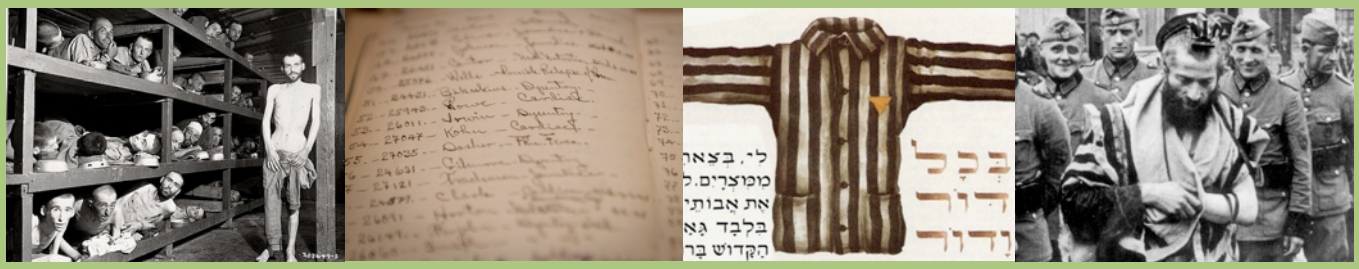
And the truth shall set you free...



Thanksgiving 2013

In the cold candlelight of the barracks, God was placed on trial.

The makeshift courtroom reeked of human sweat and excrement and the witness stand was a lice-ridden mattress. Winter winds surged through the clapboard siding as the judge, a Jewish rabbi in his former life, presided over the case. This was Auschwitz, 1944. And all those in attendance were prisoners.

The evidence was convincing; the testimonies, scathing. When God failed to defend himself against their charges of abandonment, crimes against humanity, and genocide, the judge pounded his makeshift gavel and handed down the verdict of guilty. A moment of eternal silence followed. And then, without hesitation or irony, the rabbi stepped down from his judge's bench, donned a moth-eaten prayer shawl, and declared it time for evening prayers. The whole barracks soon filled with the beautiful, warm poetry of the *Maariv*, a liturgy of praise to God for His goodness, faithfulness and love.

This story, as penned by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, plays to questions as old as God Himself concerning faith and doubt. There is something blatantly audacious — laughable, even — at worshipping a deity whose purpose is deemed moot and existence doubtful. When God is tried, sentenced and convicted beyond a shadow of a doubt, what point is there in reciting the evening prayers? Particularly in this age of ardent atheism, isn't God as good as dead?

These, and a host of other questions, were dredged up and discussed with shocking candor during a course entitled 'Atheism for Lent' that I participated in several years ago. Lent, the season on the Christian calendar just before Easter, encourages the faithful to give up some habit or desire. Typically, people forego common vices like chocolate, fizzy drinks, smoking or alcohol. At Journey Metropolitan Church, we gave up God.

Like Elie Wiesel's barracks-turned-courtroom, I and my fellow congregants met weekly to cross-examine our faith with no holds barred. In the chilly springtime of 2011, we sat wrapped against the cold under a converted railway arch-turned-church, and read testimony from Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Dawkins and the like. Conviction and zeal were checked at the door, apologetics and pat-answers silenced. When Good Friday arrived, the crucifixion story read aloud, and the words of Jesus recited — 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' — we couldn't help but feel that even Jesus became an atheist, if only for a short moment.

And so this past year, in a paradoxical display of faith, I adopted monk-like austerity, winnowed down my worldly possessions to a single backpack, and set myself adrift in the foggy seas of faithlessness. Family were worried at my lack of employment; friends were confused by my sudden and urgent departure. As for me, I needed time and space to explore my world, both external and internal. During my travels, I bowed in prayer with my Muslim brothers in Turkish mosques, lit candles in Roman Catholic cathedrals, prayed penance in synagogues, and feasted under exploding fireworks for Hindu Diwali. I spent lazy Sundays in bed with various lovers, drank casks of wine under clear and starry skies, and shook my fist in anger at the unknown God who made me. Like the Amish youth during their permissive year of *Rumspringe*, I pursued the abandonment of my faith with religious ardor.

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But religion is all around us. It underpins our laws, personal ethics and broader culture. All human societies, in every corner of the globe, have some form of religious belief. Ethnologists grapple with understanding how this universal phenomenon came to have such a tenacious hold on us, especially when societies hold such divergent belief systems that clearly runs against each other and against logic. From an alien perspective, there is no apparent or functional reason for believing that an unfertilized woman gave birth to a deified boy, or that men who sacrifice themselves in battle will live a second life in a place populated by beautiful virgin women, or that a supernatural being bestowed a section of desert in the Middle East to a favored group of people as their home forever. And still, the world's various devout populations take a stand on these positions, yell from the rooftops that their stories are true, commit unwaveringly to them, and even prepare to die for them.

