

*“If I were going to begin practicing the presence of God for the first time today, it would help to begin by admitting the three most terrible truths of our existence: that we are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little.”*

—Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow*

I spent the first two months of the new year trying to compose a tidy tale of a crisis of faith—a telling both graceful and accessible for a captive adolescent audience. As many faculty members do throughout each school year, I had agreed to give a chapel talk, a short reflection delivered during our thrice-weekly chapel gatherings to some 250 students at the Asheville School. Writing the piece, about a chilly and chilling December, proved as much of a struggle as the crisis itself.

In November, my three-year-old daughter and I borrowed a library book called *How the Dinosaur Got to the Museum*, which traces the assemblage of a diplodocus at the Smithsonian Museum. It begins about 145 million years ago as the diplodocus “grazes on the plain with his pencil-like teeth.”

In the next frame, rains turn to torrential floods, sweeping the diplodocus, and presumably lots of other dinosaurs, down the river. It is the illustration for this frame that struck me, with each reading, for its peculiarity. As the water rises around the diplodocus and reaches his belly, he maintains the exact same stoic position as when grazing on the plain with his pencil-like teeth. He bears a pleasant expression—a slight smile, even. Is he calm in the face of death? Oblivious to the threat of the water rising over his haunches? Just poorly illustrated? The book focuses on what happens after the dinosaur’s death, but I admit that his demise was our favorite part.

About the time we had to return the library book, the temperature dropped in Asheville. A few snow flurries drifted down. Now, it was December 21, 2012, and according to the Mayan prophecies, the world was supposed to end today. Normally, I subscribe to the theory put forth to me by one of my students, who told me that his grandfather used to say, “If you’re cold, you’re either poor or stupid.” I laugh every time I think of this saying; it appeals to both my Minnesotan roots and my circle of control: I can’t control the weather, but I can control how many layers I put on. And yet, on this day, I couldn’t get warm. One week before, a gunman had broken into an elementary school and shot twenty children to death. Late the previous night, a dear

friend had called me with sadnesses of her own, and her loneliness seemed to me that morning to stand for all the loneliness in the world.

I couldn't get warm, even though by Minnesota standards it wasn't even that cold. I just felt raw. I didn't picture the end of the world coming in cold. In my dreams it is always a tidal wave. I could get my head around a fiery blast. The idea that we would just freeze to death? I had not considered that.

As I stood that morning in an elementary school gym with improbably high ceilings, waiting for my turn to give blood, I felt as if I had a tiny shattered chandelier in the middle of my chest. And the donation didn't go particularly smoothly, either. I winced and grunted as the nurse, whose nametag said Nicole but logged into the computer as "Kassandra," shifted the needle in my vein. "Sorry," said Kassandra/Nicole. "You've got a runner."

"It's OK," I inhaled, focusing my eyes across the room on a yellow poster that said, "If you have a goal, get on your T-R-Y cycle," below a picture of an orange trike.

Later, after I had left the enormous gymnasium shivering, I wondered again about the diplodocus. I wondered if, instead of the one giant tidal wave I imagined in waking dreams, the end of the world could come as a slowly-rising river that piled one great sadness on top of another, where those of us who hadn't yet been touched smiled pleasantly as we grazed, while those who buried their children swept quietly away down the riverbed before us. In the weeks surrounding Christmas and leading up to the last days of the year, I felt a clinking in my heart, a current around my ankles, reminding me that for some people, the world did end in December.

I felt suddenly that my desire to give blood was nothing more than a do-gooder's grasping for some semblance of control, to feel I had DONE something to correct the chill in the air, as if I hoped I could check "do something about human suffering" off a list. My attempts to understand the workings of the world seemed as effective as riding a little orange "try" cycle, pumping knees up to shoulders in awkward contortions, pushing the pedals round and round, a full-body effort that would take me no further than the end of the driveway. The spinning of my mind invited a kind of paralysis--and I had a whopping bruise on my right arm to remind me

of my futility.

