

FCCS Sept 22, 2019
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“It’s a Mystery to Me”

They say being a preacher is like being perpetually pregnant, you give birth on Sunday and wake up Monday to find you are pregnant again. Some weeks that is an exhausting prospect, but this past week I felt invigorated.

Might have been the new people joining church last Sunday, or the wonderful gathering after services where we explored new ways of doing congregational life together. Could have been Randy and Linda’s house blessing, celebrating their new home two years after the fires.

I suspect though, more than any of those amazing things, it was the rain that came on Sunday; first rain of the season. This happens every year, right about this time, everything gets so dry that it feels like it is all about to break. The water we put on our plants evaporates before the hose is off, put lotion on and your skin cackles, *don’t waste your time* and then... it rains. Not too much at first, just enough to make the bone-dry blonde grasses relax and send out a scent like maple syrup. The prickly oak leaves, I curse for sticking to my stalking feet, become fairy-boats filled with droplets of possibility.

On Monday morning at the Sutton Reservoir, the fog was still rising off the hills surrounding the Developmental Center, the air was crisp, and the light on the water was magical.

Everything, all of my surroundings, appeared to be rejoicing; from the chocolate labs out for swim, to the elegant white egret fishing for breakfast. The fringe like watercress looked like it was straight out of a painting by Monet.

I took it all in; a tiny, sublime slice of the Cosmos- mine to behold, mine to adore, mine to steward.

It’s a big word, Cosmos! It evokes more than we can possibly comprehend. Carl Sagan said, “ it is all that is or was or ever will be/ the greatest of mysteries.”

Carl Sagan; a brilliant man, a wonderer of the world and beyond, and an avowed atheist. People ask his widow, if at the end, Carl changed his mind about God? Anne Druyan says that did not.

“Carl faced his death with unflagging courage and never sought refuge in illusions. The tragedy was that we knew we would never see each other again. I don't ever expect to be reunited with Carl. But, the great thing is that when we were together, for nearly twenty years, we lived with a vivid appreciation of how brief and precious life is. We never trivialized the meaning of death by pretending it was anything other than a final parting.

Every single moment that we were alive and we were together was miraculous-not miraculous in the sense of inexplicable or supernatural. We knew we were beneficiaries of chance. That pure chance could be so generous and so kind. That we could find each other, that we could be together for twenty years. That is something which sustains me. I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him. We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos, and that was wonderful.”

Carl Sagan was no less a great or trustworthy man for having not believed in God, to some that made him even more credible. What Sagan embraced was the mystery of the Cosmos, the truth beyond all knowing. And just as Carl Sagan was not diminished by not believing in God, neither was God diminished by Carl Sagan's lack of belief. Aren't we talking about the same thing, the **all in all**, that which is both close at hand and just beyond reach?

For me the question is not whether we believe in God, what is important is whether believing in God affects the way we engage the world. Not believing in an afterlife helped Carl and Ann embrace the fragility and impermanence of their lives together. Ironically, belief in God can have the exact same effect.

When I was a junior in High School I read Albert Camus', "The Stranger." It was my first exposure to concept of Existentialism. Camus' central character didn't require a belief in God to live a life that embraced compassion and a zest for living.

That was so confusing to me; I had been raised in the Christian church. I had been taught that right living had everything to do with my relationship to God. I had been taught to care for others because that's what Jesus did.

It had never occurred to me that someone could be those things, do those things without a belief in God; enter cognitive dissonance.

There was a boy in my English class that was always super nice to me, his name was Robin. He had terribly pock marked skin, and was painfully shy. His best friend Rick was handsome and played on the varsity football team. He had a beautiful girlfriend. The previous year they had been the homecoming king and queen.

One autumn afternoon after football practice Rick put a revolver inside a feather pillow and put end to his life, three months later Robin did the same.

I struggled with the ideas of God of Existentialism mightily during that time. I wondered if believing in God made any difference. I wondered what a life without God would be like. I wondered how God could let this happen to my friend. Those were big questions.

At some point those weren't my questions any more- the God I knew as a child, a young adult, and now as a grown woman remained constant, try as my questions might to erase that God. In the end it was not the answers that brought me comfort, but the fact that there was room for my questions.

Albert Einstien put it this way:

The human mind, no matter how highly trained, cannot grasp the universe. We are in the position of a little child, entering a huge library whose walls are covered to the ceiling with books in many different tongues. The child knows that someone must have written those books. It does not know who or how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child notes a definite plan in the arrangement of the books, a mysterious order, which it does not comprehend, but only dimly suspects. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of the human mind, even the greatest and most cultured, toward God. We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws, but we understand the laws only dimly. Our limited minds cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations."

Fortunately for most of us, faith has little to do with certainty and more to do with trust. The Labrador is no less a dog without anyone being able to identify his pedigree, nor is the heron any less a bird for my not having been named that; everything has its place in the order of things and that is a truth worth trusting. Naming Jesus as Jesus and God as God is only as useful as it helps to order one's life.

If being a follower of Jesus helps to prioritize actions of justice and peace then Christianity is of value.

If believing that all things flow to and from a Source of life and love and believing so helps us attune our hearts to wonder, then being believers is of worth.

But belief alone neither redeems or sustain life, only life can do that.

Embrace that which has been given to you, embrace all that is beyond our knowing and consider trusting that which is beyond explanation.

My only word of advice is to follow the connectedness of all things- for surely therein lies the answers we seek.

Amen