Yet like the prisoners of Auschwitz who prayed despite their scathing condemnation of the Almighty, I find there is something redemptive in faith — a story that binds us together as a tribe, group or society. The moral codes laid down in faith give us structure and meaning: a welcome order in a world that so often seems random, meaningless and chaotic. It's why an inner chord vibrates when we read 'In the beginning the earth was formless and void… and God said let there be light!' and order begins to appear.

The stories of faith around the world are diverse and conflicting. But they need not be factual in order to be *true*. After running amok this year, I've shifted from a *prescriptive* notion of faith of systematic theology and constraining regulations, to a *descriptive* notion of faith wherein the story contains truth. An example is in order.

Several years ago, my good friend Luke was telling me about the film *Into the Wild*. It's the story of a young man who unburdens himself from the heavy expectations laid on him by parents, school and society, and goes on a solo traveling adventure to live free, happy and unencumbered. That is, until he spends a season in the Alaskan wilderness and (spoiler alert) dies from accidentally eating a poisonous berry. In describing this film to me, Luke said, 'Oh man, I want to be just like that guy!'

Of course, I understand that Luke has no intention of wandering into the Alaskan wilderness to commit suicide by repeating the main character's dietary folly: that would be a *prescriptive* interpretation of the story, which misses the point altogether. No, Luke's wish was to emulate his carefree, unencumbered lifestyle, to live out the *description* of the story. And so it is has become with me and God. Religion provides us with a story around which to structure some meaning into our disordered lives. We need a story to live by, and faith brings meaning to existence. Which is precisely why the prisoners of Auschwitz could condemn God on trial, and proceed directly into prayers after the sentence is passed. Faith — even just the routines of faith — provided them with the purpose, meaning and drive to survive in the darkest nights of terror and primal fear.

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In the warm, flickering candlelight of the temple, Hiro placed an offering of a few small coins into the box at the feet of the Buddha. Incense swirled in the filtered light, and I sat under the Buddha's silent gaze, staring at the shiny gold patina along the statue's right cheek where the gold leaf had worn and oxidized from the weather. In the quiet of the cavernous hall, I asked my Japanese host why he found Buddhism so compelling. His answer was simple: 'It makes me ask questions of myself and of life. It engages my curiosity. And if ever my sense of wonder and curiosity dies, so will a part of my soul.'

We spent the afternoon walking the grounds of that temple and the manicured gardens, each view perfectly crafted to hide and reveal different facets of the landscape like admiring a diamond from it's many different facets. Hiro was impressed that I knew so much about Buddhism's faith and symbols, despite having never practiced. My response was that some stories are universal: stories that value love, generosity, selflessness, hope, faith and commitment. Every one of us has experiences that lay beyond the facility of words but that represent for us something true and real. We push our existence and understanding to the limit of our language, but beyond that limitation lay a realm of mystery and power that we cannot seem to fully embrace. It is there, on the penumbra of our linguistic limitations, that God resides.

Around the time of Thanksgiving last year, I was airing my doubts and frustrations with my wise and God-fearing mother. Seated on the living room sofa, surrounded by a windstorm of my own doubt and fury, I acted as judge, jury and executioner for my faith on trial. The emotional axe was raised high and ready to fall, when my mother quietly interjected: 'You know, I suggest you don't worry about it so much. You're not going to know all the answers the side of eternity, so just submit yourself to God everyday, return to what you know is right, and keep walking.'

It was a bitter pill to swallow, coated in the religious language of my upbringing, but healthy and true in substance. It's been an incredible blessing to have the last year to downshift and to stop carrying around so much baggage — both literal and metaphorical. In the calm after the storm, my concerned mother quietly said, "I understand now why you've done what you've done." Because sometimes, the best thing you can do for yourself is quit your job, take a road trip through Turkey, prune olive trees, make wine in Tuscany, and paint your mother's house. And sometimes, you just need to say your prayers. And when you do, somewhere along the journey, you realize that the issues and questions and doubts that plague you are not really a plague at all. They're just a part of story that is messy and complicated and beautiful and redemptive all at the same time. When you step back and hold your doubts and accusations lightly, be honest with yourself, and open your soul to the diversity of human experience and expression, you realize that nobody has the monopoly on truth — including yourself. That's not to say truth is nowhere to be found: We are steeped in truth if only we are curious enough to see it in the beauty of our surroundings.

❖ *Joel Bond*

The Permanent Nomad

More writing by Joel Bond can be found at www.joelbond.net. A full-time traveler, Joel currently works as Cabin Crew for a large international airline. When not traveling the world, he enjoys writing, good food, learning languages and taking naps. He currently lives in London.

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