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DAVID BROOKS

Opinion Columnist

The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be

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By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

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When I was an agnostic, I thought faith was primarily about belief. I thought it was about the belief that God exists and that I should extend and knowing that the stories in the Bible were true. I looked for books and arguments that would convince me that God was either real or not real.

Some people are spiritual but not religious; during that time, you could say I was religious but not spiritual. I grew up in a Jewish home where we observed some rituals and traditions but didn't seem to have much sense of spiritual reality. I was filled with pleasant, not convicting, I lived through decades of Jewish adulthood (bashert, mazel tov, bais ol Jewish schools) but all that proximity still didn't make me a believer.

When faith finally tipped into my life it didn't come through intellectual persuasion. It came through a series of transformative experiences. These are the scattered moments of awe and wonder that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time. Looking back over the decades, I remember rare transcendent moments as the feel of a mountain in New England at dawn, of Charlotte Simmons's face in the light of a Dartmouth dormitory, of a baby's skin by the month. In these moments, you have a sense that you are in the presence of something overwhelming, mysterious. Time stops and you are at least there, but is enveloped by an enormous love.

The art historian Kenneth Clark, who was not religious, had one of these experiences at an Italian church. "I can only say that for a few minutes my whole being was troubled by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before."

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Then there was the man who had a similar experience, when the psychologist William James quoted in his book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" a Frenchman who experienced "a quiet joy and exaltation overpowered. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being borne upwards on the wings of music. It was a religious state."

In Isaiah 54 we find experiences didn't mover questions or settle anything, on the contrary, they opened up vaster mysteries. They revealed wider dimensions of existence than I had ever imagined and aroused a desire to be opened up still further. Wonder and awe don't answer questions, they open up a vaster universe, a vaster something and a vaster life of wonder-inducing.

In his book "My Bright Prison," the poet Christian Wiman writes, "Religion is not about little mysteries, clinging to the shards of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so frequent that perhaps you learn how to live and even acknowledge their existence afterward."

I don't think I have had many of these transcendent moments. This time they were not mere passing experiences but illuminations — events that tell us about the meaning of life and change the way we see the world. One morning in April, I was in a crowded subway car underneath 23rd Street and Eighth Avenue in New York (truly one of the ugliest places on earth) and I was feeling a little sad about my cat, and I had this shimmering awareness that all the people in it had souls. Each of them had some piece of themselves that had to win, cater, wrapt or shape but that gave them infinite value. The souls around me that day seemed not inert but yearning — some yearning for suffering or sharpening, some were determination and crying out.

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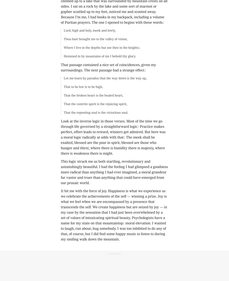
These thoughts helped me think more deeply about my job. I had approached journalism with the vague sense that the people we cover have a basic dignity by virtue of being human. But seeing them as creatures with souls, as animals with a spark of the divine, helps me see people in all their majesty, seeing their contradictions and their struggles to be more than they seemed at first and their depictions and made me feel a stronger moral and eternal human tendency to serve things up. I hope I see each person at greater height and depth.



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So that subway car it occurred to me that if people had souls, maybe there was a soul-giver. Once you accept that there is a spiritual element to each person, it is a short leap to the idea that there is a spiritual element to the universe as a whole. As C.S. Lewis put it, "Creatures are not merely created by God but are sustained, moment by moment, by the constant flow into them of his creative energy."

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Then in late June that year I was hiking alone in Colorado when I climbed up to a lake that was surrounded by mountain crests on all sides. I sat on a rock by the lake and some sort of marvelous or gopher scuttled up to my feet, stared me and scooted away. Because I'm an, I had books in my backpack, including a volume of Parkian prayers. The one I opened to happen to with these words:

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
Thou hast brought us to the valley of vision,
Where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;
Surrounded by the emanations of my Creator's glory.

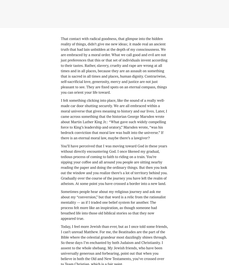
That passage contained a nice set of coincidences, given my surroundings. The next passage had a strange effect:

Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up,
That to be low is to be high,
That the broken heart is the healed heart,
That the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
That the repenting soul is the virtuous soul.

Look at the inverse logic in these verses. Most of the time we go through life governed by a straight-forward logic. Practice makes perfect, other leads to reward, sinners get admired. But here was a sound logic radically at odds with that. The meek shall be exalted, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, the last shall be first. The humility there is mighty, where there is weakness there is might.