Carol Orsborn, author of *The Art of Resilience*, calls times like these “moments of impact.” It is in these moments, when we are raw and despairing, when we turn to faith for comfort--but one of my troubles in this particular moment of impact was my disconcerting lack of a clear faith to which to turn. I’ve experienced moments of transcendence, like the first time I visited a Quaker meeting, when I felt certain that a beam of God’s light shone in that room. But I don’t have the kind of unshakeable faith I sometimes yearn for, the conviction of those who believe in the power of prayer, those who say they *know* Christ in their lives. What I wanted to ask on this morning, standing on the cliff’s edge of the Mayan calendar, was, if we turn to faith for comfort, where do we turn when our faith is shaky, undefined, in question? When we look up at the heavens and a nagging little voice in the back of our minds whispers, “What if there’s no one there?”

As I began to sketch thoughts for my talk, the usual questions floated around, too: Why do some people suffer so much more than others? Why do some places in the world seem to take so much of it? Why are humans so cruel to one another? Am I a Deist, I always wonder when I teach that part of Enlightenment thinking, in which God is sometimes described as a “Great Watchmaker”, an idea which goes some way toward answering these questions. I’m intrigued by the philosophy of author Susan Jacoby. When bad things happen, she writes, “I do not have to ask, as all people of faith must, why an all-powerful, all-good God allows such things to happen. The atheist is free to concentrate on the fate of this world ... our deeply held conviction that the absence of an afterlife lends a greater, not a lesser, moral importance to our actions on earth.” Is this what I believe? I have wondered. Am I an atheist? But I am also drawn to Buddhist thinking, which describes Enlightenment as a union with the “ever-enduring reality.” And why on earth had I agreed to give this talk? I resigned myself to the fact that it wouldn’t provide any answers; the best I could offer was an honest example, the stumbling meditations of regular person, grappling with the questions of existence.

I read John Green's novel, *The Fault in our Stars*, during that same forceful week in December, and I was struck by the mantra of his character Gus, a teenage cancer patient who reminds, cajoles, insists: "The universe demands to be noticed." But it was not until I tried to articulate my crisis of faith in writing that I realized I was beginning to cobble something together. "We are so ruined, and so loved, and in charge of so little" ... The universe hums along, demanding, at times and in ways outside of our influence and comprehension, our attention ... I was borrowing bits from the Buddhists to Anne Lamott, the Quakers to the dinosaurs—and though this jigsaw of faith did start a slow creep toward pacifying some of my anxieties, it disappointed me a little. It lacked the drama and conviction and power of being slain in the Spirit, the sense of renewal of being born again. It's just acceptance, and it is difficult and scary for someone who would rather have more of a say in things.

My strongest impulse, of course, is to try and protect my family, and I would prefer if keeping them safe fell entirely within my control, with "putting on more layers," and not outside, with "the weather" or "the apocalypse." But in fact, the word "apocalypse" does not mean the end of the world. It means "a disclosure of knowledge," "a revelation," "a lifting of the veil," and my veil is my illusion: the hope and insistence that my graspings could alter the course of the universe, or that I could understand the logic in its workings. Well, universe, consider the veil lifted. Even if I'm not sure I want it, I accept this new faith, in all its wonder and terror.

How, then, to practice this faith of acceptance? Where in it lies the comfort we seek in times of trouble?

I showed my dad, a kind of unofficial religious scholar, a draft of the talk and asked for his thoughts. His response hit me about the same as the time I forced his hand as to the existence of Santa Claus, and he told me the truth then as now. "I don't really think you have anything at all," he said. He found my conclusions too depressing; he felt I had let the atheists off too easily, and that a faith without belief in God could not offer comfort or meaning. Talk about a moment of impact: my chapel

talk was mere days away!

All my life, I have valued my dad's opinion on all things. In this case though, finally, respectfully, I disagree. Facing the unknown had frozen me, but somewhere in the effort to express my desire to move again, I came to find comfort in the idea that we have little choice but just to be, to walk out into the jagged edges of the beautiful world, and be in it for as long as the universe will allow. I sense a great opening, an unfolding, that lies in thinking of the currents of sadness that run through our lives not as a signal of the end of days, but as reminders from the universe that we are but small parts of its thrumming vastness; in reenvisioning the pain of heartbreak less as darkness and more as a refracting of the light; in reimagining my actions, like my next blood donation, not as an attempt to fix anything--to "do something," or "give back"--but as imperfect little pieces I offer back to the universe as tokens of my acceptance: I understand that you will make demands, and I will take notice. These are the offerings I know I can put forth, in difficult moments as well as in times of peace, even in those times when I wonder if anyone is there to receive them.