

WHY
FAITH
MATTERS



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From Faith to Doubt

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it is sufficient.

Meister Eckhart

DO ALL PEOPLE, in the dark of a sleepless night, wonder if they made the right choice with their lives? No matter what choices we make, the world brings us to unexpected places. When I counsel young people they often tell me the types of people they wish to marry. They come to my office armed with checklists. No corporate recruiter could be more thorough or thoughtful. In a year or two they return with partners who do not match the checklists but who have captured their hearts: “She’s everything I ever wanted.” Sometimes it seems that a plan is a useful illusion until life figures out where you really should be headed.

“Life is lived forward,” Kierkegaard wrote, “but can only be understood backward.” In high school and through col-

lege I had a checklist for life—things I planned to accomplish, things I planned to avoid. Growing up in the house of a rabbi, I wanted to avoid the responsibility of caring for a community because I saw how burdensome it could be. I wanted to avoid proclaiming God to the world because I had long since ceased believing in God. I wanted to avoid spending my life studying faith because I was convinced that it was an illusion, and a dangerous one at that.

I can trace, but still do not fully understand, the way in which life, or God, tossed out my checklist. And now I find myself in love with something beautiful, something mysterious, and something completely unexpected. As with so many things in life, the story begins in loss.



MY JOURNEY TO faith was first a journey *from* faith. Having been raised with belief, I soon came to doubt everything I had been taught. At the age of eleven, certain that God was in His heaven and all was right with the world, nothing seemed to threaten a settled world view. By the time I was twelve, and for a decade after, I had lost that faith, and everything that was once certain seemed foolish and empty.



THIRTY-TWO MINUTES SHATTERED my comfortable world.

A short documentary was released some ten years after the end of World War II. *Night and Fog* contains profoundly disturbing footage of the liberated concentration camps and emphasizes the indifference of the world in the face of the greatest atrocities in history.

I was a twelve-year-old at summer camp when my age group gathered for the movie. The image that shocked me into disbelief was of corpses bulldozed into huge holes in the ground. These were once living human beings, mothers and children and siblings and grandparents; now they were piles of inert flesh, pushed into the unforgiving earth by machine. Spirit suddenly drained from the world. Surely, if there was a God, this would not be permitted. I walked out after seeing that movie onto the green sloping field of the camp and looked down at the lake, convinced there was no God. I was soon to find someone whose words made my conviction many times stronger.

Losing faith is not a discovery that a proposition, once believed, has proved to be false. You may find out that a medicine does not really work or a relative whom you remember fondly is actually mean-spirited. These are nasty shocks to the system, but not like losing one's faith.

"I believe in God" is not the same as "I believe in a good education." Faith is where we stand in the universe, not an idea that is checked off in the truth-or-illusion column. Losing one's faith is stepping off the planet to find oneself spinning in a new orbit.

IN THIS NEW orbit I needed a guide. I had been introduced to evil and a world without God's protection. Life was suddenly murky, a place of night and fog. Human life was an accident and everything that happened was a simple product of blind forces. I longed for help in navigating this new terrain. How does one live in a chaotic world? I found a path in the words of an English philosopher.

Bertrand Russell was a leading figure in twentieth-century philosophy. His unbelief was not gentle, but scathing, witty, and angry. The bitterness of Russell's tone may be partly a result of personal history. Orphaned young, he was reared by his grandmother. She gave him a religious education, successfully evading a provision in his parents' will that he be raised to be agnostic. Despite his grandmother's intervention, Russell more than lived up to his late parents' wishes. He thought religion foolish and hateful.

Russell wrote on religion with the same certainty that he brought to all questions, from the proper raising of children to pacifism. His sentences are marked by a lucid wit and a world view that seems beyond small human prejudice. Sitting in my room in high school, a chessboard on one side of the desk and a shelf of Russell's works on the other, I read him by lamplight hour after hour. His was the voice from Olympus.

