

Doubting as a Step Toward Spiritual Growth

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Someone once remarked that two sorts of people please God: those who serve God with all their heart because they know God, and those who seek God with all their heart because they do not know God. Christians of all sorts--whether parishioners or priests, religious or laypersons--are both finders and seekers of God. We are finders of God, any of us who have been drawn, however briefly, into a sense of wonder and awe before the living Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. And we are all seekers of God, too: people who, time and again, need to confess our foibles and failures, people who hunger for a deeper intimacy with the Holy One, people who wrestle with all kinds of questions and doubts. At one time or another, many Christians have been members of churches that allowed no room for questions or doubts, churches that taught their members to be ashamed of their doubts and to keep them secret--but as novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner once put it. "If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me."

The story of Doubting Thomas in the gospel of John is for all of us who dare to admit that sometimes we have doubts--doubts, perhaps, about the goodness of God, doubts about the Resurrection, or doubts about the living presence of Christ. Thomas is the disciple who gives voice to our doubt. He is the one who is unwilling to settle for someone else's testimony about the Risen Lord. For him, it is not enough when his friends report, "We have seen the Lord." Thomas insists, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side. I will not believe" (John 20:25).

FACING OUR DOUBTS

Somewhere along the line, we may have been taught to view Thomas with just a touch of contempt. After all, as Christians we hope to be people who are deepening in faith, and here is a disciple who shamelessly admits that he has some doubts. Thomas--and all those like him, who are willing to express their doubts--may make us uncomfortable by reminding us of our own doubts, and so we flinch and draw back. To shield our faith, we may be tempted to look down upon the Thomases in our lives or to brush them aside. But I believe that both the disciple Thomas and the Thomas that we all carry within ourselves deserve our sympathetic attention and our respect. To entertain doubt is to be spiritually alive. Through the grace of God, our doubts can draw us to God just as surely as our faith can.

This may sound very strange. Obviously, our faith can draw us to God, but most of us are wary of our doubts. We tend to think of doubt as an obstacle to faith, not a vehicle of faith. And so we force ourselves to ignore our doubts, and we anxiously grip whatever faith we can muster.

But does doubt really need to be an enemy of faith? Can doubt be transformed from a wall that blocks us from God, to a doorway that opens us to the divine? What are some ways of being faithful to doubt that can actually deepen our faith?

HONORING YOUR DOUBTS

I would like to offer three suggestions for working skillfully with doubt. The first suggestion is this:

Honor your doubt. Listen to your doubt. As Frederick Buechner also said, let your doubt be the ants in the pants of your faith. Or, to change the metaphor, let your doubt be the wind at your back that propels you toward the holy mystery of God. Doubt can be a wake-up call to faith.

Perhaps we are troubled by doubts about some aspect of Christian doctrine or belief. If so, I hope we will honor those doubts. Perhaps they are a signal to learn more about current theology, an invitation to realize that good people of faith have come to understand Christian doctrine in very different ways. The last formal Christian education that many of us received may have been back in eighth-grade Sunday school. No wonder we now chafe under the uncomfortable sense that our God is too small. Certainly, we have grown and matured since the eighth grade, but many of us continue to labor under some out-dated theology or maintain childish conceptions of what we are “supposed” to believe and to accept as truth.

Doubt can be good news: it can be a sign that we are moving from the stage of passively receiving our faith, of accepting what our elders or teachers told us simply because they said it was so, to appropriating our faith and making it our own. Doubt may signal the birth pangs of a mature faith. If we are to honor our doubts, then we may need to dive more deeply into the life of the mind and learn more about contemporary theology.

On the other hand, sometimes the way to honor our doubts is to recognize that we have reached the limit of what the human intellect can understand. The doubts that assail us painfully in the middle of the night are generally not neat little questions about Christian doctrine. Instead, they tend to be urgent, personal, significant questions that cannot be answered adequately simply by reading a book or memorizing a creed.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why has someone I love died? Why am I going to die? Is there really a God? Does God really love me? Questions like these are not resolved by glib, intellectual answers. The big questions of life cannot finally be grasped by the intellect alone. So when we are aware of our doubts, aware of our questions, it means that we have come to the edge of a great mystery. One of the great mystics, the unidentified author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, emphasized that “By love may [God] be caught and held, but by thinking never.” It is a sacred moment when we confess that our intellect can go only so far and no further.

