

How do you make the leap of faith when you're not athletic?

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Let's consider your age to begin with -- how old are you?'

'I'm seven and a half, exactly.'

'You needn't say "exactly",' the Queen remarked. 'I can believe it without that. Now I'll give *you* something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day.'

'I can't believe *that!*' said Alice.

'Can't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.'

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said 'one *can't* believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

But what if, unlike the White Queen, you cannot believe impossible things? What if you'd like to believe in God, but find you can't?

And the first thing I want to say is that no one is asking you to believe anything impossible. Faith is *not* about the suppression of reason. It is not about suspending one's critical faculties. It's *not* about leaving behind the head and deciding to live out of the heart instead. If you do that, you will not be integrated, and you will not have peace – you'll still have 'head vs. heart' divisions going on within - and such 'faith' as you have will be heading for shipwreck, because that which you repress always resurfaces.

No, Jesus urges us to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, *and with all our mind*. Faith must involve the rational as well as all the other dimensions of what it is to be human. Or we will be setting up internal division where what we are in profound need of is integration.

So, if you're not persuaded of the truth of the Christian world-view, keep thinking, keep asking questions, keep working away at the rational level.

But of course there are other levels than just the rational, and sometimes the blockage to belief comes from these other levels. Sometimes our rational faculties are pulled out of

shape by these other factors. Perhaps a bad experience of the church has made us disinclined to believe what are in fact *good* arguments for the existence of God. Or perhaps a bad experience of fatherhood makes us internally reluctant to believe in a God who is so frequently addressed as Father. We need to be aware that what presents as a rational objection may have some quite other root.

Or maybe it's the other way round. Maybe the whole thing makes sense at a rational level, but not at an emotional level. Maybe you think, 'Yes, faith seems to fit the facts, and I can see how it would make sense of life, and indeed of death, and I find it attractive in terms of the purpose and meaning it would give, but nothing's clicked for me. It makes sense but it kind of leaves me cold.' What do we do? Do we just carry on through life as we always have, hoping that one day it *will* click for us? Do we just wait? Are we just passive? Or is there something we can do?

Well, what do you do if you want some *other* experience? What do you do if you want to see the northern lights, for instance? Answer: you put yourself where you are most likely to see them. I once saw them in Oxford, and they *have* been seen as far south as Southampton in living memory, but if you stay in Southampton, the chances of seeing them aren't that great. If you want to see the northern lights, you'd best go north. The question is, what is the equivalent for faith? How does one best position oneself if one would like to believe?

I want to suggest three things we can do. The first is to begin a conversation. I believe there is such a thing as agnostic prayer that has integrity. Don't pretend to anything that isn't true of you, but get talking.

You probably know the story of the rock climber whose rope broke, and he fell twenty foot, and found himself on a narrow ledge on the edge of the rock face, and he cried out, 'Is there anyone there?' To which a divine voice cried out, 'Yes, I am here. Just step off the ledge and I'll catch you and lower you gently down.' There was a slight pause and the mountaineer said, 'Is there anyone *else* there?!

The point is, if you don't know whether there is anyone there or not, there is nothing disingenuous about asking. There is nothing dishonest about beginning a conversation. Just say, 'God, I don't know if you exist, but if you do, make yourself known to me. Help me to evaluate the arguments aright. If you *are* real, help me to see the truth of your reality. And if you *are* there, will you show me the root of my inability to believe, will you unmask the problem I have with believing in you?' Saying that wouldn't compromise your integrity in any way. And you wouldn't lose anything by saying it. It just betokens an openness to the possibility of God, that's all.

Of course, a conversation is a two-way thing, so there is no point in asking God a question and then not listening for a reply. So the other conversational skill we need to practice is silence – stilling the cacophony of the inner voices that all too easily drown out the still, small voice of God. If we want God to speak, then we need to practise the art of listening. If we want God to be part of our reality, then we have to create space for

Him to meet with us. The regular practice of agnostic prayer and silence will create just that space for a conversation to get started.

So begin a conversation.

Secondly, attach yourself to a faith community. If you want to give up an addiction to alcohol, it makes sense to place yourself in a social context where others share your aim and support you in it. It's easier to do with support. So is faith. So are most things. It's easier to do in a community where that is what people do.

Sociologists talk about plausibility structures. And by that they mean that it is easier to believe things if the people around you believe them too. It is hard to believe things that the people around you don't believe. So one of the things that the church acts as is a plausibility structure.

Now, that seems at first glance like a bit of a cop-out. Isn't it a bit like brain-washing? A bit like joining a cult, where you end up believing destructive nonsense because everyone *around* you believes it? And of course there is always a danger of that – that is why I began by saying that we must never disable our rational faculties.

But remember that our current social circles are already acting as a plausibility structure. If the people we live with and work with are living without reference to God, then that itself is already conditioning us to do the same. It is already tending to filter out some of the impulses that might lead us to seek God and to experience Him. So attending a church, as long as it supplements and does not *replace* our other social circles, is just redressing the balance.

The Creed we say at communion services begins, '*We* believe'. Faith is a corporate thing. It is not something you have to work up by yourself, and *then* go and join a community of others who have trodden the same solitary road. It is something normally done corporately and relationally.

An ex-colleague of mine once did a baptism visit for a family, and the father of the child listened to what my colleague had to say about what baptism is, and then said, 'Well, that's very interesting. I have a wonderful wife, a well-paid job, two lovely children, a beautiful home – but there's something missing. I will come to your church every Sunday for one year – and if you can show me that you have what I am missing, then I'll sign up.' Eight months later, he and his child were baptized together. Belonging is the right context for believing.

So, begin a conversation. Attach yourself to a community.

And lastly, join in the work. God, according to the Judae-Christian tradition, is utterly committed to justice. If you want to meet with Him, then fighting injustice is what you'll find Him doing. If you wanted to meet with Jesus during His public ministry, then with the poor and the outcasts is where you'd be most likely to find Him. That is still true in

the twenty-first century. If you want to meet with God, if you want Him to be real in your own experience, then do something – it doesn't have to be anything huge - that aligns you with the fight for justice and that brings you into contact with those for whom society has little time. That is where He is sure to be found.