

The Image of God in Death

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(Chapter 3 of "We Love You, Matty: Meeting Death with Faith," Baywood, 2000. Matty Ventresca was born with half a heart, and died at nine years old. He lived his life with good cheer and a maturity stolen from years he would never reach. He and his parents give us evidence that God is quite unlike what we usually imagine.)

*As one hand life has rendered,
The other drew death's terse sign,
A revelation in the eye's quick twinkle,
The spit and image divine.*

We have looked at some of the myths in our own culture and the views in various classical sacred texts. Our purpose has been disturbance, but about a matter that warrants disturbance. While we have found problems with many of our notions about death, the one notion that remains intact for those who believe in God is that God and death are somehow connected. If this is true, then a closer look at death should tell us something more intimate about God. We are going forward on the assumption that death has never been, nor ever will be, beyond God's power. On the contrary, death is God's idea for a central, perhaps necessary, feature of the human race. We also go forward on the assumption that the ultimate reason for death lies somehow in God's loving care for us.

If all this is true, then a closer and more scrutinizing look at death will reveal to us both God and death simultaneously.

First we should recall the many other places we look for enlightenment about God – to our teachers, our sacred books, our personal experience, and to science. Taken together, they raise questions about God that we cannot easily answer. Even when we look at death, we will find that answers do not come easily, but we can at least eliminate some traditional answers that hide rather than reveal God.

Religion teachers state simple truths: God is perfect. God is love. God made everything. God is providential. God loves us. God is almighty. God sends prophets. God sent Jesus. God sends the Holy Spirit. God sent Mohammed. And on and on. But these teachings seldom complete the journey from our cool minds to our warm hearts. This God has no personality, no quirks, no face, and no history. These are ideas presented

for our belief without much appeal to our experience. Learning about God in school or church is like learning about the geography of far away countries: We haven't seen these lands; we just accept what we are told as true, and it doesn't make much difference to us anyway.

People who look to the Bible to learn about God lay claim on a God with a reputation, even a gender. He has character. He has preferences. He likes the Hebrew people but not the Ammonites. He chooses the unlikely to be prophets and kings. He is patient with the hard-hearted, but only up to a point. He doesn't hesitate to entice his people's enemies into an empty tidal basin and then cover them with the sea. Unfortunately, many people who rely on the Bible, as well as people of non-Biblical religions, carry some strange ideas about this God. God is always on their side, for instance. Or God prefers to speak exclusively through church authorities. Or God thinks men make better leaders than women.

Nor does the highly personal God of the Bible square well with the terrible divine silence. It is rare that anyone who claims her "prayers were answered" experiences anything like certitude about which path to take. In any church where people are praying, all the reflection and noise are going on in the people, with nary a word from God. This "loving" God never intervenes to save a person from pain or death.

What is more, there are many believers who show the identical penchant for greed and power that nonbelievers do, and they worship this same highly personal and compassionate God. The people on both sides of wars in Israel, Iran and Ireland -- to name but a few -- believe in this God of peace and reconciliation.

Besides what we have been taught, and besides what our revered religious texts say, each of us also has some Matty Ventresca in our hearts, some personal experience of God which gives still another view. God is a bright sunny day. Then God is quiet. God is moody -- sometimes vibrant, sometimes boring. God is fickle, letting the wicked buy whatever they want on ill-gotten money and giving no advantage to the faithful. God will flash out in radiant smiles, plucky courage, and wacky individuality. Then God will deal out suffering in callous disregard for a person's virtue or love. God created a universe marvelous in its workings, except for the human race, which forever works against its better wishes. Unexplainably, despite the bad impression God makes, people find themselves still asking God for help. They turn to God when life gets difficult. Despite their pessimism that God relieves suffering, they ask for relief anyway.

Our ideas of God have also been shaken by revelations coming from science that the universe is unimaginably vast. The awesome complexity of subatomic workings, intricately affecting the endless stretches of space with its strange black holes and quarks, at best reveal an engineering God, not

an intimate friend to people in need. Our ideas have also been shaken by literary approaches to religious texts. We now regard even "sacred" texts not as plain truth but as just evidence of what some people believed. Commitment to religious truths is a more personal matter that avoids a literalist reading of "inspired" texts.

Obviously, what people *think* about God does not necessarily reveal God. In our pursuit to find God, we have no way to verify our pictures of God, some of which were painted in the oils of human selfishness. For example, isn't it true that people who pray regularly usually ask for what benefits themselves more often than for what may benefit others at their expense? Isn't it true that when we describe some event as "providential," we really mean just "good *for us*"? With death in particular, we find it difficult to reconcile the finality of loss with whatever God's so-called kind purposes might be. Does anyone normally think of death as part of God's "providence"? Like thinking about God, thinking about death can mislead us. Death may not be the worst thing that can happen to us. And, if it isn't, then *thinking* that it is may well lead us to what the worst thing really is.

So there seems to be another voice about God, a voice we do not often listen to. It is the voice of death.

True, death itself seems almost the very opposite of God. Many people take the death of a boy like Matty Ventresca as a proof that there is no God. When they reflect on Matty's suffering, beginning from his abandonment by his natural parents and continuing through his numerous illnesses until the withdrawal of life support, they see no evidence of a caring God. For them, the only possible merit of religion is functional: Belief in a God tends to make some people more civil with each other, but it does not really explain anything about why Matty died and other children lived.

Yet we must admit that death and God bear a family resemblance. Neither is very impressed by us. Neither shows any respect for our schedules or for our wish to be left alone. Neither ever asks our opinion. Both death and God ridicule our efforts at getting control of our lives. These resemblances, plus the fact that we often talk about God and death in the same sentence demonstrate the principle that life's mysteries seem to converge. Life and death, love and hate, God and evil, wisdom and foolishness, suffering and pleasure -- whenever we start thinking about one of these, we end up at another. It is as if all these mysteries have a common root. At funeral parlors, during family hours, or sitting Shiva, the mystery of death leads people you'd never pictured as religious to talk about God with surprising ease and familiarity -- as if talk about death opened the door to their deepest religious convictions.

Likewise, people whose heart is set on God, on faith, and on loving the neighbor are not strangers to death. Their capacity for enjoying life seems

in direct proportion to their capacity to endure suffering. They easily side with people on the brink of death, probably because they have sustained some kind of death to their egos. They may seem deeply centered and alive to us, but not so to themselves. They regard their center as an elusive mystery, one that requires regular dying to egotistic urges to be master of their destiny.

We need to explore, then, the connections between death and God on the assumption that death is part of God's idea of sharing divine life with us. At the same time, we should suspend belief, as far as we can, in the God we imagine. This should help us get back to the roots in our everyday experience of life and death and to approach the real God afresh.

While we suspend belief in the God we imagine, we should recall our anxieties about death. Obviously I'm assuming that despite any reassurances we have been given about the afterlife, death remains frightening for us. I expect that the answers about death already reached by civilization and handed down to us do not fully dry up our questions. Some will hesitate thinking about death because they feel it is one of the most gruesome aspects of life. This begs the question. It is *because* we think of death as gruesome that we miss something valuable in life. If we feel that death is absolutely contrary to what is best in us, we probably overlook what really is the best in us.

No doubt, there is a risk in looking death in the face. We could become even more fearful than we already are. We might be painfully reminded of loved ones whom we still miss terribly. Still, what offense could it be to God if, in order to appreciate the gift of our lives, we take a hard look at death? Why else did God put brains in our skulls except that we might eliminate unwarranted impressions about everything in sight? And does not the death of a loved one leave the heart resolved to live more consciously in death's shadow without flinching?

To help suspend belief in the God we know, then, and to sharpen our focus on death, we will look at the following familiar images of God:

- 1. Is God a Creator of a World that Will End?**
- 2. Is God a "Maker" of the World?**
- 3. Does God Snatch Individuals from Their Families & Friends?**
- 4. Is God All-powerful?**
- 5. Does God Watch Us From a Distance?**
- 6. Is God a Judge?**
- 7. Does God Punish?**

8. Is God Forgiving?

Each of these images connects to our mortality, yet upon closer examination each will prove to be illusory, and that makes all the difference in the world to what death means.

A Creator of a World That Will End?

