

Healing Faith

How a physician returned to God
[Pat Fosarelli](#) | JANUARY 18, 2010

It must be hard for you,” the eighth grader said to me with sympathy. “Isn’t a doctor supposed to be an atheist?”

His words did not shock me. I had heard such an assumption numerous times before. The first time occurred when I was working in a clinic that provided medical care for H.I.V.-infected and H.I.V.-affected infants, children and teens. A foster mother was rocking an inconsolable infant whose tiny body was wracked with withdrawal symptoms because of his birth mother’s drug addiction. While I recorded the results of his physical exam, the foster mother crooned softly to comfort him. She stopped her singing to say, “Jesus loves you, and so do I.” Then she blurted out, “Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Looking up, I asked, “Why not?”

“Aren’t you doctors all atheists?” she asked. “I don’t want to offend you. You’ve been so good to the baby.”

I grew up in a Catholic, Italian-American family where going to Mass every Sunday (and even on weekdays) was expected. I attended Catholic schools from first grade through college. This Catholic upbringing enlivened in me a robust spirituality. God was very real to me. Even in college, I spoke to God in prayer regularly throughout each day.

In medical school, however, I was surrounded by classmates who spent Sunday mornings sleeping in. God had no place in their lives. More important, I encountered the enormous suffering of the truly innocent: premature infants struggling to breathe; children with vicious malignancies, the treatments for which subjected them to prolonged misery; and children with horrible congenital defects. My Catholic education had taught me the good are rewarded, the evil are punished. As a 21-year-old previously unexposed to much suffering, I struggled to make sense of what I was experiencing. What evil had these children done?

I concluded that I had been duped for 16 years. The only intelligent thing to do was to jettison my uncritical belief in God. Not courageous enough to be an atheist, I chose agnosticism. “Give me the proof,” I said to all who would listen, “and I will believe.” So as not to be a hypocrite, I refused to go to church even on Christmas and Easter.

That lasted nine long, painful years. I missed the intimacy of prayer, even as I doubted that there was anyone to whom I could pray. Medical school, internship and residency can be very difficult years: one is exposed to some of the hardest moments in the lives of others. I could have used someone in whom to confide. Once that had



been God, but now it was my colleagues. They could not answer my questions about why bad things happened to innocent people.

Why was I so disappointed in my faith? I reasoned that if God had permitted such horrible things to happen to young children, then the least God could do was to fix things. If God is omnipotent and loving, doing right by children should be a no-brainer. Ignorant of the fullness of the Catholic tradition, I had no idea that many saints had struggled with such issues. I thought I was one of an enlightened few who had exposed the ruse of a loving, all-powerful God in a world filled with the suffering of innocents. Full of myself, there was no room for God.

Children's Questions

No sudden flash of insight led my return to God. It was the children who ultimately brought me back—the same group of suffering individuals who had caused me to doubt God's existence. They buffeted me with questions: Why would God let them be so sick? Why didn't God make them better? Why weren't their prayers working? Why did God let their mom and dad break up? Abused children asked me why God had not stepped in to stop their torture: Why wasn't God on their side?

In the beginning I fled the children's questions by hastily leaving their rooms, but soon realized I was meant to hear them and respond. Instead of expecting God to make their lives better, I decided to assume my own role. I sat with children and teenagers when their family members were nowhere to be found—being present with them in their fear, confusion, anger and sorrow. I acknowledged how little I really knew about God's ways, while exploring what I could do to help. To their never-ending questions, I often said, I don't know. My refusal to be a know-it-all comforted them. They could see I was in solidarity with them in their suffering.

Suddenly God became very real to me. In the suffering children, the "little ones," I met the suffering Christ. When I rocked a child in pain, I comforted the suffering God. I remember looking into the faces of young children and asking myself, "Who is this—really—whom I am comforting?" Instead of an impassive, supremely independent God, I met a God who needed me to make a difference in the lives of suffering people.

Doctors, Science and Belief

I decided to seek graduate theological education to learn how people of different times, places and cultures understood God, especially amid suffering; I felt this would make me a better doctor. My medical colleagues were scandalized. "You are on the faculty of a school of medicine and write for medical journals, and you are going to be a student again? Why would a doctor need a theological education?"

