

PLAYING GOD

I was in a conversation recently with a person who said to me, “You always sound so certain of your faith. I have a lot of doubts that you do not seem to have. It must be wonderful to feel sure that God exists and cares – that God wants us to live in special ways and do certain things like tithe, study the Bible, pray, love our neighbors, and all the rest. It must be wonderful to do all those things if you really believe. Only, I have a lot of trouble believing it in the first place. So for me, a lot of it doesn’t make much sense.”

It was only three or four days earlier that I had heard approximately the same comment from another person. It got me to thinking. It has been a long time since I addressed issues from so early on the Path. After seeing God at work in my life and in the lives of so many other people, all the brave ways in which I had doubted God’s existence gradually lost their luster. Every time any of us walked the Way or even took a new step on it, we were blessed in some way. I still remember how to doubt the Way. But mostly, those doubts just sit off in a corner somewhere, collecting dust. New doubts are more interesting. I do not doubt God; I doubt the church. It still seems to me that we are a faint image of what we are intended to be. God seems very real to me. God is Great and is doing great! But I wonder about myself. Sometimes I do not seem very real.

Some of *you* seem pretty real to me. I watch you becoming real persons. It is the most astounding and important and wonderful thing in the world. I can feel Jesus just jumping with glee every time you take a new step and get more real. Sometimes even *I* take a new step, and I can feel His joy then too. So it’s true that my doubts have changed. I think Jesus is the only true person who ever lived on earth. The rest of us are Pinocchios trying to figure out how to be real, and maybe learning slowly that the WAY is to follow Jesus.

In any case, these two conversations have reminded me of some of the early doubts. I used to be more plagued by them. There is no way to come onto the Path except by going through them. And I wonder: Am I still able to be at all helpful to someone who is wrestling with such doubts? I do not know, but I would like to try. I certainly think a person with such doubts should feel very welcome in a place like this.

Anybody taking steps on the Path, wherever they are on it, should feel at home here. So I want to go way back up the road this morning and say just a few things about dealing with the early doubts.

First, I suppose, I better dust off my own doubts, so you know I have them. They never go away, you know. Categorically, faith is never a matter of proof. Faith is always a choice, a risk, a leap. We weigh the evidence, but all the facts are never in – not in this world. Faith decides to bet life one way instead of another. So intellectually, the doubts are never banished once and for all. After enough experience, they recede into the corner and get neglected. But I can still go find them if I have to.

I am a little rusty at this, so bear with me. Start imagining big cities. Millions upon teeming millions of people. Do not just stay in Seattle. Think of Calcutta, Hong Kong, Mexico City, London, and hundreds of lesser cities all over the globe. How many single individuals are at this very moment eking out a living, each one with hope and despair and aspirations? And does each individual think, “My own life is important”? Do you really think some god cares about all these mites, any more than we care about all the ants that crawl on the banks of the parking lot?

How can all the tragedies keep happening to all these people – in prisons, in hospitals, in mental institutions, in slums (and in some cities, those are the lucky ones; at least they can get off the street) – how can all these tragedies keep happening if some almighty god cares?

Sometimes you can look up into the sky at night and it does not feel warm and beautiful. It just seems cold and endless and far away. What does any of it matter? The stars go nova, and if there are any worlds nearby, they are totally destroyed in seconds. Is our corner of space any different?

Even on our own planet, we notice that only a tiny portion of its billions of years has had anything to do with humankind. If we evolved from primitive animals only a few million years ago, why do we suddenly conclude that it was some god’s design from the beginning, or that we have some special destiny beyond this accidental moment?

And now that we have developed world-killing weapons and our history shows that we always end up using our weapons, how much longer can it be before we blow our world to extinction before its time?

Is it not inevitable that some of our species will do that, no matter how hard or fervently some of the rest of us work and pray to prevent it? And do you think some god will step forward to prevent it?

What is all this self-centered, wishful thinking about God or love or meaning or some life beyond this one? Should we not grow up, put away our childish fantasies, see life as it really is, make the best of it while we can, and stop deluding ourselves with complex, irrational religions? Being lonely and afraid are no reasons to invent gods or build churches.