Matty knew that everything living eventually dies. Some things live a short life, others a long life. The fishflies that swarm in huge clouds over Higgins Lake one sticky day in July are all floating dead the next. The big elm in our front yard caught a disease and died. Aunt Nel lasted until she was 90. But to a child like Matty, these bugs, trees and people are "soft" things. "Hard" things like rocks and mountains seem to belong to a different realm. Being hard, they don't change. They are neither alive nor deceased. They are the solid walls, floors and furniture for generation after generation of living things rooming there awhile.

I imagine that when Matty took Science, his eyes popped to learn that even the biggest rock on the shore is, to the geologist's eye, liquid. Like a rock of brown sugar cupped in a warm palm, it leans and sags when viewed from the long time-lines of geology. Thanks to television, we can see sped-up pictures of the earth's crust lifting and cracking like a rising angel-food cake, sinking valleys here, pushing up mountains there. Great plates that carry entire forests and seas slide by each other. In 35 million years, Los Angeles will be creeping by Anchorage, Alaska, heading northwest.

I don't imagine that Matty had the chance to learn about entropy, that fascinating law of universal diminishing energy. Under entropy, whenever one rock pushes another, it not only gives up kinetic energy to the other rock, making it move, it also pays an energy toll to the surroundings. Like a cosmic I.R.S., nature demands a little heat in every transfer of energy. Whenever two of its citizens make a transaction, the universe collects a tax of calories to heat up the atmosphere.

Perhaps if Matty had lived longer, he would have asked, "If that's true, then sooner or later we'll run out of energy! Everything will be just heat, and even the heat will cool off!" This is true. Great stars that warm local planets are running out of energy. Slowly, maybe, but collapsing nonetheless. The Big Dipper will eventually lose its shape and its shine.

If the entire universe of energy is collapsing, Matty might then have asked how it got so full of energy in the first place. If we are on the downside of some universal curve, what was the upside like? If it all started with a Big Bang, who packed the original explosives? So far we have no solid answers to these questions, only theories based on extrapolating data backward into unimaginable scenarios.

We live suspended between an enormous blast and a gradual decay into an everlasting dark quiet. Scientists estimate that life began 3.5 billion years ago and that the sun will bake all life to death in 1.1 billion years. We humans arrived about three-quarters into this evolutionary window of opportunity. It makes a person feel oddly lucky to have made it here while

the game is still on. It also makes us wonder why we're here. If we are passing visitors on this floating raft, headed downstream toward some ultimate Falls, is there some lesson we should be learning? Did God create a world that would eventually disappear?

We cannot say what Matty may have learned from such reflections. One possible lesson is resignation. If everything eventually dies, than nothing really matters. Looking at the timeline showing the evolution of stars and of our solar system, the period in which millions upon millions of people appeared and disappeared is a tiny blip. Yet even the most rigorous scientists cannot put to rest questions about life's meaning. The heart remains disturbed by further questions, even though we can't always put those questions into words. A universe that disappears? That can't be all.

I like to think that Matty would have noticed the clue in his heart. He may have come to realize that the laws that govern the universe include the very laws that govern our wonder. The universe, after all, is everything – including these animals who raise questions, ponder, make choices, and love. The simple fact that humans everywhere dislike resignation (even though many embrace it) is clear evidence that part of the known universe is open to, seeks out, and pursues meaningful goals in the unknown part. This suggests that there may be more to life than entropy. We could look at this as just wishful thinking by optimists, but we shouldn't forget that the optimists are part of the universe too. They are plain proof that the universe also contains events in which certain beings refuse to believe that life is ultimately meaningless. One only has to examine any point in the universe at which acts of reflection occur. There, one usually finds refusals to give up occurring too.

Something deep within us expects that our individual lives have a meaning that death cannot eliminate. Certainly, much of that meaning will be remembered and carried on by our survivors. Our children carry on our name and style. Our friends call us to mind and tell stories about us. But the meaning of our lives is not confined to the stories people tell. More often than not, the stories oversimplify the original meaning of what we were up to anyway. Original meaning has a reality of its own. When a woman drops a five-dollar bill into the hat of a blind beggar, no one but herself may ever know the story, but she parts with her money because it has a meaning that is real. It cannot be eliminated by revisionist interpretations. Its meaning is immortal. It matters.

Newton reflected on the falling apple and concluded that a Law of Gravity pervades the universe. In the same way, reflecting on the phenomenon of human hope in the permanence of meaning, we can conclude that besides the law of entropy, there is another law at work, a law just as real and

effective as any law of physics. (We will look more closely at this law in the next chapter.)

Everything still dies. But the presence of hope in billions of hearts is a raft of data that beg explanation. The least we can say is that death does not always mean complete annihilation. Hope is a real event, experienced by everyone, an event regarded everywhere as a key to something bigger than death. Perhaps some of this world will end, but there are rumblings that not everything ends. And despite the fact that Matty probably did not think much about cosmology, if through some miracle he had lived long enough, I'd bet his sense of hope would have outdistanced most of ours. [Back](#)

Maker of the World?

Mention of entropy brings to mind old debates on creation and evolution. Every once in a while, we hear of God-fearing folks chastising yet another high school science teacher for teaching "evolution" to their children. Just as often, other teachers enrage the secularly enlightened folks for teaching "creationism" to *their* children.

Although the debate is on how humans began, it also affects our view of how humans end. To the evolutionist, the death of an individual is a necessary part of a natural process whereby early forms give way to later, and possibly higher, forms. Early forms have to get out of the way, so to speak, sometimes to make room for later forms and sometimes to give up control of local resources on which higher forms depend. But evolution seems to have no ultimate end, only successively higher ends, and, when local environments can no longer support whatever forms have emerged, then *that's* the "end" of them. When our planetary biosphere can no longer sustain us, that will be the end of us too. To the evolutionist, our "end" is about time, not purpose.

To the creationist, the death of individuals is the beginning of a new and higher life. God lifts us off the earth in a reversal of the process by which we were first set down here. The evolutionist view answers quite a different question than the creationist view because for the creationist, the "end" of human life is about purpose, not time. Human manipulation of ends and means should therefore be carried out with our ultimate end in mind. Having an end in the next life means we do not really "end" at our death in this one.

The media usually describe these disputes as clashes between science and religion. They set up the question as a debate between two beliefs: Either Creationists are wrong and Evolutionists are right, so that death is just a biological endpoint -- or vice-versa, making death only a step in a journey to an endpoint in a higher life. I would like to make the case that neither alternative is true. These rather are clashes between two parties who misunderstand both science and religion.

Any intelligent approach must start with the fact that this death that we seek to understand is a single reality, but that we can ask about it from different perspectives. So theology asks one kind of questions and science asks another. But like everything we study, our different angles of approach ought to converge. It should be possible to understand death in a way that contradicts neither science nor religion. One very fruitful way of avoiding contradictions is to start by seeing how the mind works to create knowledge. There are many differences between science and religion, of course, but a major difference lies in the kind of knowledge each discipline aims to

convey, a difference that we can abbreviate with the words *whether* and *how*.

The religious doctrine that God created us is a *whether* statement. The question that resulted in the doctrine is this: Is God responsible for humanity or not? The answer is either a Yes or a No. It is either an affirmation or a negation. The realities that are the focus of specifically religious belief are just too mysterious for anyone to make dogmatic statements about *how* God went about creating. The accounts of creation in practically every religion were understood even to their original audiences as metaphorical narratives aimed to answer the question *whether* or not God is behind it all. In *Genesis*, for example, the stories were likely written to counteract other creation stories then current that gave the credit to sex or the snake and made gods out of them. Although the use of a narrative form required descriptions of creation taking place, the purpose of the stories was to state *whether* God accomplished it, not *how*.

Science teachers who believe that humans evolved from apes are making *how* statements. Their guiding question is: How did human beings come to be? Explain the process, please. It is beyond the realm of science to make dogmatic statements about *whether* God is the ultimate origin of things. Scientific method does not aim for final certitudes; it aims for best available explanations. And explanations are quite a different matter than simple true/false statements.

