

DOING THE BEST HE CAN

“If God is good, then he is not all powerful. If God is all powerful, then he is not all good. I am a disbeliever in the omnipotence of God because of the Holocaust. But for thirty-five years or so, I have been believing that he is doing the best he can.”

Norman Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son*

In the literature classroom discussing American Puritan writers such as Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, or Michael Wigglesworth, I have often found myself trying to make the same point as Mailer. Knowing the popularity of gambling in the Clemson dormitories, I usually resort to a stud-poker metaphor to explain myself. In the imaginations of John Calvin and many of his Puritan followers, God calls the game, antes, stacks the deck, and deals. A few rounds of betting may follow, but no one is surprised by the outcome. A humanist's view of the poker-playing God (let's call Him Zeus to sharpen the distinction) still has the Almighty calling the game, but then He shuffles, and passes the deck to be cut. He does not arrange the cards to His liking, and His odds of winning are just slightly better than the others at the table because presumably, He has called His favorite game, plus He comes last in the betting order, often a decided advantage.

In one Olympian game of seven-card stud that I had the privilege to sit in on recently, I received a pair of nines showing, but nothing in the hole. Several face cards were then dealt to my opponents, but my heavy betting drove them to concede; indeed, Zeus Himself folded with the ace of spades up. Three rounds of betting later, I drove off the last contender who was showing a pair of queens. My poker-faced bluff saved the day, and a large pot was my reward. I found it interesting that after Zeus folded His cards, He walked around the table but gave no indication that I did not have that third nine, another pair, or anything else of value. In other words, Zeus was the most powerful player at the table and the most knowledgeable, but He still lost as did my other opponents, some of whom spend a lot more time in church than I do. In Calvin's game, God or His “elected” (because God casts the only vote) always wins. Bluffing is not only unfair but impossible; consequently, those Puritan games are short, dull, and monotonously predictable.

However as Norman Mailer says, one wants to think that Zeus, cheering like a t-ball dad in the bleachers, is doing His best. Indeed, the game is always held at Zeus's comfortable home, and He generously supplies the chips and dip. But if you want to drink something other than water, you'll have to supply that yourself. He doesn't make you stay to clean up, but I feel sure He appreciates the help. What I enjoy most about the competition is watching the old guy in His green visor shuffle several billion cards at once: He throws the cards in the air, and a cyclone whirls them about until they fall neatly back into His outstretched hands. What a guy!

His shuffling reminds me of a super slo-mo film of the wind blowing across a field of coreopsis. Most of the pollen falls on the ground to be sure, but some of it falls in the ovaries of blossoms hundreds of miles away. I suppose if I wanted to give *all* the glory to God and none to man or nature, I might (as Calvin believed) say that God knew where every grain of pollen would fall because His aim is unfailing. But is the grain of pollen lodged between two rocks or the acephalic fetus evidence of perfect marksmanship or a

divine miss? I know that many things that appear wrong turn out to have value down the line: think of the South's view of the Union in 1865; then think of it in 1945. But a child born without a brain, as reluctant as I am to admit it, has little or no redeeming value and never will as far as I can see. The everlasting sorrow inherent in such a birth far outweighs the pleasure of its conception. And still with all the practice God has had, He continues to supply mothers with one acephalic fetus per 10,000 normal ones. Were there no such specialization as prenatal research, I expect this number would remain roughly the same. However, the day may come thanks to human efforts when brain stem cells could be implanted in an empty skull before the fetus ever sees the light of day. Intrauterine surgery is already being performed, so why not imagine a day when a fetus without a brain can be supplied with one. No one will be happier on this occasion than the Creator who has given man the brains and body to accomplish what once was thought to be miraculous and today is routine. Indeed if it were not for the efforts of man, aspirin and thousands of other drugs would still be dormant in the plants where man first found them.

