

JOHN
ORTBERG

FAITH



DOUBT



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1

FAITH, DOUBT, AND BEING BORN

The deepest, the only theme of human history,
compared to which all others are of subordinate importance,
is the conflict of skepticism with faith.

WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

One year, in the small cul-de-sac where my family lived in Illinois, three husbands in the four houses around us had heart attacks while still in their forties.

This was Illinois, where the state bird is sausage.

There were two immediate consequences. One was that my wife wanted to know the details of our life insurance policy. The other was that everybody wanted to know what lies on the other side when the heart stops beating. Questions about God and heaven and meaning and death ceased to be academic.

And it struck me, in that year, how deeply both faith and doubt are part of my life. We often think of them as opposites. Many books argue for one or the other. But while in some respects they are enemies, in other ways they are surprisingly alike: both are

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concerned with ultimate issues; both pop up unasked for at unexpected moments; both are necessary.

I must have truth. Therefore I doubt. If I did not doubt, I'd be just another one of those suckers P. T. Barnum was so grateful get born once a minute; I'd fall for every carnival sideshow delusion that comes along. And I scorn delusion.

I must have hope. Therefore I believe. If I did not believe, I would cave in to despair. And I dread despair.

In addition to believing and doubting, there is choosing. I must decide which road I will follow. I must place my bet.

Why I Believe

If you were to ask me why I believe in God, I suppose I would tell you a story about a baby. She was not the beginning of my faith in God, but she was a new chapter of it. I did not know that when a baby came into my world she would bring God with her.

When we found out baby number one was on the way, Nancy and I went through a Lamaze class together. To spare the moms-to-be anxiety, the instructors did not use the word *pain*. They spoke of *discomfort*, as in “When the baby is born, you may experience some discomfort.”

On our second anniversary, Nancy began what would be twelve hours of labor. (All of our kids arrived on notable occasions, none more so than Johnny. He popped into the world on February 2, prompting the doctor to tell us that if he saw his shadow, he would go back inside and Nancy would have six more weeks of pregnancy.)

Laura's body was unusually positioned inside Nancy (the phrase the nurses used was “sunny-side up”) so that the hardest part of her head was pressing against Nancy's spine. Each contraction was excruciating. The worst moment came after eleven hours and several doses of Pitocin to heighten the contractions. The doc-

tor, with a single hand, wrenched the baby 180 degrees around inside my wife's body. Nancy let out a scream I will never forget. I knew I had to say something. "Honey — are you experiencing some discomfort?"

They finally had to use a vacuum cleaner with a special attachment to get the baby out. (The Lamaze people had warned us this procedure might make the cranium look pointed, but it would only be temporary.)

Suddenly the pain was over, and we held this little conehead in our arms and were totally unprepared for the world we had entered. Nancy, who had never been particularly attracted to anybody else's children, held the baby and looked around the room like a mother tigress. "I would *kill* for this baby."

I pointed out that I thought most mothers would say that they would *die* for their children.

"*Die?* Why would I want to die? If I died for her, then I couldn't be with her. I'd *kill* for her." And she looked around the room, clearly hoping someone would give her the chance to show she wasn't bluffing.

I took the baby from her and was overwhelmed by the wonder and mystery of the presence of a human person. Not just the mechanics of her body — though they were amazing. Not just my sudden love for this being — though it was a flood tide. What overwhelmed me was being in the presence of a new *soul*.

"I can't believe that there is a live, flesh-and-blood, immortal being in this room who didn't used to exist. She will grow up — and we'll watch her. She'll become a woman. And then one day she'll grow old. This red hair will turn to gray and then to white; this same skin that is so pink and

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smooth right now will be mottled and wrinkled, and she'll be an old lady sitting in a rocking chair—and it will be *this same person*,” I said to Nancy.

“Yes,” she said. “And I'd kill for the old lady too.”

