

## WHAT IS THE END OF FAITH?

This is a story from two years back. It was fall and I was out on the trail near my house walking my dogs. One of them, the big one, Sweet Pea, took off ahead of us to scatter a clutch of turkeys and chicks, which took flight and, I thought, easily avoided her. I laughed out loud at the sight of them flapping into the trees and her scooting back and forth, barking at them.

But a few yards further down the trail, after she'd returned to us, she and another dog, Merlin, were at the side of the path. They were worrying an immature tom whose neck and head had been caught under a branch. I chased them off and lifted the branch. But it was too late. The tom gave a few feeble shrugs of his wing and closed and opened his eyes. I curled my hand around his head—it was warm and I felt his labored breathing on my palm—and then I twisted his neck once and it cracked and his eyes snapped shut.

Today, I retain the memory of the way the leaves looked next to him—a bright, cheery orange—and the way the ferns covered most of his body. The wet-sack weight of his corpse that threatened to tear his neck from his torso.

This wasn't the first nor the last time I've had to kill an animal, and not even the first or last I've had to kill one with my hands. But it is representative of a time when I was, even a little bit, responsible in some way for it having needing killing in the first place. Those were my dogs who had forced it into that position and who were worrying it. I'm aware killing a turkey this way is illegal. I am also aware my option was to replace the branch, allowing the weight of it to perhaps suffocate the tom, slowly, flopping under the great weight of his pinned head. He might have lasted, I don't know, an hour, perhaps two. He might have lasted until nightfall, when falling temperatures would surely have killed him.

In his book *The End of Faith* author Sam Harris has this to say about what people believe: "Which beliefs one takes to be foundational will dictate what seems reasonable at any given moment. When the members of the 'Heaven's Gate' cult failed to spot the spacecraft they knew must be trailing the comet Hale-Bopp, they returned the \$4000 telescope they had bought for this purpose, believing it to be defective."

Our mental landscape orders our experiential landscape. Marshall Applewhite and his followers created an environment in which their calculations, their carefully observed phenomena, their scriptural readings, couldn't possibly be wrong. The instrument, the expensive telescope, was the problem. For a tech-savvy organization which took rapidly to the opportunities the Internet and Web posed for both the distribution of information and drawing converts, this was a remarkable admission. The

final surviving member of the group, Chuck Humphrey, whose attempt at suicide was unsuccessful, finally did succeed by the use of carbon monoxide and a sealed tent almost a year later in February, 1998. But prior to that, he staged an informational video presentation at which there was Heaven's Gate merchandise for sale. One participant, Janja Lulich of the Cult Recovery and Resource Center, noted the difference between previous cults and new, technologically knowledgeable cults: "We never had Jonestown mousepads," she said.

What do these two anecdotes—mine with the dogs and turkey, Heaven's Gate and their telescope—have in common? Sam Harris again: (This is a very long quote so please stick with me.)

Where faith really pays its dividends...is in the conviction that the future will be better than the past, or at least not worse. Consider the celebrated opinion of Julian of Norwich...who distilled the message of the Gospels in the memorable sentence 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' The allure of most religious doctrines is nothing more sublime or inscrutable than this: Things will turn out well in the end. Faith is offered as a means by which the truth of this proposition can be savored in the present and secured in the future. It is, I think, indisputable that the actual existence of such a mechanism, the fact that uttering a few words and eating a cracker is an effective means of redemption, the certainty that god is watching, listening, and waiting to bestow his blessings upon one and all—in short, the literal correspondence of doctrine with reality itself—is of sole importance to the faithful.

"...We believe most of what we believe about the world because others have told us to. Reliance upon the authority of others, and upon the testimony of ordinary people, is the stuff of which world-visions are made. In fact, the more educated we become, the more our beliefs come to us at second hand. A person who believes only those propositions for which he can provide full sensory or theoretical justification will know almost nothing about the world; that is, if he is not swiftly killed by his own ignorance. How do you know that falling from a great height is hazardous to your health? Unless you have witnessed someone die this way, you have adopted this belief on the authority of others. [Lower animals, it will be noted, are not in the habit of wandering off cliffs.] This is not a problem. Life is too short, and the world too complex, for any of us to go it alone in epistemological terms. We are ever reliant on the intelligence and accuracy, if not the kindness, of strangers.

