

“Notions of God”

Every few years my amazing son Will gives me a page-a-day calendar in December, from the Far Side or Dilbert. This year it is a Zen calendar, and when I tore off Friday's page to see the thought for yesterday, it seemed fitting for today: "If you open your mouth, you are wrong."

Now Will may have found this message apropos because he is a teenager. But I thought it was apt for this morning too. Anytime I open my mouth about something as unknown as God, I am certain to be wrong.

Still, Roddy honored me by asking me to come speak, which meant an opportunity for me to reflect on this topic a bit, and so I will forge ahead.

In the home where I grew up, God hung on the wall in every bedroom. Faith was forged less by spirit than by habit. I can still recite the Baltimore Catechism I had to memorize: "Who made me? God made me. Why did he make me? To know, love and serve him."

If that sounds robotic now, just imagine the affect of this dogmatic certainty on a child in the 1960s. It was a prescription for rebellion.

Gradually I began to see the Catholicism of my upbringing as spiritually corrupt. I loved the content: whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers, let he who is without sin cast the first stone, and blessed are the peacemakers. But I had problems with the form. The church was supposed to be God's love for his people made manifest, but it always seemed to have a hand out for cash. It dismissed the spiritual power of women. And through secrecy, it effectively condoned sexual abuse of young men. When the pope spoke to 200,000 believers in Saharan Africa, where about half of deaths result from starvation due to overpopulation, and he chose for his topic the immorality of using birth control, I saw that dogma's certainty as a fear of life's complexity, a faith-based denial of its messy actuality. And I ran.

But God did not run. Instead the certainty was replaced by mystery, by things I do not understand, things that transcend. In a moment I'd like to give three examples. As often happens, only after writing a first draft of these remarks did I see that there is a common element among them, which is death. That's not out of perversity, I hope, but possibly because, for me, mortality is where the transcendent unknowns are most vast.

Example one: When I was 27, my dearest friend Herb stumbled, hit his head and died. At the time I was working in the wrong job, living in the wrong city, persisting in the wrong relationship. It seems silly to admit now, but until he fell I had not realized that we only get one life, of fixed duration, and no more, and that it could end at any moment. His death propelled me into possessing my own life. In three months I had quit that job and moved to Iowa for graduate school in fiction and poetry. Had Herb not died, I would not have gone. Now jump 19 years, over a career in journalism, stories, columns, editorials and investigations, good and bad more than three million words in print. On

what felt like a meandering path at the time but in retrospect seems a remarkably straight line, I was led to write a book about how we die today, how life used to end quickly and now concludes slowly, gradually, and what an opportunity that presents for people to have a meaningful, enriching last chapter.

A few months after publication, Herb's mother is diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. I drive to visit her, on what turns out to be the ninth day before her death. She looks beautiful, pain-free and content, there at home in her bed with her remaining sons at her elbow. In her room there has been one book, she tells me, one only. I assume she means the Bible. She calls it the "owners' manual" that has guided her, as well as her family, friends and professional caregivers, all through her final illness. Then, although it is an exertion, she reaches under the sheet, holds the book out, and I see that it is mine.

Is that God? I don't know. It is some kind of mystery, though. She has relied in her final living on a book I wrote because her son died young. Some circle, over those 19 years, has just become complete. And my impulse, in that moment and now, remains to pay this mystery some kind of reverence.

(When I first came up to this podium today, by the way, I saw the plaque here which says it was restored in honor of Herb Lockwood by his family, and I wondered if maybe the circle wasn't yet complete, or if there were multiple circles somehow. Whatever the explanation, this echo of the mystery brings me to the same place: reverence.)

Example two: In 1990, in Kenya, I watched five lions kill and eat a topi. Picture a large gazelle, long horns, purple-skinned, 400 pounds. The lions were toying with it as a house cat plays with a wounded mouse. Behind them was a spectacular African sunrise, colorful and slow as it always is at the equator. When they finally brought the topi down, they began gorging while their prey was still alive. Later I revisited the scene. Hyenas and vultures bickered over the remains, while the lions lay in the shade a hundred yards off, dozing away their full bellies.

Was this God? I don't know. But the imperatives of survival and the power of the food chain are mysteries as brutal as any I can imagine. We love nature for its beauty, that sunrise in the background, but it also possesses a severity that is surpassing. And both of these manifestations of wildness compel me to consider those mysteries with awe.

Example three: My next book's research required immersion in the heart transplant world of western Missouri. It's more like adoption now, in that donor families and recipients can connect, and even become friends. I spent a morning interviewing a Kansas City woman who was dying at 54, received the heart of a 15 year old girl, and now is 61. She was full of stories about what a gift those seven years have been – grandchildren, vacations and watching the sun rise every morning. She was proud to be alive. At one moment, she yanked down her turtleneck to show me the scar.

Then I drove four hours south to interview the donor's mom. She told me all about her

daughter, how she had died, how giving her organs away had softened the sorrow. Then she confided a secret. Whenever she gets together with the recipient, which happens several times a year, she pulls her in a close hug with her left arm around the shoulders. But then she places her right hand on the recipient's chest, so that seven years later she can still feel her daughter's heart beating.

Is that God? I don't know. But it is a mystery that makes me struggle to comprehend what life is, what defines a person, what purpose there may be in our being. And if I contemplate that mystery, I cannot help but feel humbled.

Reverence, awe and humility. That is some of what the mysteries have taught me. It's very small though, just one man's view. Notions of God are as unique to each person as our fingerprints. Thankfully, these nuances are also how we grasp, touch, learn – and perhaps, believe.