We propped that tiny body with towels and blankets in the car seat of my old VW Super Beetle to take her home. I drove like I was transporting nitroglycerin. I crawled along the freeway in the slow lane, hazard lights flashing, doing twenty-five miles per hour, ticking off motorists from Northridge to Pasadena. How do you travel carefully enough to protect a new soul?

When I held Laura, I found myself incapable of believing that she was an accident. I found myself incapable of believing that the universe was a random chaotic machine that did not care whether I loved her or hated her. I don't mean that I had a group of arguments for her having a soul and I believed those arguments. I don't mean this conviction is always present in my mind with equal force. It's not.

I mean the conviction welled up inside me and I could not get away from it. I could not look at Laura and believe otherwise. I could not hold her without saying thank you to Someone for her. I could not think of her future without praying for Someone more powerful and wiser than me to watch over her. When she arrived, she brought along with her a world that was meant to be a home for persons. A God-breathed world.

Every child is a testimony to God's desire that the world go on. Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor who doubts sometimes, has written that the reason so many babies keep being born is that God loves stories.

Why I Doubt

On the other hand, if you were to ask me why I doubt, I suppose I would tell you a story about a baby as well. A couple whom I have

known for a long time had a beautiful little daughter. She was the kind of child who was so beautiful that people would stop them on the street to comment on her beauty. They were the kind of parents you would hope every child might have.

They had a pool in their backyard.

One summer day it was so nice outside that the mom set up the playpen in the backyard so that her daughter could enjoy the day. The phone rang, and her daughter was in the playpen, so she went in to answer the phone. Her daughter tugged on the wall of that playpen, and the hinge that held the side up gave way. It didn't have to. God could have stopped it. God could have reached down from heaven and straightened it out and kept that playpen up. He didn't. The hinge gave way, and the side came down, and the baby crawled out, and heaven was silent.

When that mom came outside, she saw the beautiful little body of her beloved daughter at the bottom of that pool. It was the beginning of a pain that no words could name. She would have died if doing so could have changed that one moment. But she could not. She would have to live. The memory of how old her daughter would be would have to haunt her every birthday and every Christmas and on the day she would have graduated from high school. That mom would live with the emptiness, the guilt, the blame, and the aloneness.

When that little baby left this world, she left behind a world that was God-silent.

Dostoyevsky, who was a believer, wrote that the "death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God." But of course death has not restricted itself to just one infant. Elie Wiesel tells of his first night in a concentration camp and seeing a wagonload of babies driven up. They were unloaded and thrown into a ditch of fire. "Never shall I forget . . . the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. . . . Never shall I forget those moments that murdered

my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”

This is our world. I don't know all the right responses to resolve these issues, but I know some of the wrong ones.

Wanting to Believe

When people of faith are not willing to sit quietly sometimes and let doubt make its case, bad things can happen.

Sometimes people of faith can be glib. Sometimes they respond with bad answers.

Sometimes preachers add enormous pain by telling people they have brought suffering on themselves by sinning. Sometimes they tell people they have not been delivered because they do not have enough faith.

Sometimes people want to believe but find they can't.

I think of a man who prayed for his alcoholic father for twenty years—but his father never changed.

I think of a woman who prayed for a mentally ill sister who committed suicide.

I think of a brilliant young girl who was neglected by her mom, abandoned by her dad, and molested by her uncle. She was an

When people of faith are not willing to sit quietly sometimes and let doubt make its case, bad things can happen.

atheist at age eleven and then through a group of friends became a Christian. But she was tormented with sexual addictions all through her teenage years. She began to be troubled by the thought that some people were condemned to hell just because they belonged to a different religion. She kept asking God to help her; she kept asking for answers,

but nothing seemed to change.

I think of a letter I received recently:

How can I believe a Jewish friend who is devoted to God and hears him better than I do will go to hell and I will go to heaven even though I'm not as good as he is, just because I am a Christian and he is not? Will the real God and creator of the universe stand up?

