

REVELATIONS FROM THE SANCTUARY FLOOR

March 2010

I'm friends with a few men and women of the cloth, but I fancied you best suited to answer this question for a number of reasons, most especially for the fact that you've been able to marry your intellectual pursuits with your faith and (apparently) not find them at loggerheads. My question is this: Why does God allow really, really bad things to happen to good people? I know it's probably the most rudimentary of questions, the kind of thing a kindergartner might ask at Sunday School. But it's been plaguing me for the better part of a year now. And now, with the situation in Haiti reaching an ever more shrill pitch, I'm reminded again.

I'm not talking about "bad things" like inconveniences. I'm talking big, bad, horrible stuff: people being set on fire on purpose; crib death; human trafficking; animal cruelty; addiction; excruciating, wasting disease. That kind of thing.

I mean, the easy answer is to just throw your hands in the air, and say we're all just nasty, brutish, and short. And that we either have a deist clockmaker-type God on our hands, who just wound us up and let us go, come what may. Or there's no God at all, and our hell is of our own making and doing.

Which, aside from being defeatist, just isn't satisfactory to me. Because I keep finding myself assaulted by these pesky remnants of God — the tenderest gestures; the most minute of beauties; the baffling coincidences; the perfect timing. These things are (almost always) writ small for me. But they are there. And they're persistent. They won't be dismissed easily.

The closest I've come to any resolution here is to quit trying to resolve it in the first place. And just to try and be okay with the fact that I don't understand, and probably never will. Resignation is a better plan than shaking one's fist at the heavens all the time, I guess. But it's hardly satisfying.

Cheers, Michelle

Michelle, I have been asked this question a thousand times but never as eloquently. I've been asked this question so often because it is at the heart of the matter. Christian theology even has a name for the question, which I suspect you might already know: theodicy.

A thousand answers have been proposed to it, including a handful of sound ones. None are emotionally satisfying though.

Also, I'm mindful that this question is usually posed from the prompting of someone's personal suffering, so I'll tread gingerly, knowing that the propositions *really* do not satisfy when you find your own mother is ill, or you have miscarried, or your sister has been battered, or your home has been lost.

Having stated such prolegomena, let's start with the loggerheads of reason and faith—as that is often a work around for this question. My thesis: both reason and faith are limited as bases for life. I think of e.e. cummings who wrote about scientists (who, in poetry, make a handy synecdoche for proponents of reason), "Beware of heartless them/given a scalpel they'd dissect a kiss/or sold a reason, undream a dream." Zealous proponents of reason often seek to reduce everything to fit a closed system of thinking. Principle A: God is all good. Principle B: God is all powerful. If principles A and B are true, explain the evidence we see around us: the world suffers. Either the evidence is wrong or the first principles are wrong and God is either not all good or all powerful. Of course, nothing is ever as clear as $A+B=C$, except math. Certainly nothing that deals with human feeling or thinking or our relationships to others. Consider a rewriting of the formula. Principle A: A mother loves her son. Principle B: A son loves his mother. Explain the evidence we see around us: a mother and son will fight. Does it mean the first principles aren't sound? No, just that human relationships are more complicated than formulas.

Faith, too, has severe limitations. At its most severe, the faithful surrenders all mediation of her life to another. Her perceptions, her experiences, her prescribed way of life are all created or interpreted by another. This, of course, is dangerous beyond measure, and I simply point you to any number of international headlines to make my point for me.

If neither of these is sufficient on their own, we only have two possible responses: 1) a mixture of the two or 2) an altogether different path. Since I haven't seen a workable proposition to number two, I'll focus on the mixture.

How can there be people who take the enchantment of life seriously without being muddleheaded at the same time? And how does this address the question of suffering?

The standard answer of progressive Christians is to assert the mystery of God, to claim along with the big H that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by our philosophies, realities of life that are beyond our comprehension. This is an answer that is attractive to me regarding the first question (balancing faith and reason) and repulsive regarding the second (the question of evil). As such, it seems only to work contextually for me. And as such, it might be true, but I'll try to articulate something with greater integrity for all contexts.

So, let me give you a word instead of mystery: trust. Trust is the heart of faith. Faith, by most western, doctrine driven accounts is about belief, but I think that is terribly misguided. Faith, essentially, is about trust. Do I trust God?