My colleagues' questions were based on a modern view of medicine, one in which doctors restricted themselves to science and did not entertain philosophy or theology. Yet my young patients and their families did not permit me to remain aloof from the existential questions they faced. To stand with them, I had to understand them better. My science had to come to terms with their beliefs and dreams. In so doing, I became an heir to a proud tradition that did not find God superfluous in the art of healing. In some cultures, doctors and spiritual healers are one and the same.

As a physician, theologian and pastoral minister, I find that most suffering people speak about God when their lives are in turmoil. Some are respectful; some are repentant; others are hostile and very angry at God and the people who claim to represent God. When faced with finitude, all sorts of people find God very real, even those who had no time for God before.

Although some skeptics might explain this appeal to God as a human need for a Big Daddy to mop up the hazardous spills in life, the words of patients and their family members impress me as too profound to attribute to wishful thinking.

Before the Enlightenment, physicians accepted God-talk as part of the art of healing. To them, God dwelt in the recesses of human misery as much as in the peaks of human joy. Physicians understood both the magnificence and frailty of the human body, although they could never have imagined its delicate cellular structures and exquisite biochemical balance. They attributed the body's magnificence to God and understood themselves as "chosen" by God to care for human illness wherever they found it. It was a divine calling, but they never mistook themselves for God. A physician's job was to work with the Divine Physician.

Nowadays, by contrast, it is popular to call patients "clients," as if they are party to an economic transaction. Physicians and patients are partners, but only in the crassest sense is their relationship predominantly an economic one. Rather, physicians and patients are partners in the entire healing enterprise, which includes the spiritual and the physical.

God as Healer

Physicians today distinguish disease from illness: disease is the defined condition someone has; illness is the disease and its effects on person, family, friends and social roles. In another time, it was all illness, which was not private, especially when one was suffering or dying. Illnesses are messier than diseases because one must deal with much more than an organ or an individual. Yet when one can facilitate healing of a person, one has made a major impact, not only on the life of the ill person but also on the lives of those around him or her.

Enter God.

Only God can heal because only God can affect people profoundly on both microscopic and macroscopic levels. We human beings do our part, but the project is much larger than we are. In life, especially during illness, our human abilities often fall short. Yet extraordinary events happen. Conflicted relationships are healed. Hopeless situations are resolved. Seemingly impossible events take place before our eyes. Are these coincidences or moments of grace?

Healing is always possible even when cure is not. Cures are usually restricted to the resolution of adverse physical conditions, and sometimes a cure is not possible. Healing is more holistic in that it encompasses the physical, psychological, social and spiritual. Although a dying person will not be cured, he or she can be healed. In the end, cure will elude every one of us, but healing need not.

Jesus was a healer. He looked into the hearts and minds of those who sought his aid in recovering their sight or ability to walk. He restored them to wholeness, not just to physical well-being. Their problems were larger than eyes that could not see or legs that could not move. Jesus saw their illness as well as their physical condition. He was open to the divine, which made all the difference. It still does. When human beings open themselves to a power greater than their own, extraordinary things can happen. They can see illness as well as disease. They can see the human being before them and, in that person, see God.

Consider selfless service to others. What explanation for it suffices? From an evolutionary perspective, it makes no sense. Why risk one's life to save a person who is not even kin? Yet firefighters and emergency care workers do it all the time. Doing such jobs well means risking one's life. Where does the desire for such self-giving come from, since it is of no practical benefit to themselves? To put it in theological language: What is the origin of agape love? There is but one answer.

God is in the midst of tragedies, in the persons who need assistance and in the persons who willingly give themselves to help others. Although rescuers are merely human beings even at their finest moments, that is too limited a descriptor. Just as suffering people can serve as an image of the God who suffers with them, so people who give selfless service to others show forth the God who sustains and gives. Those who give freely reflect something of the divine in the midst of their own flawed humanity.

It is no longer possible for me to be an agnostic. To doubt God's existence, I would have to deny the totality of my experiences. I would have to deny the divine spark present in the individuals to whom I give and in the individuals who give to me.

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