Russell cast a spell of clear, calm logic. Here was the genuine scientific world view. "The whole conception of God is a conception derived from ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying they are miserable sinners, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings. We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages. A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past, or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men."

For a high school student, this was a declaration of independence. Here was a place to stand. This was the platform of the rational and the free. I understood (for I was seventeen and understood everything) that some weak creatures would need faith. I knew that belief could buoy a crippled spirit. But I stood, along with my mentor, at the barricade of enlightened thought. Part of the attraction of atheism, especially for the young, is its sheen of bravery.

One day I was sitting on my bunk at summer camp reading Russell when one of the camp rabbis strolled by. He asked me what I was reading, and I said, defiantly and ready for an argument, "Bertrand Russell" (I was *always* read-

ing Bertrand Russell). “Good,” he said, to my amazement. “Why do you say good?” I asked, thinking perhaps he knew nothing of Russell or his views.

“David, how old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Well, I’d rather have you grow out of him than grow into him.”

HE PROVED IN the end to be right. My young mind was in thrall to Russell. Then I read something of his life.

Russell won the Nobel Prize for literature. His autobiography is a masterpiece; it demonstrates all of the wit, clarity, and reason for which his prose is famous. But it also shows, and later biographies of Russell amplify this, that his life was a shambles. Four marriages, proudly proclaimed infidelities, estrangement from his children: This man, who was often courageous in the public sphere and so clear in his writings, was personally a mess. I was young and did not yet know that a person in the pages of a book often bears little relation to the person one meets in the flesh. I began to understand that the clarity Russell preached was not always his. It was better to be Russell’s reader than his wife or child. Could his crystalline doctrine be a nice theory, and a lousy prescription for living? He was not just another man in the street; he was the best example of reason I knew. Yet his life was strewn with the wreckage of those who loved him.

SUDDENLY I FOUND myself in the position of so many young people who come to me today for counseling. If faith is an illusion and reason does not teach one how to live, what is left? I remember the desolation of concluding that there was no reliable guide and no certain path. Religion was self-deception, and Russell proved to me that philosophers made their lives into the same horrid muddle as everyone else.

I made my way to an Ivy League university where the professors thought religion was inane (one told me it was “ok for people who didn’t know how to think”). But my professors never presented themselves as guides to life. Lectures on philosophy or the history of literature entertained all sorts of questions, but never the question Socrates put at the center of his world, “How should one live?” Classes were a way to study how other people answered questions that we were not to ask ourselves.

I traveled, read books, argued late into the night with friends in rooms littered with beer bottles and candy wrappers. I took a cross-country bus and looked out over the Colorado Rockies and wondered if there was an invisible sculpting hand that shaped those magnificent peaks. On the ride I was offered a life fishing in Alaska or farming in Iowa. But I was not looking for an occupation; I was looking for a world that made sense. Day after day I talked to my fellow

travelers and looked out the window. The universe remained mute, or if there was a voice I did not hear it.

IT IS MORE than thirty years since I took that bus ride. In that time, life threw out my checklist and brought me to a place I would not have anticipated: to my current position as a clergyman who leads a congregation, writing and speaking daily about faith. Lately there have been a number of bestselling works proclaiming, even celebrating, atheism. When I read them part of me feels yes, I know this, my soul has been in this place. I recognize it as familiar ground. I have felt anger at God's absence. I too see kind and faithful people suffer. I too see people who claim to love God but act in hateful ways.

Russell proved in the end to be an unexpectedly useful guide. The atheistic philosopher with his corrosive wit taught me to question, constantly and repeatedly. What Russell did not teach was that questions could themselves lead to faith. A brittle faith fears questions; a robust faith welcomes them.

NO QUESTIONS?

A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believes things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so

determines, without knowing any other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy.

Milton, *Areopagitica*

FAITH BEGINS WITH a question, the first question in the Bible. In the garden, God asks Adam, “Where are you?” This is a question addressed to each of us at every instant, at all times.

