

I'm a Believer

For some reason or other the chemo suite made David think of purgatory, between life and death, heaven and hell. Purgatory had been a big deal when he was at school, a place where you suffered for all the minor sins committed during your life. A time of waiting and suffering before the big prize, heaven.

Who made you?

God made me.

Why did God make you?

He made me to know him love him and serve him in this world and to be happy with him forever in the next.

The old Catholic Catechism. It was one of his clearest memories of school, chanting both questions and answers and then being tested individually. He had had a good memory but for the life of him he couldn't now remember the third question. Why was he thinking of them and why now. He supposed that cancer did make you review your life and the chemo was a sort of purgatorial state, suffering in the hope of salvation. His mind rambled. Question and answer-so simple- presented as the secret of life. Of course the questions weren't real questions. They were only there to provide the trigger for the answers. They were not real because they were in no sense an enquiry. You were not expected to speculate, to propose that the answer to the first question might be complex involving at least the coupling of your parents and the chance encounter of a single sperm, one of millions, with an ovum and then before that the eons of evolution which led to such a reproductive process. What was in the minds of the people who provided such a closed circuit answer? Did they imagine that God was conscious of every coupling world wide and took an active role in encouraging one sperm above all others so that the intended being would be born, the being he wanted to make.

Imagine? Actually, of course, they didn't imagine, they believed. They believed earnestly. They believed in saving black babies. What was that called, that card where you pricked a pin hole in a square when someone donated a penny? That was it, St. Joseph's penny, saving black babies from Limbo. What had happened to limbo? David had believed. He had been a believer until, well, until gaining practical experience of the reproductive process. Then he had had to cope with the second question because knowing loving and serving God explicitly excluded, according to the priests and teachers, actually engaging in sexually pleasurable activities. At the time this had left him with a choice. Either go on believing and be a sinner or start asking questions about belief itself. For a time he had been the believing sinner and then the doubts began. Why, for example, if sexual pleasure outside the marriage bed was forbidden had God made it so enjoyable? Although he could never remember the question actually being put, some celibate priest had offered the

thought that, if it wasn't pleasurable, no one would do it, because, by implication, it was grotesque, and the human race would not exist. So possibly against his better judgement, God had had to make sex fun and not just for those who were married.

The nurse, Kay, came to check the bottle of fluid, attached to his cannula, flushing through the toxic chemicals injected earlier into his system.

"Everything OK David?" she said, smiling. "You are drinking a lot, aren't you?" and she glanced at the plastic jug half full of water on the table by his chair.

He nodded and smiled and then to show willing filled a tumbler from the jug and sipped the water.

"Let me know if you need anything." She smiled again and moved on.

David looked at the tube attached to the back of his hand and then around at the other patients in the room. They were in various states. One young man was curled up apparently asleep, certainly rejecting any social contact.

To his left was Maddy. She looked to be in her late middle age but in that place who could tell. Earlier she had been eagerly chatty. He was more informed than he wished to be about the progress of her breast cancer, the operations and now some problem with her kidneys. She was, she had said, on an experimental drug which the oncologist felt would be a life saver. David had doubted whether the oncologist would have said any such thing. The talk had been halted by a spasm of pain which had clenched her face and she had turned away and now seemed to be sleeping. Her husband, Alan, arrived for his second visit of the day. He looked at her for a long time gently holding one hand. He placed his other hand against her cheek and she stirred. She opened her eyes and smiled and Alan bent to kiss her. He spoke to her quietly then somehow sensed that David was watching. He turned and said, "We're very hopeful you know. You've got to be positive, haven't you? This new drug..." he nodded his head but didn't finish the sentence and there were tears in his eyes. He turned back to his wife.

David had a sudden urge to pee. He raised himself from the reclining chair and set off across the room wheeling the stand holding the bottle of flushing fluid. It was a modern oncology suite. There were ipads and wifi and personal television sets but, as he knew, a limit to your attention span. The trundling of a patient to the toilet was, therefore, and event worth noting. David smiled and nodded at the watchers.

On his way back he passed Margery, mad Margery, not that he would have said that out loud. This was the second time that their treatment had coincided and she clearly regarded him as an old friend.

"David," she said, "I have something to show you." He wheeled himself closer and she beckoned him closer still. She held on to his arm. "Look," she said. and she drew out a strip of tablets wrapped in foil. "These are the thing," she said, and she pulled him closer and whispered in his ear. "Homeopathy." she looked round as though someone might be eaves dropping. "My son won't hear of it so I ended up here. I applied for it on the NHS but they won't treat cancer patients. But my man, he's been treating me for years. He gave me these..."

Kay approached. "Everything alright Margery," she breezed. Margery quickly hid the tablets from view and smiled. "All lovely Kay, thank you." Kay moved on.

Margery continued in conspiratorial tone. "I'll get some for you if you like," she said. David realised how tired he was. "Thank you Margery," he said. "That would be very kind." It was the quickest way of releasing himself from her attention and he trundled back to his chair. He settled back hoping for sleep. His mind thought otherwise.

Homeopathy. Every rational part of him knew it was nonsense, and yet. Was his, so rational, self in a better position than Margery? She believed her empty tablets would do her good and wasn't there research which showed that believing in a treatment actually made it more effective even when the treatment was a placebo. He remember some television programme on the topic . One utterly surprising finding was that people on the placebo did better than those on nothing even when they were told it was a placebo. The very sense of being treated reduced their symptoms. Faith healing. Is that what it was? Faith heals. On the other hand faith is the great killer. Countless millions continue to die in faith fuelled conflicts. Kill or be killed for the sake of your faith. It didn't seem to matter which. All martyrs went to heaven, so they believed, presumably all happy in the presence of their God for ever.

David settled and dozed for a time. When he woke it was to see a vicar or some sort of priest passing his chair. In his literally dopey state he had a sudden flash of guilt. It passed and the priest or whoever he was passed on and stopped by a chair on the other side of the suite. He watched as the woman in the chair tried to rise to greet her visitor. The priest held up a restraining hand. David was too far away to hear what was being said. They spoke for some time. Then the priest took both her hands in his and they both bent their heads in the classic position of prayer, Christian prayer that is. "Please let this cross pass from me" or some such and then the great get out clause, "not my will but thine be done." You live. God answered your prayer. You die, it was God's will. Don't stop believing.

David checked the time. Another couple of hours and then release until the next time. He drank more water. He did it because those in authority over him at this moment said that he should. He believed them. Of course he could have asked for evidence for the effectiveness of say water over a stiff gin and tonic. He believed that there would be evidence but as with most aspects of his treatment you took it on trust. Well perhaps not entirely. There was the internet. Once you had got passed the cranks you arrived at some fairly clear description of his situation and what he should do about it. What you got were the odds. Seventy six percent survived his condition if it was diagnosed early enough. Where was he, in the seventy six or the twenty four? He hoped the former, of course. Did those who prayed improve their odds? Perhaps the act of praying helped the body heal itself. Could you have a placebo prayer? He supposed that would be a sort of meditation. What did they call it? Mindfulness, live in the moment. Actually he was feeling pretty rough. This was not a moment he wanted to live in.

"Are you OK darling?"

David turned. His wife was there smiling down at him.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine."

Kay bustled up. She busied herself detaching the cannula. "Just one more urine test," she said. "Then you can be on your way."

David smiled ruefully at his wife and shuffled off to the toilet. He would put his faith in the urine test. He didn't have much else left.

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