

## **“I Believe...Thoughts From the Sunnier Side of Doubt”**

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I was born and raised a Roman Catholic. I was a true believer...I avidly participated in all of the devotions and rituals. I loved the pomp and pageantry—the Gregorian chant—the incense—the candles—the whole bit...for the first thirty-five years of my life.

Gradually, I began to realize that the church, as I understood it, was preaching a gospel that, in reality, was promoting, no doubt unwittingly, the idea that the institution of the church itself is the divinity. How else was one to understand the dictums: “Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation?” ... and: “Let your conscience be your guide, but only as it is informed by and in accordance with church doctrine.” These ideas did not harmonize with the gospel that the first Christian preached so eloquently.

Sadly, I began to realize that I had fallen in love with, literally, a man-made institution. I felt betrayed, not maliciously, but nevertheless betrayed.

I found myself slowly drifting away from the church of my fathers.... After awhile, perhaps a few years, and after much painful soul searching, I found myself beginning to ponder the idea of atheism. During this emotional period, I was able to re-adjust my way of thinking regarding the concepts of the finite and the infinite. Using my powers of rationalization, I was actually able to have some comfort in atheism. After all, it relieved me of not having to try and fathom the depths of the ultimate mystery. How does anything exist? Now, I could go on with my life, but without the burden of having to search for meaning and purpose.

During this somewhat blissful interlude, I began to notice that something was missing in my life ... my vigor and enthusiasm was subdued... my zest for life had subsided. I did not dream anymore... there was nothing more to hope for beyond what I already had.

My atheism had slammed the door shut on all those beautiful dreams that I used to have... scenes that portrayed what life and love would be like if only the impossible were to be made possible... made possible through the agency of this unknowable, unseen, un-nameable, ineffable field of energy that is so obviously inherent and vital in nature.

Atheism had put severe limitations on my most cherished aspirations.

Something from within the depths of my psyche urged me to begin wondering again... to dream.

I began to have a more intimate relationship with all of nature. I began to take notice—life was indeed beautiful—I began to realize that nature had intended our lives to be enjoyed and savored. Life was not just a time to be tolerated...it was not just a time when humankind occupies itself with concentrating on and nurturing an insatiable desire to accumulate gratuitous wealth, power and prestige.

Rather, it is the time when humankind might husband a fledgling consciousness into its psyche that is more aware of and in tune with the plight of its suffering throughout the world.

It is a time when humankind has the opportunity to become conscious of the fact that it is a unit and that when one part of it bleeds the rest of it bleeds with it.

It is the time when humankind can begin to give meaning and purpose to its existence by stemming the flow of its own blood.

It is the time when humankind can free up, can nurture, can blossom its innate propensity to love.

It is a time when humankind could begin to recognize and to develop a more intimate relationship with the source of its being... a relationship that it could feel... could experience.

It is the time when humankind could come to terms with its own mortality... a time when it could try to accept and to make sense of a nature that ordains that it must die.

Just what is the significance of death... does it have any significance?

I remember my five-year-old grandson Little John, who was dying of neuroblastoma, asking me, "What does it mean to die?" And later I heard him, in a subtle, pleading tone, bargaining, as it were, with his uncle Paul, whom he loved dearly, explaining how wonderful it would be if he could grow up...he would be Paul's best buddy...Little John died a few weeks later...that was twenty-three years ago...

The love that permeated Little John and that permeates all of us, who had the good fortune to be near him during his brief life, still enlivens our hearts. It is real...it is eternal...my family and I would not be who we are without it. My faith allows me to reason and to hope that he also is aware and that he is thrilled with this amazing phenomenon of reciprocating love.

Of all the animals, it seems like we humans are the only ones that are aware that we will die. There must be a reason.

I believe the awareness...that death is inevitable, is the mental ingredient that affects all of our living moments, especially our relationships.

This awareness of death adds richness to our lives...we appreciate everything more...every relationship more because we know there will come a time, sooner or later, when significant changes will occur which will alter our aspect of life...radically.

It seems to me that of all the events and evolutions of time and space, none is more intriguing than the passage of death. It could well be that death, which seems to be the ultimate evil to us at times, is really the condition or event, which makes everything so precious.

I can imagine death as being the yeast that causes the dough of love to rise in preparation for being baked in the oven of life.

I hope to be able to approach death in a dignified manner...to accept it with complete trust and with a firm belief and hope that Mother Nature, having delighted me on my brief sojourn with so much love, will not abandon me just at the moment when the grand and festive party-of-a-lifetime

is reaching its most significant moments. I'm not quite sure what Dylan Thomas had in mind when he wrote his poem, but I see no reason to rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

I have come to, not only believe, but to feel that death is a natural transition in an order of existence that is precisely as it should be.

Now what that order is, I can only begin to wonder. This is where my imagination comes in producing all sorts of thoughts surrounding this phenomenon of existence. One thought that never seems to leave me is the assumption that nothing can ever come from nothing. This includes everything in the material and spiritual dimension of my life. My senses inform me that I exist and that the material with which I am made of comes from the same elements that sustain and make up this universe. I like that thought.

Scientists tell us that time and space all started with the Big Bang. That all sounds well and good but still it is not satisfying to the inquisitive side of my nature. My nature also has a part that reasons that certain elements...certain substances need to exist and be present, on the scene, and to combine before any kind of an explosion can occur. Question: Where did this combination of materials come from that caused this big explosion?

There must have been birth and order in the first instant otherwise evolution could not have begun. From where and how so this birthing and order? Since I believe that nothing can come from nothing, I reason there must be some mysterious and ineffable field of ever-evolving energy that always existed...is unbounded and is infinite.