Ben Herlong an old friend and a veteran of World War II once told me a story that helped me to understand God's limitations. One day in the terrible French winter of 1944, Ben and his infantry platoon had come under mortar and rifle fire. Several of Ben's buddies lay dead about him as he furiously tried to dig himself a foxhole in the frozen earth while the company medics cleared the field of the wounded. Hunkered down at a depth of about two feet, Ben heard a mortar round land ten yards or so in front of him. The explosion generated a wave of adrenalin in Ben followed by some wild digging, so that when the second round fell ten yards behind him, he was crouching about four feet down. Suddenly Ben realized that he was being bracketed, and the next shell should fall right on top of him. He was digging his own grave. Ben cast about for some other shelter, but the trees were too far away even if he had been fleet of foot, which he was not; in fact, his burlap-bound feet were near frozen. Suddenly in the dying light, he saw a fresh mound of dirt about two hundred yards away, and he realized that even though he could not see them, his mortar-firing enemies had to be crouched behind the mound doing the fatal math. "Though I trusted God," Ben said, "it was time for this ostrich, metaphors be damned, to seize the charging bull by the horns!" He threw his shovel aside, grabbed his rifle, and emptied a clip into the only earth visible that was not covered with snow. Perspiring profusely, he waited for the third shell to fall, but it never came. Later in the darkness, he cautiously made his way to the suspicious mound and discovered two German soldiers slumped over their mortar. After he'd pulled the bodies off a few yards and slammed a fieldstone against the mortar's barrel, he bedded down in the spacious German foxhole he'd just liberated and fell asleep.

The next morning before word came to move out, Ben wondered what the outcome would have been if the shelling of the previous day had occurred in the summer. With the ground thawed, any mortar or artillery shell landing within a few yards of a properly dug foxhole might well have buried him alive. In basic training at Fort Benning, Ben had been taught that it was not enough to dig *down* in the Georgia clay; a good infantryman also had to dig *forward* a couple of feet to protect himself from a round exploding overhead. But as many had learned too late, a shell exploding beside a foxhole occasionally caused a landslide that buried the occupants. He knew that the hole he had dug the day before was not deep enough for that to occur, but the memory gave him pause. He wondered what God's role in all of this was. Both of the adolescent Germans that he'd killed had

Catholic crucifixes about their necks. And while Ben was a Baptist, he fairly assumed that all three worshipped the same God. Was God then cheering for one Christian side and not the other? Nonsense, he decided; God just made the ground rules, one of which is: water freezes at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit. In four months, the very foxhole he was resting in might collapse around him if a mortar round exploded a few feet away especially if it burrowed a few feet into the soft loam before detonating. God does not wage war, Ben concluded, nor does He aim the mortars, guide the shrapnel, or decide what time during the year the two sides will meet. The rules are the same for all combatants, and man is free to fight or flee, dig or shoot.

But if God makes all the rules and knows everything in advance, isn't He responsible even if He doesn't pull all the strings? When this question comes up in class, I find myself resorting to the hypothetical again. As in the Olympian poker game, Zeus knew more about the deal than anyone else at the table, but unless He's holding a divine flush, He often doesn't know the final outcome. This ignorance relieves Him of absolute responsibility though the Calvinists believe He has and never will relinquish full control. Now, imagine me Zeus-like in my eighth-floor office musing out the window eating a sandwich. Suddenly amid the lunch-hour traffic, a van pulls into the library parking lot and stops in front of a good friend's car. I know it's Ray's car because he arrives every morning at six to get that coveted space. I assume Ray has called a mechanic because emerging from the van is a man in dirty overalls carrying some tools. He disappears under the car for less than a minute, crawls out, gets back in the van, and drives off. Suddenly I see some fluid gleaming in the sun running out from under Ray's car. I take my field glasses from my desk to be sure, and who do I see but Ray entering his car from the side opposite of where the leak is. Is it gasoline, I wonder, anti-freeze, *brake fluid*? I open the window and yell, but he doesn't hear me. I then grab the telephone and call Ray on his cell phone—fortunately, I have him on speed dial. Before he can leave the parking lot, I am relieved to hear his voice and tell him to stop his car immediately. His foot goes all the way to the floorboard, he tells me in a panic, before the vehicle stops against a curb scattering students in several directions. I wave to him from the window as he slumps against the steering wheel. Taking the elevator down stairs to investigate, I think back over my role-playing: was I playing God or just acting like a responsible human? I tell myself that God may have given me the raw materials, but I derived the conclusion and made the call. Silently, I thank God for His gifts; then, I strike up the little Dixieland band in my heart to celebrate a life saved. As for my "omniscience," I have no idea why anyone would have cut Ray's brake line much less who it was. So, when my neo-Calvinist sister tells me that God has all the knowledge *and* all the power, I politely ignore her. If God had the knowledge, why didn't He call Ray while I was yelling out the window? If God had the power, why didn't He derail the Holocaust? The God that Norman Mailer and I worship waves a lot from the sidelines, but sometimes we just don't see Him or pay Him any attention.