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Well, I cannot do it real justice in so short a time, especially being out of practice as I am. But you can probably tell that under the dust, such thoughts have crossed my mind. There are lots more, there in the corner. I tried not to add any new ones to your pile. I might be able to. I was a good doubter when I was young. It is doubting, after all, that drives us to seminary. Doubts plague us until we have to drop our lives and go seek answers. Then if we keep meeting God along the way, pretty soon we forget why we came and find ourselves busy with other things.

I want to tell you three things about doubting that I hope will be helpful. The first is: Never be afraid of your doubts. If you worship God and your God is real, then obviously God is not going to be afraid of your questions. If God designed your mind to be so questioning, then God does not fear your doubts, and neither should you. I am trying to say that much damage is added to doubting by those who feel guilty for having the doubts in the first place. Failure to doubt is no mark of saintliness. It signifies either a lack of intelligence or a fear-frozen mind. Check the lives of any of the saints. The greater the saint, the more doubts they have wrestled with.

On top of this, we must add that most breakthroughs to new understanding come through doubting. The Holy Spirit loves our doubts, if those get us back into dialogue; get us thinking again; get us uncomfortable enough and stretching enough so that we can get some new insight. In His time, Jesus was the only Jew in Israel who dared to doubt that Moses was the final word, or whether the traditions were truly honoring what Moses had intended. Jesus doubted absolutely everything (with respect). Otherwise, He could never have grown open enough to let God do so many absolutely new things with Him.

Never fear your doubts. They are leading you to new insight. Just remember that you are body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Doubts are only one portion of the intellect part of your mind. Keep a little perspective. Pay attention, but do not take it too seriously. You can only doubt up to the capacity of your own mind. That's impressive to you and to me, but it is not exactly absolute intelligence. There is a lot we cannot comprehend, even when we do wake up and pay attention. God is not counting on our intelligence alone. That's no insult; it's just comforting.

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The second thing is this: Be fair. Eat the whole meal. Most of the time when we doubt, we cheat. We take a tiny piece of a doubt, take it out of context, and then cherish that doubt, turning it over and over in our minds and “enjoying” it without noticing or dealing with all the implications.

If you begin to believe in Jesus as the Christ, you end up with a whole constellation of beliefs: God, the Holy Spirit, the church, eternal life, the whole vast array of values and teachings and principles that Jesus represents – until, as we say, you have a whole new way of thinking and feeling ... until a whole new WAY of Life is involved. You cannot just believe in Jesus as the Son of God, for instance, then turn around and claim that there is no God. One thing is connected to another, and all of them hang together and affect everything you do or think about.

Well, doubts are the same way. They come in constellations. Only, we cheat. We try to pick one good-sounding doubt out of the pile, without noticing all the others that are connected and come with it. For instance, I may have suffered a cruel blow, lost a friend or a relative, or lost a job. If I am new in the faith and the hurt is too great, one release is to get angry toward God. We do not reason it out at such a time. It is more emotional pain than it is rational doubt. And often it can be healthy and healing to blame God, if we go to God with our pain and anger. But sometimes, after the grief subsides, we still keep the doubt. A person ends up saying God does not exist or God is no damn good, because God did not save the loved one.

Only, we cheat. We keep the rest of our convictions about life just as they were before. We forget that all of them are based on a belief in God. And then we pretend that all we threw out was our belief in God's existence. But if there is no God, there is no meaning either.

It is an accidental universe. There is no plan. What we do does not matter. There are no morals because there is no authority. Groups or civilizations may get together and make up rules, but no rule is better or worse than any other. There is no standard to measure by unless there is an authority, and all concepts of authority trace back to God. If there is no God, it's just a matter of who can collect the most opinions. The opinions have no validity except for a temporary condition of "might makes right."

When you doubt, do not cheat! Eat the whole meal. If you want to stay with your doubts, then change your life to match. There is no love; there is only self-interest. There is no nobility, no future to hope in, nothing to live or strive for beyond keeping comfortable and amused while you wait out the accidental time you have stumbled into.