Now, ordinary common sense should compel me to accept the fact that a statement like that is absurd.

If nothing can come from nothing... where would this field of energy come from?

Common sense or no, I believe in this idea...I believe in the impossible. This belief allows me to live a zestful life full of faith and hope that a loving humanity can and will evolve into a more meaningful existence. If that is a fantasy... there is joy in it.

On nothing more than the strength of my faith, I believe that the essence of humankind is imbued with this evolving field of energy and has been from before the first instant and that it will continue to evolve beyond time and space.

If believing in this field of energy makes me more conscious and aware of my essential oneness with all that is...of the essential brotherhood and sisterhood of every human being on earth, then I want to believe and be immersed in this field of energy.

John Burroughs, a noted American naturalist and prolific writer, who lived from 1837 to 1921, had this to say:

“A man is not saved by the truth of things he believes, but by the truth of his belief—its sincerity, its harmony with his character. The absurdities of the popular religions do not matter; what matters are the lukewarm belief, the empty forms, and the shallow conceptions of life and duty. We are prone to think that if the creed is false, the religion is false. Religion is an emotion, an inspiration, a feeling of the Infinite and may have its root in any creed or in no creed.”

While we humans can never know the essence of the goddess, Mother Nature, we can take solace and delight in the awareness of how good she is to us. She quenches our thirst with water...she

fills our lungs with air, she delights our ears with music and conversation...she dazzles our eyes with color and form...she allows us to taste the succulent feasts from the hearth...she provides us with olfactory organs that enable us to enjoy many splendid fragrances...she lifts our sometimes weary spirits with the soothing qualities of the fermented grape...and as if that were not enough, she enables us to experience a moment of infinite bliss in the sexual expression of love shared with our beloved.

I sense there are far more reasons to believe in the impossible dream... to believe that existence can have meaning and purpose...than there are not to believe.

Diamuid O'Murchu, in his book titled Catching Up With Jesus, states: "...One of the most revolutionary and baffling features of quantum theory is what proponents call the collapse of the wave function. Broadly, it goes like this. The quantum visionary works primarily with a world of unlimited possibilities and believes that reality—at any level—can be honored only when all possibilities are entertained."

Can only be honored when all possibilities are entertained...I like that. What would the world be like without our imagination...without our ability to dream...to search...to create?

Science has afforded visionaries and poets the wherewithal to dream...to imagine "outside the box"...they are no longer limited in their vision by time and space.

I reason that a life lived with a firm belief and hope that anything is possible is a life lived more in harmony with the human psyche that naturally wants to exist ...to explore...to discover...that abhors chains, fences and closed doors. I think it trumps a life of negativity...where the door of dreamland has been welded shut.

If I were to allow my rational and deterministic brain to dominate, I would have to resign myself to a life of mediocrity... a life without the excitement of anticipation...a life without hope for anything better... and I would have to lament with Peggy Lee as she sings "Is That All There Is?" Personally, I find no joy in that attitude.

I do believe that we hobble ourselves in the pursuit of truth if we insist that our intuitions pertaining to the essence of reality have to be intellectually and rationally comprehensible before we even consider them. For example, science informs me that all matter and energy will eventually disintegrate into chaos, but my intuition leads me to ponder the idea that a loving personhood can be eternal because it naturally yearns to be and because it transcends matter and time and is therefore immune to the process of degradation.

When we rip the blindfolds from our intellectual and rational eyes, we open an infinite number of heretofore-unimaginable chapters in our book of life.

If, at death, all personhood ceases to exist, neither the believer nor the non-believer will ever know whether the one had missed out on something or whether the other had believed in and lived a joyous life filled with fantasy.

There is a school of philosophy that tries to anesthetize the sting of death by advancing the thought that the memory of us and the worth and meaning that we bring into our world will forever live in the genes of our posterity.

I'll admit, that is a nice thought, but I'm not satisfied...it does not satisfy my deep yearning to be part and parcel of all that is...and to be aware of it.

It seems that nature has deemed it expedient for humankind never to be satisfied...there must be a reason.

I cannot believe that nature...that has been so providential heretofore, is a sadistic teaser...a teaser that throughout our lives dangles the lure of satisfaction...always just beyond our reach...perpetuating in us the constant state of yearning.

It is my faith and hope that nature will, at death, tear asunder the veil that hides the great secret from us...will open the vault that contains the key to all knowledge and understanding and that we together, as a community of lovers, will, with complete satisfaction, bask in the sun of eternal amazement at our experience of being one with all that is...where we will no longer wonder...we will know.

Fantasy or not, the love that Little John, my grandson, shared with us has never really left us. The life of Little John is a manifestation of the unconditional love emanating from this great spirit...it permeates all that is. The essence of Little John is now, and will forevermore, revel in being his Uncle Paul's best buddy.

I believe all things are possible, including the impossible. After all, existence is impossible to my rational way of thinking.

It is all a matter of choice...whether to leave ourselves open to the possibility of realizing all of our aspirations or to close the door to our imagination... give up all hope... and in so doing; resign ourselves to the tedious task of patiently waiting for the music of life to stop so that we can, perhaps sadly, recede into everlasting nothingness. We can only hope to choose whichever makes us happier...whichever adds richness and zest to our lives. Personally, like Tennyson, I choose to stake my claim on the sunnier side of doubt.

We can take comfort in the wisdom of William Cullen Bryant, embodied in his poem "Thanatopsis", wherein he suggests that we... "So live, that when thy summons comes to join the innumerable caravan, which moves to that mysterious realm, where each shall take his chamber in the silent halls of death, thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night, scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."