

Loosing My Religion, Becoming an Atheist

Dialogue with B. Patrick Williams

Patrick: I've enjoyed this. It's no wonder that you would be alienated from Christianity given your parents hostility to your interests and personal space. It strikes me that your father embodied a religion of controlling judgment and not the self-transcending love central to authentic Christianity. Also, I celebrate your desire to learn so as to better yourself and humanity in general. Proposing this dialogue is certainly evidence.

You declared at one point that you were not a Christian anymore, you became an "angry atheist," and that you realized that Christianity was not the "one true religion." You relate the study of history, religion, and politics as a precursor to your having abandoned Christianity. You also refer to atrocities perpetrated in the name of Christianity – "fundamentalist Christians killing abortion doctors, beating and berating gays," etc. Thus, it sounds like you were influenced by the negative actions of a small number claiming to be Christians who are not real Christians at all. Christians are those who perceive Christ as Lord and Savior; as such, they aspire to follow the teachings and example of Christ. The examples you cite are not of true Christians, but extremists committing atrocities in the name of Christianity. How has this small group of violent extremists caused you to reject the reality of God in general and your prior Christian faith in particular? What are the reasons for your departure from Christianity and your subsequent embracing of atheism?

Josh: The points you raise are interesting, but I think I would disagree with your assertion about "true Christians." I have my opinions on Christianity, so do my parents and millions of other believers, and these various beliefs are no doubt different from yours. We

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could fruitlessly spend our whole lives arguing about who holds the “true” understanding of Christianity and what that even means. The notion of identity and subjectivity is tricky and I would argue “authenticity” is a hard item to nail down. I am reminded of the Post-Modern relativist Stanley Fish who has argued quite successfully in literary and legal circles that “interpretive communities” see what they want to see when it comes to relating to reality and interpreting texts. I would disagree that this is inevitable, but I would argue that people who ascribe to religious creeds are a prime example of this phenomenon.

I would argue that Jesus never thought he was “God” or a “savior” and that his early followers, primarily I’m thinking of Paul, “misinterpreted” Jesus’ life and message to suite their own purposes. Thus, the four divergent “Christ” centered gospels, which authors like John D. Crossan have argued are clearly late additions to the oral tradition surrounding Jesus. This set the precedent for a long line of “see what you want to see” interpretations of Christianity. But the fact remains that Christianity became a state religion (Rome, Europe, England, and the U.S., just to name a few), and thus by extension, this ideology is guilty of the intolerance and bloodshed of those who use it, even if those activities and attitudes go against the original spirit of Jesus, as far as we can tell what that might have been. Christianity has sanctioned slavery and racist propaganda just as much as it has sanctioned peace and love.

In America we have had a similar phenomenon to the German Reformation. Just like you, Luther wanted to believe that he had found the “true” interpretation of Christianity, but in fact for the next several hundred years all Luther managed to do was create a war of words over who had the exact handle on the “truth,” when in reality there is no way any one organization can establish an orthodoxy without some measure of force. Thus the more radical protestant sects left the old world for the new only to bring their intolerant “we have the true and only

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interpretation” with them. These Protestant sects were especially hard on the Native Americans, not to mention Catholics, Jews, free-thinkers, and atheists.

Regardless, *The Bible* can be interpreted in many ways. Yes, I would agree with you that Jesus teaches “love your neighbor” and “do not judge,” but Paul teaches “judge your neighbor” and his own brand of exclusive Christology. Likewise, I would argue that the Old Testament God is a genocidal monstrosity, which only adds to the viciousness of the current struggle in Palestine: *The Bible* clearly teaches the elect to exterminate the “heathen” and “conquer” the promise land by force. We still feel the reverberations of this dangerous credo. Likewise, there is a clear mandate that homosexuals are an “aberration” to God. Absolute dogmatic nonsense. After studying history I refused to belong to any institution guilty of genocide. Clearly, Christianity has its hands stained in blood. Yes, there are many enlightened Christians who practice a benevolent and tolerant faith, but their sacred book *The Bible* also justifies the bigots like Pat Buchanan and Jerry Farwell.

Patrick: You speak of Christianity as a state religion that is “guilty of intolerance and bloodshed.” How do you define Christianity? You asserted that you and I would disagree about our definitions, but you did not give me an explicit definition of this term.

