

David Brooks

When I was an agnostic, I thought faith was primarily about belief. Being religious was about having a settled conviction that God existed 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 experienced peoplehood more than faith. I went to a Christian school and camp where I sang the hymns with pleasure, not conviction. I lived through decades of Jewish adulthood (kosher home, the kids at Jewish schools) but all that proximity still didn't make me a believer.

When faith finally tiptoed into my life it didn't come through information or persuasion but, at least at first, through numinous 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 at the foot of a mountain in New England at dawn, at Chartres Cathedral in France, looking at images of the distant universe or of a baby in the womb. In those moments, you have a sense that you are in the presence of something overwhelming, mysterious. Time is suspended or at least blurs. One is enveloped by an enormous bliss.

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 irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before."

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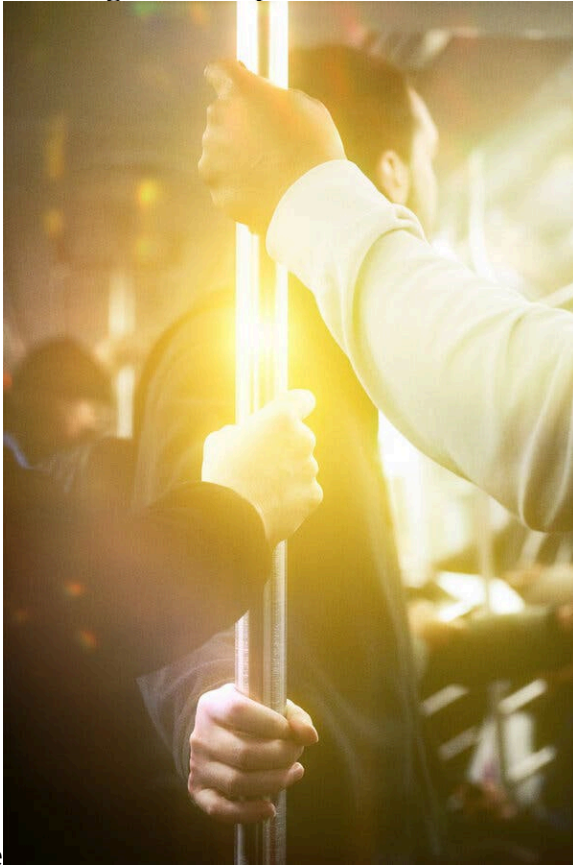
Then there was the man who had a similar experience, whom the psychologist William James quoted in his book "The Varieties of Religious Experience": "For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some 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 wafted upward and almost bursting with its own emotion."

At least for me, these experiences didn't answer 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 are the emotions we feel when we are in the presence of a vast something just beyond the rim of our understanding.

In his book "My Bright Abyss," the poet Christian Wiman writes, "Religion is not made of these moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward."

In 2013, I experienced an acceleration of those moments. This time they were not mere spooky 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 33rd Street and Eighth Avenue in New York (truly one of the ugliest spots on this good green earth). I looked around the car, and I had this shimmering awareness that all the people in it had souls. Each of them had some piece of themselves that had no size, color, weight or shape but that gave them infinite value. The souls around me that day seemed not inert but yearning — some soaring, some suffering or sleeping; some were downtrodden and crying out.

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 them simultaneously as fallen and broken creatures both prepared me for their depravities and made me feel more tender toward our eternal human tendency to screw things up. I hope I see each person at greater height and depth.



Image

Essay on faithCredit...Photo Illustration by Balarama Heller for The New York Times

In that subway car it occurred to me too that if people had souls, maybe there was a soul-giver. Once you accept that there is a spiritual element in 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

once observed, an atheist can't guard his faith in nothing too closely; a mere glimmer of the spirit can bring that faith crashing down.

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 marmot or gopher scuttled up to my feet, noticed me and scooted away. Because I'm me, I had books in my backpack, including a volume of Puritan prayers. The one I opened to begins with these words:

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,

Thou hast brought me to the valley of vision,

Where I live in the depths but see thee in the heights;

Hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold thy 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 victorious soul.

Look at the inverse logic in those verses. Most of the time we go through life governed by a straightforward logic: Practice makes perfect, effort leads to reward, winners get admired. But here was a moral logic radically at odds with that: The meek shall be exalted, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst, where there is humility there is majesty, 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 far vaster and truer than anything that could have emerged from our prosaic world.

It hit me with the force of joy. Happiness is what we experience as we celebrate the achievements of the self — winning a prize. Joy is what we feel when we are encompassed by a presence that transcends the self. We create happiness but are seized by joy — in my case by the sensation that I had just been overwhelmed by a set of values of intoxicating spiritual beauty. Psychologists have a name for my state on that mountaintop: moral elevation. I wanted to laugh, run about, hug somebody. I was too

inhibited to do any of that, of course, but I did find some happy music to listen to during my smiling 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 truth that had lain unbidden at the depth of my consciousness. We are 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 sacred in all times and places, human dignity. Contrariwise, self-sacrificial love, generosity, mercy and justice are not just pleasant to see. They are fixed spots on an eternal compass, things you can orient your life toward.