The God I used to believe in was very easy to hear and follow. Now I'm in the dark, and he feels like a stranger. I'm praying but am getting nervous that he won't answer because I now have so little faith . . . not even the size of a grain of mustard seed.

Philosopher André Comte-Sponville writes poignantly about the beauty of humility: “Humility may be the most religious of virtues. How one longs to kneel down in churches!” But he said he could not bring himself to do this because he would have to believe that God created him, and human beings seem to him too wretched to permit that possibility. “To believe in God would be a sin of pride.”

Wanting to Doubt

Sometimes people want *not* to believe. A number of recent best-sellers by professional doubters are part of what is being called the New Atheism, a kind of reverse evangelism. They are written by people who are quite certain that God does not exist, and in some cases they are mad at him for not existing. Philosopher Daniel C. Dennett wrote *Breaking the Spell* to argue that religious faith has been protected by the idea that it is holy or sacred. He says a little critical thinking that would reveal it to be nonsensical would “break the spell.”

Noted author Sam Harris writes that the only difference between believing *in* Jesus and thinking that you *are* Jesus is the number of people involved in each category. “We have names for

people who have many beliefs for which there are no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common, we call them 'religious.' Otherwise, they are likely to be called 'mad, psychotic, or delusional.' While religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are."

British journalist Christopher Hitchens has written *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The title pretty much tells where the book heads.

Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins says in *The God Delusion*: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. Jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal . . ." He gets hostile after that.

The current popularity of such books may have been sparked, chronologically at least, by Daniel Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

With this book Brown sought to undermine almost all the historical basis for orthodox Christianity, although what gets presented as history in *The Da Vinci Code* is hotly contested by scholars of all stripes. (A historian friend of mine said, perhaps a little unkindly, that *The Da Vinci Code* is the only book after which you've read it, you're dumber than you were before you started.)

Ever since what was modestly called the Enlightenment, people have been predicting the demise of faith in God. I want to listen to doubters and not just argue with them.

Ever since what was modestly called the Enlightenment, people have been predicting the demise of faith in God. I want to listen to doubters and not just argue with them, partly because deep down I have doubts enough of my own, and partly because when I'm just trying to win arguments, I turn into Dan Ackroyd debating Jane Curtain

in an old *Saturday Night Live* sketch: “Jane, you ignorant . . .” Nobody wants to be around me then. Not even me.

I do not like books by believers or doubters that make it sound like the question of God is simple, that anyone with half a brain will agree with them, that people in the other camp are foolish and evil. I have read and known too many people who don’t believe in God who are better and wiser than me. But I do not think the professional doubters will make faith go away. The predictors keep dying, and faith keeps spreading.

Doubt and Faith in Every Soul

Because old Mother Nature is a dysfunctional parent who keeps sending us mixed messages, we need both faith and doubt. The birth of every infant whispers of a God who loves stories; the death of every infant calls his existence into question. Writer Michael Novak says that doubt is not so much a dividing line that separates people into different camps as it is a razor’s edge that runs through every soul. Many believers tend to think doubters are given over to meaninglessness, moral confusion, and despair. Many doubters assume believers are nonthinking, dogmatic, judgmental moralizers. But the reality is, we all have believing and doubting inside us. For “we all have the same contradictory information to work with.”

Perhaps great believers and great doubters are more like each other than either group is like the great mass of relatively disinterested middle-grounders. Both are preoccupied with understanding the nature of the universe. Both agree that this is, after all, the great question. Most doubters know the discomfort of uncertainty. An agnostic writer for *Wired* magazine reviewed the works of the New Atheists and wrote of his envy of their certainty, his attraction to declaring himself an atheist rather than simply an agnostic. In the end, though, he could not join their ranks, because, he said, “I might be wrong.” Another prominent scientist writes, “I have

wavered between the comfortable certainty of atheism and the gnawing doubts of agnosticism my entire life.”

