

The Most Real Things
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Francis P. Church had one day to write his famous editorial to Virginia O'Hanlon. Church was a newspaper editor, and to the best of my knowledge, he had no children of his own. Yet in less than a day he penned a classic of philosophical hope suitable for children and adults. His father was a famous Baptist minister. I like to imagine that sitting through endless childhood Sunday services created a well of philosophical and theological inspiration.

There isn't much written about Francis Pharcellus Church. He was not even credited with being the writer of this editorial until his death nine years later. Even his obituary had more to say about his famous father and his two better-known journalist brothers than it did about him. If we are to take his editorial to Virginia as inspiration, I don't think it would have mattered to him, because "the most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see [or read] . . . nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world."

In penning and publishing these words Church made a choice. As a man who witnessed and reported on the horrors of the Civil War he knew the human potential for cruelty and suffering. As a man who worked at a major New York paper he was well aware of the Gilded Age of robber barons, impoverished immigrants and a growing American culture of frivolous consumerism. And yet, Church chose to *see* something else, hope.

"Yes, Virginia" is one of the most reprinted editorials ever written. Yet it would hardly stand up under the scrutiny of a skeptical age, let alone a discussion group of Unitarian Universalists at First Church. Church writes about fairies, poetry, romance, Santa Claus. Santa Claus?!? He doesn't even have his own partially missing scriptural text in an ancient tongue.

Everyone believes something. You believe in God, you don't believe in God. You believe in something. Perhaps you believe that if something can go wrong it will go wrong. Perhaps you believe that joy will be yours in the morning. You believe in love, or humanity, or yourself, or progress, or the apocalypse. You believe in something. And we believe things based on faith, some faith in something. The most important sustaining things we believe can not be proven with fact. How do you prove love, commitment, truth, power, safety, happiness, beauty? There is no equation for these things (not even a diamond that is "forever"). And sometimes the facts, especially the scientific facts that we believe in, are ultimately proven wrong.

Does your belief include hope? Church's did. So did the early Christians. The early Christians came up with the crazy, illogical, unscientific idea that a little baby was both God and love incarnate. That "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten

son.” That’s an unquantifiable idea, which is why Christianity has thrived for two thousand years (and I mean this in the best possible way).

More than want hope we need hope. Winter is a metaphor for a season of human existence, that season when you can’t see the sun, when you don’t know where to go, when there is no comfort, no shelter, no safety, not enough to get you through the day. Each of us here tonight has had this season; perhaps you are having it now. Like winter, it comes and goes and comes again. Winter is our dark night of the soul when we see through the mirror darkly and don’t know which way to turn. When we feel alone.

When Church sat down to reply to Virginia he spoke not just to her and her little friends, but to himself and other adults, and perhaps the adults needed and still need the hope most of all. When children we still see behind the veil into the eternal light that makes tolerable this existence. As adults we don’t see much behind the veil anymore.

There is something about an educated man, a man of power and position choosing to write about fairies, fancy, and baby’s rattles and combining it with transcendent prose,

All minds Virginia, whether they be men’s or children’s, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Whether than being overwhelmed and depressed by the scope of this world, Church chose to imagine a world of unseeable hope that was real and abiding. The magic of “Yes, Virginia” is that Church chose to find these things in a world he knew was also complex and dangerous. And he chose to name them the most real things in this world.

Christmas Eve is all about choice and your reality this evening is about choice. Yes, it’s cold and as a matter of fact it is dark. And I am going to bet that at least one, if not two things have already gone wrong in your holiday plans. Yesterday I saw a woman crying at Aglamesis’s while eating her ice cream. It happens.

But in the trajectory of this evening, will you behold a star even if the sky is cloudy? Will you find a moment of wonder in an old year dying and a new one waiting to be born? There are a lot of crazy things out there, and it is just as crazy to lack hope as it is to have hope. What will you make live on this night? And what will you make live tomorrow and next year?

What is the editorial you will choose to write about your life? What is your answer to the Virginia wondering within your heart? We do have little minds and we live in a skeptical age. On nights like this I draw comfort from the smallness of my knowledge, and the enormity of the world which enables me to say “Yes, Sharon, there is a Santa Claus. He exists certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist. Maybe *he* is actually a woman in three inch platform heels, but *he* is out there, real and abiding in my life, and I hope, in yours. Merry Christmas.