Whether we worship Zeus, who could not or would not save His own son from dying in battle though He saw the Greek spear before it was thrown, or Jehovah, who either could not or would not save His son from the Roman spikes before they were driven, we are left with a God whose powers are circumscribed. The sooner we recognize that, the sooner we humans can get down to the business of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, curing cancer, and slowing global warming. Surely even the terrorists among us would welcome those goals. Squabbling over whose God or prophet is superior is a tragic distraction that prevents us from improving the lives of billions.

I've long loved the story that Jews and Muslims alike tell about the wise old farmer who is planting a tree in his orchard when he is interrupted by a neighbor excitedly yelling, "The messenger of God has come!" Says the rabbi or mullah to his listener, "When you find yourself like the farmer in such a conflicted position, first finish planting your tree; then, go and meet the messenger who claims to be from God." Stories like these lie about the fringes of every religion in the apocryphal writings that didn't make the final cut, but it's here that we often locate the nuggets in the mud.

Speaking of the fringes, I can't imagine many places more remote than the Sinai Desert. In the shadow of Mt. Sinai in the midst of that vast desert stands the monastery of St. Catherine built in the fifth century A.D. to wall in what was considered the Burning Bush of Moses' day. As the Egyptian crow flies, the monastery lies about a hundred and fifty miles from Jerusalem, nine hundred miles from Athens, and sixteen hundred miles from Rome. For some fifteen hundred years, the famed Old Testament shrub had grown in the desert before Greek Orthodox monks built massive stonewalls to protect it. How they located the right plant is not recorded. Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Jews alike admit that the bush has not burst into flame in three thousand years; nevertheless, in case some cheeky Muslim youth douses it with gasoline and strikes a match, a fire extinguisher stands at the ready. The silent admission of this modern precaution speaks volumes about the reality-based faith of the brothers who maintain the monastery. I doubt that there are any lightning rods at St. Catherine's, but plenty of them and lots of sprinkler systems as well have been installed on and in churches where lightning is commonplace.

If I were a guide at St. Catherine's and a tourist asked me about that extinguisher, I'd say, "The monks here trust in God to be sure, but they recognize that with a universe of immense size to watch over, divine oversights may occur. The next time your back goes out, remember that for some two million years the hominid spine traveled parallel to the earth, not perpendicular. The responsibility for the once-divine shrub is now man's, so it is he who waters, prunes, and fertilizes it. Long ago when the monks observed that the pruned branches of this *rubus sanctus* do burn, the installation of a fire extinguisher in proximity to the shrub was considered prudent."



After discussing free will in a class once and announcing the first examination, one student asked if I thought he'd pass: "Is it in the cards, professor?" he wondered aloud alluding to my fondness for poker. I said that like God before testing Abraham and Job, I had no clue what his or anyone else's score would be. To the best of my ability, I said the test would be a fair measure of their comprehension of the material we'd covered. Moreover, while I might predict some failures and notable successes, all my predictions are non-binding and subject to error.

Murmurs of discontent from the back rows led me to assume that some didn't believe me, so holding up an empty grade book, I said that like God, I could only pray for their best efforts, but that all of them, prepared or not, have the option to pass or fail. With tuition as high as it currently is in 2006, students often don't consider the value of failure, but after running up a grade-point average of 1.5 on a scale of 4.0 as a civil engineering major at Georgia Tech in my first and only semester there, it was comforting to know I would never

design a bridge that would collapse in heavier-than-I'd-anticipated traffic. Indeed, the D's and F's I'd accumulated were not just a good thing for me, but for drivers everywhere.

I prayed that I'd never have to take another calculus class, and my prayers were answered when I dropped out of Tech and enlisted in the army. When I returned to school four years later, calculus was not required for English majors. Who among us, I wonder, has not prayed and discovered what he prayed for within his grasp? Regardless of one's faith, it is often tempting to think that the answer to one's prayers is merely a coincidence, but it would be a bizarre world indeed, if coincidences never occurred. The law of averages states that occasionally red, black, or green is going to show up on the roulette wheel three, four, and even five times in a row. No mathematician who's ever lived, however, could predict without technological assistance when a given color will show up at any given time. Indeed, the odds of red appearing on one turn of the wheel are 38:18 unless you're in Europe where they are 37:18. Too often, however, people pray for rain; the rain falls, and those happy wet souls attribute the rain to their heartfelt prayers. If, however, they'd checked the weather forecast, they would have seen that cold front sweeping down out of Canada toward another front pushing up from the Gulf of Mexico.