But most believers know uncertainty as well. Billy Graham, an old man near ninety, when asked if he believes that after he dies he will hear God say to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” pauses and says after a surprising inner struggle, “I hope so.” Martin Luther, the champion of justification by faith, was approached for help by an elderly woman troubled by doubt. “Tell me,” he asked her, “when you recite the creeds—do you believe them?” “Yes, most certainly.” “Then go in peace,” the reformer said. “You believe more and better than I do.” Elie Wiesel, when asked to describe his faith, uses the adjective *wounded*. “My tradition teaches that no heart is as whole as a broken heart, and I would say that no faith is as solid as a wounded faith.” I believe. And I doubt. The razor’s edge runs through me as well.

One of the paradoxes of faith and doubt is that it is the ultimate intellectual challenge, yet simple and uneducated people may live with great wisdom and PhDs may choose folly.

Sometimes I get frustrated and feel that if I were only smarter I could figure the whole God-issue out beyond doubts.

I feel as if I’m back in school taking a math test with the really hard question about one train leaving Cleveland going twenty-five miles an hour and one leaving Pittsburgh doing thirty and when do they pass each other, and that the proof about God has to be out there if I just had more time or could find the right book. I’m tempted to think that doubt is merely a problem of intellect. But making the right choices about faith—like making good choices for life in general—does not seem to rest primarily on IQ. Smart people mess up as easily as the rest of us.

Three men are in a plane: a pilot, a Boy Scout, and the world’s smartest man. The engine fails, the plane is going down, and there

are only two parachutes. The smart man grabs one. "I'm sorry about this," he says, "but I'm the smartest man in the world; I have a responsibility to the planet," and he jumps out of the plane. The pilot turns to the Boy Scout and speaks of how he has lived a long, full life and how the Boy Scout has his whole life in front of him. He tells the Boy Scout to take the last parachute and live. "Relax, Captain," the Boy Scout says. "The world's smartest man just jumped out of the plane with my backpack."

Our world is full of smart people jumping out of planes with backpacks. One of the paradoxes of faith and doubt is that it is the ultimate intellectual challenge, yet simple and uneducated people may live with great wisdom and PhDs may choose folly.

One thing is for sure: sooner or later the plane is going down. We all are on the same plane. Smart guys and Boys Scouts alike: everybody has to jump. Everybody has to choose a parachute. No one will know who chose wisely until after they jump.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a brilliant philosopher at Yale, is the father of a son who died at age twenty-five climbing a mountain. Wolterstorff is also a believer who asks questions. He writes of how some people try to explain the problem of death by saying God is its agent, with a not-so-subtle reference to his son: "You have lived out the years I've planned for you, so I'll just shake the mountain a bit. All of you there, I'll send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely."

Others, like Rabbi Harold Kushner, try to explain suffering by saying God too is pained by death but cannot do anything about it. (Elie Wiesel once said in response to Kushner, "If that's who God is, he should resign and let someone competent take over.")

Wolterstorff writes as a believer who still has unanswered questions.

I cannot fit it all together by saying, "He did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing he could do about

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it.” I cannot fit it together at all. . . . I have read the theodicies produced to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.

So it goes for those of us who live in a cul-de-sac, where babies are brought home from the hospital and watched over, where hearts stop and feet slip, where we wonder if there is a hidden road that leads somewhere.

We believe and we doubt. Believing and doubting share the same inevitability, but they are not equal. They cannot lay the same claim on our allegiance. They do not share the same power.

If there are places beyond the cul-de-sac, doubt cannot take us there.

2

WHY BOTHER?

Faith is a free surrender and a joyous wager on the unseen,
unknown, untested goodness of God.

MARTIN LUTHER

When Smart People Disagree

Have you ever considered how many different ideas about faith, religion, and God exist among the human race?