This logic struck me as both startling, revolutionary and astonishingly beautiful. I had the feeling I had glimpsed a goodness more radical than anything I had ever imagined, a moral grandeur like Vartec and Grace that anything that could have emerged from our grossness.

I felt that at the force of joy. Happiness is what we experience as we celebrate the achievements of the self — winning a prize, for is what we feel when we are encompassed by a presence that transcends the self. We create happiness but are aroused by joy — in my case by the sensation that I had just been overwhelmed by a presence that was more powerful than I. Happiness is a feeling that leaves me my state on that mountaintop: mental elevation. I wanted to laugh, not shout, but nowadays I was too inhibited to do any of that, of course, but I did find some happy music to listen to during my sinking walk down the mountain.



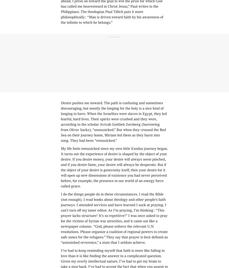
That contact with radical goodness, that glimpse into the hidden reality of things, didn't give me new ideas, it made real an ancient idea that I had been taught but had never felt as a reality that I am embraced by a moral order. What we call good and evil are not just preferences that this or that set of individuals invent according to their tastes. Rather, slavery, cruelty and rape are wrong at all times and in all places, because they are an assault on something that is eternal. Love, compassion, kindness, self-sacrifice, self-sacrificial love, generosity, mercy and justice are not just pleasant to see. They are fixed specs on an eternal compass, things you can return your life toward.

I felt something clicking into place, like the sound of a really well-made door closing securely and firmly. I felt that I was being pulled toward a moral order that is rooted in history and our lives. Later I came across something that the historian George Marsden wrote about Martin Luther King Jr. "What gave such widely compelling force to King's leadership and oratory" Marsden wrote, "was his ability to connect the ideals of the Bible with the aspirations of his people in an eternal moral law, maybe there's a moral law.

You'd have perceived that I was moving toward God in these years without directly encountering God. I would have felt pulled, without pieces of coming to faith to ruling on a train. You're traveling in a direction and you don't know why, you don't know reading the paper and doing the ordinary things. But then you look out the window and you realize there's a lot of territory behind you. Gradually over the course of the journey you have left the realm of atheism. At some point you have crossed a border into a new land.

Sometimes people have about our religious journey and ask me about my "conversion," but that word is a critic from the rationalist world. It implies that a single intellectual argument or a single process felt were like an inspiration, as though someone had breathed life into those old biblical stories so that they now appeared true.

Today, I feel more Jewish than ever, but as I once told some friends, I feel more Jewish than ever because I feel Christian. I feel that the Bible where the colonial grandeur must dazzlingly shine through. So these days I'm enchanted by both Judaism and Christianity. I assume to the whole shebang. My Jewish friends, who have been universally generous and forbearing, point out that when you combine Judaism and Christianity, Christianity, you've crossed over to Doom Christian, which is a bad, poor.



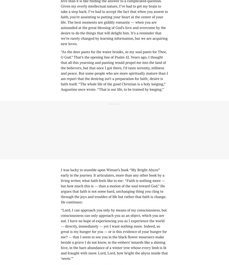
It's been 11 years since that first epiphany. I've spent those years trying to grow in understanding and faith. The Bible I read can be confusingly anarchic but man! What did Jesus mean when he said, "I did not come to bring peace but a sword?"

The most surprising thing I've learned since then is that "faith" is the wrong word for faith as I understand it. The word "faith" implies possession of something, whereas I experience faith as a process of being possessed by something. Faith is not a thing you grasp. For me faith is more about longing and wondering than knowing and possessing.

Let me try to tease this out. Think of the drives that propel you through life. Some are caused by a void. You get hungry when your stomach is empty, you get tired when you haven't slept, you get sexual when drives arise and feel the forward pulled forward by its goodness. Sometimes I feel pulled by a gateway that seems grand and far off, a divine hammered light heaves over the far horizon.

Sometimes I feel pulled by concrete moments of holy delight that I witness right in front of my face — the sight of a table laughing with friends, the sight of a mother holding her child, the sight of a sunset, the sight of a Catholic priest at a poor church looking radiantly to heaven as he holds the bread of Christ above his head. I've found that the most compelling proofs of God's love come in moments of radical delight or radical goodness — in the example of those who have lived a life of radical love and self-sacrificial love.

