

Seeing the Face of God
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“If you see God’s face, he will kill you.”

That got my attention. The two of us were sleeping out under the bright diamond stars sparkling above the high desert plateau at my uncle’s farm in western Colorado. Lying there on the dry ground, under that pristine canopy, you could see how vast and varied the universe was. We had been watching meteors as they flashed across that deep black velvet background. Looking at patterns near the Milky Way, I offered an eight-year-old boy’s speculation that if we looked hard enough, maybe we would get a glimpse of God up there.

Sternly and confidently my country cousin Joe told me not to try. “If you see God’s face, he will kill you.” Now Cousin Joe, five years my senior, had a lot of credibility. It was Joe who taught me to ride a bike, and a bucking calf, and how to make the soles of your feet tough. Joe told me amazing things—like how the farm animals mate. He had even witnessed the action—and the later birth—and told me that human beings do the same things! Wow! Joe always had my attention. And, sure enough, later on, I heard a preacher verify Joe’s admonition. “But,” God said to Moses, “You cannot see my face; for no one may see Me and live.” [Exodus 33:20]

I thought about this a lot. Why are we forbidden to see the face of God? Are those people who paint portraits of God in trouble? What if I see his body without seeing His face? I learned that the Bible teaches even that the name of God is a word not to be uttered [Leviticus 24:16]. Being the curious type, I started asking around to find out if anyone knew God’s name. They could write it down for me and would not have to utter it.

Years later, I learned more about this religious tradition of opposition to enlightenment, this perceived danger in seeking the truth, this fear of questioning of what is myth and what is reality. I learned that this anti-intellectual theme is not only ingrained in religious teaching, but also arises from our culture, and that this opposition to new knowledge corresponds to a deep yearning in ourselves to hold onto comfortable conceptions, to keep believing in omens, and superstition, and Santa Claus, even when the evidence against him becomes overwhelming.

My home church of the American Fundamentalist variety warned its young people against attending secular colleges where the faculties would be programmed to destroy our faith. Why?, I wondered. My high school teachers had not seemed to be part of this worldly anti-Christian conspiracy. Moving on to the University level, I learned that this fear of the light, this fear of seeing God, was not confined to my own homegrown churching. My roommate, product of the best Catholic schools, was forbidden—at pain of sinning—to attend the Protestant church with me. I prodded him about it. What is

your church worried about—whether you hear some other doctrine—if they believe they possess the TRUTH?

A little book that began to change my life was Albert Schweitzer's autobiography. You recall his first career was as a preacher, scholar, and lecturer in theology. But his famous doctoral thesis was a study of the life of the historical Jesus. Schweitzer's research, still an important reference, led him to conclusions that undermined his possibilities as a professional theologian. His research led him to the conclusion that his religion tried to "avoid coming to terms with historical truth", and consciously or unconsciously, he said, "evading, or twisting, or suppressing it". [Schweitzer p 45]. thus, Professor Schweitzer left the ministry and turned next to his musical genius, and then to becoming a medical doctor so that he could devote his life to helping people directly. He explained, "I wanted to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk." He tried to solve his disagreement with the religious establishment by putting into practice his own way of spiritual living that he called a "religion of love". [p. 77] Even this was too intellectually independent for his religious mentors. In searching for missionary societies to sponsor him, he found that they objected to accepting a mission doctor "who had only correct Christian love, and did not...hold also the correct Christian belief". [p 79] But, as the world knows, Albert Schweitzer's courage both to pursue truth *and* to practice love made him one of the world's renowned humanitarians.

Others have searched fearlessly for God's face and found it in the natural world. Dr. Edwin O. Wilson, renowned biologist and author of two Pulitzer Prize-winning books, both with a metaphysical view of nature, is now among the foremost researchers of "ultimate truth"; that is, the search for a consistent unification of the material world of science with the conceptual world of the humanities. Wilson's immense contribution to our knowledge of our world was made possible once he dared to defy superstition and look full into the face of God. He describes the joy of his epiphany when, as a young scientist and scholar, he discovered for himself where life comes from and how it is regulated. He wrote,

I found it a wonderful feeling not just to taste the unification metaphysics but also to be released from the confinement of fundamentalist religion.... Could Holy Writ be just the first literate attempt to explain the universe and make ourselves significant within it? Perhaps science is a continuation on new and better-tested ground to attain the same end. If so, then in that sense *science is religion liberated* and writ large. [Wilson pp 5,6; my emphasis]

I find that this conflict, this tension between confining traditions and liberating light is an arch-typical theme still resounding from the Promethean myth. Prometheus first brought mankind knowledge of fire, then taught man the arts and sciences. Humans, formerly impotent before the unknown forces of nature, discovered they had new powers, and they were responsible, at least in part, for their own destinies. Prometheus' reward for intellectually liberating mankind was to be chained to a rock by Zeus and to have his liver picked out again and again by a vulture. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus declares his defiance: "To be the bond slave of the rock, is better than to be Zeus' trusting herald."

Thinkers from Goethe to Lord Byron have extolled the Promethean spirit, the defense of rationalism, the free pursuit of knowledge to understand our world, and to defy traditional thinking for its own sake.

