

Reading: from “The Accidental Universe” by Alan Lightman

I will put my cards on the table. I am an atheist myself. I completely endorse the central doctrine of science. And I do not believe in the existence of a Being who lives beyond matter and energy, even if that Being refrains from entering the fray of the physically world. However, I certainly agree that science is not the only avenue for arriving at knowledge, that there are interesting and vital questions beyond the reach of test tubes and equations.

I believe there are things we take on faith, without physical proof and even sometimes without any methodology for proof.... We cannot prove the meaning of our life, or whether life has any meaning at all. For these questions, we can gather evidence and debate, but in the end we cannot arrive at any system of analysis....

Faith, in its broadest sense, is about far more than belief in the existence of God or the disregard of scientific evidence. Faith is the willingness to give ourselves over, at times, to things we do not fully understand. Faith is the belief in things larger than ourselves. Faith is the ability to honor stillness at some moments and at others to ride the passion and exuberance that is the artistic impulse, the flight of the imagination, the full engagement with this strange and shimmering world.

“What’s the Point?”

A Sermon Delivered on March 31, 2019

By

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I was at a dinner party a while ago, and I found myself sitting next to a woman I had not met before. So we went through the usual getting-to-know-you pleasantries – what’s your name, where do you live, what do you do. Now let me tell you, I’ve been a Unitarian Universalist minister for thirty six years. I like being a minister. It has given me a wonderful life, doing fulfilling and satisfying work. But in social situations like that, I always rather dread being asked what I do. That was particularly the case in the UK, where even going to church is generally regarded as a sign of mental deficiency, let alone being a minister. I dread the question because invariably I get one of three reactions. The first is that I can see the instant look of fear in their eyes, and the quick checking for the nearest exit as they apparently think I am about to get all evangelical on them, and then for the rest of the evening they apologise if they happen to say anything even remotely irreverent, or goodness, a swear word, given that as a parson I obviously must have such delicate sensibilities. The second response is that they spend the rest of the evening interrogating me, as if there is no other subject I could possibly be interested in or be able to talk about. But the third response, oh the third response is by far the worst. That is when they spend the rest of the evening telling me all the reasons why they do not go to church. Let me assure you, whether or not someone goes to church is entirely a matter for them, I really don’t care, but they seem to feel the need to justify

why they don't, with all the most specious rationalisations you could think of, all of which I have heard a hundred times before.

This particular woman fell firmly into that third category. She proceeded to tell me, at great length, about her disdain for church and her reasons for not going. Churches are full of hypocrites, she said. It is not true, by the way. Churches are not full of hypocrites. There is plenty of room for more. Religion is bunk, she said, nothing but superstition and nonsense, and think of the wars started because of it, blah, blah, blah. I tried to keep my head down. I tried to pretend I was intensely interested in my Brussels sprouts. I was a guest after all, my mother brought me up right, I know it is not good manners to start an argument at someone else's dinner party, but then this woman said that anyway, going to church does not make you a better person.

It was then that I kind of snapped. I turned on her. That is exactly where you are wrong, I said. Going to church does make me a better person, and that is the whole point. I go to church in order to be a better person. Not a better person than you, or a better person than anyone else, but a better person than the person I would be if I did not go to church. How could it do otherwise? Going to church reminds me of values the world would otherwise make me forget. Going to church puts me in the company of the wisdom of humanity's great spiritual teachers and exemplars. Going to church means I learn the stories of everyday folk who have overcome great adversity with serenity and equanimity through the steadfastness of their faith. Going to church means I hear poetry and music which touch my soul, which comfort and inspire my sometimes tremulous and fainting heart. Going to church does not make me a better person than anyone else. It makes me a better person that I would otherwise be. It makes me a person who is trying to pay attention to the business of being faithful in life, faithful to life, holding myself accountable to that which is greater than myself. I go to church because I want to be a person of faith.

Faith. What is faith? The other day I came across a definition of faith I had not encountered before. But before I tell you this definition, let me ask you a question. How would you define faith? If you worked at the Oxford English Dictionary and were responsible for words beginning with the letter F, what would you say about faith? I was once at a dinner party – and yes, my life does consist of nothing but dinner parties – where another guest did work at the Oxford English Dictionary, and he was an expert in words beginning with the letter P.