Still, science and religion are essentially two realms of questions in the human mind. Only as a result of these two realms in the mind do we find, on the one hand, collections of labs, chemicals, instruments and researchers and, on the other, churches, prayer books, candles and incense. So the creationist has every right to ask a scientific question. Indeed, the idea that creation might be a little complicated ought to make a creationist *more* impressed with God, not less. If we imagine that God creates everything through the instrumentality of probabilities and that the inventiveness of humans (we who likewise arrived according to the workings of probabilities) is part of God's way of creating, should we be scandalized? Must we defend the story that God placed us one-by-one on earth as a child sets dolls on an imaginary stage? Does it increase our reverence for the mystery of creation if we insist God must be simple-minded?

By the same token, the scientist cannot help but ask the question about the meaning of death and to find clues in the way things in the world die. Science in its own right, after all, presumes a view of nature that repudiates the idea that death is an annihilation. The notion that death is a total end is a completely foreign exception to how the universe runs. That is, although it is not the business of science to make *whether* statements about our ultimate origins and destiny, science gives evidence everywhere that death

is not an end. The theory of evolution actually reinforces the idea that, wherever death occurs, higher life emerges.

For example, when we look at the destiny of things, everything "dies" in service to some bigger thing. Free electrons "die" when captured by an atom. Atoms are constrained when chained into molecules. Molecules serve chemical rulers. Nervous systems in clams obey the dictates of their sensitive systems. A raccoon's sensitive system is subordinate to its mating instincts. In humans, ideas are incorporated into decisions, decisions into action, action into results. People belong to communities. Communities belong to history. What, then, is the larger, directive system after history? Science will not make any pronouncements here because the evidence is not conclusive and probably never will be. But if there is any universal pattern in the universe that science reveals, it is clear that destiny everywhere involves a kind of death, not a death by annihilation but a death by an incorporation.

Likewise, when we look at the origin of things, everything comes from earlier things. Planets came from astral debris. Rocks come from hot magma. Apples from seeds. Fawns from deer. Today's weather from yesterday's. You and I from our parents. Social institutions from plans, plans from insights, insights from wonder. But to accomplish this, nature slaughters with mindless abandon. Most bright ideas are killed under the scrutiny of verification. Every year the maple tree in our backyard sends thousands of little helicopters spinning down to the lawn, all destined to rot or to sprout shoots sliced off by my lawnmower. Tens of millions of a man's sperm swarm around a woman's egg on the chance that one might fertilize, with the rest returning to the ecosystem, their highest potential now dead. The Big Bang that established the architecture of the known universe five billion years ago was itself one probability among many that never came to be. What alternative universes might there have been? Would they be governed by gravity, electromagnetism, strong and weak atomic glue? We cannot say. But here again the rule seems to be that every mortal thing is born from a prior mortal thing, and that billions of potential forms die for every form that is actualized. Clearly, the ultimate origin of the universe contains mortality in some fashion.

Both the origin and the destiny of the human universe are indescribable. And they always will be because we are speaking of a level of being quite beyond our own. We are fish talking about air. We could no more give accurate descriptions of this larger view than cats could tell jokes.

Yet cats thrive within a larger, human world. (Indeed, were cats equipped with the appropriate wonder, they would be insulted over the many jokes told at their expense!) We too live in a world larger than we can describe, a world whose origin and destiny affect our everyday lives in ways beyond our

comprehension. Maybe celestial beings are falling over, laughing over jokes about us, just as we do about our cats. Or maybe there are no celestial beings, only God. We can't really say. However, unlike cats, at least we have the appropriate wonder. Nothing else in the universe we know about can wonder, and wonder is the power to question everything. In particular, we bear the unsettling questions about our origin and destiny. This is why our lives are mysterious to us while life to a cat is no mystery at all, just a series of nips and naps and lion practice.

So both creation and evolution are mysterious. Neither is a set of unambiguous teachings that should command the loyalty of zealous groups. And a mystery is a reality we continuously question without ever getting certitude, a reality that bothers us, that draws us to itself through the services of a wonder in us that won't stop. Death is such a mystery. We don't completely understand it, yet to it we are drawn.

Indeed, isn't everything we experience a mystery? No matter how familiar things are, the fact that they are simply *there* has seized the attention of poets and artists everywhere. We cannot help but marvel at the fact that we exist, when we know very well that we did not have to be. And God, thought of as the ultimate origin and destiny of everything, is the ultimate mystery. Not the ultimately unknowable God of agnostics, whose sense of the divine runs so deep they resist taking the very non-logical step to believing that this rampant inner wonder is Someone's gift. No, when we say God is the ultimate mystery, we are saying that we cannot reach God by certitudes, only by faith. If we ever reach a demonstrable certainty about God, we should worry.

By saying that God is the ultimate mystery, we are also saying that whenever we wonder, it may well be by God's thread tugging our hearts and minds. This mysterious behind and beyond surrounds us, infuses every thought, every feeling. Everything that is so familiar to us is mostly beyond our comprehension. Certainly we ought to spell out religious doctrines, but more as fences to corral religiously fanatical thinking than as clear disclosures about the divine. And certainly we should continue explaining how the world evolves, but more as plausible explanations that will give way to later explanations that make more sense. While all this is going on, though, it remains extremely important to use the mind simply to acknowledge and reverence the ultimate mystery of the universe and its divine origins and destiny. It is the kind of thinking one does sitting quietly on a hill somewhere, remembering how answerless our wonder is. It is contemplation.

In such a contemplation we make simple affirmations. We look at aspects of the human condition and point in the direction of God to indicate their sources and destinies.

So let me offer a few short philosophical koans that may help keep our minds focused on the mystery. I recommend these for contemplation. You will recall that contemplation has to be kept simple. This involves suppressing questions of why these statements may be true, or how they work out in practice. It also means suppressing your imagination (artists in particular will want to portray these somehow). Even suppress your feelings; neither let your possibilities excite you nor your failures depress you. Just acknowledge that these statements are true. Just say Yes:

Whatever beauty we appreciate, it is beautiful by a beauty-full God.
Wherever we, like God, make beauty, we too are beautiful, made so by artistry of God.

Whatever design we find, it is designed by the design of God. Whatever we, like God, design, we too are designed, a design made intelligently by God.

Whatever we say is so, it is so by the say-so of God. Whenever we, like God, make something so, we too are so, made so by the Yes of God.

Whatever we find good, it is good by the goodness of God. Whenever we, like God, make good, we too are good, made good by the kindness of God.

Whomever we love are lovable by the love of God. Whenever we, like God, make love, we too are lovable, made so by the passion of God.

[Back](#)

My Individual Savior?

From what we have said thus far, we have evidence, though not proof, that something about life is immortal and that any really satisfying immortality is not just endless life. The presence of human hope in the face of disasters and the recurrence of human wonder despite confusion about creation and evolution point to the divine. The deathless prize we yearn for lies in making something meaningful of ourselves and creating meaningful ties to others. So, even though everything we know of comes to an end, there is still a wonderful and mysterious kind of eternity in the natural universe. It can be found in human hearts, in the way our consciences and understand reach out beyond death.

Isn't this rather subtle, though? Isn't it far easier to believe in an afterlife, where we carry on, and where our good deeds are rewarded and bad deed punished? Philosophical arguments that prove there is a life after this one do not exactly knock the wind out of us. In any case, most people who believe in an afterlife inherited that belief without much question. And many of those who later examined this belief closely rejected it as wishful thinking or as a myth suitable for children only.

If we suppose, for a moment, that belief in an afterlife is a mistake, with no foundation in reality, then we are brought back to wondering what kind of immortality lies on this side of the grave. We can find that immortality by looking at how all of us are somehow tied into the human family. That immortality can be seen in how we make life "civil."

Civilizations are the result of events in which humans reached out for what endures and were doing so consciously. The millions of decisions made over the centuries by men and women seeing permanent worth in following certain courses of action have played an essential part in the evolution of all human communities. Despite the wars and the callous use of people as if they were disposable pens, people of genuine hope have everywhere conducted themselves with compassion, self-sacrifice, and an intelligence that sets common good over personal gain. They do not want their contribution to die. They want to leave an immortal mark on the world. We do not easily notice this because most people seek this immortality quietly. While accounts of wars are easy stuff for historians because the data is public, much more difficult are accounts of how the hope of billions of anonymous people has contributed to civilization. Any easy dismissal of that contribution to the benefit of humankind overlooks the vast majority of events on which all genuine progress to date has depended.

