

“What’s a Nice Atheist Like Me Doing in a Church Like This?”

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Okay, what *is* a nice atheist like me doing in a church like this? I’ve wrestled with this conundrum ever since signing the membership book seven years ago. Perhaps none of you are so perplexed by this, but, believe me, my being up here, preaching from a church pulpit, is so laughably at odds with the sense of identity I had most of my adult life that it bears some explanation. And, thinking about why I’m here raises some intriguing questions about why any of us is here, about what it means to be a church, and what that might mean for the future. I appreciate your indulgence.

To explain what a nice atheist like me is doing in a church like this, it’s necessary to clarify certain terms. I will elaborate on three words in my title: Me, Atheist, and Church: let’s not take their meaning for granted. At the same time, I make certain assumptions *a priori* that will remain unexamined; it’s only fair to let you know what they are. First, please just take my word for it that I am nice. Second, in trying to make sense of the universe, I assume there is only one reality to consider; I reject any philosophical systems that entail a concept of the supernatural. We may never fully explicate all the laws of nature, but I assume such laws exist; if there were a God, God would not be exempt from them. Lastly, I make no pretense of being exclusively rational; I readily accept some truths on blind faith, that is, based solely on my trust in someone else’s authority. The authority on which I rely is no sacred text, but the collaborative, evolving, cumulative body of knowledge called Science. If an evangelical Christian maintains that the earth is 6000 years old, and Science says it’s more like 4.5 billion, I side firmly with Science, even though I personally cannot lay out the arguments or the evidence for either position.

Alright, those are my priors. So, who is this “Me” of the title? I was raised a Roman Catholic, one of the standard routes to Unitarian Universalism. Unlike some ex-Catholics, though, who rail against its oppressiveness, I really loved the Catholic Church. I loved the rituals, the Latin, the incense. I aspired to having miraculous visions, like St. Bernadette, without success. Through eight years of Catholic school, I nearly memorized the Baltimore catechism. And there are certain ideas, certain principles absorbed from Catholicism that I still subscribe to today. Those same principles became problematic as I became an adolescent and questioned everything critically, including Catholic doctrine. It was always stressed that Catholic teachings were revealed as a cohesive body of belief to be accepted whole, not piecemeal. And belief alone was not enough; one should live one’s faith through one’s actions. We were immersed in stories of ancient martyrs, and modern-day Christians facing communist persecution, driving home the point that living one’s faith is often not easy, or convenient, or even safe. Some day

you may have to put everything on the line for what you believe. So, when I started to seriously question one particular Catholic teaching, it precipitated a spiritual crisis. If one “infallible” teaching was wrong, the whole notion of papal infallibility must be wrong. Eventually all sense of certainty about any of the Church’s teachings, right down to the existence of God, crumbled. Life would have been easier could I simply have become a lapsed Catholic, or a “cafeteria Catholic,” but once I doubted the reality of God I felt a moral obligation to be a declared atheist.

And so I was, with a convert’s zeal, for almost two decades, until:

My Atheist Epiphany

If my joining a church was surprising, that event was foreshadowed by an even more astonishing personal experience that occurred a little more than twenty years earlier. I still can’t explain it. It was a discrete event at a single point in time, bearing most of the hallmarks that William James ascribes to mystical experiences and sudden religious conversions. It profoundly changed my life from that moment on. The day was November 11, 1987. I was thirty-six years old. I’d been increasingly depressed for many months. I was unhappy in my job, stagnant in my career. Worse, I was lonely: single, and, I feared, doomed to remain so, having endured one romantic disappointment after another. Lasting intimacy seemed perversely elusive. For months I’d just been going through the motions of living my life; inside, I felt empty. On this day, a Wednesday holiday, an ice storm the night before had turned into fog and drizzle. I woke up to a monochromatic world of gray skies and damp, bone-chilling air. Every shape and surface I could see from my window was entombed in a crust of ice; the scene outside mirrored my emotional state. I dragged myself out of bed and slumped into an armchair, just staring out at the frozen grayness for what must have been a few hours. My thoughts kept recycling a litany of all the things wrong with my life, forecasting the ways they could only get worse; a nauseating weight filled my stomach. Finally, by early afternoon I knew I had to do something besides wallowing in this gloom. I went for a walk. I lived near Newton Corner at the time, and I wandered toward the Charles River, with no particular goal in mind, other than to get away from my own despondency. But, of course, my misery followed me every step of the way. I paused in a clump of trees near the riverbank and leaned against a trunk, on the verge of tears, utterly defeated. My thoughts raced: “I can’t stand it anymore! What do I have to do to make this stop?” An ironic thought occurred to me: “Is this where I’m supposed to turn everything over to God and beg for help? Is that what I’m supposed to do?” And, in a rush of desperation and surrender, I remember thinking these exact words: “I don’t care anymore! I’ll do anything! Do I have to believe in God to make this stop? Okay, I give up! I’m even willing to believe in God, if that’s what it will take, but first... I need a sign.”