The Bible answers the first question with the second. The second question in the Bible is asked in the aftermath of murder. When Cain kills Abel, God asks of Cain, “Where is your brother?” We find out where we are, the first question, by discovering whether we care for others, the second question. Cain’s response to God is also, revealingly, a question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Though he intends the answer to be “no,” it is a question that we understand needs to be answered “yes.”

Russell’s mockery was intended to subvert faith and end the discussion. Instead I pursued the questions he raised: Because religion is ancient, must it therefore be outdated? Is it possible for an entity to exist that cannot be seen or measured?

There are questions that open the heart and questions that close it. “Oh yeah?” closes it down—it is not even a true question. “How can I understand this?” is a question. “Will I have the strength to go through this?” is a question,

one of the deepest a human being can ask. “Doubt,” as the theologian Paul Tillich wrote, “isn’t the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.”

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE RELIGIOUS?

PART OF WHAT kept me from God was the assumption that I understood what religion was. To ask, “Am I religious?” presupposes that one understands what it is to feel God and to have faith. In fact, the question, properly asked, is an invitation to a journey, not an answer.

I began to ask myself questions about faith that I have, in subsequent years, asked thousands of lecture audiences:

1. Do you believe only that which is tangible—that which you can see or touch or measure—is real, or do you believe there is an intangible reality?
2. Do you believe that there is a mystery at the heart of the universe that we will never be able to fully understand, not through lack of effort but because it cannot be understood?

The first question is about scientific or philosophical materialism. We know that the world contains much that

we cannot see with the naked eye—cells, atoms, molecules, the ephemeral quarks of modern physics. But all of them are in some way measurable, tangible. They exist in the physical realm. They may be measured through the space they leave behind, as a child holds his hand against a wall and sprays paint so that when he steps back the outline of a hand is visible. Particles may only suggest their presence or even change when we observe them, but still, they exist in the world.

For a religious person, there is an unseeable order, an intangible reality. Obviously such an order cannot be measured. Detection will never be possible, even with more refined instruments. When Khrushchev declared in a speech to the Soviet plenum that cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin flew into space but didn't see God, his was a crude variety of "disproving" God with the instruments of science. The first question for a believer is not "Can the tools of humanity demonstrate the reality of God?" but rather "Is there more than we can ever see?"

The second question uses the word "mystery" in a specific sense. One might understand the world to be a puzzle, not a mystery. A puzzle can be figured out. Our intellect may not be equal to the task, but that is not a statement about the nature of the world, but about our inadequacy. The solution exists and we just cannot get there. Mysteries, as we are using the word here, remain unsolvable; they are beyond the capacity of intellect.

HUMAN BEINGS GET great satisfaction out of solving puzzles. Generally we are taught to think of the world in terms of puzzles and solutions. A detective novel is satisfying because at the end the characters are assembled and what seemed a mystery is solved. Everything becomes clear.

Faith rejects the rational perfectibility of our science. We may think we've got all this figured out, but it does not add up as neatly as a detective novel. From its earliest days, religion has taught that at the heart of everything is not a puzzle but a mystery. We do not throw up our hands and simply confess ignorance. Each of us is charged to add to the collective wisdom. Slowly it dawned on me, however, that making sense of everything is not an obligation or even a possibility. So much of what goes on in the world, so much of what goes on even inside ourselves, is beyond our grasp. Acceptance of mystery is an act not of resignation but humility.

My experience reading Russell made clear that the same people who propose to understand the universe do not understand each other or indeed themselves. The ability to confess to bafflement struck me as a kind of spiritual triumph, a victory of truth over ego. In elementary school one of my favorite teachers used to quote the Talmud to us: "Teach your tongue to say 'I don't know.'"

Clearer and sweeter than Russell's sharp certainty is the example of the poet Robert Browning. Browning, whose verse is famously obscure, was once approached by a woman who asked the meaning of a particular stanza. "Madame," he answered, "when I wrote that only God and I knew what it meant. Now, only God knows."