It is rather easy to see this "immortality" in the way groups carry on despite the death of their members. Look at the rest of nature, where the death of individual things becomes the life of larger things. Forests last for centuries

because the old trees drop seeds and fall out of the way for seedlings to replace them. Among animals, that larger "thing" is a hive, a herd, a swarm. Among us rational animals, that bigger "thing" is community, togetherness, friendship, the universal network of love and care that links one person to another.

Also, a look at the exact manner in which the individual death of a human draws meaning from the larger community reveals some interesting aspects about death. Is it not true that we become our best selves when we engage our lives with others? Is it not a universal experience that when we exchange energy with others, we are much more "alive" than if we hoard what we have? Is it not true even about our garbage insofar as we return our leftovers to the land with a mind to its replenishment? Yet is it not also a fact that in every such life-giving exchange, we "die" a little? Every time we yield some privilege or give up some possession to others, we are also giving up -- letting die -- a potential self that we are capable of becoming. In other words, the larger reality of human community thrives precisely to the extent that its members "die" in some fashion.

This gives us a somewhat larger view of the total picture. Although entropy continues to erode the foundations of the physical world, spirit is busy building on new footings. Although every human will die, communities carry on. Some might object that communities themselves die, but the death of communities is nothing like the death of the individual. In the "death" of most communities, the last members move on to other communities, carrying with them much of the cultural wisdom and practical lore of the "dead" community. Families do not exactly "die." Members are born and members die, but, if all the data were available, we could weave a string of stories where each chapter depended on the previous and set the stage for the next as one family proliferates into others with very different names.

What exactly is it that a community "carries on" beyond the deaths of its members and through its various transformations? It is neither the group's name, nor its property, nor even necessarily its bloodline that carries on. What makes a community a community is shared meaning -- its ways of life, its priorities, its language, its protocols, its laws, its ethics, its art, every single insight that shaped the ways it circulates money, fuel and the news of the day. Each such element of meaning originated through the creativity of some member, a member who dies while the contribution carries on.

In the long course of history, this work of carrying on the values and meanings of a community has been looked at in two mutually-opposed ways, which we might call the Originalist and the Progressive.

Most of our distant ancestors were Originalist. They never imagined that the human spirit had the creativity capable of improving our life together. Older philosophers and historians believed that a civilization improved only to the

extent that it returned to the original wisdom of the ancients. We can still hear echoes of this conviction in the common wisdom among many older people everywhere that the past was better than the present. Even the great story of creation in Genesis and its variant in the Koran depict us as off to a great start and then tripping up by an "original" sin. Politicians and educators concluded that civilized life is something to be kept in good repair against the storms of barbarian invasion and natural disasters. To shore up a culture, leaders used planks inherited from forebears. What counted was memory, not creativity.

But since the arrival of empirical science, and the philosophical reflections of August Comte and Karl Marx, people in developed countries now think of the human vocation as a matter of progress and invention. In this Progressive view, we are called to *improve* the human condition, which means to surpass the wisdom of the ancients. We do not wrap ourselves in our origins; we stand upon them and build from there. Nowadays, no one can read a history book without the background notion that even the worst wars are only temporary setbacks to a natural progression of history into something better.

Parents, for example, typically forgo their own satisfactions to make things better for their children. Many an aging mother has been laid to rest with the comforting thought that at least she gave her kids a chance at a better life than she had. And *her* kids will feel the same about their kids. During an economic recession, we hold our breath, waiting for the market to find itself again, as if it somehow must. In developed countries, people carry a deep confidence that the economy somewhat naturally expands, eventually delivers ever higher returns, and improves the general standard of living in the long run.

Strict Originalist thinking seems too short-sighted to most people. It tends to suppress change and to devalue adaptation to changing circumstances. Yet strict Progressivist thinking tends to be too far-sighted insofar as it presumes that history practically improves itself. Progressivists fixate on a wonderful future that, somehow, will automatically emerge, as if our planet were some kind of egg with a marvelous chicken inside. You would think that genocide, racial vengeance and anti-government terrorism -- the particular horrors of our times -- would have tempered any belief that this progress should be automatic.

Still, I see the scales of history as tipped a little to the Progressive side -- not automatic, but progressing on account of a dynamism in nature that, statistically speaking, tends to hit on the improved form, the better configuration, the optimal integration of materials. Many people will dispute the existence of such a dynamism. They feel that the Natural Selection is sufficient to explain how higher entities emerge from lower ones. That is,

they subscribe to the idea that as chance genetic variations give certain plants and animals an advantage, these tend to reproduce, while those without this genetic edge simply don't survive.

But this doesn't explain the phenomenal organization of plants and animals everywhere. Who, watching Saturday-afternoon nature programs on TV, can help but marvel at the complex yet economical way that the simplest organisms evolve, how cellular life yields control to conscious life and animal sensitivity, and how that animal sensitivity is only a jumping-off platform for the magnificent leap to intelligence in humans? Scientists who believe that the law of natural selection sufficiently explains the emergence of forms that are more adaptable to alien surroundings usually overlook the fact that once new forms arrive on the evolutionary stage, they take charge of all the stagehands and props, making it *less* likely that they will be replaced by yet higher forms. Other scientists, however, based on this evidence alone, propose that there must be another law at work in nature besides natural selection. This other law predisposes matter not merely to forms more adaptive to surroundings but forms of successively higher centralized control. This law may not guarantee progressive evolution at every step, but neither is evolution controlled merely by genetic accidents hitting on mutations that are better equipped to survive.

The evidence of such a law of emerging spirit explains the emergence not only of human individuals but of human communities making meaning in history. And because it does so, it gives our hope in immortality some this-worldly objectivity. In other words, despite the common belief that God saves individuals while communities become irrelevant, there is no individual immortality without a communal immortality. Of course we must understand this immortality as residing in the realm of *meaning*, not in the realm of *time*. We must look for the meaning of any one person's life chiefly in his or her contribution to the commonweal. This is the contribution that becomes irreversible -- immortal -- at one's death.

Think again of Matty Ventresca and you cannot help but think of Gina, Brian and Kimy as well. Does anyone doubt that Matty's cheerfulness came from his family? Is anyone surprised that Matty's courage was inherited from spouses who adopted a handicapped child? These are the meanings that are immortal. The "Matty" died, but the "Ventresca" lives. At the human level, evolution occurs in the realm of virtues rather than biological substrata. New species of care regularly spring up, usually under the action of forgiveness.

The idea that God somehow "removed" Matty from earthly things simply misses what Matty *means* to his family, to me, and perhaps now to you, the reader. The same is true for anyone who dies. To imagine that God lifted him away, like removing a card from a deck, overlooks the fact that the

world today bears Matty's remains, not just in the earth, but in the minds and hearts of all who knew him.

[Back](#)

An All-Powerful God?

I do not know Matty's frailty. I never suffered the kind of diseases he did. Once, during my bout with cancer, I thought I could approximate the day of my death, and so for a brief few weeks savored the gift of each day, much as Matty did. But the scare passed and I returned to normal life feeling rather strong and on top of things.

Recently, though, a sense of frailty is returning. I would like to describe it, partly because I'm beginning to understand Matty's view of life, and partly because I have discovered that in the experience of frailty God touches us in a very intimate way.

My growing sense of frailty comes with aging. I'm getting up there. Getting on in years. When I think about the end, it seems to be far away. But when, after not thinking about it for a few months, I look at it again, it seems a little closer, like bush-covered aborigines sneaking up on cattle, spears poised.

Although the end approaches imperceptibly, I feel its pressure on me to choose between possibilities. When I was eighteen years old, so many possibilities surrounded me that I didn't really have to decide. I more or less fell into things -- these friends, this school, and these hobbies. But recently I've begun to watch my step. Every choice *for* is also a choice *against*. I think that I could learn to play the clarinet, and I would like to. But I doubt that I will because there are other things I would like to do, and time is running out.

Despite actuaries telling me that my chances of not seeing seventy are about 25 percent, I'm confident I'll be able to choose a few more things to do before the end. Perhaps my confidence stems from comparing myself to people older or more infirm, for whom options have already run out. There is very little for them to do. People turn down their offers to help. Each day, time embezzles a little from their bank of helpful energy. Each month erodes their dexterity and renders them less helpful. Many younger people really do not want the help of their elders because they prefer speed and zest to deliberation and care.