There are Christians. There are Hindus. There are Muslims — Shiites and Sunnis. There are Confucianists, Shintoists, Buddhists, Bahais, Rostafarians, atheists, agnostics, nihilists, humanists, deists, pantheists, New Agers, witches, wizards, and satanists. There is a group online who claims to believe in a Flying Spaghetti Monster. There are certain followers of Jainism who believe there are over three hundred thousand gods. There are Unitarians who, Bertrand Russell said, believe there is *at most* one God.

Even among Christians there have been thousands of denominational variations and movements, and every one of them thinks

they are right. I grew up in a Baptist church, and we looked forward to the day when we would be in heaven and there would be no more divisions. Some Lutherans would be there, represented by Martin Luther. Methodists would be there, represented by John Wesley. Some Catholics would be there (though this idea was a little more controversial), represented by the pope. And we Baptists would be there, represented by . . . Jesus.

Everybody thinks he or she is right—which means that a lot of people are going to find out, when they die, that they were wrong. One of the ironies of atheism is that if there is no such thing as life after death, atheists can never know for sure that they were right, and believers can never know for sure that they were wrong.

I'd like to know. Not just trust, not just hope. I'd like my own bona fide miracle—like my own burning bush or magic fleece or the Cubs winning the World Series in my lifetime.

All this difference of opinion raises a problem. Many people who are smarter than me, better educated than me, and bigger hearted than me cannot even agree with each other. I cannot read every book. Even if I could, I am not smart enough to untangle what perplexes minds far smarter than mine. So how can I choose with any confidence?

During the late nineteenth century, a philosopher-mathematician named William Clifford wrote a hugely influential essay titled “The Ethics of Belief.” He argued that it is “always wrong, everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on the grounds of insufficient evidence.” Although he didn’t say it directly, what he was really writing about was faith in God. He was really saying, “A lot of smart people out there disagree with each other about whether God exists. There is no way to know who is right or who is wrong, so the only appropriate response is, ‘Don’t decide. Don’t commit. Abstain. Opt for doubt.’”

It was around Clifford’s era that Thomas Huxley coined the

term *agnostic*, which did not exist before the nineteenth century. Agnostics, Huxley said, “totally refuse to commit” to either denying or affirming the supernatural. Huxley himself celebrated René Descartes as the first to train himself to doubt. Descartes’ method for knowing was to begin by doubting everything until he found one unshakable belief: “*Cogito ergo sum*” — “I think, therefore I am.” (My favorite Cartesian joke: Descartes walks into a bar. “Care for a beer?” asks the bartender. “I think not,” says Descartes and disappears.) Huxley said that “doubt had now been removed from the seat of penance . . . to which it had long been condemned, and enthroned in that high place among the primary duties.”

I get his point. I would like to know for sure. I want to know if it is all true—that God is really there, that Jesus really did drive out demons and walk on water and rise up from the dead on the third day. I would like some assurance that when they play taps over my body down here Someone will be blowing reveille on the other side.

I’d like to *know*. Not just trust, not just hope. I’d like the skies to part sometime. I’d like my own bona fide miracle—like my own burning bush or magic fleece or the Cubs winning the World Series in my lifetime.

And since I can’t *know*, Clifford said, I should just settle into the land of “I don’t know” and be content with agnosticism.

When Neutrality Is a Bad Choice

But a philosopher named William James responded that sometimes Clifford’s advice is bad strategy. He said doubt is the wrong alternative when three conditions are met: when we have live options, when the stakes are momentous, and when we must make a choice.

Sometimes I have to choose between two options even when I cannot prove either one. Cosmic neutrality ignores this problem:

I have to live. I have to make choices. I have to spend my life praying or not praying, worshiping or withholding worship. I have to be guided by some values and desires. And then I have to die. I must give my life in total, in full, without the luxury of holding something back for the second hundred years. My life is the ballot I cast—for God or against him.

My brain cannot provide the certainty that I'm betting my life on the truth. My mortality will not provide the luxury of waiting until I know for sure. There is one road to certainty—through a door marked “death.” Then I will know, or there will be no me left to know. But I need to decide how I will live on this side of the door. Once we have been born, trying to put off deciding what to do about God is like jumping off a diving board and trying to put off actually entering the water.

