

Enlightenment: Myth *and* Reality

- an imagined dialog in four parts -

by

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Part One

As I sit here waiting for Brian and his friend, Stephanie, I am having second thoughts about inviting her to come along. It sounds like she takes her Zen Buddhism pretty seriously as I did when I was her age. But things have changed for me. I am no longer a believer. Instead of becoming more religious with age, as one might expect, I have become less so. Now, how is my skepticism going to sit with Stephanie? I don't want to do anything to undermine her faith. Or do I?

Knock on the door.

PB: *(extending hand)* You must be Stephanie.... welcome. And Brian.... glad to have you back. Come in.

Brian: *(easing into the burgundy chair)* On the way over, Steph asked me what she should call you.

PB: And you said

Brian: *(turning to Stephanie)* What did I say. I think I said, "Feel your way," or something like that.

Stephanie: Your exact words were, "Just be natural." And that's what I intend to do, not because you suggested it but because that's who I am.

PB: "Natural" sounds just fine to me.....wherever it leads us. Now Brian hinted the last time he was here that you might have some questions you wanted to ask. Any truth in that?

Stephanie: Well yes, there is. According to Brian, you have painted a picture of the "healthy" person as independent, self-sufficient, not needing very much

from others a person with lots of inner security. You seem to be implying that this is an ideal place to get to maybe some kind of future state that we should all aspire to. That's all fine but I don't hear any mention of one's spiritual life. Did you forget to talk about it or do you see psychological health and religion as totally unrelated?

PB: I didn't forget. The two strike me as quite intimately connected.

Stephanie: O.K. Let me change my question a bit. Does being emotionally healthy make you more religious.... or less so?

PB: I would say that it makes you less religious. There are many factors that affect how religious you turn out to be as an adult the way you were brought up, the culture you presently live in, people or books you have been exposed to, real life experiences and so on. Your mental health is just one of those factors.

Brian: I don't see why mental health should affect your religious beliefs. They seem like two separate things to me.

PB: I disagree. Our beliefs about the supernatural are not spun out of the blue; they are shaped by tradition, by our own spiritual experiences and ultimately, by our needs. While religion is multi-faceted enough to answer a variety of needs, for most of us it functions as a source of security, a bulwark against the dangers that lurk everywhere in a world that has known earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, drought, forest fires, volcanic eruptions..... to mention just a few. Then we have diseases like cancer, AIDS, cholera, malaria, tuberculosis, stroke, and Alzheimer's, all of them life-threatening. Add to these the ravages of war, starvation, ethnic cleansing, nuclear bombs, and now global terrorism not to mention the parochial hazards of losing a job, losing a house, divorce, being run over by a car, or being gunned down by a madman. In every case there is the very real possibility of loss of health, property, job, companionship even life itself. It is no wonder that we turn to divine Beings for comfort.

Stephanie: But are you implying that religion is nothing more than a security blanket? Doesn't it

Brian: (*interrupting*)doesn't it answer our big questions like "Why are we here?" or "Why do we exist at all?" Don't we turn to religion for a sense of purpose and

Stephanie: and a guiding hand in making moral choices?

PB: It does all these things you mention and more but I think they are all related to security, even our beliefs about the meaning or purpose of life. Some of our insecurities are clearly physical (like the fear of disease or getting killed in war); others are more emotional (for example, the fear of being abandoned or rejected). But further down in our psyches, beyond awareness altogether, is perhaps our greatest fear of all the fear of purposelessness. We dread the possibility that our lives have no meaningthat life itself has no purpose, that it's all just an accident. All of these fears physical, emotional, and ideological alike spur us to find something or somebody that will make us feel safe. When there is no such person or force available in the real world, we invent one. Similarly, when we are unable to find any obvious reason why humans or other life forms should exist, we manufacture one. Using our imagination, we go on inventing until we have populated the universe with a host of figures that offer comfort for any situation figures like God and Jesus and the Virgin Mary as well as places like Heaven that will allow us to live forever and theories about why God put us here in the first place.

Brian: Freud talked this way, didn't he?

PB: Yes and David Hume the philosopher before himand Nietzsche and a good many others. I am hardly the first.

Stephanie: I can see how our fear of war, earthquakes, and AIDS can make us turn to a spiritual protector and how our anguish over losing someone we love can make us reach out to a celestial being for comfort but I don't see how our insecurity can account for whole theologies those grand systems of thought that talk about why we humans are here, what our purpose should be and how we should go about living our lives. All the world's great religions offer such ideas. You even find something similar in tribal mythologies. If everyone seems to need such an umbrella one that provides a sense of purpose and meaning beyond themselves then, how can you say that it is nothing more than a security blanket?