There are powerful reasons, of course, that encourage us to resist the onslaught of new ideas that are apt to dislodge the common view of how things are and how it all came to be. From the earliest signs of civilization, people constructed explanations for their world and how it works. Shamen, priests, prophets and kings then perpetuated, upheld, and defended the common explanations they had invented. It was obvious to almost everyone that we were at the center of the universe until Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and others carried forth the Promethean torch with the revolutionary ideas that led us to our current understanding that we are passengers on a minor planet of an average star, among billions of stars on the outer spiral arm of an average galaxy, among billions of galaxies that are all hurtling outward from each other at unimaginable, accelerating velocities. Galileo and others suffered for upsetting the keepers of orthodoxy. But even today, many of us continue living our lives as if we inhabit the comfortable, old world of an unchanging earth at the center of the universe.

Other forces are at work that cause cultures to resist accepting new understandings. I will mention six.

- Our stone age brain. Like it or not, we are equipped with a brain that evolved during the Stone Age; a brain limited in its abilities to perceive and analyze. We find it a mental struggle to imagine the curved and warped nature of the time-space continuum. Despite the new astronomical observations that reach literally to the edge of the universe—and to the beginning microseconds of time—we have trouble integrating this information into our concepts of who we are, why we are here, and where we are going. A general understanding of relativity and quantum theory is essential now to understanding the nature of our world. But, for many of us, relativity and quantum theory are beyond our capabilities or outside our interests. As Professor Wilson puts it, “the full reality of the universe seems to grow progressively more alien...The cost of scientific advance is the humbling recognition that reality was not constructed to be easily grasped by the human mind.” [p 31] So, in general, people tune out—or don’t tune in—to such apparently abstract and—to them—useless information. The best-selling newspaper in the U.S. is...? No, not USA Today, not the Wall Street Journal or The New York Times. It is the National Inquirer. What is the most popular program on cable TV? Professional wrestling. Who drew the most votes in Time Magazine’s on-line poll for Person of the Century? Elvis Presley. Some eighty percent of Americans believe they can utter words and wishes of supplication that will be received, considered, and acted upon personally by the creator of this vast universe. Eighteen percent of Americans in 1999 believed that Jesus Christ will come from Heaven to Earth and take over *during their lifetime*. Nineteen percent of American adults believe that the Antichrist is now alive on Earth. [Newsweek poll] Most newspapers carry an astrology column but not a science column. Our Stone Age brains handle superstition or simple concepts much better than the new and complex realities that are being discovered every day.

- The confinement of specialization. The explosion of new knowledge over the past century has fundamentally changed our understanding of the material world, from the inner workings of atoms and the elemental forces of nature all the way out to the edge of the universe. This proliferation of complex knowledge has intensified the necessity for specialization among those who are interested and open to learn. People become, by necessity, compartmentalized in their fields—often not recognizing the potential relationships between fields and the universality of phenomena. They remain lost in their trees unable to discern the nature of the forest. The recent field of studies known as *complexity theory* has been the first attempt, since the early years of the Enlightenment to synthesize and integrate the arbitrarily separated disciplines. But most scholars, just trying to succeed in their own specialties, remain captive in their narrow view that never exposes them to the magnificent unified vistas that are now emerging. As laymen, we suffer in turn the vacuity of their scholarly myopia.
- Undermining tradition. New discoveries tend to desanctify the old hypotheses, threatening carefully constructed paradigms, and unleashing all sorts of reactionary forces. It is painful to have the relevancy of your Santa Claus or your god questioned. Adam Carley, a researcher of human consciousness (the soul) writes, “Galileo desanctified *where we live*. Darwin desanctified *where we come from*. Explaining consciousness will desanctify *what we are*.” [FI, Fall 1994, p. 26] The exponentially increasing rate of discovery in paleontology and biology, especially our new understanding of the cell and its genetic structure opens new insights into who we are and how we got to be this way. However, sometimes we don’t want to think about it. One of our wannabe national leaders, asked about the Kansas Board of Education ruling against the teaching of evolution, bravely told the world that he was *damn sure* the HE was not a descendent of any monkey.
- Morality. There also is a well-intentioned fear that morality is jeopardized by accepting the true understanding of the human predicament, what we are and how we got here. As a counter-reaction to the Enlightenment, and still prevailing today, there is fear of nihilism, of a loss of values. There is a fear that humans will have no motivation to avoid “evil” and do “good” in a world without a divine final judgment day. How will children behave if they do not believe in Santa Claus? What motivation is there for adult humans to do good if they have no fear of hell-fire or expectation of heaven?
- Death. Death always has been a major human concern and people always have felt the need to find comfortable ways to deal with it. The earliest human cultures developed concepts of an afterlife, a continuation of some sort after death, because it is discomforting to imagine the end of our consciousness. Immortality sells, regardless of what we learn about reality.
- Reason undermines progress. Finally, an expedient reason our culture resists following the Promethean light is the perceived practical virtue of resisting reason and living in tune with our Stone Age impulses and motivations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, leading the counter-Enlightenment movement, held that, “our minds have

