

My Memoirs - Chapter 1 - Meet you later, God

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Young Dan Fefferman

So, the world's youngest philosopher began his quest to understand the origin of the Universe. Where did I come from? Did God create the world, or did everything just exist? When I see something, is it real? Are things that are "blue" to me also blue to other people? How can I be sure that what they call "blue" isn't really red? The big one, of course, was "what happens after we die?" If my dad had died from his heart attack, would I never see him again, or would we meet again eventually?

Of course, my now five-year-old self wanted to believe in God, because that meant I wouldn't "really" die after I died. So, being a good little empiricist, I devised some tests. I called them "God bets." "God," I would say, "if you're there let me catch this ball 100 times in a row." Or "if you're really there, let me hit a bird with my sling shot." I didn't try stupid tests like demanding God give me superpowers. But wait, I do recall running around with a cape and a Superman shirt. So maybe I did. Anyway, sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. The jury was still out.

Then came the showdown day. My favorite team back then was the Hollywood Stars, since the Dodgers hadn't come west yet. I watched the games on my parents' new black and white TV. It was the bottom of the ninth, the bases were loaded and the Stars were losing. With two outs, my favorite player, Dale Long, came up to bat. I knelt down in front of the TV. "God," I said, "if you let him hit a home run, I promise I will believe in you." You guessed it. On the very next pitch, Dale Long hit a grand slam.

I'd like to tell you that this bet settled it for me, but in truth is that all it did was to drive home the seriousness of my decision. If I chose to believe, I would break with my parents. If not, I would renege on a 'God Bet' that God had clearly won. I began asking questions. My dad's uncompromising "I don't want to meet the sonofabitch" atheism didn't do much for me. I liked my mom's agnosticism better, since it left the "maybe" door open. Elsie, the housekeeper who had become something of a second mom to me, was clear as clear could be: God is real. Jesus is real. Satan is real. What was my five-year-old self to do? Violate filial piety, or betray God?

I decided to ask my parents about Jesus. I don't really recall what my dad said, probably something along lines of "Jews don't believe in Jesus." I do remember my mom's answer. It was an important moment emotionally because I had never seen my mother get nervous before. I sensed question struck her in a place that made her very uncomfortable. After a moment she gave her reply: "We don't think Jesus was God, like Christians do. But he was good man who taught good things. If we had been alive back then, we would have followed him." Damn good answer, Mom.

And so, considering all this, I made my choice. I decided it would be too hard for me to live in a world so completely different from the rest of my family. Regretfully, I got down on my knees again and prayed: "God, I'm sorry, but I can't believe in you yet. When I grow up, I promise I will believe in you then."

The little philosopher then locked this episode deep in his memory, while God patiently waited.