Modern medicine has made old age more possible for almost everyone. Not everyone is cheering, however. One is forced to retire from everyday employment. One's life changes dramatically. On numerous fronts, one has to begin a new life. Maybe it's a life lived at home, maybe a life of travel, maybe a life spent learning new skills and working on neglected hobbies. Most likely it will be a life increasingly dedicated to health maintenance. But all this requires dedication, discipline, and encouragement from others if old age is to be anything but a boring wait out here in life's right field for the big pop fly.

Old people want to be useful. Usefulness is the yardstick that measures the quality of their lives. Of course, younger idealists will insist that there is more to life than usefulness. They protest being forced into situations in which they might "be used." But being used is enough for the elderly. My mother-in-law comes into the kitchen and asks, "Can I do anything?" And, with superfluous good will but abysmal understanding, we tell her, "No, Mom. You can just sit down and relax." But she doesn't want to relax. Her bones know that relaxation is a step away from death, and she still feels in those bones the ability to help others.

It takes years to really like the idea of being useful. Children balk at being more useful around the house. To them, being useful is an unwelcome interruption to play. Even as adults, being useful is usually a means to other ends. It gains you esteem, job promotion, power, perhaps love. To the elderly, however, being useful is just that, simply being of some use for someone else. No rewards or punishments. Winning the esteem and love of others has become unimportant. What's important is to be able to give. True, this generosity may be driven partly by raw fear of being cast aside, yet even that is as much fear of the meaninglessness of an unshared life as it is fear of rejection.

There may be senior citizens fully dedicated to doing nothing, but I've never met one. Seniors either show remarkable zest for what's new or, if they are handicapped by diminishing capacities, show open resentment that they can't put their desires into action. So "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." The Christian apostle Paul wrote that wonderful phrase to sum up the difficulty of avoiding sin. But it applies in spades to getting old. It seems the older we get, as our spirit more urgently insists on staying involved, our flesh more stubbornly refuses to cooperate. Everyone who does not die young faces this anomaly.

It is easy to resent this aspect of the human condition. But resentment gets old too. Sooner or later we find ourselves wondering whether resentment is really appropriate. If this simultaneous expansion of the spirit and contraction of the means to put its inspirations into practice are part of the human condition, part of human nature that is not exclusively about evil, then there may be something good in it. There may be some value in being weak.

Again, Paul: "My power is at its best in weakness". We need to face the possibility that God's involvement with humanity *necessarily* brings weakness with it. That is, deep in God's character, there may be a kind of frailty that has eternal worth. The weakness of the flesh, while it surely accounts for malice in the world, may also tell us something about God.

God works best against odds, it seems. Human life is meant to be a struggle, not a perpetual escape from struggle. It is God's wisdom that

designed the human condition to involve putting things together and repairing what's broken. We create, we rest. We rest, there's trouble. We fix the problem or redeem the situation, we rest. Trouble again. By the time we're old, we are leery of rest. We imagine "rest homes" as the worst fate awaiting us, our blood laced with Haldol, our minds turned to mayonnaise.

Gradually it comes clear that God doesn't simply *create* life. God holds life for those who will fight for it. This is a clear reflection of God's feisty and restless personality. "I will give you your life as a prize of war," God says to Baruch. Does God require human struggle because of human sin? Perhaps. Still, the idea that God rests in absolute peace while we drive each other crazy does not square with the belief of most people that God loves us. Take *that* idea, and develop it, and you end up with the possibility that in human suffering God may be sharing something absolutely personal and divine with us. They say doctors play God, but not this God. That God is aloof, capricious, antiseptic, and comfortable. This God is involved, loyal, dirty, and restless. That God sends patients home. This God comes home with the patient.

So maybe getting old means drawing closer and closer to God's frail center. Perhaps the unfairness of waxing in wisdom while waning in strength is only apparent. Age's cruel agonies may not be evil. While we shouldn't go so far as to say that aging is better for us, neither should we say it makes us worse persons. We fight to the end. Even when we stop fighting in our conscious minds, our hearts stubbornly keep pumping, our chests heaving, until the last cells finally yield. It would not be appropriate to compare this struggle to a wrestling match, where the point is to win. Here the point is just to wrestle. The "life" that is a prize of war is *not* one that simply goes on. Real "life," mysterious though it be, is something that *includes* getting older and feebler, enduring the slow losses one by one.

We can look at frailty from another angle. A traditional spirituality counts frailty as a letting go of all the temporary supports to our sense of self and allowing God to take us, dispossessed and nervous, to divine beatitude. Frailty is a reminder that we are not God; we are human. The trouble with this view is that it discounts all the creaturely things we touched and loved. It belittles the millions of ways in which we depended on God's creation. It portrays God as having all the power, stubbornly holding it all, and refusing to let anyone approach unless they're stripped of every possession. It portrays God as liking us, but on condition that we don't like anything else. "You can't take it with you," the adage says.

I, for one, don't believe it. You *can* take it with you. I believe that those who live authentic lives will lose nothing of any thing or any person affected by them. I look at it this way: At my death, even should I find no physical

comfort or emotional consolation, I hope that faith will assure me that nothing worthwhile shall be lost. I hope that God is interested not just in me but in my company, my friends, my acquaintances, in everyone whose life I may have touched. I want to "take with me" anything that I shared with others. God's original idea of me, after all, resulted first from the grand idea of a human family making history. So it seems appropriate to think of God not simply as removing me from my surroundings but rather as improving my surroundings by the way I die. From God's point of view, my death is an act of a community living on in history.

So too for every individual's death. Each death is the Kingdom coming, part of the divine process of sharing life. Far from receiving power from God, death is receiving an exquisite vulnerability from God.

You'll remind me, though? I'll probably forget.

[Back](#)

A God Watching From a Distance?

Imagine yourself, at five years old, being told that you are very special. And the reason you are special is that you will never see high school. You will die first. Matty Ventresca's response to this news was fearless, owing to how his parents told him and perhaps to a natural fearlessness in children about death. Still, whether Matty had to live his few years in fear or in hope, he had to live in the shadow of a mortal deadline.

We all live in this shadow to some extent. We know we will die someday. We hope to get our families raised and some projects completed. Because we don't think about our death much, you would think we would act as though life might continue forever. This is hardly the case. We act as though there never is enough time. The hands of our clocks point accusingly. Their faces stare out impatiently. Yet we seem to like their scolding presence. We wear clocks on our wrists: we call them "watches" as if they have been appointed to remind us of our duties. We hang clocks all over the house. In the kitchen especially: Our kitchen has a clock on the stove, a clock on the microwave, a clock on the coffee maker, and, in a space of honor by itself, a clock on the wall. We have two calendars on the refrigerator, along with half a dozen yellow sticky notes. We even have a sundial on our garage. We are being watched, reminded, beckoned. We dream for the day when we can live without their tyranny.

That day comes when we retire. Then we discover too late that we don't know what to do with ourselves. Our "natural" self -- that imaginary Robinson Crusoe liberated from the chains of an overscheduled civilization -- is bored cross-eyed. So we set a date with friends -- "Meet you at 7:30." We join a volunteer group, which expects us to be there Saturday morning, 9 o'clock, sharp. Our hoped-for escape from timetables turned out to be a disaster. We quickly get on the phone with calendar in hand.

So clocks and schedules have their place. They belong among our instruments for staying connected. Dates are really about staying plugged to the pipelines of life. Not only the "dates" we go on when we're single, but all the dates we set with other people. Meeting together for business is the human way of making sure that people are well served somehow. Hardly romantic, meeting to serve others is an act of love.

It is important not to name time as our enemy, lest we overlook what really threatens human life. Time can be a framework for love and care. Our schedules, appointments and dates are the only way we know how to make our benevolence work. They are the means by which we stay connected to each other. They can give us the opportunity to rely on others in our needs and to allow others to rely on us.

Unfortunately, these schedules, appointments and dates can also be hate channels. People plot to undo others, using clocks and calendars to ensure efficiency. But time is not the enemy here, either. The enemy is something that twists the heart, and a twisted heart is the major, if not exclusive, enemy of our natural vocation. Time, far from being our enemy, is the victim of our true enemy.

What is God's idea of time? In our imagination, we tend to think of absolutely everything as bound by and living in time. Yet philosophical reflection usually concludes that God is beyond time; God invented time. But what is behind God's idea of time? If God made time for some purpose, what might that purpose be?