Some days this longing for God feels like loneliness, separation from the thing desired. But mostly it feels like a venture toward something undeniably worth wanting, some ultimate concern. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward that which is ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call" has called me heavenward for Christ Jesus." Paul writes in the Philippians. The theologian Paul Tillich puts it more philosophically: "Man is driven toward faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs."



Desire pushes one onward. The path is confusing and sometimes discouraging, but mostly the longing for the holy is a nice kind of pain. Sometimes I feel it in my stomach, sometimes I feel it in my healthy hard-boiled heart. These spirits were created and they work according to the scholar Arnold Gerhard Zerdenay (borrowing from Oliver Sacks), "unmoulded." But when they crossed the Red Sea on their journey home, Moses led them on they burst into song. They had been "remoulded."

My life feels remoulded since my own little Exodus journey began. I feel more compassionate and more open to the world and its joys and desires. If you desire money, your desire will always seek plunder, and if you desire fame, your desire will always be desperate. But if you desire God, your desire will never be satisfied, but your life will open up ever dimensions of existence. You may not perceived before, for example, the presence in our world of an energy force called grace.

I do the things people do in these circumstances. I read the Bible (not enough). I read books about theology and other people's faith journeys. I attended services and have learned I suck at praying. I have been blessed to have met people who are "Christ-like" (a phrase they have always "remoulded." But when they crossed the Red Sea on their journey home, Moses led them on they burst into song. They had been "remoulded."

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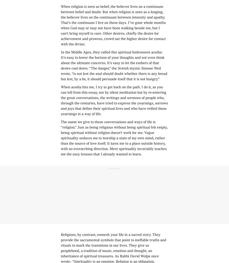
I've had a long reminding myself that faith is more like falling in love than it is like finding the answer to a complicated question. Given my overly intellectual nature, I've had to put my brain in my pocket. Faith is like falling in love, it's a process of falling in faith, you're yearning to prying your heart at the center of your life. The best moments are pitifully romantic — when you are astonished at the great blessing of God's love and overcome by the desire to do the things that will delight him. It's a reminder that you are changed by learning information, but we are separating new loves.

"As the deer pants for the water breaks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God." That's the opening line of Psalm 42. Years ago, I thought that all this yearning and passing would propel me into the land of Christian joy. But I'm still in the land of longing, of wonder and yearn, and pant, the same people who are never satisfied with what they have, I am report that the desiring isn't a preparation for faith, desire is faith itself. "The whole life of the great Christian is a holy longing," Augustine once wrote. "That is our life, to be trained by longing."



I was lucky to stumble upon Wiman's book "My Bright Abyss" early in the journey. It articulates, more than any other book by a Christian I have read, what it feels like to be a Christian. Wiman has been much like to — than a mention of the soul natural I call." He argues that faith is not some hard, unchanging thing you cling to through the pain and troubles of life rather that faith is change. He continues:

"Lord, I can approach you only by means of my consciousness, but consciousness can only approach you as an object, which you are not. Lord, I can approach you only through my mind, which I can know — directly, immediately — but it is most nothing unless, indeed, as great to my hunger for you — or is this evidence of your hunger for me? Lord, I can only know you through my mind, which you have given me, but I know that, in the extreme moments, when the intensity is strong here, in the barn abundance of a winter tree whose every limb is lit and bangle with snow. Lord, Lord, how bright the abyss inside that tense."

When religion is seen as belief, the believer lives as a continuum between belief and doubt. But when religion is seen as a longing, the believer lives as a continuum between longing and satisfaction. That's the continuum I live on these days. I've gone whole months when God may or may not have been walking beside me, but I still long to call him my friend. Other days, I feel the desire for achievement and process, crowd out the higher desire for contact with the holy.

In the Middle Ages, they called the spiritual hindrances sloth. It's easy to lower the horizon of your thoughts and not even think about the ultimate concerns. It's easy to let the embers of that desire cool down. "The danger," the Jewish mystic Simone Weil wrote, "is that the soul may be so weary that it no longer desires God but has, by sin, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry."

When acedia hits me, I try to go back on the path. I do it, as you can tell from this essay, not by short meditation but by reviewing the great conversations, the writings and sermons of people who, over the years, have helped me to understand the Christian scheme and joys that define their spiritual lives and who have sifted those conversations for me.

The name we give to these conversations and ways of life is "religion." Just as being religious without being spiritual felt empty, being spiritual without religious doesn't work for me. Vague spirituality seduces me to worship a state of my own mind, rather than the transcendent. It leads me to worship my own comfort and with no overarching direction. More spiritually, everyday teaches me the easy lessons that I already wanted to learn.