One afternoon, I took my poetry workshop outside to enjoy the spring weather, and the first young woman to present her free-verse poem (a reworking of the Adam and Eve story) announced that she regretted the poem's "blasphemy." The class's most outspoken critic suggested that she apologize forthwith, but I said that if God seriously objected, He'd throw down a lightning bolt that instant. Actually, the sky was darkening and a very light rain was starting to fall, so lightning was not out of the question. Instead, the poet's cell phone rang just as I said "lightning." We all laughed at the synchrony while the poet had a muffled, red-faced conversation. As she hung up, we all wanted to know if God had called.

"No," she said, "it was my Indian friend Krishna." Thirteen jaws dropped simultaneously before we all broke into laughter again. After class, I asked if she'd been kidding about Krishna calling.

"No," she said, "Sri Krishna is his name."

"Sure am glad it wasn't Shiva!" I said and wished her a good day. Walking back to the office, I thought such is the coincidental stuff that most if not all mystical experiences are comprised of. The radical deist Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason* (1793) called these experiences "hearsay" and argued that they shouldn't be admissible in the court of public discourse. My personal beliefs, however, are much closer to the twentieth-century American poet James Dickey's than Paine's. Dickey, a mentor of mine in graduate school, was puzzled by people who deny the existence of God with no more evidence than those who vouch for His intimate involvement in human lives. "The thought of a Creator makes the world sweeter," said Dickey in class one day, "and helps all of us feel more secure as when we see a uniformed pilot boarding the plane before we do. Who is so callously self-confident, I wonder, that he could deny a lonesome child an imaginary friend? I see a lot of bumper stickers saying, 'My boss is a carpenter.' Well, my boss is the primal electrician who let there be light before creating the stars! Whoever or whatever made this universe, even if it's nothing more than the mystery of life or the blind force that refused to leave a vast void unfilled, deserves to be worshipped." And whatever the Creator is, I would add, It deserves our knee-bending respect if for no other reason than the obligatory worship which rescues us from pride.

I'll never forget a Clemson physicist at a faculty forum who mocked a reference of

mine to “God the prime mover.” Said the smiling astrophysicist, “Creation just happened like spontaneous combustion.” I replied, “But *someone* had to douse those rags in linseed oil and pile them in the corner, didn’t He, She, or They?” As Edgar Poe says in “Sonnet—To Science,” science is a vulture that alters everything by its ceaseless questioning and scrutiny, and though the bird’s appetite is insatiable, its food is never completely consumed. The situation is every student’s nightmare—answer one question, and two more appear beckoning the test taker to some black hole of absolute reason where God has no purchase.

The American poet Wallace Stevens referred to the spiritual reality that humans universally have a need to believe in as a “necessary” or “supreme fiction.” In 2006 incidentally, 92% of Americans agree with Stevens. Call it a lie or call it faith, but few of us are willing to make a long trek through a pitch-black tunnel without a light to walk toward. Without the “fiction,” Stevens suggested, humans are emotional cripples with dangerously inflated notions of themselves. I recently asked my five-year-old grandson Spencer who he thought God was, and without hesitation, he said, “He’s the great spirit who started everything with a BIG explosion. Now He takes dead people and turns them into spirits like Himself.” Not a bad definition for a kindergartner or an astrophysicist especially if no one *really* knows either way. If one cannot know, why not opt for the utilitarian view that brings the most people the most happiness? No harm is caused by such innocent belief because I’m not speaking about organized religion, just faith. And as Nietzsche observed, “With a ‘why,’ any ‘how’ is bearable.”

