



John Ballantine

The God Question

“There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread...”

—“The Way It Is,” William Stafford

I. The boy questions

What is the thread holding the patchwork scenes of my life together? I have wondered about the blue-green thread tying together the young boy questioning Einstein as he wandered to work at The Institute for Advanced Study, he with wild hair questioning God’s games and teasing us kids as he walked. My sister and I were troubled, too, by all these adventuresome gods my father, and Homer, told us about on Sunday evenings. The Greek gods were much more engaging than the stern Christian edicts of Sunday school. We chose Odysseus traveling far in a rocky boat after Troy, while Penelope spun tales to keep suitors at bay. And what, we wondered, became of those without gray-eyed Athena by their side, and why, I asked my father, was Jesus forsaken?

Why so many gods? Why the struggles?

I was happy when Pan died, letting the Greek gods fade into myths to entertain, not pyres upon which I should worship. Those gods were dead and I, as a young boy, only had to deal with the stern Old Testament man who cut boys in two, or the more forgiving New Testament God who sacrificed his son for the sins we inherited from Adam and Eve. Questions persisted; who should I pray to? Homer's Greek gods were much more fun, fickle, and dangerous if you crossed them. Poseidon consumed many more wayward sailors than God's disciples, turning their backs on Jesus, crucified on the cross.

How could I cover my base with head bowed watching the sun set? Who would save me when I went astray? At 12, I was stuck with the Christian God as I biked to school. All the fire and brimstone spouted by preachers, pretending to know. They did not ask the most obvious question that plagued me—until *Time Magazine* plastered it on the cover in 1966—“Is God Dead?”

He died for me in 1961 when I lost a small thimble in the living room rug and could not find it. God took it, I swear. When I pedaled fiercely to Witherspoon School in seventh grade, Carl and I debated God's existence, to and from school—how to prove, what did you know about the gods, were those miracles real? And what about those other more mercurial gods? What proof do you have? Some fuzzy belief, a temple, cathedral spires, hieroglyphics etched in stone, a Dead Sea palimpsest—and what about that lost thimble?

These fierce ontological debates raged as we pedaled faster and faster to school. Serious questions that kept us up late at night. Like Einstein, we did not rest when life's forces did not compute. Later I learned of my atheist grandfather and his minister theologian father writing daily letters about God's ways—my grandfather turning to commerce, law, and sophistry, and my great-grandfather embracing music, mystery, and love. Carl and I debated the same questions—why God did so little. How could he leave us a world turned upside down by nuclear bombs, war, and poverty? Why did the gods play with our fate? Testing us, some argued, then asking us to believe.

II. A long family debate

The God question was a long family struggle with real consequences. My great-grandfather, Reverend William Gay Ballantine, was thrown out—or asked to leave—several colleges when he explained in written words how Darwin said we creatures evolved slowly, testing fundamentalist tenets. He traveled to Palestine in the 1880s, surveying what was to become the hotly contested Promised Land. The books in Greek, Hebrew, German, and Latin lining his shelves told him there were no seven days, no forbidden fruit, and no Satan crawling like a snake near the Euphrates. He dug deep into scripture, trying to show how evolution fit into a creation story. His students and parishioners nodded skeptically at his spin on how seven days stretched out to a millennium before Adam and Eve wandered, lost, in the Garden of Paradise, finally falling to birth us. He preached of questioning souls with no imperious god, or one way to

salvation.

My great-grandfather argued with true believers—those that could burn you at the stake—about our existence, our purpose. William Gay was tossed out, almost sacrificed because some enlightened souls saw the apple fall and believed it was God’s doing and not the birth of empiricism with Isaac Newton. He wrote daily letters from his Professor-of-Theology chair to his son, my grandfather, the legal scribe, who said *pahh* to such sophistry. Long, passionate letters from father to son and son to father.

Our laws do not say how to love, or why there is no peace.

III. Again, the God question

I knew nothing of these family conundrums, or why my ancestors were itinerant ministers. Questions about God were in our bones. The Vietnam War, divorce—sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll—protests, raised fists, and civil unrest turned my family upside down. The spinning gyres could not hold.

- My sister found solace as she wandered in Anglican cloisters with Christian prayers, as she donned the cloth and worried about my lost soul.
- I held to my swearing off God for taking that thimble. But at 19, I tried to say no to Vietnam, lying in my conscientious objector essay that I believed in some supreme being. “Do Not Kill” thy enemy; do not send me to Vietnam. But those rumpled draft board men with enquiring eyes looked directly through my deceit. There was no way I was a conscientious objector if I did not believe.