Josh: Yes, good point, a clarification is in order. Like I said, I don’t think Jesus thought he was “God,” I think this is a later insertion of the oral tradition surrounding Jesus after his death. The same thing happened to Buddha and has happened to just about every saint or holy person: nostalgia raises the human to divine levels. Utter nonsense. Anyway, Paul powerfully inserted “Christ” into the message and life of Jesus, which produced “Christ”ianity. Christianity was at first a small, community oriented religion, which was persecuted by the Roman authorities and then became as State religion. It has been a State religion ever since and, thus,

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for “authentic” or “true” definitions of Christianity you must seek to know how the religion exists in relation to the specific socio-political-economic circumstances of whatever secular state it operates in, and the definition alters through historical evolution.

In terms of the contemporary U.S. we see a radical, evangelical organization that overwhelmingly supports Republican politics, thus, Christianity in the U.S. is closely aligned with Republican issues and in some cases the Republican party is but a mouthpiece for conservative Christian issues: school prayer, i.e. Christian prayer; government support of religious institutions, specifically Christian (education & social work); the ten commandments as a moral *and legal* code; evolution as heresy and Christian “creationism” as science; homosexuality as abhorrent, immoral and un-human; abortion as immoral in all circumstances; premarital sex as immoral, thus, teaching abstinence in schools; and the most pernicious policies have been issues relating to immigration (specifically with Mexico); globalization/foreign trade policies, which reflect an implicit racism (i.e. its o.k. to shamelessly exploit non-white, third world countries in the false name of “development.”); and finally foreign policy where U.S. policy makers have turned 9-11 and the war on terrorism into a “class of the civilizations” and a “war on Islam,” and also the religious right’s sweetheart, one-sided dealing with Israel in their aggressive war on Palestine.

Thus, my definition of Christianity in contemporary America is what I have just laid out. It is very close to the hypocrisy of Republican politics. I know you would disagree with me here, but I would say that the tolerant and politically critical “Christianity” that you as an individual practice is a minority sect within the geo-political landscape. There is a reason why the “Christian Right” is a powerful political entity. In my opinion, the “true” nature of Christianity in the U.S. lies there.

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Patrick: O.K. but I want to go back to your first argument. I discern both a positive and negative element to your discussion of a “bloody” Christianity. First, the “positive” element – you raise the important concern of Christianity’s affiliation with certain atrocities over the years (I’m thinking of the crusades and the inquisition). You do not name the atrocities, but I think we all (Christians and non-Christians) need to own up to times when certain institutions have been involved with evil activity. As a Christian, I feel this very strongly, and I think even as I would understand atrocities like the crusades to be perpetrated by those not acting as true Christians, I think Christians must be aware of such terrible activities given they were carried out in the name of Christianity. But also the “negative” element - you are extremely general while making severe charges. You have not clearly identified what you understand Christianity to be, and then you have impugned it without being specific as to how Christianity is responsible for the wrongs you allege. Further, you have answered my earlier question about the role of violent extremists in your loss of faith by switching subjects and focusing on a completely different matter (over a thousand years of history containing numerous complex social, political, and historical events). Please be specific in your definition of Christianity and how/why you see Christianity as guilty of “intolerance and bloodshed” and having “sanctioned slavery and racist propaganda.” How is Christianity responsible for these wrongs? Finally, you have identified both loving and hateful actions as being carried out by those affiliated with Christianity. I return to my original question: “How has this group of violent extremists caused you to reject the reality of God in general and your Christian faith in particular?” You assert: “After studying history I refused to belong to any institution guilty of genocide. Clearly, Christianity has its hands stained in blood.” Whose hands are stained in blood? I am a practicing Christian, and I do not know of anyone who attends my

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church who is guilty of genocide. I myself am not guilty of genocide. Please explain specifically how “Christianity” is guilty of genocide, and how that guilt relates to Christians today.