Brian: I think Steph is on to something there. I mean if you take away people's religious beliefs, wouldn't their lives become meaningless?

Stephanie:or absurd as the existentialists say.

PB: O.K. Granted that we all need some sense of purpose. We look for it in all the little things we do each day it's just part of our cognitive modus operandi. So it makes sense that we should look for it in the bigger issues as well like the purpose of life itself. But do we really need religion to give us that sense of purpose? Isn't it possible to create our own purposes? Each of us?

Stephanie: Sure you can manufacture your own personal goals your own sense of mission in life. But if you know that those goals are of your *own* invention, aren't you left with the fact that life itself has no ultimate purpose?

PB: Agreed. But to the healthy person who has found his or her own security, these "private" purposes may be sufficient. Someone who feels *inwardly* secure may not be looking for additional security of the sort that religion provides. If you are at peace with yourself and no longer wrestling with the inner demons of doubt and uncertainty, you can afford to face life's vicissitudes head on without calling on imaginary cosmic forces for help.

Stephanie: But I know some very healthy individuals who consider themselves believers. They may not go to church very often if at all but they continue to hang on to their religious beliefs.

Brian: And what about Einstein he seemed like a pretty together guy yet he remained a believer to the very end.

PB: I think his beliefs about the universe were more metaphysical than religious. But Einstein aside, I agree that there are people out there who meet the most stringent tests of mental health and who continue to believe in a spiritual world that includes an all-knowing Deity and an afterlife..... all of which suggests that mental health is not the only determinant of what you believe. The culture you grow up in certainly plays a critical role. A healthy individual who grows up in a faith-bound family and who lives in a God-fearing community may find it difficult to let go of his faith altogether. He may never pray. He may question the existence of angels and the authority of Scripture. He may become more lax in his church attendance and more "secular" in his views on morality. But, despite being a very healthy adult, he never surrenders his belief in a Deity who created the world and placed mankind in it for some good purpose.

Brian: But you're saying, aren't you, that secure people are less likely to need religion than insecure people..... holding other things like family or culture constant?

PB: Yes.

Brian: Now, earlier you said that philosophers like Hume traced religious beliefs back to fear.... fear of earthquakes, lightning, fire, death, and so on. Does it follow that your hero the healthy, self-actualized person isn't afraid of anything and that's why he doesn't need religion?

PB: We all have some fears and it's good that we do. You wouldn't want to go about your daily business without the capacity to feel fear. Think of all the things it is wise to be wary of: wild animals, being mugged in a dark alley, having your purse stolen, a hot stove, even stock market dips. Actualized individuals may have all these fears and more but they don't doubt themselves. They are confident. They have built their lives on the bedrock of their deepest values. They don't wobble. And thus they are secure enough to go about living without the help of illusory forces.

Brian: So you're saying that religion is something of a crutch that if you're really healthy really secure both inside and out you don't need a crutch. You can stand on your own two feet.

Stephanie: That sounds an awful lot like Marx's view of religion as an opiate of the masses something that dulls the pain of existence so that the rich can go on screwing the poor. That claim strikes me as too simple. Perhaps it applies in some cases like India with its caste system and the inescapable Wheel of Karma but it doesn't acknowledge the depth and breath of religious belief. If religion were nothing more than an opiate, how could it have inspired some of our greatest artists people like Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Dante, Milton ... or in your own field of music, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven?

PB: I agree that it is more than an opiate or pain-reliever. But the fact that religion has inspired some of our greatest artists doesn't prove that it is more than an illusion. One needn't view the world realistically in order to create objects of beauty. In some cases here I'm thinking of poetry it may even help to be a bit psychotic. A touch of madness allows you to see connections that don't really exist for example, a man out walking at night looking up to see the moon "caught" in the branches of a tree. I remember hearing Archibald MacLeish say that the heart of poetry is metaphor connecting two objects which are unrelated in the real world.

Brian: I want to get back to the subject of meaning; it seems pretty central to what we're talking about. You seem to be saying that we can we make our lives purposeful without relying on religion to do it for us. How do you manage that? How do you create your own private sense of purpose the kind that provides the philosophical anchoring that you agree we all need? Maybe you could give us an example or two from your own life.

PB: Sure. It has taken the better part of four decades to identify and zero in on my deepest interests. Over that span, I explored divinity school, teaching sociology, research in psychiatry and community medicine, managing a restaurant, substance abuse program evaluation, a practice in psychotherapy,

and authoring a book on free will. There were doubts about where I was going at every step along the way..... but all of those doubts disappeared when I discovered the synthesizer some 15 years ago. Since that time writing music has become my primary mission in life. My goal is to write pieces that will enter the Euro-American cultural mainstream and provide enjoyment for classical music lovers of all stripes. If I can write a couple dozen pieces of superior quality before I die, I shall die a happy man.