I felt something clicking into place, like the sound of a really well-made car door shutting securely. We are all embraced within a moral universe that gives meaning to 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 bedrock conviction that moral law was built into the universe." If there is an eternal moral law, maybe there's a lawgiver?

You'll have perceived that I was moving toward God in these years without directly encountering God. I once likened my gradual, tedious process of coming to faith to riding on a train. You're sipping your coffee and all around you people are sitting nearby 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 hear about my religious journey and ask me about my "conversion," but that word is a relic from the rationalist mentality — as if I traded one belief system for another. The process felt more 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 can't unread Matthew. For me, the Beatitudes are the part of the Bible where the celestial grandeur most dazzlingly shines through. So these days I'm enchanted by both Judaism and Christianity. I assent to the whole shebang. My Jewish friends, who have been universally generous and forbearing, point out that when you believe in both the Old and New Testaments, you've crossed over to Team Christian, which is a fair point.

It's been 11 years since that first quickening. I've spent these years trying to grow in understanding and faith. Why did God ask Abraham to murder his son Isaac? 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 experience it. The word "faith" implies possession of something, whereas I experience faith as a yearning for something beautiful that I can sense but not fully grasp. For me faith is more about longing and thirsting than knowing and possessing.

Let me try to be less cryptic. Think of the drives that propel you through life. Some are caused by a void. You get hungry when your stomach is empty. But others are caused by an attraction. You sense some distant delicious thing and find yourself pulled forward by its goodness. Sometimes I feel pulled by a goodness that seems grand and far-off, a divine luminosity that hovers 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 rabbi laughing uproariously as his children pile over him during a Shabbat meal, 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 serve the marginalized with postures of self-emptying love.

Some days this longing for God feels like loneliness, separation from the thing desired. But mostly it feels like a venture toward something unbelievably worth wanting, some ultimate concern. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward that which is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus," Paul writes to 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 me onward. The path is confusing and sometimes discouraging, but mostly the longing for the holy is a nice kind of longing to have. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, they led fearful, hard lives. Their spirits were crushed and they were, according to the scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg (borrowing from Oliver Sacks), "unmusicked." But when they crossed the Red Sea on their journey home, Miriam led them as they burst into song. They had been "remusicked."

My life feels remusicked since my own little Exodus journey began. It turns out the experience of desire is shaped by the object of your desire. If you desire money, your desire will always seem pinched, and if you desire fame, your desire will always be desperate. But if the object of your desire is generosity itself, then your desire for it will open up new dimensions of existence you had never 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 can't turn off my inner editor. As I'm praying, I'm thinking: "This prayer lacks structure! It's so repetitive!" I was once asked to pray for the victims of Syrian war atrocities, and it came out like a newspaper column: "God, please enforce the relevant U.N. resolutions. Please organize a coalition of regional powers to create safe zones for the refugees." They say that prayer is best defined as "astonished reverence," a state that I seldom achieve.

I've had to keep 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 get my brain to take a step back. I've had to accept the fact that when you assent to faith, you're assenting to putting your heart at the center of your life. The best moments are giddily romantic — when you are astounded 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 we're rarely changed by learning information, but we are acquiring new loves.

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, 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 panting would propel me into the land of the believers, but that once I got there, I'd taste serenity, stillness and peace. But some people who are more spiritually mature than I am report that the desiring isn't a preparation for faith; desire is faith itself. “The whole life of the good 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 living writer, what faith feels like to me: “Faith is nothing more — but how much this is — than a motion of the soul toward God.” He argues that faith is not some hard, unchanging thing you cling to through the joys and troubles of life but 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. I have no hope of experiencing you as I experience the world — directly, immediately — yet I want nothing more. Indeed, so great is my hunger for you — or is this evidence of your hunger for me? — that I seem to see you in the black flower mourners make beside a grave I do not know, in the embers' innards like a shining hive, in the bare abundance of a winter tree whose every limb is lit and fraught with snow. Lord, Lord, how bright the abyss inside that ‘seem.’”

When religion is seen as belief, the believer lives on a continuum between belief and doubt. But when religion is seen as a longing, the believer lives on the continuum between intensity and apathy. 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 can't bring myself to care. Other desires, chiefly the desire for achievement and prowess, crowd out the higher desire for contact with the divine.

In the Middle Ages, they called this spiritual listlessness *acedia*: 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 not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry.”

When *acedia* hits me, I try to get back on the path. I do it, as you can tell from this essay, not by silent meditation but by re-entering the great conversations, the writings and sermons of people who, through the centuries, have tried to express the yearnings, sorrows and joys that define their spiritual lives and who have reified those yearnings in a way of life.

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 religion doesn’t work for me. Vague spirituality seduces me to worship a state of my own mind, rather than the source of love itself. It lures me to a place outside history, with no overarching direction. Mere spirituality invariably teaches me the easy lessons that I already wanted to learn.

Religions, by contrast, enmesh your life in a sacred story. They provide the sacramental symbols that point to ineffable truths and rituals to mark the transitions in our lives. They give us peoplehood, a tradition of music, emotion and thought, an inheritance of spiritual treasures. As Rabbi David Wolpe once wrote: “Spirituality is an emotion. Religion is an obligation. 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 despondent 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.”

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 call 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.

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.”