Josh: First let me say that the German Protestants said the same thing during Hitler’s reign, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized that where the Christian church did not stand up to murder and oppression they were guilty also. Thus pastor Bonhoeffer felt compelled to take the drastic step of trying to assassinate Hitler. Likewise, the U.S. military made the decision to fire-bomb German cities and kill hundreds of thousands of German civilians and Truman made the decision to drop the H-bomb on Japan and kill hundreds of thousands. We Americans all share the guilt of these actions. Also, the U.S. military has been responsible for aggressive wars and exploitative global economic policies for 150 years and you better believe that a great many people on this planet hate Americans and see the general U.S. population as guilty of the crimes committed in their interest and in their name. Thus Sept 11, 2001 was both a warning to the American people about the crimes of U.S. foreign policy, while at the same time it was an example of fanatic Islamism confronting a perceived spiritual threat – both Christianity and the secular West. Another example: Sweatshops and the global exploitation of corporate America. All Americans benefit from goods produced in intolerable circumstances and a large sector of agricultural and factory work within our borders are done by laboring slaves who, because they are mostly illegal aliens, are treated with dehumanized work and wages. It’s called “systemic injustice.” If you are part and benefit from the “system” then you share in the guilt, even if your hands are not “bloody.” I would refer you to Richard A. Horsley’s book *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* for reference on how Jesus addressed and dealt with systemic injustice.

My answer is complicated and theory driven, and it is something that I have devoted a great deal of length to in *Studies in Ideology*, but let me attempt a brief summary. Institutions are

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social structures that have a specific “party-line” (dogma) and a rigid definition of “identity” usually based on an exclusionary language of “us/them.” But within institutions there are individuals who have the ability to shape orthodoxy through challenging or revising the “party line,” and there is the inevitable “outside” influence where the institution changes through time due to the evolutionary course of history. Christianity is an institution with a basic party line, but the Protestant dogma of “a personal faith” has really challenged the authority of an orthodox and unified Christian Institution (thus the Catholic/Protestant wars for hundreds of years in Europe). The fallacy of the non-denominational, Evangelical Christianity of present day American is that somehow it represents the “one-true” essence of Christianity and that it is an almost “timeless” tradition based on nostalgic premises of a “personal relationship” with “Jesus” and “God,” when in fact this belief, this dogma, is just another “sect” vying for social power in a socio-political landscape.

When the word “Christianity” is invoked one must bear and accept the full historical weight of that institution and not just pick and choose what they think “Christianity means to me,” which is the Evangelical-Fundamentalist fallacy. My opinion is that Institutions have historical baggage that cannot be ignored or explained away. The past intimately effects the present however much our generation is ignorant of that past. Thus, Christianity in my definition means, the “conservative Right,” the Republican party, the “moral majority,” or whatever term is taken to explain the political consequences of Christianity in terms of concrete historical policy and actions, as I mentioned above.

Personally, Patrick, I think that you have an admirable definition of Christianity in light of your progressive political opinions. I also think that our common teacher, Marcus Borg, has an admirable definition of Christianity, which by the way, is different from yours, but which also

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has progressive and equitable political consequences. However, I subscribe to the radical opinion that the world needs to clear away the “old” clutter of established ideas, institutions, and blood-stained history (Christianity included) to re-forge a new definition of *human being*, and thereby, create new institutions that are free of the tyranny of history, that set up a new foundation based on the progressive ideals that you, I, Marcus Borg and many others share, but which we cloth in different shades of ideological terminology – terms, which are based upon our past, individual experiences and our associations with the established institutional party-lines.

Patrick: You mentioned a “semi-mystical experience” you had prior to attending graduate school. Can you tell me more about what that experience was like in particular? What is the source of this mystical experience? Where were you when it happened? How long did it last? What did you see? Feel? Taste? What specifically changed about the way you saw the world after this experience? What did you learn from it? Do you really believe that “everything that lives is holy”?

Josh: The first time I had a mystical experience it was after a long study of William Blake, the great Christian radical and mystic poet. I had also been studying indigenous traditions, Buddhism, and Native American Philosophy, as well as Evolutionary Biology. I came to the realization that “everything that lives is holy,” by which I mean, everything is part of the great web of life feeding into the unified biosphere – an ecological perspective of the planet Earth. I think I agree with “Gaiya hypothesis” that the Earth is one living organism, each part somewhat autonomous, but feeding and nourishing the whole. Human beings have the capacity to be stewards over this living organism, but we have rejected our “connection” with the Earth, other species, and even with other humans. We are an animal that has a strong capacity to dominate

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and destroy, and given our technology, our intolerance, and our exploitive attitudes, we have the capacity to destroy all life on this planet.