Stephanie: Sounds like you want to be famous have your name known for centuries to come. Is that your mission?

PB: Not really. Maybe I'm kidding myself, but being known as the composer of these pieces is secondary perhaps not important at all. I can't be sure until I get the music out there but in the meantime what makes my life meaningful day after day is inventing the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that go into each piece. This is my core project. This is what makes my life purposeful.

Stephanie: Pardon me if I'm being obstinate here but your private mission says nothing about the world as a whole. It gives no meaning to life in general; it doesn't explain why we are here, what we are supposed to be doing and what will happen to us when we die. Your personal projects may make your days purposeful but they say nothing about the central problems of existence the problems that all the major religions attempt to answer.

PB: It's true that my self-imposed mission of writing music answers none of your bigger questions about existence but I stopped asking those questions years ago because they ceased being important to me. For example, you ask, "Why are we here?" That used to bother me a lot as a child but as I grew up I came to see that the question was unanswerable. I turned instead to science where Darwin's theory of evolution does an impressive job of explaining not *why* we are here but *how* we got to where we are.

Stephanie: If I asked you what the purpose of life was, how would you answer?

PB: I can't see that it has *any* purpose..... no goal toward which it is moving, no reason why there is such a thing as life or why the world exists at all. The universe doesn't come with any built-in goals or meanings; they have to be imposed by the individual. To say that the universe as a whole has a particular meaning or purpose requires the assumption of an even larger entity in terms of which the universe can take on meaning. The same principle holds true for everyday events. We go to medical school for the purpose of having careers as physicians. We take a job for the purpose of providing for ourselves and perhaps others. To say that one act has a purpose requires that we relate it to a larger

event or process. Since I can't conceive of an entity which transcends the universe, I find it impossible to say what the purpose of the universe is. So I simply leave the question of why there is a world and why things, including humans, exist to others. To me those questions are unanswerable.....

Stephanie: unanswerable because you are unwilling to accept the possibility of a cosmos which includes our universe and much more.

PB: Yes.

Brian: I would like to follow you along this path, Paul but when I consider how insignificant we humans are huddled here on this tiny planet swirling through space along with billions of other planets and stars spread endlessly across an empty night lit only by the fires of burning gases..... I get very lonely and frightened. It all seems so cold and meaningless. You must too. How do you personally deal with that awareness?

PB: Mmm. I've never seen the poet in you before, Brian. But to your question yes, the vision of homo sapiens as a microscopic spark of intelligence swallowed up by an infinite sea of uncaring space leaves me humbled, awed, and sad. But this is all background. In the foreground is the joy I feel almost every day at the beauty I am surrounded by right here (*looks out window at mountains*). The bleakness of outer space is background as well to the personal excitement I feel in writing music in working on goals I have set for myself. When my projects are going well, the background is just that out of awareness. In between projects it moves closer to the front and I feel the mystery and the wonder as well as the aloneness all over again.

Brian: And what do you do when that background awareness returns to center stage? Isn't it painful? Doesn't it tempt you to embrace the idea of a God who has an ultimate purpose for each of us and an afterlife that promises yet another existence?

PB: Well yes, Brian I do wish that existence mine, yours, everyone's had an ultimate purpose and I dread the thought of dying. But I can't bring myself to accept any of the spiritual answers being offered. They all seem so clearly delusional so clearly an expression of our neediness. I would rather look that empty space in the eye and make my own meanings.

Brian: Even though you know that those meanings apply only to you that they say nothing about the purpose of life itself.

PB: Yes. They do make my personal life meaningful. They give me a strong sense of purpose of direction. For the broader picture I rely on what science reveals to us about the universe.

Stephanie: But as you admitted before, science cannot answer our deepest questions those about *why* we are here and *why* there is a universe in the first place.

PB: As I said, those questions are unanswerable. I can see that it may help some of us to invent a deity who created the universe out of love for us humans. But that hypothesis brings its own set of unanswerable questions. Why, if He loves us, does He allow or worse yet *cause* so much suffering the perennial dilemma of the theodicy. All this begs the more basic question of how do we know that God even exists. We can't turn to empirical evidence since He is not thought to be a physical entity. So we have to rely on non-empirical evidence like that of personal revelation evidence which I find highly suspect. It's very easy to confuse the voice of God with the voice of one's own unconscious.

Stephanie: (*becoming more frustrated*) But millions of people from every culture we know believe in some kind of spiritual world perhaps not with a God at its center maybe with many lesser gods, buffalo spirits or what have you but some kind of transcendent power that guides us, protects us, gives our lives a purpose. Doesn't that suggest that people really need to believe?