We must think in metaphors here. The easy metaphor is that life is a game whose end is set like an alarm on a clock. Our experiences as children teach us that we have only a limited time to do the chores assigned by our parents. What counts is not what we are doing at this minute but what we will have done when the time is up. We idealize the deathbed conversion, as if that moment were the most important moment in our lives. As we grow up, however, that simplistic view loosens its hold on our spiritual imagination. The significance of time is not to set a day of reckoning.

Nor do we have to look back to the beginning of time to understand God's purpose. We can see a purpose to God's idea of time by looking at how God creates in the present. In our various reflections above we noted that God's habit is to *build* life, not create it full flower out of nothing. God works slowly, not suddenly. And God works through the working of the universe itself. That is, God does not create new-minted coins to slot into the world as it is. Instead, God has charged the world as it is with an energy that brings forth new forms according to its own ancient laws. Certainly the slow evolution of planets and of civilization on this planet gives us reason to respect God's patient way of bringing forth life. In this perspective, God's idea of time was to make it possible for us to collaborate with the divine. Time is divine room to make mistakes as we grope our way through life. Time tilts the odds to our side that we will find God and allow God to work in us.

With human life in particular, God seems to loathe acting independently of us. There is no unquestionable miracle, recorded by any religion, that God has ever performed without time-consuming human cooperation. In other words, it seems that God wants to build life *with* us on earth, not just *for* us on some land beyond.

This patient and gradual nature of divine collaboration runs extremely deep. For example, look at how each one of us collaborates with God as our minds evolve. As children we depended on images. In grade schools we developed our understanding and, in high school, the ability and intention to

verify our beliefs. We are not alone in this development. We are engaged with God as our free choices interact with God's inspirations. This takes time, and this takes care. This takes community, and this takes history.

Still, community and history have never been universally popular among the people responsible for creating community and whose mistakes make history. Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, proposes that "Hell is other people." Margaret Thatcher once said, "There is no such thing as society. There are only men and women and their families." And many honorable thinkers regard history as nothing but illusion, that nothing really "goes forward." For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "There is properly no history; only biography." But for people who believe that God has fully shared the divine life with us, creating us in the divine image and likeness, it means that there is something about community and history that lies at the heart of the divine essence.

I find it interesting that nothing in any religious tradition prevents us from believing that God may have created another solar system to share divine life with other creatures. Suppose there is intelligent life out there. If their spiritual features have really been drawn from God's most intimate self, then they would absolutely have to be creatures working out their life together over time. Contrary to what some science-fiction movies depict, there would not be a race of pure, unfailing minds, living in perfect harmony with the natural universe. In some respect it would be hearts and minds dealing with each other, needing forgiveness as much as love, subject to death like us, and going to that death with hope for their posterity. Because they too will weave their destinies from a beginning to an end, shuttling from solitariness to community and back, they will need watches to help them watch out. I can see no other conclusion if our condition of living in community and history are an essential share in the divine life of God.

[Back](#)

A Judge?

When I was young, I was taught that many things were wrong: murder, stealing, lying, taking God's name in vain, fornication, birth control, abortion, etc. This was *The List*. Do them and you did wrong.

Morality had an immediate connection to death. Do wrong and you suffer in the next life. Death was simply one's last chance to do something right and to repent of all the wrong things. We were encouraged to pray for the grace of having time for a deathbed confession. In the *Hail Mary*, we Catholics asked Mary to "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Then came sophomore year high school, when this simple framework became unglued. The great enterprise was to exasperate teachers by thinking up exceptions to rules. You could legitimately murder in a war. A desperately hungry person could steal food. You could lie to people who had no right to know what you know. You could even fornicate if you were stranded for years on a deserted island with someone of the opposite sex and had no hope of ever seeing anyone from civilization again. (Sophomore year, remember.)

Because I was raised in a strict Catholic environment, birth control and abortion stayed clearly wrong without exceptions. Ironically, despite our wild attacks on The List, no one questioned that The List existed, mostly in the minds of parents and certainly in the mind of God. The basic myth was still complete. We had swallowed it hook, line and sinker, reel, creel and boat.

But gradually I began to make moral judgments about matters not on The List. Being inconsiderate of others began to feel wrong. Carelessness about my health, taking stupid risks in the car, ignoring small inspirations to say a kind word -- experiences like these nagged my conscience.

At the same time I began to do some of the forbidden things on The List because, at the time, I didn't know what else to do. I'd lie to my parents simply because I didn't know how to tell adults courteously to mind their own business. I explored sexuality in a manner that certainly violated the bounds of intimacy and respect taught me by my religion, yet to this day I cannot envision how I reached what meager maturity I may have without those "mistakes."

The transition from belief in a List to a fundamental trust in conscience was prolonged and difficult. I was *taught* to trust the word of authority; but I had to learn on my own to transfer that trust to my conscience. The word of authority in my early days cautioned me against the evils of everyone deciding privately what's right and wrong. Catholic authorities in particular emphasized the dangers of "private inspiration." These were the terrible

mistakes, I was told, that made Protestant churches continually subdivide in history. Yet my conscience gradually grew more intelligent and more insistent on taking charge.

What eased the transition was a conviction that God is kind. God's kindness, in turn, was measured by my experience of the kindness of my parents. My parents made it clear that they wanted me to take responsibility for what I thought and what I did. The List, like my parents' rule about looking both ways before crossing the street, was just a provisional introduction to growing up.

Some good schooling helped too. In History class I learned that charging interest on a loan was considered wrong only during certain historical periods. In Religion I learned that no one in New Testament times thought capital punishment might be wrong; not even Jesus denounced the practice. Eventually I had to endure the moral shock of realizing that every moral rule sprung from ordinary people like me trying to make sense out of their experience.

There was no permanent, immutable List.

The shock reverberated through everything spiritual in me. The entire task of life turned out to be something very different than behaving properly and avoiding penalties. You had to act responsibly. This meant following your conscience and using your head. You had to be intelligent about figuring out good and bad. You relied on traditional values and codes of conduct for the most part and, in situations that presented real moral dilemmas, you used the head you happened to have and did your best.

St. Thomas Aquinas probably went through the same hesitation before putting conscience above law. But his mind was eventually clear on the matter: "Better to die excommunicated than to violate our conscience," he said.

The effect of debunking The List, far from freeing me to act in any way I pleased, instead made me face up to the thousands of times I neglected to carry through on good ideas. Standing before a kindly God, not an Accountant in the sky, I became more the sinner. More the sinner, not by doing more Wrong Things but by seeing all the wrong things I had always been doing and still doing them. I may be presumptuous here, but I believe I understand what the saints meant when, fully intending to state the absolute truth, they claimed to be great sinners, sinning even while standing in God's great shower of grace. Their sins, like mine, were 90% failures to obey inspirations to offer someone a hand or suppress a sarcastic remark. When one realizes that inspirations are God's work on our behalf, every inner disobedience tells God, "You're wasting your time; stop bothering me."

Where I formerly had divided life into three parts -- good deeds, bad deeds, and a huge middle part labeled "neutral" -- I gradually saw there is no middle. Everything is grace or sin. In this revelation, I was fortunate to be thoroughly immersed in a theology of history taught by Ignatius Loyola. From his "Two Standards" meditation I learned that the heart is a battleground of two subtle but opposed forces. A gentle voice usually draws us to the ungarnished truth and to looking for what is objectively the best, not what pays off just for us. A more agitated voice usually yanks us toward securing a place for ourselves and muscling others out of our way. Every inclination, every impulse, every thought and emotion occurs on this moral slope leading either upward toward grace or downward toward sin. There simply is no neutral event that does not somehow enter into our making of ourselves wheat we are becoming.

This moral shock of realizing that all we poor humans have is our minds and consciences doesn't eliminate The List in one's mind overnight. If my experience is common and I may speak for all, even after we have seen how conscience and understanding are the sources of everything we call "good," we spontaneously consult The List to judge others, to scold them, to dismiss them. We use The List as a moral bludgeon. It is habitual, and it is also far easier than trying to understand every situation we run into.

What is more serious, The List seduces us with a tempting offer of power over others. Parents easily lord it over their children. When they say "That's good" or "That's bad," without ever appealing to their children's understanding, they poison the normal growth of young consciences and probably harden their own.