How would you define faith as an objective phenomenon in human life? And perhaps more interestingly, how would you describe faith as a subjective phenomenon in your life? What is the basis, the reality, the significance of faith to you?

Well, the definition I recently encountered was that Faith is believing things you know are not true. Believing things you know are not true. A rather cynical definition, it has to be said, but then Mark Twain was not known for being entirely without criticism of the many foibles of organised religion. Twain's rationale was the if you know something is

true, then believing it does not require faith. Therefore, faith is believing what you know is not true.

One of the subjects I had to study for my theology degree was The Development of Christian Doctrine up to the year 461AD. I know, wild and crazy times, right? Those first few hundred years were very important in the life of the Christian Church as it tried to make sense of itself, but it got side-tracked into the mistaken idea that being a Christian meant believing the right things. It is the only major world religion which is based on the primacy of belief. None of the others are. Not Islam or Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism. All of them are about practising the life of faith. But early on Christianity got stuck in the idea that it was all about believing the right things. This was largely thanks to the efforts of Roman Emperor Constantine, who for entirely political reasons converted to Christianity and wanted to impose his own hegemony over the empire. Hence the Council of Nicaea which came up with the Nicene Creed, recited weekly to this day. Note something very significant about the Nicene Creed. It is all about believing things about Jesus. Things which you know can't be true. It says nothing about what Jesus taught, or how you might live as a follower of Jesus. Very cunning, that Constantine.

So the early church fathers tried to formulate it all into a coherent system of beliefs, separate from but consistent with the Judaism from which it had been hewn, and compatible with the predominantly Pagan gentile world within which it had taken root. What could it all have meant, for Jesus to have been the Saviour and yet to have died so ignominiously, to have been both god and man. It was a great intellectual challenge, a puzzle over which endlessly to fret.

Those early Christians kept holding Councils, not just at Nicaea but for the next century, at which Bishops from throughout the Christian world would assemble to argue for weeks and weeks and weeks about the tiniest detail of doctrine. They would meet in smoky back rooms, do deals, cajole and threaten, and finally they would hold a vote. And those on the losing side who did not immediately repent the error of their ways were then banished, imprisoned or executed. I think we should introduce that into our UU congregational meetings. It should certainly liven things up, don't you think?

Anyway, it was Tertullian, in the early part of the third century, who wrote a vast tome on the doctrine of the trinity, trying to make sense of how three could be one and one could be three, and each was separate but they were both the same, and though Jesus was the son of God he was as old as God even though ordinarily a father does come before the son. Thousands of pages, going around and around and around. You can see why studying it gave me high blood pressure. Heady, exciting stuff. Poor old Tertullian got himself into a terrible tangle, and the more he tried to explain it, the more of a tangle he got himself into. Until finally, in exasperation, he threw up his hands and declared, "It is absurd! That is why I believe it."

I guess some things haven't changed. When I look critically at some of the details of what some churches expect you to believe, I too throw up my hands and exclaim, "It is absurd!" The difference is, that is why I don't believe it.

But, for all that some things that some people believe as articles of their faith might, in my entirely non-judgmental opinion, be completely unreasonable, having faith itself is not unreasonable. Not only is having faith not unreasonable, having faith is essential. Without faith, all is lost.

The story is told by a tribe in West Africa of the Sky Maiden. It happened once that the people of the tribe noticed that their cows were not giving as much milk as usual. They could not understand why this should be, so one young man volunteered to stay up all night to see what might be happening. After several hours of waiting in the darkness, he saw something extraordinary. A maiden of astonishing beauty came down from the sky on a moonbeam. She carried a large pail, and she milked the cows one by one, filling her pail and then climbing back up the moonbeam to the sky. The young man could not believe what he had just seen, so he lay in wait again the following night and, sure enough, the maiden appeared again to milk the cows and then return up the moonbeam to the sky. On the third night he set a trap, and when she came down again he sprang the trap and caught her.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

She explained that she was a Sky Maiden, a member of a tribe which lived in the sky and had no food of their own. It was her job to come to earth at night to find food. She pleaded with him to let her go, but he was so enchanted by her great beauty that he demanded that she marry him.

"I will marry you," she said, "but first you must let me go back to my home for three days. Then I promise I will return and be your wife."

The man agreed, and three days later, true to her word, she returned, carrying a large box.