WHAT IS REAL?

I SEARCHED FOR a way to deepen my questions. The more I understood about faith, the more it seemed to me built on searching as well as finding. The Hebrew Bible is full of warnings against idolatry but has none against atheism. False belief is dangerous, but the art of questioning is important if the questions are honest, persistent, and deep. Faith does not ask "Which medicine will cure this disease?" but "How can I use the experience of illness to help others?" It does not map the orbits of planets but does ask over and over again about the inexplicable twists of the human heart.

Asking questions of another is not only a sign of relationship, it is a means of establishing relationship. Abraham challenges God with a question: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Gen. 18:25). Jesus on the cross also challenges God with a question from the Psalms: "My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1, Matt. 27:46). Each draws closer to God by asking a daring, powerful question.

So long as I asked dismissive questions, faith seemed to me impossible. As life softened some edges and granted some wisdom, I began to ask out of genuine seeking, out of curiosity and not contempt. The very nature of a question opened my eyes to the possibility that what we cannot touch, what we cannot see, may indeed still be real.

QUESTIONS ARE INSUBSTANTIAL. You cannot see a question or touch or measure it. This is true not only of questions; our lives are built on the intangible. Right now you are reading marks on a page. They do not physically enter your brain. Yet in the interaction between the ink blots on the page and your brain, understanding is conveyed. Is the understanding tangible? What moved from the page to your brain? Can you point to it? How much of our lives take place in the elusive spaces of this world—how much is conveyed, like the artistry of the master musician, in the silence between the notes?

Ask a child to point to love. He will point to his heart, or perhaps to you, but there is no “place” for love. It is intangible.

When I learn something new, a scan may locate physiological changes in the brain, but the change is not the

idea. You can map the currents in my brain when I feel a rush of emotion, but is the mapping the same as the feeling? Who really believes that the idea of justice or the meaning of morality is nothing more than a chemical change in the prefrontal cortex?

Consider the story of your life. Where you were born, where you grew up, what your home life was like, how you met the important people in your life. When someone asks you about yourself you make a careful selection from the countless facts of your life to portray a picture of yourself, to tell your story.

Now, where does that story exist? Does it have a physical existence? Although it may, in some sense, correspond to the synapses developed in the brain, does it actually have a *physical* existence? Did the story exist before you told it to someone?

We speak of things that exist “between” people. Is there indeed a “between”? If so, it exists in no physical space. The world is, so to speak, full of nonphysical entities that baffle our understanding. When the Psalmist asks, “Where is the place of God’s glory?” he is wondering if we can speak of a place for that which is not physical. As we are accustomed to acknowledging what we cannot see, the idea of God seems less strange. Nonphysical things are real; they are the stuff of life. Our lives pivot on real things that are non-material: ideas, emotions, imagination, memory, relationships, intuition, suffering, joy, and faith. To believe only in what you can see seems a peculiar form of blindness.

COGNITIVE SCIENTIST DOUGLAS Hofstadter puts it this way:

“Do you believe in voices? How about haircuts? Are there such things? What are they? What, in the language of the physicist, is a hole—not an exotic black hole, but just a hole in a piece of cheese, for instance? Is it a physical thing? What is a symphony? Where in space and time does ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ exist? Is it nothing but some ink trails on some paper in the Library of Congress? Destroy that paper and the anthem would still exist. Latin still *exists* but it is no longer a living language. The language of cavepeople in France no longer exists at all . . . One doesn’t have to believe in ghosts to believe in selves that have an identity that transcends any living body.”

While this is the stuff of freshman philosophy or late-night dorm room debate, it is also the battleground of neuroscience and modern thought. To speak of an idea is to speak of an intangible with tangible effects. To speak of consciousness (perhaps the hottest question in neuroscience) is to wonder how substance, mere matter, becomes aware of itself.