I half expected to be struck by lightning, but instead something much subtler, and totally unexpected, happened. After a moment's silence, I found my eyes focusing on a tiny thing that had been right in front of my nose the entire time. A slender twig bent down from the tree I leaned against; at the end of the twig was a small, red bud, encased in ice. The ice was smooth and clear, like a magnifying lens, allowing me to inspect the bud in fine detail. The bud was obviously alive and healthy. As I observed this, the sick feeling in my stomach eased, the trembling in my throat quieted, the tears welling in my eyes receded, all the feelings of hopelessness, shame and bitterness that had been tormenting me throughout the day were gone, and in their place I was suffused with a marvelous sense of peace and well-being, and an insight, a deep sense of understanding. Now, here's the part that's most difficult to explain. I specifically remember, moments before, mentally forming the words "I'm willing to believe in God..., but... I need a sign," as if reciting a speech in my head. But the understanding that followed came in an instant, entirely without words, though with a meaning clear and explicit. I'll do my best to verbalize just what that was. The bud and the tree were coated in ice because it was November and there'd been a storm. *There was no problem, and nothing was wrong.* The tree was alive, but dormant, because trees are not always in leaf; they go through cycles of growth and rest. The tree couldn't force the weather to change just so it could bloom, nor would it, because the tree is part of an interconnected system in which every element plays its part. Everything does not revolve around the tree's coming into leaf. Nor does the universe revolve around my happiness. I am also one element in the same vast system. I will be happy sometimes and unhappy at other times. I will be lonely sometimes, and sometimes in love. But *there is no problem, and nothing is wrong.* I can't force the universe to bring me happiness on demand; if I'm foolish enough to try I'll only make myself miserable. All I can do is participate in this universe of which I'm a part, and play my role, whatever it is, as best I can. That's the gist of it, although it felt more elegant as it came to me, and, as I say, it came in an instant. Immediately, I felt physically light, very much alive, and happier than I had felt in a very long time. The world around me, that moments earlier had seemed a grim parody of personal suffering, now was revealed as a thing of wonder and beauty. I marveled at the countless beads of ice bejeweling everything. I couldn't keep from smiling. I remember that as I headed home, I passed two women about my age, engrossed in conversation as they walked. Now, in the months leading up to this day, I'm embarrassed to admit, when I encountered a woman I didn't know I often avoided eye contact, either feeling a pang of longing for a connection I thought I could never have, or else imagining that she viewed me with repugnance, recognizing me for the pathetic, unlovable creature I must be. (This, no doubt, my punishment for having sinned against the Holy Ghost long ago, back when there was a God, or so it seemed.) But on this day, as I passed these women I saw that they were just friends out for a walk, and that was a good thing; our only connection was that we all shared the privilege of being out for a walk on this beautiful day. I didn't expect to ever see them again; that was not a problem. My heart

was brimming with benevolence; I smiled at them as I passed, and said “hello.” They returned the greeting warmly, and without missing a step we continued on our separate ways, and I felt, well, I wouldn’t have used this word at that time, but you could say I felt blessed.