Our beliefs are not just estimates of probabilities. They are also the instruments that guide our actions.

When I think about this urgency, I'm reminded of a saying my friend Kent the drummer told me about. The background for this saying is that all musicians are torn between the desire for perfection and the demands of reality. They would like to know before they sing a note that it will be pitch-perfect. They would like to know before they hit the drum that the beat will fall in perfect rhythm. But musicians are thwarted by reality. There are no guarantees for the perfection of their choices. In fact, to the contrary, there is the guarantee of imperfection. Kent tells me that no one has ever sung on perfect pitch; no drum has ever been struck in perfect time. So Kent has a saying that reminds him of the need to actually play a note in the face of potential imperfection: “*You have to put it somewhere. If I refuse to sing a word or play a note until I'm certain of perfection, there will never be music.*”

If you don't want to go to the grave with all your music in you, you'll have to take a shot. You'll have to roll the dice. You have to

accept limits and uncertainty and risks and mistakes. You have to put it somewhere.

Some people choose doubt. But doubt is not always the best strategy. If we followed Clifford's advice, no one would join a political party, take a position on capital punishment, or vote for a school board candidate, because people smarter than us disagree on all these things.

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin writes that we live in an age that favors doubt over faith. We often speak of "blind faith" and "honest doubt." Both faith and doubt can be honest or blind, but we rarely speak of "honest faith" or "blind doubt." Both faith and doubt are needed, yet it is faith that is more fundamental. Even if I doubt something, I must believe there are criteria by which it can be judged. I must believe something before I can doubt anything. Doubt is to belief what darkness is to light, what sickness is to health. It is an absence. Sickness may be the absence of health, but health is more than the absence of sickness. So it is with doubt and faith. Doubt is a good servant but a poor master.

"Doubt is useful for a while. . . . If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if he burst out from the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' then surely we are permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

Is Faith or Doubt More Rational?

Doubters often accuse believers of being irrational. But the rationality of belief is a tricky issue. Our beliefs are not just estimates of probabilities. They are also the instruments that guide our actions.

Let's say you manage the Los Angeles Dodgers. It's World Series time—you against the Oakland Athletics. It's the ninth inning, and you're one run behind with one man on base and two outs.

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The world's greatest relief pitcher is on the mound. You have two pinch hitters; both of them bat .250. One of them says, "I will probably make an out. There's a three out of four chance I will lose the battle. But at least I will not allow my emotions to cloud my thinking. I will acknowledge the probability of my failure calmly and clearly." The other guy says, "I believe I will get a hit. I have a deep conviction this is my day."

Who do you send to the plate? Would it be more *rational* to send up the logic chopper who thinks he will fail? Wouldn't it make more *sense* to call on Kirk Gibson with his five o'clock shadow and his gimpy knee and his swaggering conviction that he is destined for immortality? You would send the pinch hitter who has all the confidence he could muster. There are *reasons* for faith that go beyond mere evidence. (If you're not a baseball fan, note that Kirk Gibson was a badly injured power-hitting Los Angeles outfielder who in 1988 produced the greatest World Series moment of all time and forever convinced Dodger fans that God not only exists but is in fact a Dodger.)

Let's try another analogy. I'm trapped on the tenth floor of a burning building. The elevator has melted, the stairs have collapsed, and my only escape is to jump out the window into a blanket held by a group of volunteer firemen. The blanket looks thin. Some of the firemen have been celebrating at Oktoberfest. Would it be *rational* to say, "I'm not jumping; at best I give them a 10 percent chance of catching me; I may die up here, but I won't jump out the window and risk looking naive"?

Standing in the burning building, I am intensely aware that I am not in the probability calculating game; I am in the survival game. What makes jumping out the window *rational* is that it is the best shot I have at achieving my *purpose*, which is to survive.