Relying on conscience and intelligence may well be described as a "situation ethics." By that I do not mean the approach that discounts practically everything in tradition in an attempt to look at a situation with a fresh mind. That kind of situation ethics is naïve. A "fresh" mind is not an empty mind. I believe a good juror is someone who knows a lot about the situation, even though some of that knowledge may be incorrect. I'd much rather rely on the mind's ability to raise a relevant question, an ability which only familiarity can give, than on a mind free of all bias because it has never thought about the matter at hand. In the same way, the best moral mind is the mind that knows some history and can reasonably consider moral judgments made in the past and adapt them to the present situation.

The "situation" I have in mind here includes everything anyone involved already knows and everything they can ask about. That is, the situation always includes the *mindsets* of the participants. It includes the values passed on by tradition. It also includes the practical experience and judgment of the people involved as they adjust their scale of moral priorities in the face of new problems.

A few years ago Catholic officials illustrated the wisdom of adapting past practices and values to a present, unforeseen situation. At the 1994 United Nations Population Conference in Cairo, the Vatican decided not to object to clear assumptions that artificial birth control would be the preferred means of restraining population growth. Before the conference, it was easy for the Vatican to uphold an unyielding position opposing artificial birth control. But sitting at a table in Egypt with men and women equally concerned about the future of humanity, Vatican officials seemed to realize that other issues were more important. Like them, we might wish that all moral positions could be settled ahead of time, but the reality of this, God's world design, is that the good is created, not applied; it results from collaboration, not isolated reflection; and it changes shape in different situations.

When we examine how moral precepts get started, we see that all our Lists of rights and wrongs are like this. The human race may be subject to divine morality, but that does not mean we define abstract categories such as "murder" and "lying" and say that everything in those categories is therefore "intrinsically" wrong. The absoluteness of morality means only that there is a difference between "truly" good and "only apparently good." It does not mean there has to be a set of actions that humans can classify under some concept like "cheating" or "adultery" and then mindlessly condemn every action listed under those headings. We have no warrant for restricting God's way of teaching to the deductive method. Indeed, on this planet, the best teachers more often use *induction*: they patiently assist students in getting insights into their own experiences.

If God has preferred to educate humanity through the inner spirit responding to concrete situations, and writes laws only to retain what has been learned, then what is truly good does not exist in a "general" vacuum. The human good is always the actual or the possible. Ideals such as honesty, loyalty, compassion, fairness, etc., are only conceptual pure types that we use as background for discerning right and wrong in the concrete. Experience tells us we cannot draw a straight line from fixed general concepts to fresh particular insights into concrete right and wrong anyway. For example, people agree that disloyalty is generally wrong, but will argue that *this* act of theirs was not really "disloyal." People agree that murder is wrong, but disagree whether abortion is always murder.

The good life, then, is ever insecure. We seldom say, with certitude, "This is right" or "This is wrong." There is usually a mental reservation going on: "If what I am told is true . . ." or "If this will really be the consequence, . . ." And we take a risk. Being good is a matter of pushing history forward a little from the present situation, inherited from imperfect people, to what we hope is a somewhat improved situation. We stand in hope -- both because we are half-blind discerners of right and wrong and because the heirs to whom we hand on the situations are too.

Morality still has a direct connection to death, though one unlike a bank teller tallying accounts at the day's end. We still approach our deaths with a questionable résumé, but we don't really know for sure what good we have done. In some cases, we did good deeds sheerly for self-gain. In others, we acted altruistically but hurt someone anyway. Is there something wrong with being morally uncertain? I don't think so. In God's providence, it seems better to be unable to list the good we've done. If God has no List of things we shouldn't do, then neither should we keep our List of good things we did. And when we think of the people whose integrity we admire, don't we always see people who don't bother keeping moral records? Aren't they loath to boost their own grades and to mentally quiz others on their moral worth?

Again, having to live with moral uncertainties and to make mistakes out of that uncertainty can be quite discouraging without faith that God is somehow at work here. Many pious adults will blanch at this prospect and return to The List for assurance. For them, The List is God enough.

[Back](#)

Does God Punish?

"My belief in a God who punishes is firmly based on my experience of rush-hour traffic. Those weavers especially. If they don't pay somehow, I'll have words with God."

This sentiment is not as shallow as it sounds. Think of the horrors of terrorism and torture. Think of child molesters who are never caught. The world is not a just place. It never has been and never will be. So it is natural for those who believe in an afterlife to hope in a divine "getting even."

If you could go back in time to November 2, 1948 and observe any Catholic church in North America, you'd see the very curious manner in which this hope in divine justice was expressed. All day long, men and women, girls and boys, would emerge randomly one-by-one from every door of the church, turn around, and head back in. Five minutes later, out they'd come, around they'd turn, and in they'd go again. What they were doing was the once-a-year work of buying parole for the souls of the dead confined to Purgatory before they could move on to Heaven. Six Our Fathers, six Hail Marys, six Glory Be's and out popped another soul. Boing.

Also, as the nuns instructed us, you could designate exactly which souls you wanted out. Unless someone beat me to it, I sprung my grandfather John, for example. And when you ran out of names, you could designate certain categories, such as "the soul who has longest sentence." That considerate thought, however, turned out to be more complicated than first appeared. Sister Grace Ellen was stumped when we pointed out a bias in the system. As long as lots of people were nominating the soul with the most years to go, it was to your advantage to die with a long string of venial sins, and hence a long sentence, particularly on November 2nd, say, mid-afternoon.

Besides, the souls who *really* had the longest sentence were hidden in the middle somewhere, stuck there simply because we, their survivors, had no formula for giving them anything like the priority we gave to "the last soul." The "middle" soul could be gotten out; the "100th soul" had a chance; the "soul who had fewest friends" had reason to be optimistic. But that left lots whose predicament could not be adequately described. OK, pray for "those whose predicament we cannot adequately describe" and . . . oh, well.

Even granting that this somehow benefited the dead, I cannot think of any benefits for the living, except that some of us developed a mindset that achieves respectable scores on computer games. Unfortunately, few church leaders saw the need to lead growing children to a more adult, more intelligible view of how God deals with sin and death. No doubt, these shepherds in the 40s lived before modern psychology had worked out how our minds develop as we grow up. But even today, psychology has not

sufficiently helped us deal with death. With our emotions, yes; but with our faith, no. With grieving, yes; but with hope, no. With anger, yes; but with commending our spirit into the hands of God, no.

Anyway, one very helpful insight into how to think about our own deaths lies not in modern psychology but in ancient psychology. Aristotle noted that the mind can ask two very different kinds of questions -- *what* and *whether*. The *what* question asks for a description or an explanation. About death we naturally ask *what* happens, *where* do we go, *how* it unfolds. Answers to these questions are long and metaphorical. That is, we can only give analogies about *what* happens.

However, the *whether* question asks for simple affirmations. Yes or no. About death we ask *whether* it is our total elimination or *whether* God somehow loses nothing worthwhile. We ask *whether* all shall be well and *whether* the entire universe has its fullest meaning beyond death. Answers to these questions are not metaphorical at all. We can say that death is not the end or that death is the end. We can say God created the universe, even though *what* happened at creation is much disputed. We can affirm that, yes, God gives us the wherewithal to make our lives meaningful, to overcome whatever is the enemy of our nature, and to face our deaths with an assurance that whatever good we did will remain in eternity. *What* will make our lives meaningful and *what* good we did remain hidden.

About Purgatory, all a Catholic can say is that, yes, God makes good out of evil. The sins we committed are somehow purged from us. *What* God might do to achieve this we cannot say, and yet we need some description, some palpable image, to support our belief. Parents try stifling evil in their children through rewards and punishment, and it is this system that children appropriately expect God to use. Hence the reward of Heaven, the punishment of Purgatory and Hell. But fire and time are only metaphors for the reality.

Still, we need metaphors. So why not clothe our adult affirmations of faith with metaphors taken from the ways adults make good out of evil? Our metaphors for God's love should be based on how mature adults love, not on childhood or romantic varieties. Mature adults have learned that punishment and reward are only provisional supports to living a decent life. Eventually a person ought to pursue life along the paths of intelligence and reasonableness, responsibility and love. Mature, loving persons share burdens. They live in some measure of anxiety despite their reputation of being at peace. They put the commonweal above personal gain. All of this means some regular involvement in suffering. So perhaps a better metaphor for the fate of evil in our lives lies in the suffering borne by those who love. In other words, if anyone suffers in some Purgatory, it is God. God's agony is the suffering of a lover eager to forget and itching to embrace the

beloved. God's agony is the agony of any good person absorbing the worst that evil can do rather than perpetuate the evil to protect the self.