Anyway, I had a mental visualization of this great web of life and myself as part of that web. It was a feeling of oneness and connection with all that lives. I lost my ego and felt no real barrier between the world outside the doors of my perception and my conscious body. For a long time I thought this notion of oneness meant I could not kill or use other organisms (I was a vegetarian for several years), I should do no harm, but after reading indigenous philosophies I agreed that killing is a natural part of existence, but we should not kill or use more than we *need* and that we should live simple, community/earth centered lives where humans are not more important than other species and, thus, have *no right to exploit* the earth or other species for profit. My mystical experience was exceptionally *human* and I affirmed my humanity by agreeing to work for the common good of the planet and other human beings.

Patrick: Thank you for elaborating on your mystical experience reading Blake. It sounds fascinating and powerful. And yet, what really strikes me is that you conclude that your experience was “exceptionally human” and that you wanted to “work for the common good of the planet.” While I certainly don’t want to take anything away from your motivation, I’m struck by the fact that your experience does not sound “exceptionally human” at all. Quite the contrary, your experience sounds very much trans-human. Based on your description, it appears that the boundaries between what separate you from the rest of the earth fell away to leave you closely interconnected with all beings and things. This “web of life” you describe, if real, suggests a different level of reality, a non-material level, which is real yet imperceptible according to our normal five senses. How do you understand this?

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Josh: I would disagree and say that what I affirmed was *material* reality in its fullest sense. So much of what we take for “human” life on this planet is really ideologically driven nonsense, which obscures our ability to see life. Our linguistic and cultural constructions create blinders and what I affirmed in my mystical experience (and reconfirmed after reading Nietzsche) was the throwing off as best I could of those established, institutional linguistic and cultural constructions so that I could see and experience the *raw reality* of existence. No doubt this sounds contrived and constructed in its own sense, but my experience was a getting *under and over* human experience in the Nietzschean sense. Humans get caught in their humanly constructed webs of social structures, institutions, religions, economic modes of production, etc. My mystical experience was one where I felt released from human entrapment, to see the bonds of being human, but also to see the material reality underlying the human condition so as to understand the human condition in a greater, material context, by which I mean the contextual “non-human” elements that surround human society.

Patrick: You showcase your concern with “conservative, fundamentalist Christians” and “conservative politics.” Thus, your focus seems a very selective one, locating evil in a fundamentalist form of extremist Christianity and in conservative politics (both American). There are many other evils in the world in addition to those perpetrated by these two groups. For instance, terrorism connected to Islamic extremists is a much more frequent and violent phenomena than the incidences of abortion doctors killed by fundamentalist Christian extremists (c.f. Algeria, Indonesia, Sudan, Israel). And, while conservatives in the USA may be reprehensible, their evils pale compare to the routine police state jailing and torture that appear in China or North Korea. Why have you chosen to focus on fundamentalist Christian extremists and conservative politics?

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Josh: For one, because they are examples I see every day. They exist in my backyard, as it were, and thus my challenge is not to change the whole world *per se*, but more to change my own life and my own backyard. I do not believe in the concept of evil. I believe in the empirically proven concept of cause and effect, of actions and consequences, a non-dogmatic form of Karma if you will. Fundamentalism takes many forms, but the most destructive forms have been Imperial fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism, which often go hand in hand. The Imperial ideologies of Europe and America have the blood of billions of people and the destruction of the environment as their legacy. Bomb throwing Muslims are a product of indiscriminate oppression and murder. Why is it that the news covers mostly the indiscriminate retaliatory crimes of Islamic fundamentalists? Israeli bulldozers have torn down innocent Palestinian houses often killing those who cannot or will not get out of the way, Israeli snipers have killed Palestinian children, Israel settlers take land that they do not own and build fortified compounds. This does not justify Palestinian suicide bombers, but it sure as hell *causes* individual Palestinians to strap on bombs and retaliate. Likewise with 9-11. Does the average American have a clue about the millions of innocent civilians our proud military has killed in the last century? We killed some 500,000 Iraqi children just through a decade of sanctions. Nothing justifies that horrendous cruelty. George Bush Sr. made a calculated decision to leave Saddam Hussein in power after the first gulf war, but no one blames him for Saddam's supposed "urgent" threat to humanity. I have written extensively on many types of fundamentalism, but my main focus will always be America because that is where I live and if I hope to change the world it will be here, attacking the bigots in my backyard.