"I will marry you and I will make you very happy," she told him, "but you must promise never to look inside the box."

They were very happy together. Then one day, when his wife was out, the man was overcome with curiosity, and he opened the box. There was nothing in it. As soon as she returned, with the intuition only a wife can have about her husband, she knew what he had done.

"Yes, I opened the box" he confessed, "but I don't understand why you forbade me from looking inside an empty box."

"I cannot be your wife any more" she said.

"Why?" the man demanded. "What is so terrible about looking inside an empty box?"

“I am not leaving you because you looked inside the box,” she replied. “I was sure that one day you would. I am leaving you because you said it was empty. It was not empty. It was full of sky. When I went home for that last time, I filled the box with everything that was most precious to me to remind me of where I came from. The box contained the light and the air and the smells of my home in the sky. How can I live with you, when everything that is most precious to me, is mere emptiness to you?”

Having faith is not about what you believe. Having faith is fundamentally about how you see the world. Is the world mere emptiness, in spite of all there is of beauty and charm and miracle and wonder and delight? Or is the world precious, in spite of all there is of pain and anguish and bitterness and ugliness? Having faith is ultimately about how you see the world.

For the past two years and more, most of us have had our faith severely challenged. Our faith in the wisdom and discernment of many of our fellow citizens; our faith in the reliability of this country’s democratic traditions and institutions; indeed our faith in the future. These have not been easy times; they threaten to get even worse. How do we retain our common faith, in spite of all there is of pain and anguish and bitterness and ugliness?

When he was fifty three years old, Ed Guiton, an Englishman, went on a rock climbing holiday in Bolivia. He was a very fit man. He had always been very active in strenuous outdoor sports. One evening, after a satisfying but tiring day of climbing, he was back in his hotel room when a combination of high altitude and low blood pressure made him do something he had never done before. He fainted. As he fell, he hit his head on the bedpost, and broke his neck. A freak, meaningless accident, and now Ed Guiton is a quadriplegic.

My God, how would you cope if such a thing happened to you? How would you cope? The fact is, every single one of us, all of the time, is just one second away from the possibility that our safe, predictable, contented lives will be wrenched irredeemably from us and twisted into some unimaginable new shape. An accident. A diagnosis. An act of unprovoked evil or malice by another person. How would you cope? How would you adjust the way you see the world so that you could continue to live in it, so that the world had become not mere emptiness but remained full of things precious to you.

In an essay about his experience, Guiton says this.

“There is still immense pain and frustration. But I am heartened, if by nothing else, then by a change of direction in my dreams. There is one recurring dream, in which I’ve got two walking sticks and I’m hobbling painfully down the road, jerking about a bit, and people are walking past and I can hear them muttering “Poor old sod”. And I’m saying, “No! you don’t realise. This is me, getting better!”

Being a person of faith, ultimately, is knowing that, in spite of everything which might appear as evidence to the contrary, in spite of the feeling sometimes that we are strangers and pilgrims in an inhospitable land, in spite of whatever misfortune or malady or malice might befall us, in spite of it all, life is good, life is precious, it does make sense, it is worth while, and though we might not know what it is, there is meaning and purpose to it. Sometimes people construct elaborate theologies and observe strict rituals and write endless tomes to remind and reassure themselves of that basic article of faith. And sometimes people just feel it in their bones.

There is the story of the Jews, prisoners in one of the Nazi horror camps. One day they decided to put God on trial for allowing the terrible suffering that was all around them. One was the prosecutor and the other counsel for the defence, the rest were the jury. After each side had put their case in this mock trial, the jury decided the case for the prosecution was overwhelming. There was no God, and if there was, such a God was not worthy of their worship. And just as they delivered their verdict, one of them noticed that the sun was setting.

“Look” he said, “the sun is setting. It is the start of the Sabbath.” And together they all turned, and prayed.

Having faith is what enables you, in spite of everything, still to turn to your God and pray. It is the way you see the world. And coming to church is a way of being reminded that there is this way to see the world, it is to be in the company of all who have seen the world and everything in it as wondrous and holy, and have centred their lives on that vision, a vision that sustains them through whatever might have been their fortune or otherwise.

And if there are people out there, who look at us and say in their condescending way, “Poor deluded sods”, we can reply, “No, don’t you see, this is us, and we are getting better!”