Both my immediate, gut decision to break the neck of the turkey and the more reasoned, more deliberated decision of Marshall Applewhite and his compatriots to ingest their lethal Phenobarbital-and-vodka cocktails relied on a single, similar premise: That it was better this way, whatever the “it” is. In my case, better for the turkey, in the case of the Heaven’s Gate disciples, better for them.

Harris continues: “This does not suggest, however, that all forms of authority are valid; nor does it suggest that even the best authorities will always prove reliable. There are good arguments and bad ones, precise observations and imprecise ones; and each of us has to be the final judge of whether or not it is reasonable to adopt a given belief about the world.”

I may have been wrong. That turkey might have been acting as if he were dying so I would leave him in peace, much the same way as a possum, and if I had and turned around quickly a few yards further down the trail, I might have seen him leap to his feet and scurry off into the underbrush. And for all I know Marshall Applewhite and Chuck Humphrey and all the others succeeded in shedding their containers, which is how they referred to their bodies, and are currently undergoing the ride of their lives or afterlives with aliens ferrying them to the further reaches of Alpha Centauri.

Is it only a difference in kind? Is my faith that the tom’s end would not be pleasant except by the end I prescribed any different from Marshall Applewhite’s faith that shedding their earthly containers was the only way for his followers to join their cosmic escort?

This has been the hardest sermon to get down that I’ve ever written and I’m not entirely certain why. It isn’t the subject matter, with which I’m comfortable, or with the

admission I made to you at the opening, again with which I'm comfortable. But I've been trying to pin it down and I think the problem I've had—why I couldn't sit down to write this until yesterday, the latest I have ever composed a sermon—lies in the fact that to answer the above question I've needed to ask myself two questions with which I'm not comfortable. What is faith? And do I have faith?

Harris again because, frankly, it is easier to let him do the thinking and for me to report it. Again, it's a long quote.

Nothing is more sacred than the facts. No one, therefore, should win any points in our discourse for deluding himself. The litmus test for reasonableness should be obvious: anyone who wants to know how the world is, whether in physical or spiritual terms, will be open to new evidence. We should take comfort in the fact that people tend to conform themselves to this principle whenever they are obliged to...

It is as yet undetermined what it means to be human, because every facet of our culture—and even our biology itself—remains open to innovation and insight... We will therefore want to understand those processes—biochemical, behavioral, ethical, political, economic, and spiritual—that account for this difference. We do not have anything like a final understanding of such processes, but we know enough to rule out many false misunderstandings... We do not know what awaits each of us after death, but we know that we will die. Clearly, it must be possible to live ethically—with a genuine concern for the happiness of other sentient beings—without presuming to know things about which we are patently ignorant. Consider it: every person you have ever met, every person you will pass in the street today, is going to die. Living long enough, each will suffer the loss of his friends and family. All are going to lose everything they love in this world. Why would one want to be anything but kind to them in the meantime?

For years I've availed myself many times to the heaps of magazines the Menomonie Library has withdrawn from circulation and put out for the community to take. Two of my favorites are the old issues of *The Nation* and *Mother Jones*. It's something of a kick to read those old issues from 2003 and 2004 with their articles and their ads which start with lines like, "After Bush is thrown out in the next election..." The writers of these little exploding time capsules were quite certain in their faith, as Julian of Norwich would have it, that, now that the electorate has seen everything that

Bush is capable of and the immense detriment his administration has been to our society, the scales will fall from its eyes and “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Both a kick and pretty damn sad because that wasn’t what happened at all. The war in Iraq. Abu Ghraib. A return to domestic spying and a president who says, “If the president does it, it isn’t illegal.” Extraordinary renditions and secret prisons. Just a few days ago, the CIA bombed a party in Afghanistan at which it thought members of Al Qaeda were present, and whether they were or not no one’s really certain, but we are certain that 18 people were killed and that, at most, 4 of them may have been a legitimate target. Those are lousy odds and to base an operation on them is wrong. Over 2100 US soldiers dead, an average of almost 6 killed each day, and no one knows how many Iraqi civilians, although the British medical journal The Lancet estimates the number tops 100,000. I often said in those innocent, pre-war days, “things have to get worse before they get better.” I had faith that things would get better and faith that things could get worse. I still have faith things could get worse. I’m not so certain I have faith that things will get better.