Brian: You mean, even if it's not true even if, as Paul says, it's all just an illusion?

Stephanie: Yes even if it's not true. I happen to believe that there *is* a spiritual world but even if there isn't, what I'm saying is that people the world over need to believe there is one. That belief is so universal that it must be a necessary part of being human.

PB: You mean, Stephanie, that humans because of their very physical and emotional makeup need to believe in some kind of higher power to invent such a power even if it does not actually exist?

Stephanie: Yesbut I don't see anything wrong with that as you probably do. There is so much suffering in life even here in our own country where most of us are well off financially. It is still possible here to lose a child to a car accident or to disease. It's still possible for someone in the middle of a successful career to have a stroke and die or to watch while a spouse is brought to her knees by sclerosis, breast cancer or diabetes. And think of how much more

suffering there is in countries like Zimbabwe or Swaziland where tyrants rule and AIDS runs rampant.

PB: The ubiquity of suffering is obvious all you have to do is watch the evening news on television. And where suffering goes, the invention of gods and goddesses is sure to follow. But that doesn't make them any the more real.

Stephanie: You still don't get it. I'm saying that even if they aren't real, they are still necessary as evidenced by the fact that belief in some kind of spiritual world is nearly universal today and as far as I can see, always has beenperhaps ever since cave-dwellers began honoring their dead some 150,000 years ago.

Brian: (*smiling*) Steph I know you are deeply into Zen Buddhism so you must believe in a world beyond this physical one. But I'm surprised to hear you say that such beliefs, whether Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim are necessary for our survival even if they aren't true.... that they can have a kind of placebo effect that they can do good even if they are based on an illusion.

PB: I like your reference to medicine, Brian. It suggests that Stephanie may have a point. The belief in a protective God and an afterlife the belief that existence has some cosmic purpose all of this has clearly helped people throughout history cope with adversity. Believing can work, even when those beliefs are unfounded. In medicine, experiment after experiment has shown that if you think the pill you have been given is helping to cure your disease, chances are that you will feel better even when the pill contains no active ingredients at all.

Stephanie: Many of my friends have what you would probably consider "wacky" beliefs but I shudder to think what might happen if you convinced them to give up those beliefs.

Brian: So what are we coming to here? Are we saying that humans are so weak that they can't live with reality that they have to invent figures like God and places like Heaven in order to get by in life? Are we so crippled that we can't survive without illusions?

Stephanie: (*scowling*) Well yes, but I don't think it is as bad as you make it out to be, Brian. What's wrong with hanging on to a few illusions if they make life more manageable if they relieve some of our pain? Isn't it just another form of positive thinking which we know is beneficial in just about any situation?

Brian: Yeah ... but if that positive thinking as you call it is based on a lie or distortion of reality, how can it really help us?

Stephanie: (*taking deep breath*) O.K. Take two patients same age, both suffering from the same kind of potentially life-ending cancer. One is optimistic; the other is convinced she is going to die. Which one has the better chance of surviving?

Brian: Of course, the one with the positive attitude. But that's not necessarily a distortion of reality. You say that it is a *potentially* life-ending disease ... not a disease that is necessarily terminal. So being optimistic about your chances when it's still possible to beat the cancer is not based on a false belief. It's not what you would call "wacky". That *was* your term wasn't it, Steph or was it Paul's?

Stephanie: It's a term I said Paul would probably use.

PB: And indeed I might. Positive thinking may sound better than negative thinking but either one, when taken seriously enough, can lead to a distortion of reality and thus to irrational behavior. My own preference is for *realistic* thinking.

Stephanie: I fail to see how thinking positively can get you into trouble.

PB: Keeping your hopes up before a job interview is unlikely to hurt you. Nor is thinking positively about your speaking ability prior to giving a speech. But we're talking here about the kind of positive thinking that takes liberties with the facts the kind that spills over into illusion. And here I think there is real danger. Let me give you an example a case which involves an obvious twisting of reality to satisfy an unmet need for love. The woman's name is Renata she died in a car accident several years ago so I'm sure she won't mind my telling you this. I saw her for the last time at a wildlife sanctuary on the Atlantic coast. As we sat under the scrub oaks eating the lunch we had brought, she pointed to the trees, smiled at me, and said, "Don't you feel that these trees are loving you? I do. I feel the same way about the moon and stars. I feel loved by so many things it's wonderful." Then she stopped, turned to me, and in a more sober voice asked, "What do you think?" I jokingly (or perhaps not so jokingly) suggested that some anti-psychotic medication might help. She laughed and went on to elaborate. Later, while we were walking along the beach looking at baby seals, she added another chapter to her tale. During a recent visit to a psychic, she continued, she was asked if she had anyone on the "other side," meaning anyone who had died recently. When Renata revealed that her faithful sheepdog of 12 years had passed away recently, the psychic told her that the dog Jocko by namewas doing well in his new haunts and had a gift for her. Several months after the visit, Renata said she

opened her front door one morning to find a young sheepdog waiting at her doorstep. Since the dog seemed to have no name tag or collar, Renata took him in and cared for him until his death two years later.