Patrick: You said, "I do not believe in the concept of evil. I believe in the empirically proven concept of cause and effect, of actions and consequences, a non-dogmatic form of Karma

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if you will.” What do you mean by this? Why don’t you believe in the concept of evil? I understand evil to be the self-interested harming of others for self-benefit. One of the things I like and respect about you is your concern for others and your desire to help others. This is apparent in your opposition to what you perceive to be harmful and dangerous such as Bush administration policies that oppress others. Don’t you accept that there can be harmful and self-interested actions that merit the label “evil” (as opposed to using neutral terms like “cause and effect”)? What about acts like the cannibal murders of Jeffrey Dahmer? What about the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust, the 35 million killed in Stalin’s purges, the 25 million killed in Mao’s cultural revolution? I find it hard to describe such activities without the concept of evil.

Josh: I think we must choose to disagree here. Personally, I think the word and idea of “evil” is a remnant of religious thinking, which needs to be left behind. Specifically, look how political opportunists like George W. Bush use the concept to declare world war (i.e. “axis of evil.”). The notion of “evil” is a theological construct which inevitably means the opposite of “God’s goodness,” which I wholeheartedly reject because 1) I reject the existence of God, 2) I reject the objective existence of some moral virtue called “goodness” and 3) I think “evil” and “good” are everywhere contextually defined in relation to the socio-economic mores of dominant political groups. Thus good is invariably associated with the goodness of those in power: America is “good” in the fight against the “evil” terrorists. Utter simplistic nonsense! And look specifically how the war against the “evil” terrorists has turned to tide of the Israel/Palestinian War where Israel is literally crushing the homes and hopes of innocent Palestinians, literally walling them into a corner as Israel illegally takes by force more and more Palestinian land. But the concept of evil needs to go, especially in light of reconciliation projects after horrendous tragedies, such as the holocaust, South African apartheid, or the Chilean “disappeared.” It is

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hard to reconcile with human beings if you can only see the face of “evil” instead of the frail face of selfish and intolerant *inhuman* beings.

Patrick: You said, “Bigfoot, aliens, and a living Elvis might all be true, but I’m not buying it until the evidence is in.” What sort of evidence do you require to establish something as real?

Josh: I’m a firm believer in the scientific method, via John Dewey especially: empirical observation, hypothesis, experiment and a critical community. There is always a danger of reductionism with the notion of Science, in terms of lowest common denominators, but it is a method that works and it has produced all the vital knowledge that defines our lives. We need not live by myths alone, however necessary stories might be, we do have access to reality.

Patrick: When I asked, “What sort of evidence do you require to establish something as true,” you responded, “I’m a firm believer in the scientific method....it is a method that works and it has produced all the vital knowledge that defines our lives.” What do you mean? How do you verify something as true or real? Do you really believe that the only things which are “true” are empirically verifiable and experimentally testable facts?

Josh: To reiterate, the scientific method is exactly as I stated: empirical observation, hypothesis, experiment and a critical community. I personally would like to leave behind idealistic constructs like “truth.” I think the notion of “truth” or “falsity” is invariably subjective and based upon practical considerations, which is not to say that I reject the notion of “objective” reality. I simply mean that for us to come to a notion of “objective” reality we must have multiple human perspectives observing empirical reality with which to create some kind of consensus – thus the scientific reliance on reproducing evidence through a continual re-

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examination of reality until some level of “certainty” emerges based on the accumulated evidence.

Patrick: You reached the conclusion that “all ideas and all ways of life were constructs created by human beings in fumbling attempts at greater self-consciousness and greater socio-political efficiency.” This is a huge claim. You’ve reduced all that exists to the material and the psychological while rejecting the possibility of any greater spiritual and/or nonmaterial reality existing beyond what you might understand. How can you be so sure of such a reduction? What do you base it on?