The question of faith is never just a question of calculating the odds of God's existence. We are not just probability calculators. We live in a burning building. It's called a body. The clock is ticking.

Let's say we throw in our lot with the doubters. What hopes do I have for a grand purpose in a cul-de-sac? This is how Bertrand Russell, an atheist from a previous century, put it: "In the visible world, the Milky Way is a tiny fragment. Within this fragment the solar system is an infinitesimal speck, and within the speck our planet is a microscopic dot. On this dot, tiny lumps of carbon and water crawl about for a few years until they are dissolved again into the elements of which they are compounded."

Is it only me, or is that just the tiniest bit depressing? Would you want to have that read at your funeral? "There was a little lump of carbon and water crawling around on the speck for a while. Now it's gone. Elvis has left the building. So long."

Maybe old Bertie was right. Maybe the universe is a machine assembled by accident, intended for nothing. Maybe one day it will wind down. Maybe, when the Big Bang collapses in on itself, maybe when the sun expands and the earth is destroyed—maybe then all of life as we know it will end, and it will not have made any difference in that day whether I loved my kids or beat them. We're all just atoms. Maybe so. But I don't know anyone who lives consistently with that idea.

A theologian named Woody Allen captured the absurdity this leaves us in: "More than any time in human history, humankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly."

I do not see how it would be possible to find a meaningful life in a meaningless universe. The only purpose that is worthy of life is something bigger than life itself. It is more than maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain for a few years on earth. The only

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purpose worthy of life is to be part of a grander vision—the redemption of creation, the pursuit of justice, becoming a saint.

You Are Launched

It is precisely this realization about the human condition that lies behind Blaise Pascal's famous posing of the issue of faith as a wager. Making a decision about faith is more like making a wager than like judging a debate, because in life—as at the roulette table—we have something riding on the outcome.

Some people think Pascal was just making a crude appeal to self-interest. I had two floor-mates in college who worked up what they called the “worst hell” theory of choosing a religion. It worked like this: study all religions, identify the faith that threatens to send people to the worst hell, then join it. Thus you will eliminate at least the worst-case cosmic scenario.

But I don't think that's exactly what Pascal was trying to say. Pascal was a brilliant mathematician. He invented the first calculating machine and the first public transportation system, developed probability theory and much of the mathematics of risk management, and proved the existence of the vacuum—all of which set the stage for quantum physics, the insurance industry, Powerball lotteries and racing forms, vacuum pumps, the atomic bomb, and outer space exploration. He was, as one biographer notes, “the man who invented the modern world.”

Pascal was also a wealthy French aristocrat. He was fascinated by gambling, which was an obsession in upper-class seventeenth-century France. His use of the wager was a way of showing that faith is not simply a matter of estimating the probability that God exists. There are certain votes from which it is impossible to abstain, what William James called *forced* decisions. For example, if you decide to put off making a decision about getting in shape, your body will decide for you.

So it is, Pascal said, when it comes to God. Evidence alone cannot clearly indicate that God does or does not exist. However, we must choose whether we will seek him. Not to choose is its own choice. Your wager began the moment you were born. You were “launched.” You will bet your life one way or the other. God either exists or he does not. Heads or tails—no third option.

If God does not exist, we lose a life devoted to seeking to love, to live generously, to speak truth, and to do justice. But if God does exist, and we choose not to follow him, we lose everything.

“Everyone believes, for there is no other way to live. Even those who say they *know*, that they have no need of *belief*, are throwing the dice. They are just throwing harder than most.” We all have, in the most literal sense, skin in the game.

There is a kind of recent secular version of Pascal’s wager. Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick, based on an aspect of modern physics, speculated that it may be impossible for persons to cease to exist. He suggested this approach to life: *first, imagine what form of immortality would be best; then live your life as though it were true*. Nozick died a few years into the new millennium. If it is impossible for persons to cease existing, now he knows.