I knew my goose was cooked when I sat in the Unitarian Church on Brattle Street one Saturday evening with other draft dodgers. We donned assorted God rationalizations, some supreme being invocation for “getting out of Vietnam.” No truth or God in our words. I would fight in World War II, but not Vietnam or Iraq. Going to war was my choice, not theirs or some god’s. I danced with the God question at 21, but the draft board stared back at me and said, “No.”

God and country. My way or the highway.

Skepticism was part of our family conversation—questioning back and forth over wine, my ancestors on bended knees, and me pedaling to school, furiously debating the shape of the earth. Like Galileo, my family thought this mattered and that Popes would not excommunicate us. God did and did not matter. As I stared out my dorm window on tear-gas streets, I did not see gods stopping bad wars, helping addicts in back alleys with needles in arms, or giving a hand to mothers wailing in the dark. I turned pages, searching for answers, slipping into casual atheism.

IV. Death almost

The God question stayed with me as I crawled 60 miles through the Craters of the Moon desert at 21 with my girlfriend. We did not pray for salvation, or ask for forgiveness when we were about to die. I looked at the sky, the planes overhead, and thought of the fickleness of fate. And much later when my prostate was full of cancer—discovered just in time. No, no turning to God, or the gods, when death raised the scythe’s shadow high over my head. Asking for help from God was not in my cards. Yes, I saw those that believed prayed and were kind. But I did not give in. So stubborn.

What is the meaning of your life?

In college, the existentialists left too many words ricocheting around my head with no clear answer. *Being and Nothingness* was Sartre’s way to bed Simone de Beauvoir. Beckett too wanted someone to warm him at night while he waited for Godot. For me, the Renaissance was full of too many priests selling favors and supporting the tyranny of the Church, while saints burned at the stake. Still, I stayed with the God question as Dante journeyed deep into the depths of Hell with Virgil, trying to unravel the persistent, sometimes deadly, sins of man and woman. Why so many circles? Were our sins so neatly catalogued? And who meted out the punishment? And the great spinner of tales, Shakespeare, confounded me with Hamlet’s musing and Prospero’s tempestuous dreams.

I left college confused with bookshelves of learned tomes. Poets played better with life’s riddles than prophets. Better to walk barefoot in the desert, lost, than wait for the burning bush to speak.

“I prefer moralists
Who promise me nothing...
I prefer the hell of chaos to the hell of order ...
I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
That existence has its own reason for being”
—“Possibilities,” by Wislawa Szymborska

V. Don’t you believe in the spirit of Life?

No, of course not. I knew that for years, since I was four, maybe five, when I saw Einstein wrestle with the God question—hair on end, not able to tell us why God played dice with the universe, or why his quantum theory did not quite work. If Einstein could not get the God question right, why should I?

Later, when I was not so young—with my father reading on the window seat in the evening light as he walked us through the myths in the Golden Bowl, and Homer telling of the trials of Odysseus—I prayed to all the gods. Such capricious, jealous gods, fighting wars over

Helen, a woman who loved too many great warriors. Hector and Achilles were vulnerable men and not gods, manipulated by spirits beyond them.

The capricious fates unnerved me. Why, why, why? No Old Testament God struck me down for praying to golden images. I had no proof for those miracles, those stories. At 11, Carl and I argued about the order of the world. There was no turning back and no one burning at the stake in my town. I was free to say no. I was lucky.

Early on, I felt the God question was a trick. Ministers and elders gathering their flock to do deeds for them. Of course, I didn't believe in those myths, those wars, that set of tablets, or Abraham sacrificing his boy, the sea separating for Moses, and Jesus turning water into wine. How could a young boy who heard such stories—whether by my father or preacher on high—how could I believe in God? The questions were a ruse to lead me astray.

Like Galileo, I drew circles of the moons and knew we were not the center of the universe. No, God made the world in seven days. Still, I read the stories and marveled at Satan's cleverness, his sophistry. I read how Dante descended through the circles of Hell, a lost man at 40, sliding down and down with an inscrutable guide to places he could not see, searching for Beatrice. I saw this Hell pictured on church walls, across frescoes and framed paintings in patrons' palaces, and brothels full of fun.

And John Milton, justifying the beheading of King Charles I, sang of the beauty of Paradise and the reasons for our fall. He argued that it was better to wallow in our free will than taste the fruit of God's imagined garden in a place with no seasons—no wind, snow, or rain—just sun, and no sin or death. Better to fall and try to believe, I muttered.

Milton's blind protestations resonated. Where was God? How do we love? I wandered with these tomes hoping for light, for a way to break my disenchantment. There must be some way out of here.