I know this will sound made up: I stopped being depressed that day, and haven’t felt the same way since. The very next day, I decided to take a chance and show up at the weekly contra dance where recently I’d had my eye on a cute young blonde woman who had then disappeared for a month, to avoid me, I’d imagined. And yes, that next night at the dance there she was again, and yes, I asked her out on a date, and in fact we went on many dates, and in less than a year we were engaged, and a year after that we married, and this year in November it will be thirty years that we’ve been together, and all because of that tree bud in the ice.

I really don’t know how you can explain things like this. Perhaps some believers will say I cheated, that I made a promise to God and then reneged once I got the goods, but that’s not how I understand it. Before that day, I’d felt like a committed partisan in an endless debate over the question: “Does God exist?” I knew which side I was on (i.e., the right side), and it was important to me that I never waver or back down. But in that moment of clarity that day, I saw that being on the right side of that debate wasn’t important; the question itself wasn’t important. Really, none of my opinions about traditional notions of a personal God changed that day; it was my feelings that were transmuted. Rather than insistently dwelling on what I don’t believe, I became much more curious to understand this mystery: how was it possible to undergo such a radical change of mind and heart so spontaneously? It did not feel like anything I had done. The concept of a god was no more illuminating, then or now, but it was obvious I don’t have all the answers. I said I would clarify what I mean by “Atheist.” While technically I guess I could be classified as an atheist both before and after my epiphany, the truth is that I was transformed from an anti-theist to a non-theistic seeker.

What does this atheist believe? I believe in reality: a reality that exists independent of what anyone believes. Reality is what it is. But reality is not designed to suit the mental capabilities of human beings. Surely, we apprehend a mere fraction of it, and understand even less. Humans have evolved with a hunger for explaining how things work, and we always want to understand more. For thirty years, I’ve been seeking to understand what changed in me that day in 1987, and how. I don’t know. If I have to, I can listen to people talk about God and can translate it into something congruent with how I view the universe. But personally, I dislike using “God” language, mainly because it constrains my imagination. It’s the same reason I’ll never use pen to solve a crossword puzzle: you know, once I’ve inked a letter “G” into that little square, I can tell myself it’s a mistake, but damned if I can think of any other letter that might

go there. Likewise, I'd rather not be distracted by implausible ideas about God, the better to contemplate a true reality that's greater than me, and wonderful.

Now, I said I've been a seeker for thirty years, but for two decades or so after my epiphany, I was content to ponder the mystery on my own. I had no need for institutional religion; the idea of a spiritual community held no appeal for me. When I did start coming to Winchester Unitarian Society, I really thought it was just to sing in the choir, because I missed music. I intended to think of it as a series of weekly choral concerts, and I just wouldn't listen to anything else, but soon I had another epiphany of sorts. Not instantaneously this time, but rapidly, over just a few weeks: once again I felt blind-sided by an unexpected, visceral realization. I saw an invitation to participate in a religious community, not as a one-sided submission to a fixed creed I couldn't buy into, but as a collaborative process of seeking understanding together. I knew that if I joined this community, it might change me: I might become a little bit more "churchy;" but the church could also change, becoming a little bit more non-theistic by having me, and this mutual transformation might lead to something I couldn't get to on my own. Is that a deal?

I do need to say something about what I mean by "church". Quite in contrast to the view I grew up with, of the Church as a divinely finished product, history clearly shows that churches, religions of all kinds, are creations of human culture. Culture, like humans, and all living things, is continually evolving. Churches evolve not only in their forms and appearances, but in their core beliefs. There's so much I want to say to you about religion and evolution, but as my wise editor and dancing partner gently pointed out to me, that's really another sermon. (Maybe next year.) One point, though, I must make: the thing to remember about evolution, both the genetic and the cultural kind, is that, as it's pushed and pulled along by selection forces, it has no idea where it's headed. You and I here today create this church, and plant the seeds of its future. What kind of church will that be? In an environment of competing social entities, will our church prove fit enough to survive? Where will it lead us? Who knows? But with luck, it may lead to a communion with that ultimate reality that's usually only glimpsed in moments of mystical revelation, and to the peace that that brings. You never know, but may it be so.