Brian: And this was Jocko's gift?

PB: Renata certainly believed it to be.

Stephanie: And who is to say that it wasn't?

PB: I'll let you decide that for yourself. As we sauntered further down the shore, she told me that she had finally stood up to her dictatorial father during a recent conversation at home. The father was so taken aback by the experience that he up and left, taking Renata's mother with him. Sometime later, during a period in which she had no communication with her parents, Renata had a "vision" in which a cosmic Mother appeared to her, embraced her as a long-lost daughter and welcomed her back to her true home.

Brian: Wow!

PB: Now what do you get when you put these three tales together? What do they suggest to you about Renata's state of mind? I should add, just to fill out the story, that she admitted to having gained 30 pounds over the last ten years.

Brian: (*chuckling*) Well, for one thing, she has a pretty vivid imagination.

Stephanie: Briansometimes you are just plain cruel. Yes, her beliefs do sound a bit crazy at least the way Paul describes them. But don't you think they helped her get through a difficult time in her life? Don't you think they helped her deal with her loneliness in the same way that a person's beliefs about medication can help her deal with a serious illness?

PB: I agree that Renata's beliefs probably did help her to satisfy her longings for affection her desire to be loved but isn't it possible that had she not invented those beliefs beliefs in trees that love her, a dead dog that sends gifts, and a cosmic Mother that welcomes her homethat she might have tried harder to gain the love she wanted from other people in this world the real world? Isn't it possible that her illusions deflected her from a healthier way of getting her emotional needs met?

Stephanie: From what you say, it seems like that so-called healthier route you suggest was out of range for her emotionally. And isn't that true for most of the spiritual beliefs we have been talking about? Reality can be a bitter pill to

swallow. Take something as universal as dying. Isn't it better to believe in Heaven and to "know" that you are going to see your parents again? Death is disturbing enough as it is. How much more frightening would it be if we were convinced it was really final?

Brian: But Steph, doesn't the whole idea of an afterlife raise some thorny questions about your soul and its reunification with your body? I mean ... what if your mother died a horrible death in a car accident in which she was burned to a crisp. Would you really want to see her in that condition when you got to Heaven?

Stephanie: (*slightly exasperated*) I'm not sure about this reunification business, Brian. You're a Catholic or at least used to be so you know more about it than I do. But in your eagerness to side with Paul you seem to forget that I don't believe all this stuff about Heaven and Hellor inanimate objects that have the capacity to love and certainly not dead dogs that send gifts. I'm just trying to make a case for why the illusion of an afterlife, God, angels and so on may be necessary for survival at least for most people. Why would you want to take away something that so many people seem to need so badly?

PB: I don't disagree with your assessment. Most humans and this probably goes all the way back to the Stone Age have felt a pressing need to lean on spiritual Beings who offer hope, comfort, and protection. But I would like to hold out the possibility that as people become stronger and more secure in themselves, they won't need these "crutches" as much.

Stephanie: Perhaps that day is coming centuries from now. But even if it is, I still don't see why it is so important to you that we humans learn to walk without "crutches." What's so good about living a life completely free of illusion?

PB: This may be seen as quibbling over semantics but I think the appropriate term here is delusion ... not illusion.

Brian: The difference?

PB: We usually think of an illusion as a misleading or deceptive imagea visual image although you could probably include other sensations as well. A delusion is a false set of beliefs about oneself or one's relationship to one's environment. When you see a straw in a glass of water, it appears bent; that's an illusion. When you falsely believe that a serial killer is stalking you, you are suffering from a delusion.

Brian: And you're contending that a belief in God, Heaven, Hell, angels, devils, the ten commandments and so on is delusional?

PB: Yes at least those cases where the self is involvedas it is in our belief that God is constantly watching over us ... or when we believe that God will send us to Heaven or Hell depending on our actions here on earth. It is delusional because we are talking about a fictitious figure that has the power to influence our lives in every conceivable way. Christians, for example, typically believe that this imaginary figure not only created each of us but now protects us, judges us, and knows everything we are doing, thinking, feeling at every moment. All six billion of us.