Though I regularly attended church services for over twenty years and I appreciate the fact that the church rescues alcoholics and addicts long after families and state agencies have given up on them, much of organized religion is “the poison in the blood” as Salman Rushdie has argued. I saw first hand how religion drove a wedge between my maternal grandparents when my grandmother decided that full immersion was the only acceptable form of baptism. She left the Methodist church that she and her husband had attended for close to forty years, and in doing so, left my grandfather a very lonely man on Sunday mornings. Similarly, a friend of mine’s Northern Irish Catholic family refuses to lay a wreath at a World War I memorial in Belfast because the shadow of an Anglican church occasionally falls across the memorial. Another friend’s mother became a Jehovah’s Witness after the baptism of her seven children in a Baptist church which meant that she refused to be a witness to any of her children’s weddings in the church where her husband retained his membership. I’ve seen enough instances of such divisiveness that I’ve decided there’s no reason to pay for another layer of bureaucracy between me and the Creator. In about 10,000 years of recorded history, man has established some 100,000 religions; which one would I choose?

On the other hand, I’ve watched enough goose-stepping state funerals and eight-minute Soviet weddings to convince me that a God-less culture has little appeal either. But the “fill-in-the-blank” Episcopal services that hardly mention the deceased don’t assuage my grief either. Give me a convivial wake with family and friends in my living room or a local tavern, and my spiritual needs are usually met.

My own innate faith might be called “the faith of the unsqueezed rat.” In the 1950s, some psychologists at Johns Hopkins had the bizarre notion that if a rat was squeezed in human hands to within a whisker of its life, the poor beast might become more passive than a Native American infant wrapped in a papoose. The rats were each held until all struggle ceased. As if nearly pressing the life out of them wasn’t enough, these sadists in white lab coats then placed the despondent rats into a bucket of water whose sides were

so high and steep that no escape was possible. Thousands of rats were squeezed or not squeezed and then placed in the water. Some rats were tame; others were wild. Sometimes the water was warm; other times it was cold. All of those rats who'd been squeezed, however, quickly drowned. A few swam for up to an hour, but many sank like stones without any effort to save themselves. The rats who'd not had their "faith" crushed, on the other hand, swam for as long as eighty-one hours!

Like Albert Einstein, the unsqueezed rats, my grandson, and myself, many of us want to believe in a benevolent God, not a cosmic crap shooter, but a charitable uncle in the garment business who has wrapped us in the biosphere's cloak (but not too tightly) even as He has left us to our own devices. We can sink or swim. "With the right attitude," Robert Pirsig observed, "anything is possible."

When Einstein's beloved sister Maja was near death, however, he did not advise her to place her faith in God, but to "look deep into nature, and all will be well." However, the vast majority of us, Einstein charged, are like "fish who know nothing of the water." Yet if the fastest human swimmer moves at four m.p.h. and the fastest fish at sixty-eight m.p.h., and if man has inhabited the planet for four million years and fish for 450 million years, I'd be willing to bet that fish know a lot more about their environment than Einstein gave them credit for. On the other hand, what *do* humans know of their "water"? We know, for example, that the life span of the atoms which comprise the human body is ten to the thirty-fifth power or 1,000,000,000, 000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 years. That may not be an eternity, but it's a lot longer than the Bible's "three score and ten," ample time for scores of incarnations both animate and inanimate. We know too that the pineapple, the chambered nautilus, the spiral nebula, and many other seemingly unrelated things share the mathematical organizing principle known as the Fibonacci Sequence. It may be just a coincidence, but it's a staggering one.

The German philosopher Georg Hegel famously argued that the Fibonacci Sequence, which he compared to one orderly room in a mansion, doesn't prove the existence of a master architect. In 1779, sure as Hegel was of the pre-eminence of chaos, he could not have known that even the mansion's formal living room lies in disarray. Our subatomic closets are a rat's nest according to quantum physics, a quaint notion that Einstein never took seriously. Indeed, given the uncertain behavior of neutrinos and muons, he was ridiculed for his belief in an order-maintaining God. But even if the quantum theorists are right and Einstein is wrong, what's wrong with a messy sub-basement as long as the landlord does his best to run a tight condo? Don't we all have some place where chaos reigns?

There's a great adventure ahead, I believe, and it has nothing to do with pickling oneself for eternity or strumming a harp. We have nothing more to fear from death than what we felt at birth—death's equivalents of the forceps and surgical shears. I won't pretend that meeting my Maker doesn't make me apprehensive especially when I dodge a "bullet" on the Interstate or wrestle in the dark with a flu bug, but when I stand on Table Rock Mountain, where I wish some of my ashes spread, with a clump of bluets at my feet and look out over the Blue Ridge Mountains into that "blue yonder," what's to fear? It'll be like coming home.