“Life is a great surprise,” Vladimir Nabokov wrote, “I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.”

Radical skeptics believe we cannot know anything. There is an old story about a philosophy test on skepticism that consisted of a chair sitting in the middle of a classroom. Students were to solve a single problem: “Prove that this chair exists.” One student answered in two words: “What chair?” He got an A.

Skeptics may believe it is impossible to prove that chairs exist. But they still sit down in them.

Radical nihilists believe we *can* know something, and what we know is that there *is* no meaning. We can know that, in Jennifer Hecht’s memorable phrase, “the universe is nothing but an accidental pile of stuff, jostling around with no rhyme nor reason,

and all life on earth is but a tiny, utterly inconsequential speck of nothing, in a corner of space, existing in the blink of an eye never to be judged, noticed or remembered.” But even nihilists, writes Michael Novak, devote beautiful October days to sitting indoors at their computers pecking out messages in the faith that someone will read, that someone will be enlightened, and that what they say will have *meaning* in a universe they claim has none. “They are men and women of faith, our nihilists.”

Maybe, as hard as it is to bet on faith, it is even harder to bet on doubt.

Flying and Catching

I think that Clifford was wrong in his essay about the ethics of belief; when it comes to God, it is folly to abstain even when you don't have certainty. I'd put my money on Pascal. But I'm not sure the idea of a wager quite captures the desperate need of the human condition. So I'll try one more picture.

This comes from Henri Nouwen, whose gift to the world was his struggle with pain and faith as the wounded healer. The final year of his life he took a sabbatical from working and writing. He longed for God yet found it hard to pray. He found himself drawn—go figure—to a circus act. A Dutch priest who had taught at Harvard and Yale was hanging out with the greatest show on earth. They were a trapeze act, “The Flying Rodleighs.” He watched them perform, and then he got to know them. Trapeze artists usually use a safety net nowadays, but even falling into one of those is dangerous and sometimes fatal.

There were five members in the act—three “flyers” and two “catchers.” The flyer climbs the steps, mounts the platform, and grasps the trapeze. He leaps off the platform, swinging through the air. He uses his body for momentum, swinging with increasing

speed and height. The catcher hangs from his knees on another trapeze, with his hands free to reach out.

The moment of truth comes when the flyer lets go. He sails into the air with no support, no connection to the earth. He does a somersault or two. Picture him in the middle of a somersault and freeze the frame. There is absolutely nothing, at the moment, to keep the flyer from plunging to his death. What do you think he feels like? Do you think he feels fully alive—every cell in his body screaming out? Think he's feeling any fear right then?

In the next moment the catcher swings into our view. He has been timing his arcs perfectly. He arrives just as the flyer loses momentum and is beginning to descend. His hands clasp the arms of the flyer. The flyer cannot see him; to the flyer everything is a blur. But the flyer feels himself snatched out of the air. The catcher takes the flyer home. And the flyer is very, very glad.

Nouwen spent some time getting to know the flyers. Flyers are small, weighing 150 pounds or less, because if you're a catcher, you don't want a flyer with a sweet tooth. He learned about the equipment they used. They had socks filled with magnesium dry powder for their hands, especially for Joe, because Joe was one of the catchers. They told Henri, "Joe sweats a lot." If you're a flyer, you don't want a catcher with sweaty hands.

Here's where trusting comes in. Letting go is always an act of trust. Rodleigh, as the leader of the group was called, told Nouwen, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I'm the star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump."

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Nouwen asked him, “How does it work?”

He answered, “The secret is that the flyer does nothing. The catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait.”

Henry asked him, “You do nothing?”

“A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch. The flyer must trust with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there waiting for him.”

We are all going to have to let go. But we get to choose to whom we jump. We get to choose—not our level of certainty—but the convictions to which we commit. Believing matters. But there’s one other aspect of believing we should know about. Figuring out what we actually believe turns out to be surprisingly difficult. A lot of people think they believe in God, but they really don’t.