Religions, by contrast, smooth your life in a sacred story. They provide the sacramental symbols that point to ineffable truths and ritual to mark the transitions in our lives. They give us peaghbrand, a tradition of music, creative and thought, an institutional structure to carry us along. They provide a community with an overarching direction. More spiritually, everyday teaches me the easy lessons that I already wanted to learn.

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Spirituality soothes. Religion mobilizes. Spirituality is satisfied with itself. Religion is dissatisfied with the world."

These days I go to church more than synagogue. But I've learned you can't take the Jew out of the boy. I'm attracted to Jesus the Jew, not the wispy, ethereal, gentle-faced guy with his two fingers in the air whom Christians have invented and put into centuries of European paintings. The Jewish Jesus emerged amid revolution, violence and strife. He walked into the center of all the clashing authority structures and he overturned them all. The Jewish Jesus was a total badass.

I've heard Christians say that our job is to take our hands off the wheel and let God drive. Or as John Calvin put it, "The only haven of safety is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever he leads." In the face of that, I find the Jewish concept of "co-creation" is stubbornly baked into my mind. It is our human will, energy and creativity, working within God's, that matter. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik put it, a Jew "received the Torah from Sinai not as a simple recipient but as a creator of worlds, as a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation." In Jewish tradition, this world is more important than the next because in this world we can create, pursue justice and accomplish things, while in the next world there's nothing left to do.

If faith is perpetual change, then faith can be understood as three interrelated movements. First, sanctification, the desire to become a better version of yourself. My favorite footnote in all literature is from Soloveitchik's book "Halakhic Man": "Religion is not, at the outset, a refuge of grace and mercy for the despairing and desperate, an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man's consciousness with all its crises, pangs and torments."

But over time "the pangs of searching and groping, the tortures of spiritual crises and exhausting treks of the soul purify and sanctify man, cleanse his thoughts and purge them of the husks of superficiality and the dross of vulgarity. Out of these torments there emerges a new understanding of the world, a powerful spiritual enthusiasm that shakes the very foundations of man's existence. He arises from the agonies purged and refined, possessed of a pure heart and new spirit."

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The second movement is the movement to heal the world. Some people are inspired by faith to pursue grand missions. The great abolitionist William Wilberforce wrote in his journal, "God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners." Dorothy Day, who dedicated her life to living in community with the poor, once said the Christians should live in a way that doesn't make sense unless God exists.

Most healing that I see is smaller and unobtrusive. It is seen in one person's simple countenance, that individual's way of paying attention to the world, marked by patience, peace, kindness, joy and love. It is seen in others as they do small things with great love. Serving dinner is a material act, but hospitality is a spiritual gift. It is seen too in those who are able to love the people who are hard to love — the criminals, the outcasts, the strangers.

The third movement is to experience greater and greater intimacy with God. There's a big difference between knowing about God and knowing God, and to really know him, you have to talk with him, through prayer, the spiritual disciplines like fasting and contemplation and through daily submission. I haven't made much progress on this front. Mostly I experience him as a pervasive presence, the "ground of being" in Tillich's phrase. Do we live in a cold, meaningless universe? No, there is an underlying source of love pervading everything. I concede that this statement is a little abstract.

The desire for God appears to be insatiable. Nobody ever said: "I once experienced God's presence and that was enough for me. I'm good." Jews calls their study halls "houses of seeking." The word "Israel" itself means "wrestling with God." I'm onboard with the early church father Gregory of Nyssa, who argued that heaven itself is endless longing. That's the heaven I want to be in.

Faith has not always been pleasant. It has radically widened the gap between my actual self and my desired self. But it has been a grand adventure. I hope that it's made me more vulnerable, more gracious, but I don't really know.

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We religious people talk about virtue so much you'd think we'd behave better than nonreligious people. But that's not been my experience. Over the past decade, especially in the American church, I've seen religious people behaving more viciously, more dishonestly, and, in some ways, being more tolerant of sexual abuse. I sometimes joke that entering the church in 2013 was like investing in the stock market in 1929. My timing could have been better.

Still, I've been grateful to live in an enchanted world, to live toward someone I can seek and serve. I've been grateful to have to learn and relearn yet another startling truth, that faith is about yearning but it's not about striving. You can't earn God's love with good behavior and lofty thoughts, because he's already given it to you as the lavish gift that you don't deserve. "I prayed for wonders instead of happiness, Lord," Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "and you gave them to me."

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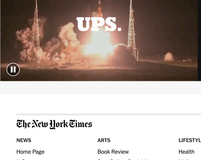

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