But before I ask you to join me in drinking the Kool-Aid, let me try to come up with a definition of faith. A colloquialism my mother is fond of is that faith is what you hold onto when everything else tells you it isn’t so. That’s lovely, but taken too far it suggests that you should trust that, even though Kenneth Lay has bankrupted and looted Enron, you should hire him to run the cash register in your little store because, well, you looked into his eyes and seen the good in him. Or it might be that faith is a belief in the unseen because it fulfills some need in you, the so-called God-sized hole. Again, lovely, but taken too far suggests that with enough faith you can do anything, even pray your

cancer away. Ask any former member of the Church of Christ, Scientist, a mother perhaps who prayed nonstop over the body of her feverish child as his heart withered and slowed and finally stopped, how well that works.

The truth is I don't really know what a definition of faith could be. And to my second question—do I have faith?—I'd have to give equally conflicted answers. Do I have faith in God's mercy? I suppose I do, but I also have faith that nine times out of ten, the cute little bunny that ventures out into the field where I can see him and feel a part of the grandiosity of nature will be snatched moments later by a hawk or a weasel. Do I have faith that there is something waiting for me after I die? I suppose I do, but I am equally certain that what that something is is the liquefaction of my body to its component elements and the delicious meal I will provide some grubs. Beyond that, well, I just don't know. There's the sticking point: faith apparently requires giving up the need to know.

A final quote from Harris, who calls faith itself, "surely the devil's masterpiece:" "Man is manifestly not the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own, is a mystery absolute, and the only miracle worthy of the name. The consciousness that animates us is itself central to this mystery and the ground for any experience we might wish to call 'spiritual.' No myths need be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstance. No personal God need be worshipped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish."

It is while in the throes of all this that I had a conversation yesterday with Jill, who is my liaison to the congregation, and in the course of that she pointed out something to me. Despite my best intentions, despite all my planning and manipulation and influence—all for the good, you know—this congregation will continue on its own or it will not. “You have to have faith,” she said, not knowing then what I was thinking about, and by that she meant faith in this congregation. Faith, she meant, in all of you.

Faith, ultimately, isn't something you have in some ineffable higher being, although you can have that too, or in your own goodness, although that obviously helps as well, but in something which is itself bigger than you and more than you. Call it community, call it humanity, and call it the interdependent web of all existence. The US will go on, perhaps not in a way that I'd like it to, and looking nothing like I grew up with, but it will, nonetheless, go on. Faith is what binds us. It is the connective tissue between my actions and your thoughts, between my words and your deeds.

Because ultimately the fact is there is a difference between my act with the turkey and the act of Marshall Applewhite and it isn't a matter of degree but of kind. My act was for someone else, while the members of Heaven's Gate acted for themselves. This then, ultimately, is a part of my definition of faith: that the things we do in selfless ways that benefit other beings—people, animals, rocks, bacteria—are more likely to have a better result than the things we do that benefit only ourselves.

But I can't count on that alone. What about all those times when no good deed goes unpunished? The carjacking victim who wrests the weapon from his assailant only to be gunned down by the cops? The good woman who works hard all her life, amasses a fortune, and leaves it all to charity, only to have her children bankrupt the organization by

forcing it to defend its claim in court? Man isn't the measure of all things and if we use only him as the yardstick, as feeble and weak and, yes, human as he is, we are bound to be disappointed.

The end of faith finally, the result of faith, isn't that all shall be well but that all shall go on. George Carlin has a routine in which he talks about the immense arrogance people display when they complain about "the end of the world as they know it." Because despite what we do with it, all the poisons, all the destruction, the world will go on. It may look more like the Moon or more like Jupiter, big hunks of deadness rolling around in the sky, but it will nonetheless go on. And it may eventually come around to finding the right conditions again to meld the elements to make water and then plants and then animal life. Or it may not. But I have faith.