

“WHERE IS YOUR FAITH?”

By Michael Ventura

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My brother Aldo returned again and again in our conversations to one question. He posed it always as though for the first time: “Mike, how can you have a personal relationship with an impersonal God?”

Again and again we’d define our terms. “God,” for Al, was the personal, Catholic God of our childhood, a God he’d rejected emotionally and intellectually. At the same time, on levels deeper than emotion or intellect, he felt himself abandoned by that God. To believe and not believe in the same breath was an agony for my brother. He’d say that his simultaneous belief and unbelief left him suspended above a spiritual abyss, praying with nothing to pray to. For Aldo, an impersonal God was no God at all. He wanted to feel not judged but evaluated, to be of significance in God’s eyes. “To be condemned to hell by a God who cares is better than being ignored by a God who does not.” (That, in one sentence, was my brother.)

Then came my turn to define my more indefinite terms. The relative and the absolute co-exist in a continuum in which “relative” and “absolute” are arbitrary terms that equally miss the point. The universe is a vast, living organism, connected in all its parts, in which humanity is a tiny cell, subject to forces we can imagine but never know, sense but never measure. Joseph Campbell said that “God” is a metaphor for what is beyond human category. “Good” and “evil,” “chaos” and “order,” “relative” and “absolute,” are categories we invent to explain our world. We have no way of knowing whether they apply to the universe or to God. So, I would tell Al, when I say “God” I mean the living connectivity of all things, playing itself out over time. “We live *in* God. We call it living in Time.”

Then Al would say something like, “Don’t you feel lost in all that vastness?” I was 7 when our mother first went insane. Aldo was 2. When our family fell apart utterly, I was 13, homeless, alone. Al was 8, in a Catholic children’s home. Al knew my meaning when I said, “I’ve been lost since I was 13. It’s my natural habitat.”

I spoke not with despair or self-pity, still less with bravado. One learns to live with the world one is given, or one does not. I was OK with the world I was given because I learned to live in it. Al spent his life in mental hospitals and “supportive apartments” – he couldn’t be OK with a world he never learned to live in. “Mike, you talk like a guest at a feast I wasn’t invited to.”

How can I have a personal relationship with an impersonal God? I said to Aldo, often, something like: “The moon doesn’t know I exist. Or, if it does, I have no way of gauging that. Yet I love the moon. I go out at night to gaze at it, speak to it. People I love -- far away or out-of-touch – look at that same moon. And all the strangers to whom I’m a stranger. My prayers to God are like how I talk to the moon. I say to the moon, ‘Thank you for the blessing of your beauty.’ I say to God, ‘Thank you that my beloveds and I have been included in the unfathomable infinity of your creation.’”

Al asked if I prayed for specific stuff. No, I pray that we’ll go well on our ways, whatever those ways may be. It may be a terrible way, but one can go well on it -- as, I believe, Aldo went well on his terrible way.

Sometimes we switched roles. Living on Staten Island, the TV ballyhooed a tornado warning. Aldo's roommate asked, "Should we pray to God to protect us from the tornado?" Al said, "You're praying to the same guy who sent the tornado."

That's what I would have said.

When Al was dying, I prayed to God to grant him peace. That's what Al would have prayed for me.

We each believed and disbelieved in several types of God at once. I doubt that is uncommon.

Trying to explain myself, I read him a passage from Joseph Conrad: "The ethical view of the universe involves us at least in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges... of reason itself... seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view – and in this view alone – never for despair! Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves. The rest is our affair."

"Then what do you think God loves most, Mike?" "If God created this universe, and if we estimate God by that creation, then what God loves most is variety. That's what there's most of." Aldo laughed one of his rare laughs.

He would have been laughing at me these last two years or so.

I meditate nightly. Before I meditate, I pray. Before I pray, I read my "devotionals" (a Catholic kid's joke). A page each in two Zen volumes. a page of the *Tao Te Ching*, a Hasidic tale, a Sufi tale, the meditations of Marcus Aurelius and Dorothy Day, verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, poems by Hafez and Ikkyu, and sayings in *The Complete Jesus*, a compilation from many sources -- before I open that book, I recite a sentence from Matthew 6:24, Luke 6:43, or Thomas 45 (take your pick): "Whoever has a crust of bread in his basket and frets about tomorrow is of little faith."

Two years or so ago, in *The Complete Jesus*, I read this simple question: "Where is your faith?"

It stopped me cold. Haven't gotten beyond it. I pick up that book, recite the "crust of bread" line, then say aloud, "Where is your faith?"

I don't know. To confuse me further, a few weeks ago I read in the *Gita*: "A man consists of the faith that is in him. Whatever his faith is, he is."

So every night I've come up against the question of what it is I actually believe, rather than what I think I believe or want to believe. I believe life is neither good nor bad, meaningful nor pointless, tragic nor comic – I believe all those qualities exist in a larger continuum beyond our comprehension. I don't believe the universe (or God) is ethical or moral, but I believe I have to be – though many may judge my morality dubious. I believe change is the only constant, yet humanity's appetite for violence and senselessness seems not to change. I believe people striving for what's good often create harm, and this will never be explained. I believe life can't be perfected and that suffering is a given. I don't know how anyone else should live, except that to be unkind is to miss the entire point. I believe in standing for what's right as you see it – even if your idea of what's right is different from mine -- for dignity is achieved no other way. I believe in doing what you say you'll do. I believe in live and let live. I believe no one becomes wise enough not to make mistakes and that no one is undeserving of mercy. I believe that life is not ultimately manageable and that no person or combine is powerful enough to control

life, for nothing works as planned, and no plan or vision ever accounts for all the variables. Life always outwits us. It's my experience that any moment extends its possibilities in all directions – any moment partakes of the infinite.

Any moment contains unknown possibilities for good and ill. Life is, itself, alive, and we are a small part of that larger life. Our relation to it is unknowable. "Is" is a vast word. I have faith in what is. In Conrad's terms, I have faith in the worth of the wondrous, horrific spectacle life is. That spectacle is its own justification. It does not require our yay or nay.

"What is your faith?" I invited the question by opening the book and, finally, I've replied. What I've said is only that: a reply. Not an answer. (Aldo might say I failed to answer or reply. His questions were always weightier than my responses.)

Naunie says, "Take it a step at a time and watch what you step in." That works for me. But the thing about stepping is one foot is always on the ground, and one foot is always in the air.

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