I am speaking metaphorically still. Our purgatorial suffering will perhaps be limited to seeing, with absolute clarity and in a single view, all the ways we slap God in the face and all the ways God welcomes us with love anyway. It is the purgative experience of having our faults overlooked and forgotten by someone deeply in love with us. It is purgative in the sense of a catharsis, a welcome elimination of useless baggage. Standing maskless before God, we burn, not from fire but from a poignant mixture of shame and gratitude.

We should not forget those sanctimonious frauds who prefer the sour justice of making amends, those who want to purchase Heaven by penance, those who are afraid of the embarrassing extravagance of God's ecstatic welcome. We can spot them in how they scold the imperfect. Come death, they're in for a quite an embarrassing, scathing purgation of divine forgiveness for their self-righteousness. At least we can hope so.

[Back](#)

A Forgiving God?

Somehow I find it difficult to think of Matty Ventresca worried whether or not God is forgiving. No doubt, Matty had his share of petty lies and meanness, but he grew up in a family that welcomed him despite both his peccadillos and his handicaps. They didn't forgive him anything before opening their doors. They took him as he was and delighted in his company. Their hospitality is not just a metaphor for how God acts. For Matty, it was the ordinary, day-to-day revelation of how God acts. Any religious sentiments he carried were massively influenced by how his adoptive parents cared for him. The idea of God having to forgive was probably far from his mind.

Most religions teach that God is infinitely forgiving. That made sense to me when I was young, but not so much because I ever thought God might abandon me. For me, forgiveness was about scrubbing out small black smudges on my soul. I believed God wanted me clean, though I had no doubt I'd be accepted lovingly were I to arrive dirty. With adults, however, for whom distinguishing right from wrong depends ultimately on conscience and intelligence rather than on authorities and laws, this moral fly-specking is the work of an Accountant God. This is a God who's pretty mad about our breaking the rules but who condescends to forgive anyway because of how bad we feel.

We have discussed the possibility that there really is no eternal list of rights and wrongs. If this is the case, if what is good is what results from intelligent and responsible choice, then God is simply not interested in passing any sort of after-the-fact judgment. God is far more preoccupied with helping people win their lives. If there is any passing of judgment on us, we do it to ourselves.

This is clear in an often-overlooked chapter in the Adam and Eve story that describes what happened to Cain after he killed Abel. God did not impose a capital punishment on Cain. With profound irony, Cain judged himself. His deepest fear was that he might be murdered. He ended up begging God to protect him from people who kill -- people like himself. So God put a mark on his forehead, with the warning that whoever killed Cain would inherit a sevenfold vengeance.

This is an irony that marks everyone's conscience. Our deepest fears are that people like ourselves will cross our path. Just as the murderer Cain feared murderers, so thieves fear robbers, slanderers fear rumormongers, charlatans fear fakes, seducers fear seduction, and so on. God has no need to condemn our wrongdoing; we condemn ourselves. Any final judgment by God will be unlike the sentencing of a courtroom judge. It will be more like God's final decision to honor what we have chosen. With resignation, God will finally give up inviting the fearful to give up fearing. Unable to reverse

the effects of our free choices, God will have failed to turn the hearts of those who covet the neighbor's goods or spouse.

That the Last Judgment is essentially a self-judgment is clear in what I believe is the most terrifying story in the New Testament -- The Prodigal Son. Briefly, a father has two sons. The younger has the itch to get away and the elder more obediently stays home. The younger asks the father for his inheritance, which he gets, and then heads out, wasting it all on wine, women and song. He eventually returns home, head hung in shame, hoping for a modest place among his father's servants. The father, who all this time has longed for his son's return, welcomes him with warm embrace, robe, ring and celebration. Meanwhile, the elder brother complains that he has been faithfully laboring in the fields all these years, and where is the celebration for him?

There Jesus' parable ends. It may more aptly be called The Irked Brother, since Jesus aimed the parable directly at the Pharisees, who were claiming lifelong adherence to the rules and were irked because Jesus paid attention to their less holy fellows in religion. Like the Pharisees, the older brother in the story resented that the father would welcome home a foolish son.

Notice that the father never exactly forgives the prodigal; forgiveness is just not on his mind. He mainly is overjoyed that the son wants to be with him, and so he wants to celebrate. To the upright brother (that's you, Pharisee!) he gives the same invitation to join the celebration: "The doors of heaven are wide open. Come and celebrate with God -- and all those God welcomes. There are no locks in the afterlife. Come into Heaven whenever you please . . . unless, of course, you don't like the company."

Jesus had the insight that what makes separation from God a harrowing torment is that the damned repeatedly choose it for themselves. No one else damns them. Hell is identical to the refusal to accept the free gift of company with God. The Pharisees, Jesus implies, run an extreme risk of losing taste for a God who enjoys sharing a good time. Should they do so, then the free choice of damnation is theirs alone. Jesus skillfully ends the story without telling the Pharisees (or us) whether the brother lets go of his bitter righteousness. Thus the obedient are easily damned. Terrifying, yes?

So, if God doesn't even bother much with forgiveness, if Jesus' picture of the father in this story is an accurate picture of God, then it really does not make much difference how certain we should be about our moral standing. What really does count, maybe the only thing that counts, is that we desire to be with our kind God and with the other fumbling mortals with whom we share the universe -- along with everything else Jesus made a special point to mention: the veal entrée, the classy outfits, the finest jewelry, the music, the hugs, the dancing, and all our friends.

Somehow I can better picture Matty at this party than with a God who keeps records.

[Back](#)

The God We Find in Death

We have looked more closely at death in order to understand more about God and about the kind of faith we need to meet death. With this approach, we have already presumed something that takes faith to believe, namely, that death is God's idea for sharing divine life with us. That belief alone has the power of leading us to a profound and yet practical trust that God would not allow death to be the end of us. Not that this trust is easy. Anyone who cares for the dying with this in mind will still find it difficult to accept the pain a dying person usually goes through. The friends and family of a person facing a terminal illness typically go through the same stages of dying -- denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and, after some shuttling among these responses, acceptance. However, there is a profound difference in an acceptance that is just resignation and an acceptance that is full of hope. When a loved one dies, almost everyone eventually accepts the fact, but to carry on with mere resignation is nothing like carrying on with confidence that all shall be well.

To help support this difficult act of faith, we needed to reconsider seven common images of God. We needed to strip each image of various misleading impressions they often convey. But notice that it was not enough to replace these images by some alternative images. We also needed to state propositions -- declarative sentences that call for an assent of the mind, not a picture in the imagination. It is these declarative sentences that point to the realities we believe in. Here, for example, are some of the major statements we offered for this assent:

Hope is a real event, experienced by everyone, an event regarded everywhere as a key to something bigger than death.

If there is any universal pattern in the universe that science reveals, it is clear that destiny everywhere involves a kind of death, not a death by annihilation but a death by an incorporation.

It remains extremely important to use the mind simply to acknowledge and reverence the ultimate mystery of the universe and its divine origins and destiny.

Despite the common belief that God saves individuals while communities become irrelevant, there is no individual immortality without a communal immortality.

Deep in God's character, there may be a kind of frailty that has eternal worth.

God wants to build life *with* us on earth, not just *for* us on some land beyond.

God has preferred to educate humanity through the inner spirit responding to concrete situations, and inspires some to write laws only to retain what has been learned.

Our metaphors for God's love should be based on how mature adults love, not on childhood or romantic varieties.

If God doesn't bother much with forgiveness, then it really does not make much difference how certain we should be about our moral standing.

The "Last Judgment" is essentially a self-judgment.

These are only some of the many propositions that follow from the basic belief that death belongs to God's way of sharing life with us -- the divine life that remains ever mysterious, remote to our understanding yet intimate to our desires. At any one of the many deaths any person goes through, God is revealed. To meet these deaths with faith means accepting death as the price of life and, as well, learning intimate truths about God.

[Back](#)

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