If so, you have—mostly, I think— solved the problem of reason and faith. If faith is not about propositional belief, it is a different order of thinking than reason and provides much less of a direct conflict. Depending on your preferences, it either burnishes or provides the foundation for questions of reason. Now, an atheist would rightly counter that it is not *reasonable* to believe in that for which you have no evidence—but as you may have already noticed, experiments with the numinous carry their own types of evidence. Write me a formula for mystic communion. Write me a proof for the peace that passes understanding. It can't be done. It's outside of what reason finds reasonable... and thank God for that. It is its own prodding, its own 'tender gestures, minute beauties'. Can you trust that your assaults are from a benevolent deity? Can you further trust that they are intended to provide you comfort? Insight? Wisdom? Compassion? Beauty? Love? This is the crux of faith for me. Not some ridiculous notion of eternal rewards.

So, in a rare display of faith, let's say trust in God wins out and becomes our default orientation to life. Where does that leave this question of evil or suffering?

Here it is, get ready, my great wisdom to share with you that you will find emotionally unsatisfying: we must trust God. What!?! That's a ridiculous answer. Okay, let me finish. Usually, when this answer is given, you hear this: we must trust God that something good will come from this; or we must trust that God has some purpose in this; or some such nonsense like this. This is how I would finish this sentence: we must trust God that God has made the right choices about human agency and finitude.

Because, ultimately, I think most of suffering is attached to these two realities. Humans have agency. Humans are finite.

I'll take them in reverse order: everyone dies. My body will slowly break down and I will die. I cannot escape this, regardless of how many salads I eat and how much I hit the treadmill. Not only will it break down eventually, but I'm also prone to illness and chronic disease. Consider how much suffering this alone causes: death, Alzheimer's, cancer, 'a persistent rash'(!). Is this fundamentally unfair? The cynic in me wonders how much of this is anthropocentric. Because this is true for every living thing: cats, milkcows, peonies, lobsters, yams, redwoods, what-have-you— but rarely do we lament this fact.

Finitude, in a word, sucks. But it is a reality. I wonder what it would look like if creation were not finite. This is unanswerable, of course, but would we suffer less? Would life be as meaningful? Would we ever have children? Ultimately, if God made this world, then God chose finitude. Can I trust that is the right decision?

Human agency: This is where you've got the really ugly stuff. Slavery, rape, murder, economic oppression, molestation, the cold apathy of the wealthy, the petty violence of the poor, the denial of medicines, the willful spread of AIDs in Africa, the human bomb, female genital mutilation, bride burnings, and on and on and on, the stuff that makes you cry into your pillow at night. None of this needs to happen. All of this happens because we do it ourselves.

Of course, none of this would happen if God didn't allow us agency. So, can I trust that God make the right decision on that one? When I look at most of the things on that list, most of them are primarily a denial of another human's agency. Would I ask the same of God to fix it? Would I ask God to be a hanging judge for the perpetrators of these crimes? (I probably would, but violence begets violence, and ultimately, in the truest revelation of the character of God we've ever seen, Jesus walked away from a violent solution, even at the cost of violence to himself.) Can I trust that human agency is the right decision?

If so, then I will always see and experience suffering.

Which leads us to the question of how we live with suffering. Do we come to this conclusion: "that we either have a deist clockmaker-type God on our hands, who just wound us up and let us go, come what may. Or there's no God at all, and our hell is of our own making and doing."? I think there's another alternative. Nicely, I think it's the story of Christianity: incarnation. The story of Jesus is a story of God being present with us, not to prevent the suffering that happens in our world, or to reward or punish us for our parts in it, but to be present with us fully during it. This is why the cross is so important to Christians (whether progressive or conservative, it is critical) because the cross tells me God renders himself under these same conditions. God is also willing to be captive to human agency and finitude (resurrection is a counter to finitude—not a cancellation). God is acquainted with great suffering and, like all people I know who have known deep suffering, never turns away from us in ours. Which ultimately means that instead of perfection, God offers us presence. And I have come to trust that this is a much better offer. That's why I have faith.

Suffering doesn't disappate because I have faith. Regardless of how we are oriented to it, it is always with us. In fact, when we are best oriented to it, it hurts us more, the inhumanity of the world just sits with us, and because we love people, it's easy to be splintered in pain. But, I have found that when this suffering is present and that God is present in it, it might hurt more, but it bothers me less. Indeed, when God is in it, those writ small miracles you talk about, resound even more and the experience of love that can be found amidst all that gross pain, is a wonder, a deep, cavernous, yawning wonder that re-enchants the world, day after day. This is what is meant by grace, and it is good.

May you know grace, Michelle. May we all know grace.

Peace,

Casey

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