PRAYING ABOUT DOUBT

This brings me to my second suggestion about how we can make our doubt draw us to God, and that is to pray our doubts. Doubts are part of who we are, and if we want to grow closer to God, if we want to be real with God, we must be willing to share our doubts with God in prayer. C. S. Lewis once observed that “the prayer preceding all prayers is ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.’ Our intention in prayer is to be our real selves and to encounter the real God--not our ideas about God, nor our concepts of God, and much less our projections and fantasies about God. If the “real me” is full of doubts, then that is the prayer

I have been given to pray. Like the anguished father in the gospel of Mark (9:24), I must learn to cry to Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

Doubt is a form of spiritual pain, and we can pray our doubt in much the same way that we might pray any physical pain. How do we do that? By leaning into the doubt, breathing into it, going into its center. We do not flee from our doubt or deny it or avoid it. We let it be exactly what it is. As we gently bring careful attention to our doubt and share it very simply and honestly, with God, we may eventually notice that something is hiding behind the doubt.

For example, maybe anger is behind the doubt: maybe I discover in prayer that what is really troubling me is not that I doubt the reality or the goodness of God but that I am angry with God. Or maybe I discover in prayer that what lies behind my doubt of God’s presence or God’s care for me is a deep sense of abandonment and loss and grief. Or perhaps behind my doubt there lurks some kind of fear--maybe the fear of commitment or the fear of taking myself seriously as a spiritual being.

When we pray our doubts, we open ourselves to discovering the feelings that lie beneath the doubt, and then those feelings become our prayer. We pray our anger, our grief, our fears. As in any friendship, it is often through sharing our feelings with God that our relationship with God is freed to become more intimate and more authentic. For many people, risking their feelings in prayer--daring to reveal and express their honest feelings with God, however painful or shameful those feelings may be--is what brings their relationship with God to life again. Doubt can turn out to be the doorway through which we discover a new, deeper, and more authentic relationship with God.

MOVING BEYOND DOUBT

My third and final suggestion is this: Be ready to move past your doubt. Please note that I am not urging that we suppress or squelch our doubt or force it away. That would be to avoid the truth and to pretend to be people we are not. But after we honor our doubt and pray our doubt, there may be a time when God invites us to move past our doubt. There may be a time when we realize that doubt is holding us back from God and keeping us from even dipping our toes into the ocean of God’s love.

“Come and see. Come and see.” That is what Jesus said over and over again to the people who paused to look at him, and who wondered who he was and what he was up to. “Come and see”--come and discover for yourselves what Rudolf Otto, in his classic work *The Idea of the Holy*, called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*--the awesome and rapturous mystery of God. “Come and see,” says Jesus. “Come and see.”

Doubting Thomas is one of my favorite of Jesus’ disciples. He is the one who wouldn’t settle for secondhand reports about the resurrection of Christ but wanted to know God in and through his own experience. He wanted to see and to touch for himself. And how did Jesus respond? Jesus welcomed him. “Put your finger here,” he said, “and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (John 20:27).

Jesus invites us to do the same thing. He invites us to explore and to trust our own experience and to discover his presence for ourselves. For some of us, exploring and trusting our experience [is] not easy to do. For one thing, we may have been taught to rely on some external authority for religious knowledge rather than to examine our own lives. To make matters worse, some of us come from dysfunctional families that taught us not to trust our senses, our feelings, or our imaginations, and certainly not our heart’s desires. We may have learned early on not to trust what we saw or heard or felt, to pay no attention to what was right before our eyes, to ignore our deepest longings. It takes a long time to

unlearn such lessons.

SEEING FOR OURSELVES

But Jesus says to us, “Come and see. Come explore your own experience. Come learn to pray. Come learn to trust your feelings. Come learn to listen to, and to trust, the deepest desire of your heart, which is the desire for love, the desire for wholeness, the desire for God. Do not be afraid of your doubts,” he says to us, “but come and see.”

Whether we think of ourselves as people who are seeking God or as people who have found God--whether at present we are wrestling with doubt or filled with faith--the questions before us are the same: Are we honoring our doubts? Are we praying our doubts? And, when the time comes, will we set our doubts aside? When the Living Christ breaks through the closed doors of our minds and hearts, will we hold back from Love? Or, like our brother Thomas, will we utter those words of joyful trust and faith, “My Lord and my God”?

RECOMMENDED READING

Adams, J. *So You Think You're Not Religious? A Thinking Person's Guide to the Church*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1989.

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