigate the human factors shaping the AI revolution. He is the author of four books published by Routledge: the *AI Use Cases for Diplomats* trilogy and *Mind Leap: How to Think, Feel, and Flourish in the Age of AI*.

For more than two decades in the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service, Dr. Kilburg specialized in public affairs and strategic communication, engaging foreign audiences in support of U.S. foreign policy. His distinguished career included serving as assistant press attaché at the U.S. Embassy in China, intelligence analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, spokesperson for the Bureau of Energy Resources, and public affairs officer in the Bureau of Global Public Affairs.

He coordinated press operations for senior U.S. officials, produced intelligence analysis selected multiple times for presidential briefings, helped coordinate the evacuation of 25,000 Americans from Mexico following Hurricane Wilma, and pioneered the use of generative AI in diplomacy. His service earned him multiple Meritorious and Superior Honor Awards.

Before entering the Foreign Service, he served in the U.S. Army Infantry, taught psychology at Eastern Washington University, and was a Japanese Government *Monbusho* Research Fellow at Mie University, in Japan. He holds a Ph.D. in experimental psychology from DePaul University, with a focus on social cognition, and trained in four languages. He is married and has three children.

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Apprentice to Reality

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I was born in Chicago and raised Catholic, but my curiosity and wanderlust took me around the world. I earned a Ph.D. in experimental psychology and studied foreign cultures, languages, and belief systems. I visited cathedrals, temples, ashrams, and dojos in faraway places. I prayed, meditated, practiced martial arts, and read widely in religion, philosophy, psychology, and science. I became a soldier, a professor, and a diplomat. Through it all, I sought to test my cosmological views against the reality I encountered. What survived that test was not the God I inherited, but a vast, lawful, creative, and indifferent reality within which consciousness, wonder, and mercy arise.

I could no longer accept many of the claims made by traditional religions: that a personal God knows everything, can do anything, and is perfectly good; that one faith alone possesses the truth; that miracles interrupt the natural order; that humans were specially created; that the soul survives death; that everything happens according to a divine plan; and that another life awaits us. Even so, I remain grateful for what religion has given me: a serious concern for right and wrong, compassion for those who suffer, a sense of awe, meaningful stories and rituals, inspiring examples of how to live, and a call to mercy. I still value those gifts, but I no longer believe they depend on religious teachings being literally true.

The evidence led me to see human beings not as the center of creation, but as one late branch of an ancient tree of life. Evolution explains both our kinship with every living thing and the hard terms under which life develops: mutation, competition, predation, disease, death, and extinction. These facts do not rule out every possible God, but they do rule out the comforting picture of a ruler who could prevent suffering, knows it fully, and always acts with perfect goodness. Prayer and miracle claims did not reveal a clear hand guiding events, and religions themselves followed the boundaries of culture and geography. Yet one mystery remained stubbornly open: consciousness. Matter somehow becomes aware, able to love, suffer, wonder, and judge the world that produced it.

That mystery kept me from closing the question. I cannot prove that consciousness is fundamental, that death is not the end, or that some deeper purpose stands behind existence. I can only say that reality has produced beings capable of awareness, love, moral judgment, and mercy, even though the system appears indifferent to suffering. That leaves me with a humbler idea of God: not a supernatural ruler who manages events, but the reality from which everything arises and within which everything belongs. Whether the word *God* helps or hinders is less important to me than remaining faithful to what is true. My task is not to defend a doctrine, but to keep learning from reality, to change my mind when evidence requires it, and to bring what mercy I can into a world that does not guarantee it.

Further Reading:

Kilburg, Don. 2026. "The Strange Architect." *LinkedIn*, June 1, 2026.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/strange-architect-don-kilburg-ph-d--ed07e/>