Stephanie: (*shaking her head*) Basically you're arguing that people who believe such things are not very healthy. When you really come down to it, what you're saying is that most of humanity is sick and that includes nearly everyone from the earliest cave-dwellers up to the present. That's a pretty extreme statement. After all, how can there be so many sick people on earth and so few that meet your lofty standards of health? There's got to be something wrong with your concept of health. Believing in a non-existent God who watches over you and a non-existent Heaven ready to welcome you may be delusional at least by your definition but it is hardly a "clinical" delusion hardly a sign of pathology.

Brian: Steph has something here. If a belief in God or the afterlife were really a sign of sickness, wouldn't we see some negative consequences of that belief? You know like religious people tend to be depressed ... or more likely to commit suicide or act strangely.

Stephanie: when in fact religious people seem to be stronger than non-believers when faced with adversity ... like POW's or when they are confronting something like terminal cancer. Their faith gives them greater confidence.... a greater ability to endure isolation or the threat of death.

PB: That's an interesting point. Some delusions may in fact be benign but I think you have to look at the big picture. Yes, religion makes people feel more secure. It tells us why we are here, what we should do with our lives; it provides us with figures like Jesus and the Virgin Mary whom we can turn to for guidance and comfort. It consoles us when tragedy strikes. It fills an otherwise empty and uncaring universe with meaning with purpose, love and even justice. And on top of all that it promises us an eternal life. This is a lot of security but at what price does it come? What do we lose by putting our faith in figures, forces, and places that do not exist? What do we lose by looking at the world through rose-colored glasses?

Brian: I guess the simplest answer is that we don't see the world the way it really is. But I'm not sure why that's such a bad thing if our faith, even if it's delusional, makes us feel good.

PB: It's an unhealthy thing because it keeps us from growing up. Maybe another example will help get my point across. I was once acquainted with a woman who believed that everything that happened to her was God-sent and, no matter how bad it might look on the surface, was designed to help her become a more spiritual being. She saw every little event as a lesson in how to live a more elevated life. Her goal was to get to a point where she could accept whatever happened to her accept it gladly, knowing that if she read the lesson correctly it would help her to become more spiritual. Her struggle, of course, was to keep reminding herself that even painful events were blessings in disguise.

Brian: So even if she got stuck in a snow bank, she saw that as a good thing?

PB: Events, in her faith, cannot be other than good. If she is stuck in a snow bank, perhaps someone will come along to help ... and that will lead to a lasting friendship. Perhaps she will be hurt physically as the car swerves off the road and in the hospital they will discover that she has cancer and treat it in time to save her life. At the heart of her philosophy is a trust that God has a plan for her and that whatever He makes happen is for her ultimate good.

Brian: (*laughing*) If she is stuck in a snow bank, maybe the lesson is quite simple: drive more slowly when the roads are icy.

PB: Well, that too although she would probably be inclined to see such advice as missing the real point. She would be more focused on the spiritual lesson to be learned. For her that means acceptance. To accept means to stop protesting when bad things happen and trust that God is trying to help you. Let God run things His way; after all He has a plan for you. If you run your car into a snow bank, it is meant to happen. Everything that happens is *meant* to happen. Nothing is fortuitous.

Stephanie: So what's wrong with that kind of faith even though it might seem a bit naive to sophisticated people?

Brian: (*whispering*) Like us?

Stephanie: Somehow Brian, I don't see you as all that sophisticated.

PB: What struck me about her when we talked was how optimistic she was about everything. Given her world view, nothing could be bad. It might appear to be unfortunate on the surface even tragic but if God made it happen in order to help her become a more spiritual being, it must really be good.

Brian: Voltaire would have liked this person. He probably had someone like her in mind when he wrote *Candide*. You know Dr. Panglossthe best of all possible worlds looking at the world through rose-colored glasses pollyanna ... that sort of thing.

Stephanie: But does her faith help her or as Paul seems to be implying, does it hurt her?

PB: It clearly helps her to survive but I sense that in the process it makes her child-like keeps her from growing up. She tends to be impetuous does things like buying a new car when she really can't afford the monthly payments or moving to a house where the rent is so high that she is forced to leave in a few months and move to a cheaper place. She goes around convinced that whatever she does whatever she decides will be good that God is guiding her to become a more spiritual being and that no matter what happens, no matter what decisions she makes, she will benefit from the lessons learned.

Stephanie: She does sound like a child. How old is she?

PB: When I knew her, she was in her 50's. I remember her as being very child-like and also the most loving, non-egotistical, generous person I have ever met.

Stephanie: How did you respond when she told you these things?

PB: I tried to walk a thin line between the role of practical advisor and that of a supportive friend. I didn't dare challenge her too directly because she made it clear on several occasions that she *had* to believe that everything was for the good.....

Stephanie:or what?