VI. How did you escape purgatory?

At 20, in dark theaters, I saw men, forlorn, walking down black-and-white streets, muttering to passersby about the meaning of life. My movie characters were happy to play chess with the grim reaper or cavort with the devil. Injustice and the hard, mean ways of the world were broken by wistful eyes; the ties of tyranny and cruelty did not strangle hope, wars played out on the screen, the sun rose.

ART moved my heart. Michelangelo's finger pointing. Van Gogh's starry night. And a late-night trumpet breaking my blues. Many wrestled with the God question and why bad stuff happened. Cinema did not serve up easy answers. But even lost in the movies and the castles of learning, I could not say I believed in the Supreme Being, or some master of the universe.

Why did it matter? Why the existential questions?

I knew that killing was bad, that going into a senseless war in Vietnam was not for me.

But this was me, not God speaking. I pretended some voice said, “This war is bad,” but this didn’t work. No communism for me, no peace from them that want war. Better, I muttered, to run from the bad wars that my elders, my parents’ friends guided and then say okay to God. Better to choose what war, what fight is right, and what war is not.

So when asked point blank, I could not say I believed in God. I saw, instead, the destruction that such beliefs bring. I felt the opprobrium of them that believed, the patriots, the fighters and the soldiers going to war. Maybe they had God on their side, yet I saw the casualties of war.

“I have met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces...
 We know their dream; enough
 To know they dreamed and are dead...
 Are changed, changed utterly
 A terrible beauty is born.”

—“Easter 1916,” by William Butler Yeats

VII. And what about death?

It was easy for me—at 5, 11, and 20, I could say, “No, I don’t believe in God.” But at 70, the question rises again. An archangel, one of the diaphanous ghosts, tells me of cancer and my fate—death not so soon, but closer than I imagined. Yes, I visit the dying, take serums and pills, am poked with needles. Around me pallid figures, brave hands holding fast, and the light of day shines on all who greet the waning light. Sadness and brave, happy smiles fill cancer wards. There is no surprise here; all our days are numbered. But no god will save me, or you.

Kind, soft hands, pills, and “How are you today?” greet me. The smile of caregivers fills my heart.

I am lucky to have come so far without God, to have sidestepped bad wars, and to have learned what? To be kind, thoughtful, and not mean? To breathe and listen to the spirit of the morning. The sun, the birds, the cold winds of winter snows. To take in the love offered and be thankful for love so close.

Why the smile? Why the bounce in your step?

Standing atop the mountain, I see not the struggles of men and women oppressed or diverted from goodness. No, I see more mountains, hills, and valleys, peaks painted with snow, the wind howling, and the hardness of each day. I see the early morning rays reflecting light from broken branches. I feel the rain, shifting jet streams, and the April weather ushering in spring. I hear the hawk up high, the bear crashing through the forest, and the coyote howls. I see, hear, and feel the shifting fortunes of nature surrounding me, not the honking horns or impatient

looks.

I see me, a tiny silhouette against the mountain, the plain stretching to the sea—calm and heaving with much effect. I imagine all the creatures trying to make their way. I pause and hold my breath. What are we doing here? I feel the breath nearby, next to me.

How is it that I am so important, so special, waiting for the forces—gods, if you will—that made earth, sea, sun and moon, day and night to do better? We spin the stories, make myths that explain why we are, why I am, so important; but this is not so. I am a speck standing in our great universe. I know little more than the hawk above, or bluebird signaling another magnificent spring. I am barely visible.

Now that you have walked and played chess with death, do you not believe?

No, not yet. I touch the harsh beauty that surrounds. I ask questions, find words, and see all that surrounds me. I breathe in and am quiet. I walk lightly, ask fewer questions, have no answers. I do not gasp as the air fills my lungs, and I give thanks. I hold the love that surrounds.

Even when death stares at me from afar, even as others fade, lost to memory, I do not bend to the God question. Like a stubborn child, I cannot say, “Yes, I believe.” I try to do good. One day I am here, the next gone. A stone, a memory, even a picture smiling, but then we are gone.

So why do I continue to wrestle with the God question, to pedal faster on my bike, to stare at the draft board men, to be touched by the dying, the brave, the caring? Why do I read, listen to music, and recite poetry? The puzzle of each day has walked with me since I rolled out of the crib and watched Einstein wander. Why did I just not say, “Yes?” I stay up late at night, wondering still at the questions that persist. I am amazed each day as the sun rises and the songs fill the air. I embrace the unknown.

“Someone who does not run
toward the allure of love
walks a road where nothing lives”

—Rumi

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