Josh: I know what I see and I have gleaned an understanding of the world based upon the critical investigation of learned communities and individual experience. The scientific method is really the humanism of our time. Dewey was right to put faith in the ability of human beings to rationally and critically come to an understanding of their world, share that understanding with other people, and come to an agreement about reality and what we should do to live our lives. I’m sure if a God exists, a being or force that got the whole universe going, “it” would not be offended by Occam’s razor. We worship and work with what we see, what we come into contact with, and what we can influence through our ideas and actions. Evolution is a fact of life as far as I’m concerned. The evidence is in and there is no denying it. We are biological beings shaped by our environment and we have the ability to understand enough of how our world works to create just, equitable and sustainable societies. Myths, fables and metaphysical speculation are fine and really add flavor to life, but it’s all fantasy, like kids playing in a backyard visualizing fantastic adventures. It is time for the human race to grow up, leave our fantasies behind and take a look at our backyard and the work we have to do to build a home.

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Patrick: Do you realize how reductionistic, simplistic, and even arrogant that sounds?

You seem to be implying (without support) that spiritual beliefs are analogous to kids acting out their childish and simplistic “fantasies” in a backyard. Hence, fantasy here seems to have a negative connotation that implies wishful thinking, like kids pretending to be soldiers or knights. Nothing has been established, only asserted. If you assume that only the empirically verifiable is possible, then all you find is possible is what is empirically verifiable. However, you seem to assert (via your mystical experience) that there is more than just the empirically verifiable that is possible. As a poet, I would think you would concede that there are ways the human heart is moved and touched that are beyond what we can empirically verify. In the same way, music, art, and literature can touch us and change us, if we let it. You seem to be taking a hardened ego-centered position that rejects anything it cannot understand, including that there is anything it cannot understand. To do so is to artificially limit your self. A legitimate point of view doesn't have to be a simplistic opposition between fairy tale/fantasy/imagination and what is empirically verifiable. There is room for both.

Josh: Ah, good response, but I think you are getting the wrong impression. First, I am not using the word “fantasy” in a negative way, nor am I using it without concrete scientific evidence based on child psychology and my own extensive work with and observation of children. I firmly believe that more can be learned about *human being* from watching a child than from talking to a college professor. I think the notion of “fantasy” and “play” that children partake in unselfconsciously is the perfect description of the human condition where we intertwine our fantastic ideologies within our socio-material circumstances, which I think is a natural and fundamental part of what human beings must do to survive. The problem comes when we cross the line and start believing that our fantasies are “real.” That is called psychosis

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and I would argue that fundamentalist and religious thinking is a form of psychosis, i.e. mistaking fantasy for reality. I know we will probably never agree on this point, but I will make it one of my primary duties in this life to collect enough evidence to prove this assertion. And here I will refer you to *Studies in Ideology* for my first attempt to outline my theory.

I would like to end with a short discussion of “possibility” in relation to reality. Some fantasies are simply wishful thinking that could never, ever come “true.” Then there is the “what if” variety of the idealistic human brain, which operates out of material reality to ask what is *possible*: Humans treating disease and living longer lives? Humans flying in the air? Humans landing on the moon? Humans living peaceful, sustainable and equitable lives? These all represented the possible in the brains of human beings and most of these things emerged into the *actual*. The poet in me is absolutely mystified by the complexity and beauty of reality and I often sit in dumb awe at the wonder of it all, and I dream about what is possible. There is the poetic “kid” inside me that wonders “what if” and teases out the possibilities of peace, justice, and equality all of which are “fantastic” human dreams, but which have yet to become concrete socio-political realities.

My assurance and directness can be mistaken for arrogant “egoism,” but I think you know that I am not an egotistical person. I lost my ego long ago. My fantasies of peace, justice and equality do not end with a heaven where a God well pleased with my work will reward me. I labor under no such selfish delusions. In fact, based upon my experiences thus far, I expect a lifetime of incomprehension, rejection, and misunderstanding and a peaceful slumber in death will be my reward. I do not think that our limited notions of empirical reality are all that is possible, but it is the strongest tool we have to work with in our quest for knowledge and understanding, and I will not apologize for what I consider to be the overwhelming evidence

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against the “divine.” However, and I have told you before, I can accede an agnostic point of view and say there are limits to human understanding and there may be transcendent “truths” out there waiting for us after death. If so, I’ll worry about those when I die. Right now I’m concerned with living and all the challenges, hope, and despair that this process entails.