PB: or she would start blaming herself for all the bad things that had happened to her over the years, get depressed, maybe become suicidal. It was clear that life had given her a real buffeting starting in childhood with sexual abuse, a mother who despised her, two marriages to dictatorial men, grown children still angry because she abandoned them when they were young not

to mention multiple physical problems like cataracts, bad teeth, gimpy knees and sensory integration disorder.

Brian: So her faith is a kind of crutch. She needs to believe that God has been behind her throughout it all.... that He is trying to help her even when He tosses her into a snow bank.....

Stephanie: or tells her to leave her children. It makes sense that she really needs to hang on to this faith just to survive.

PB: Yes and it makes sense as well that her faith in turn keeps her locked into a very child-like, unrealistic way of dealing with life's problems. It keeps her from growing up and adopting a more mature, realistic strategy for handling everyday bumps in the road. In a sense, her faith is stifling, impoverishing.

Stephanie: But she can't very well let go of it, can she?

PB: Not until she feels more confident in her ability to handle the vicissitudes of daily life. Not until she feels more secure in herself. And that's the point I'm trying to make. We need our delusions religious and otherwise because we are not yet secure enough in ourselves to stand on our own two feet. When we eventually gain that inner security, our need for beliefs like my friend's will disappear. Only then can we throw away our crutches.

Brian: (*leaning forward*) And we gain that inner security by moving up Maslow's ladder, right? By getting enough to eat, by making ourselves safe, getting attention, love, and approval from others and on, up to what he called self-actualization.

PB: Something like that. By satisfying all of our basic needs ultimately by bringing life into alignment with our personal valuesthat is, by becoming our own person.

Stephanie: I still don't see what's so great about getting rid of all our illusions or delusions as you call them. In some cases, yes, they might hold us back but isn't it possible that with many people the advantages of a rock-hard faith outweigh the disadvantages ?

PB: That's hard to say without specific details about the individuals involved. But let's look at the bigger question. You're asking what's to be gained by throwing away one's spiritual crutches. For one thing, it means you have more mobility. You can move around more freely, unfettered by what God or His priestly representatives tell you that you should be doing. You can decide more

things for yourself without worrying that an omniscient deity is looking over your shoulder. You can enjoy the kind of freedom we typically feel upon leaving home to take up life on our own..... the freedom to choose without parental restraint. Throwing away one's spiritual crutches is a kind of *rite de passage* into true adulthood. It makes you more responsible as an individual. To reverse-phrase a popular shibboleth: "Let not God's will but yours be done." When you stop "outsourcing" responsibility to a divine figure in the sky, you find yourself in a better position to make your life purposeful ... to set personal goals to build a life that fits your own values..

Stephanie: That may be true, but don't you pay a price for that freedom? Without religion you stand naked before death. Once you give up your faith in a spiritual world that promises eternal life, you have nothing to shield yourself from the prospect of total and utter extinction. You said yourself that you dreaded the thought of dying.

PB: True enough. I dread it because I'm afraid that I might not get all my projects finished in time. Being something of a late bloomer, I feel a real sense of urgency particularly about writing music. After all, I just started composing a few years ago. Now that I have a computer and a synthesizer at my disposal, I don't want to waste any time. The prospect of impending death is scary but it makes each day that much more precious. If I thought I could live forever or go on writing music after I get to Heaven, the days I have left would not mean as much to me. Knowing that I will die probably sooner than later elevates the value of whatever life remains. Believing in Heaven, reincarnation or some other death-defying state detracts from the value of this earthly life. Given a choice, I would rather face up to the world in all its unadorned rawness then wrap myself in a cocoon of illusion.

Stephanie: (*smiling*) Some cocoons can be cozy. What seems really raw to me is not reality but the way you are trying to reduce our loftiest religious beliefs, our holiest practices, our most sacred rituals to what to a kind of pathology. You call it insecuritybut to me that insecurity is just part of being human. Everyone I know has some need for a higher power or a spiritual world that transcends this physical one. And every culture we're aware of embraces the belief that there is more to life than what we see on the surface (*shaking her head*). But you claim that all of this will change that the day is coming when we all feel secure enough to throw off our religious chains. Somehow I don't see this happening anytime soon.

Brian: (*impishly*) Certainly not over the weekend.

PB: Perhaps not for centuries to come. But it will happen someday I am sure. The day will come when we look back on this period in the maturation of our species and smile at our naiveté our credulity.

Brian: Smile? but with some embarrassment no doubt.

PB: I don't expect to be around so that's hard to say.

Brian: You know, one thing that bothers me about this atheistic utopia of yours is morality or better yet the lack of support for it. If you take away religion, what's going to keep people from looting and robbing, killing and lying all the things that the church condemns. It's like one of the Karamazov brothers said ... I think it was Ivan: "Without God, everything is permissible."

