Faith Within Atheism

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Things have a way of working out for the best. Whenever I have experienced loss, I have found that I have been able to change my viewpoint to adapt to my new condition. In this way, I have been able to cope with having schizophrenia. Because I believe that this adaptation happens naturally, realizing that this process is natural demonstrates to me that I am living within the framework of something bigger than myself: that a form of faith is possible and has allowed me to experience a meditative calm. In this way, I believe that faith is a state of being.

This is similar to an idea that I had when I was a child: that the important thing in life is to live in the most adaptive way possible. In other words, the best philosophy is the one that produces the best results. In essence, this is what I think we are all attempting to do, that we are all doing our best given our circumstances. However, I do believe we have a choice. Without working through our problems, it is easy to turn to the path of least resistance. For instance, putting all of one's hopes and efforts into a false panacea, be it a religion, a partner, or a drug. This is to my mind the path of least resistance, of least understanding. However, by putting in the effort, I believe that we have the potential to gain insight and, in so doing, realize peace.

For instance, when I developed schizophrenia, I soon realized that if I did nothing, I would fall into a downward spiral. Let me explain what this means. During my psychotic break, I lost the chance to enter graduate school at the doctoral level and chose instead to work with a master's in psychology. In other words, I settled for less in order to receive a measure of safety. With the stress of graduate school, I risked another psychotic break, and to risk that was to risk my life. The downward spiral, in my view, is this continual settling for safety at the expense of a more prominent position in life. The choice of risk and safety is a delicate balance, and ultimately I chose safety—in other words, life. Having done so, I have gained much more: personal growth through acceptance.

Choosing life has influenced and altered my life philosophy. I have moved from a position as a strict atheist to a viewpoint of faith within atheism. I have seen that a good life exists beyond ambition and pure reason. My life has now settled into an alternative place. I now have a job as a social worker. Although somewhat different than my field of study of clinical psychology, I love the work and the chance to make a difference. Arriving here took my realization that life deserves effort. I realized that an important part of my job was to make sure I stayed well. To do so, I altered my diet and lifestyle. I began eating more fruits and vegetables, cutting unnecessary fats and sugars from my diet, and practicing yoga. Moreover, I began to monitor my stress level, in particular the hidden stress that comes from positive changes in my life, such as being accepted into graduate school or presenting my master's thesis at the American Psychological Association's national convention. This positive stress, so-called eustress, in my opinion, has been the source of my descent into psychosis both times. Since my most recent psychotic episode, I have experienced minor residual symptoms, in the form of believing that others are speaking disparagingly of me. This is a mixture of the paranoia and referential thinking that lies within the symptom range of schizophrenia. The experience is undeniably unpleasant, but I am able to deal with it by confronting my own thoughts when they occur to me. I tell myself, “my mind is playing tricks on me,” or “this is a symptom, not reality.” When I still have confusion, I confide in a close friend or family member to bring me back to reality. In essence, I am using my psychological training to be my own therapist.

Moreover, my experiences have shown me that not everything I have seen has been delusional. An important piece of the puzzle for me was to understand how it is possible to live with self-respect after the experience of psychosis. Psychosis is an altogether different state of being. It is a state in which connections are seen between all things and where it is possible to see existence as a great interconnected tapestry that works in perfect harmony. Even now that I no longer can see this tapestry at the same level of vibrancy as during my psychotic breaks, I find that I cannot deny this as entirely delusional. In my view, this tapestry of multiple patterns working in
harmony has been demonstrated through the cold lens of science, and my experience of “seeing” this tapestry in delusion has demonstrated unequivocally to me the existence of God’s handiwork in detailed clarity. This experience has led me to rethink the Christian faith that I grew up with.

Joan of Arc has proven the perfect role model for how to live with faith as a schizophrenic patient. Even though her experiences were admittedly delusional, her life has demonstrated the power of faith. Although others, even during her own life, did not believe in what she had seen, she still had been able to arrive at a state of being in which she exercised a profound effect on others. I have taken the lessons of her life and applied them to my own, to live an inspiring life upholding belief and the spirit and to live for a cause other than purely one’s own self-interest. In this sense, I have become what might be called an atheist with faith. For me, if God exists, he is unknowable, except through his work. In other words, the intricate balance of the tapestry of existence, where I am but one small thread. Moreover, I am an atheist by natural disposition. I do not believe in fairy stories that cannot be proven. The lens I see through works primarily through empiricism and reason. The main difference between me and a strict atheist is that my reason has been colored by my undeniable experiences of psychosis. That is, I have seen the evidence of God as metaphor in amazing vibrancy.

Personally, I have seen my place in this world is to create a more beautiful tapestry, in other words, to influence my surroundings for the better, in the best way that I am able. I have come to the conclusion that the best way to do so is to live for the spirit, for belief. Living in this way has enabled me to obtain acceptance of my condition, reaching a more serene plane of existence. Whether this serenity is “truth” to me is besides the point. The point for me is to better my life and my world. Quoting the notable philosopher Albert Camus, “One must believe, not that God exists, but in God.”

The cold truth is that I have lived against the odds. I have survived 2 suicide attempts during 2 distinct psychotic episodes. I have come to realize that our lives are precious and that life deserves our full effort and participation. We owe the world our efforts. I realize that my experiences are not within the normal range, but nevertheless, I believe that it is too easy for others to dismiss my new philosophy as nothing more than a simple coping mechanism.

In reality, none of us have chosen our life experiences, but it is also true that given the situation that I was born into, I have chosen my own path, I have chosen life, and I have chosen faith. This is what separates those with schizophrenia from others, the possession of a faith that is immutable to reason, which has been proven to us by our own lived experience. To deny our faith is to deny who we are. As the fictionalized Joan of Arc said in the film Le Passage de Jeanne d’Arc, “One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.”

The important distinction is how to choose what to believe and what not to. When one discovers how to live a life devoted to staying well, one discovers a peacefulness to life and serenity that once discovered is glaringly obvious, yet each path to that state is unique to each person. This has been my path, the way of faith within atheism.

References