Not only do we live in constant company of the nonphysical, we cannot even adequately describe what *is* physical.

Bertrand Russell begins his classic book *Problems of Philosophy* by demonstrating how hard it is to decide if there is a table in the room, and to describe the table if there is. After examining its texture, color, and shape, Russell writes: “Two very difficult questions at once arise; namely, (1) Is there a real table at all? (2) If so, what sort of object can it be?”

All we know of Russell’s table is what we experience, and our experience differs from that of others and is dependent on where we are standing, what part we touch, how hard we touch it, and on and on. We are the blindfolded men around the elephant, each feeling but a small part of the whole. Some are arrogant enough to believe we can whip off the blindfold and see everything. But since the blindfold is the brain, it is not possible.

As I began to appreciate how much of our world moves in the spaces we cannot see, the possibility of a nonphysical reality, a greater reality, took hold of me. If we, who are creatures with bodies moving in a physical world, are so dependent on things that cannot be seen, did I conclude too quickly that the nonphysical world, a nonphysical God, was an impossible illusion?

Honest people recognize the limitations of their own knowledge. God’s perfection does not extend to God’s creatures.

TWO WAYS TO SEE THE WORLD

INTUITING THE UNSEEN is a gift of perspective. Albert Einstein said there are two ways to see the world: as if everything is a miracle or as if nothing is a miracle. Living with an awareness of the miraculous re-enchants the world. From a flower to a star, it is easy to confuse knowing what a thing is made of with knowing what it is. Significance overflows the physical description; mastering botany is not the same as appreciating beauty. Acknowledging that overflow, what a flower *means* or what a human being *is*, not in chemical composition but in spiritual significance, is seeing everything as a miracle.

I joked with friends that I was going to rabbinical school “on spec.” I needed to understand more about God and about myself. When I asked my brother what he thought of my going to rabbinical school, he said, “It’s a phase.” He knew that Russell’s version of reality still lived in me: that faith was just my emptiness projected on the world; that science disproved the claims of religion; that religion caused the world’s wars; that if only people would get rid of these unsupported beliefs, they would be happier and more prosperous.

I thought I had to surrender my questions, doubts, and intuitions of darkness in order to believe again. Increasingly, I learned that the great spirits of religious traditions do not solve all questions but live *in* the questions, and return to

them again and again, not as a circle returns, but as an ascending spiral comes to the same place, each time at a higher level.

STUDYING AND TEACHING brought me to confront the reality of God in the lives of those I met. An intuition of God's presence can come to us in closeness to another whose spirit touches our own.

I cherish the memory of a remarkable teacher, filled with learning and gentleness, precious to me despite the ridiculous conditions under which we met.

I was a new rabbinical student and in my reading had come across the phrase "noch einmal." I approached Dr. Slomovic, knowing he spoke several languages, and introducing myself, asked him what "noch einmal" meant. "Once again," he answered.

Well, he was old, and probably hard of hearing. So I repeated, a little louder, "What does 'noch einmal' mean?" He said, a bit more emphatically, "Once again."

Poor man, I thought, must be difficult on him to make people repeat themselves all the time. "WHAT DOES 'NOCH EINMAL' MEAN?" I screamed. He looked at me with compassion, and placing his hand on my cheek, said, "Noch einmal' *means* once again."

Sitting in his class, day after day, listening to him weave together stories of his life in the Eastern European home in

which he grew up, listening to legends of the tradition and faith that survived the shocks of the twentieth century, was more powerful than any line of reasoning. Before me was faith as it is lived.

An argument looks different when it vibrates through a living person. Repeatedly in religious circles I came face to face with the force of faith, a faith that is not self-satisfied or closed-minded, but is a strength grounded in humility. Meeting such people reinforced the truth that faith is not an idea but a way to live, not a logical proposition but an outcome of encountering a noble soul. Russell made belief a question of logic; I was learning that it was a question of life.

Increasingly I was less concerned with what God might be than with what faith in God might make of me.