It is not fair to entertain just one tiny doubt while you sit in the comfort of all the rest of the benefits of faith. If your doubts start to trouble you, then get serious. Eat the whole meal. Compare the full program of doubt with the full program of faith. Otherwise we are cheating. The trouble with cheating in this game is that we end up in limbo – halfway in between, where nothing ever comes clear.

People talk about hypocrisy within the church! And they are right, of course. We do not live up to what we claim to believe. But the hypocrisy outside the church makes *us* look like amateurs. I have never met an atheist or an agnostic yet who did not still talk about and live for truth or excellence or love or beauty, and usually some combination of all of them. That's just flat-out dishonest. Where do they think those things come from? The very concepts and possibilities are grounded on and presume the existence of God.

Do not cheat! Eat the whole meal. It will help you a lot when you struggle with your doubts.

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Third, and finally, I want to urge you to play God. You never thought you would hear me say this, but I do not mean it the way you think. Sometimes we use the phrase "playing God" when we are talking about power games, pride, and people who try to be in control of their own lives and everybody else's. That's not what I am suggesting.

This third suggestion, though, is my favorite. If it helps you as much as it does me, I will be pleased that I preached this sermon, and I hope God will be too.

PLAYING GOD

Playing God is a mental exercise where you pretend you are in God's shoes, and you redesign this place the way you think it ought to be. It's a lot of work, but a lot of fun too. Frequently, it's more entertaining than even the best television program.

This wonderful game is really best played with paper and pen, so you cannot forget what a wonderful "creator" you would have made. You put down on paper the things you would have done – the ways you would change things – if you were God.

Then, after you list the changes, you have to meditate for a while on all the repercussions that would come from those changes. You have all done it at times; I am urging you to do it a lot, and seriously. Do you remember some of the simple ones? When we were children, most of us said, "If I were God, there would not be any pain." And then we slowly began to realize how horrible that would be: People dying needlessly everywhere because they had no warning of the damage. It would be like a perpetual and absolute leprosy. Of course, we never could have evolved or survived under such circumstances. So our first brilliant improvement as creators was not so good.

Next, we usually wiped out death. You think we have a population problem now? Then wipe out birth. Terrific, that just eliminated all of us. And so it goes. And that's only for openers.

See if you can follow this one: God has designed us so we only have to endure so much pain. Beyond that level, we black out. You cannot increase the pain beyond that level. A human will go unconscious. Now, what if God's design reduced that threshold even slightly? We would die easier. You see that? It would take less to put us out of commission. Things we survive and recover from now would be fatal if God reduced our suffering one iota. And what if God made us hardier, able to endure and survive greater damage than we can now? Then our suffering would increase dramatically. We would be much harder to kill, but the price would be horrendous pain. Do you really think you can improve the ratio? Do you really think you are more merciful, more rational, more practical than God? You will suspect so and assume it – until you learn to "play God" seriously, and well.

Playing God is a wonderful game to play with your doubts. Try and try and try to come up with one single improvement you could make. "Well," you might say, "that's only because we are used to things

the way they are. We have never known a different reality, so naturally we will conclude that things must be this way.” Hey, that did not stop you from complaining an hour ago! Why think of that now, when I am giving you this terrific game to play that can really help you?

Try not to wipe us all out. Do not cancel our free will, so we have no more capacity to love. But “play God” long and hard and well. You will find out why bad things happen to good people a lot clearer than the book told it. You will even find out why good things happen to bad people, and maybe even why Jesus said, “*No one is good but God alone.*”

The psalmist tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made – that God has designed it all with intricate caring, down to the smallest detail, and all of it is intertwining in patterns and purposes far beyond our comprehension. Do you believe that? Faith trusts that it is so. In any case:

Do not fear your doubts.

Do not cheat. Eat the whole meal.

Play God.

If you are having trouble believing, get good at doubting. God is happy to pick you up at either end. Just do not hang out in the middle.