Stephanie: I've been thinking the same thing. Without religion to uphold our moral code, won't crime flourish? After all, the church does more than just condemn it reminds us that God Himself will punish us if we break His commandments. That punishment might not come until we die, but it will be swift and irreversible when it comes.

PB: Religion certainly does reinforce our moral do's and don'ts but I don't think it is as critical as the two of you suggest. The moral codes we live by are really quite secular in origin. Wherever people gather together to form a group, tribe, or society, they generate a set of rules everyone is expected to obey. It may take a while but no community can endure without such rules. And where do the rules come from? We may say, after the fact, that they are God-given as with Moses and the Ten Commandments but I think it more likely that they arise from the exigencies of everyday life. A tribe of nomadic herdsmen spread out over miles of open land is more likely to come up with a set of norms protective of individual rights than a tribe that depends for its survival on hunting large mammals that can only be caught by working closely together. The norms that emerge whether individualistic or collectivisticare those that work the best for the situation at hand. Once they emerge they may be buttressed by ascribing them to a divine source but they are secular in origin.

Stephanie: (*looking askance*) So what if they are?

PB: It means that we are going to have our rules of conduct our moral code whether we have religion or not. Everything will *not* be permitted. And to back up those rules we can expect to have a whole array of rewards and punishments. I'm thinking of both informal sanctions like approval and disapproval..... and more formal ones like fines and imprisonment. Together these sanctions should be adequate for enforcing whatever rules we agree upon.

Those secular rules may not carry the same authority as those thought to come from God, but they are probably sufficient to ensure a good measure of social stability. After all, the atheists among us today seem just as law-abiding as the church-goers. We can't be sure about that without some research ... but it seems likely.

Stephanie: Maybe. I don't know. But there's still something lacking here.... something that I would miss in a world without religion. There's more at stake than rules and commandments. All of the great religions call us to love one another. It's a very lofty ideal one more honored in the breach perhaps than in the observance but it makes us more civilized. It keeps us from descending into a nether world where everyone is out for himself.

Brian: (*smirking*) Or herself.

Stephanie: (*half-smiling*) That too.

PB: I agree that compassion deserves to be one of our primary ideals. But if it is to be genuine, it must grow naturally out of our emotional health. You can't force people to be compassionate. You can't legislate it by setting up a norm and pressuring everyone into conforming to that standard. All you end up producing is a lot of guilt on the one hand and self-righteousness on the other. It is when an individual feels most secure in himself that he can *afford* to become concerned about the plight of others. And that spontaneous kind of compassion is the only kind that really helps.

Brian: But, Paul, I know several people who are seriously flawed psychologically at least by your standards but who care deeply about others even people they don't know personally. They seem to be able to identify with other people's problems maybe because they still have so many of their own.

PB: I know people like that too. The woman I talked about earlier the snow bank woman is one that comes to mind. Emotional or mental health is clearly just one of the factors involved in making a person compassionate. Similarity of experience is another. There may be unconscious factors at work as well like helping others as a way of satisfying your own unmet needs. Overall, though, I think it is the secure, actualized person who is in the best position to enter into the lives of others..... and to enter selflessly without any of his or her personal baggage. And that is certainly part of what we mean by compassion.

Brian: But, as you said in our last chat, people who are well along in their self-realization don't have much need for attention, love, or approval or any of

the things that usually bring folks together. They're not going to have that much contact with others, right? So, how are they going to show their compassion?

PB: You might be right. I can't think of any specific case that would support my claimbut I can imagine one. I can imagine a very self-sufficient, secure man let's say someone with ample meansdoing a little detective work in his community finding out who is in need for example, who might need a car repaired but can't afford it who needs a new roof on his house, some dental work, an operation and so on. And then getting money to that person anonymously. He wouldn't have to know the other person and no appreciation would be expected just the satisfaction of knowing that someone's life had been made a little easier.

Stephanie: Or sending money to help feed AIDS orphans in Africa.

PB: Yes. Things that we already do but could do much more of.

Brian: And you don't think that Sunday sermons or the promise of rewards in the afterlife are needed to get people to cough up.

PB: They probably help but I think in the long run becoming secure in yourself is more important. When you have identified your deepest values and brought your life into conformity with those values..... you are in a better position to give. Giving becomes easier more spontaneous when you don't have any pressing problems of your own. It certainly is possible while you still have such problems but it's easier when you don't.

Stephanie: I don't know about you guys but this creature could use a rest. This is pretty heady stuff we're talking about

Brian: I'm with you Steph. Paul, do you think we could come back next week and continue the conversation?

PB: I would be delighted to have you.

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