been corrupted in proportion as our arts and sciences have made advances toward their perfection.” [Bronk p 50] Immanuel Kant’s view was that most human progress was brought about by competition, antagonism, and conflict within societies, the desire of men to dominate one another, rather than progress being the result of rational planning or well-intentioned reforms. George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” Hegel also gave great importance to war and conflict as essential molders of humanity. [Bronk p 57] Without doubt, great civilizations have been built on the use of slavery, exploitation, and conquest. Nations have profited by war, it gives us our heroes, and it has even been viewed as one of the best drivers of our own economy. Having served on the United States delegation to international arms control negotiations I can attest to the fear some have of peace and disarmament. Nevertheless, the world may have reached the point where civilization can better be defined by positive accomplishments and by saving our own fragile planet rather than continuing to ignore its destruction.

Plato aptly described the tendency to prefer the familiar and comfortable darkness to the blinding light of new ideas in his “Allegory of the Cave.” His metaphor was a group of humans living in a cave, chained with their backs to the only light, so all they could see were the shadow images on the wall of people or animals passing by the cave entrance. Having lived all their lives in such darkness, their reality was their interpretation of the shadows on the back wall of the cave that passed before their eyes. They gave them names, and speculated about why they appeared and what they meant. To these people with their restricted perceptions, the shadowy images were truth. What happens when these people are released from their cognitive prison? Plato wrote, “...when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look toward the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, and that now he is seeing reality. And when he sees the true objects pass by, will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?”

With all of these reasons why we seem to prefer our comfortable and familiar view of the world, holding fast to tradition for its own sake, what motivation do we have to venture out into the rapidly emerging new understanding of material reality? I believe there are powerful reasons that outweigh the risks of the transitory discomfort. First, assuming we are mortal and have only one life that we know for sure of, what a pity to live and die in the fear and ignorance handed down from ancestors, or comforted by hopeful belief that we are on our way to a big reunion in the sky with Mama, Moses, Jesus, and Joe.

Edward Wilson sees the bold pursuit of knowledge and reason as akin to release from a “cognitive prison”. He is a crusader in search of ultimate objective reality to “save the [human] spirit, not be surrender but by liberation of the human mind.... When we have unified enough knowledge we will understand who we are and why we are here.” [p. 7]

The Promethean spirit symbolizes human independence and confidence to build a framework of knowledge based on reason and observation. By boldly looking the gods in the face, whether Zeus or Yahweh, or by defying our own cultural prison keepers, we advance the cause of human freedom. We raise the level of humanity in general. God is us. Thomas Jefferson exemplified this Promethean spirit in his bold pursuit of knowledge. In the national monument to Jefferson are his words engraved in stone: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Imagine if all the world could take that oath.

If we are not swayed by metaphysics, there are very practical reasons to pursue the truth about our material universe. Carl Sagan wrote, "I know that the consequences of scientific illiteracy are far more dangerous in our time than in any that has come before. It's perilous and foolhardy for the average citizen to remain ignorant about global warming, say, or ozone depletion, air pollution, toxic and radio active wastes, acid rain, topsoil erosion, tropical deforestation, exponential population growth....Consider the social ramifications of fission and fusion power, supercomputers, data "highways", abortion, radon, ...addition, drugs [to ameliorate mental conditions], alleged hereditary antisocial predispositions, space stations....How can we affect national policy—or even make intelligent decisions in our own lives if we don't grasp the underlying issues?....Of the 535 members of the U.S. congress, rarely in the twentieth century have as many as one percent had any significant background in science. The last scientifically literate President may have been Thomas Jefferson."

What about the need we humans experience for awe, mystery, majesty, and ritual? Yes, we are all (genetically) or culturally) programmed to experience those needs. Edward Wilson writes, "Pure reason is unappealing because it is bloodless. Ceremonies stripped of sacred mystery lose their emotional force, because human beings need to defer to a higher power in order to consummate their instinct for tribal loyalty. In times of danger and tragedy especially, unreasoning ceremony is everything. There is no substitute for surrender to an infallible and benevolent being, the commitment called salvation. And no substitute for formal recognition of an immortal life force..."

People of reason can experience this awe, mystery, majesty, and ritual without selling their soul to ritual superstition. Contemplate the images being produced by the Hubble Space Telescope of worlds now being born out of the clouds of great star clusters, of merging galaxies generating fireworks on an unimaginable scale, or, gaze inwardly, at our new knowledge of the amazing and intricate structure of an organic cell. Have you seen any mural more transcendent than a desert sunset? Is there more intricate ritual than the workings of a tropical ant colony?

I believe we have nothing to lose by pursuing boldly Prometheus' light, by fearlessly looking for God's face in the universe. We have nothing to lose but our ancient fears, superstitions, and false hopes. Albert Einstein, being honored now as Time Magazine's Man of the Century, wrote, "It stands to the everlasting credit of science that by acting on

the human mind, it has overcome man's insecurity before himself and before nature.”
That is, if man is willing to raise his eyes to the light.

“...and the truth shall make you free.” [John 8:32]