

The Gift of Doubt Dan Shenk-Evans

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As some of you know, last October I took a month off of work to give myself more time for personal and spiritual reflection. My goal was to bring closure on a particular segment of my spiritual journey, and to come out the other side refreshed and ready to embark on the next phase of my life. What you may not know is that for about a year before this sabbatical month, I had intentionally entered a period in my life that I labeled "the dark night of my soul." I wanted a year where I could be bluntly honest with myself and God about my doubts, and where I did not try to hide from or run away from the shadow side of my faith. Walking with me most closely during that year were the three men in my Friday morning fellowship and prayer group, David Deal, David Dawson, & Rob Tennant, and my wife Wendy. Leading me through my sabbatical was Bob Sabath. I owe a debt of gratitude to all of them for putting up with my pontifications and speculations.

My sabbatical did turn out to be a wonderful, life changing experience. While I have only begun to take a few baby steps down a new path, it is good to feel more centered, to have a newfound sense of peace about God and my faith, and to have a new yearning for spiritual fulfillment. However, today I will not be focusing on the meaningful experiences I had, or on any revelations I received. So for those of you who came to hear the answers to faith's greatest questions and the meaning of life, I'm sorry to disappoint you. If you want those answers, just mail me \$20 in a self-addressed stamped envelop.

No, today I want us to contemplate honestly the reality of Doubt. I am going to share with you the reasons I felt the need, quite desperately actually, to take a sabbatical. I will do so mostly through sharing with you my personal story, not because I like to talk about myself in public, but because I want to make sure it's grounded in real life. I don't want us to just have what my Grandfather would call a "high-falluting" philosophical debate.

A few years ago it became clear to me that I was feeling spiritually burnt out and depressed. There were 3 main general areas about my faith that I came to realize I needed to address, somehow, someway, or the rest of my life seemed destined to feel increasingly empty.

1) First, I had little joy in my faith. It wasn't that I was miserable – I had joy in my life through good relationships, this faith community, and my comfortable lifestyle. It's just that my personal faith felt more like a theological battleground than a source of joy. I was tired of arguing with myself. I had known for decades that I wasn't a standard Evangelical, and yet subconsciously I think I was desperately seeking an alternative version of their assurance.

2) Secondly, I felt like I had more of a relationship with my theological paradigms than with God. I wanted to know God, the source of life and love more directly and intimately, and at a level much deeper than my mind. Not without my mind, but beyond it. I knew my soul yearned for something different, because even while I was struggling with my faith and feeling out of place in church, tears of yearning would fill my eyes at some point during most worship service. A new experience was there waiting to happen, but there was a barrier. I wanted that blockage out of the way.

3) Finally, I also came to realize I couldn't love a God I couldn't respect or who made no sense to me. And in order to fully respect God, I had to completely discard some concepts that I thought I had outgrown years ago, but that clearly still had some lingering effect. I needed a faith that was congruent with what I knew about the world, what I witnessed in history, and how I experienced reality. To paraphrase Bishop John Shelby Spong, "The heart can't worship a God which the mind can't accept."

And what was the common thread I found under all of these issues that hindered a joyful and meaning faith? Doubt.

Doubt:

For most of my youth, doubt seemed like a curse. I wanted to overcome it. It's easy to see why, because as a young boy growing up in an evangelical setting, one often got the impression that God had provided fairly straightforward answers and it was our job to believe and to feel secure by the assurance. The scripture passages read today (Mark 11:22-24; James 1:2-8) provide a few examples of the way in which doubt is cast as quite negative – there are many more.

As I matured and grew older, I developed plenty of theological space for the essential component that mystery plays in faith. Yet, I believe now that I never quite outgrew that particular evangelical drive for assurance and almost perfect knowledge. While I thought I had dealt with my doubts by developing sophisticated theological interpretations of scripture and life, the process of intellectual debate had actually started killing my love of God. I had created a lot of theological scaffolding around my faith and built many reinforced ramparts to keep it from falling down, but the whole apparatus was starting to teeter.

So allow me to share my doubts with you this morning. When I talk about doubt, I am not talking about rank cynicism or skepticism. For today, I use the word Doubt to mean our ability as individual subjects to recognize that there may be more to the story than whatever is being communicated, or even that a different version of the story could be more correct. I also believe that combined with the human drive for knowledge, healthy doubt becomes the source of our yearning to get closer to the truth. As such, the existence of 'doubt' is a gift, and should be considered part of what God intended.

Before I share the content of my doubts, I first want to acknowledge that some of what I share may make you feel uncomfortable. I am going to journey through the deepest recesses of my doubts. If you have objections to what I say, I can fully empathize, because 20, 10, 5, and even 1 year ago I would have had trouble with some of what I say today. Please realize that most of the changes in my theology have been evolutionary, each step dependent on the other. At this time the end point may seem like a radical departure that is unrecognizable from the starting point, but that is an illusion.

I also want to acknowledge my awareness that I am among fellow travelers. When people join our church, they almost always say that they finally can feel at home in a church where questions are welcome, where we don't assume we know all the answers, and where faith is understood as a journey and not as adherence to particular propositions. In a very real sense, we are a spiritual refugee camp. Even so, we don't place ourselves above those that have gone before us who did their best to incarnate love, despite their weaknesses. There is no place for judgment on our part.

The Beginning of Doubt: The Presence of Ambiguity

For me, the beginning of doubt was becoming aware of the reality of ambiguity. From a fairly early age I sensed that faith, God, and life were not as easily explained as some of my fellow Christians maintained. I grew up in a Mennonite family that had what I will call a "soft" evangelical predisposition. However, I also was exposed to faith communities that skirted at the edge of fundamentalism, and the Religious Right was not too far away. Very often in this environment, God and faith were laid out in pretty cut-and-dry terms, especially at church. The message was straight forward and the answers close at hand. And while my upbringing was not fundamentalist, I could both repudiate and feel convicted by the bumper sticker: "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it."

I had an underlying sense that understanding and practicing one's faith is not so simple a proposition. For example, as I began to learn about my Mennonite heritage and other

Christian traditions, I had serious questions about why there was such a wide variety of views on war and doctrine. What does it mean to be a Christian if baptized Christians were willing to kill my Anabaptist ancestors, not to mention Jews, other fellow believers, and enemies? Why didn't the Holy Spirit make it much clearer that killing people over faith convictions is demonic? I also came to perceive that on issues of doctrine, agreement seemed to be skin deep but disagreement went all the way down. Why would God allow so much ambiguity that even well intentioned people could have such varying opinions on matters that were supposed to be about 'The Truth'?

I can look back now and see that I did not like uncertainty and ambiguity. I think I dealt with these initial insecurities by becoming a bit of a Jesus fundamentalist. Since Jesus was God incarnate, then all conflicts and contradictions would be solved best by trying to determine "what would Jesus do (WWJD)". If a particular brand of theology did not suit my taste, I think I dismissed it mostly by placing it in the category of "cultural Christianity" and the adherents as not being true "disciples of Jesus." I was quite judgmental, and probably still am. Back then it was easy enough to feel like I belonged to the true remnant of the Church. We Mennonites must be something reaaaally special.

Later in life, though, my loss of certainty spread to my own tradition and to many convictions I hold dear. As I matured the idealized pictures of the early church and my Mennonite heritage were punctured a bit. If you read the New Testament closely, it's clear that the Holy Spirit didn't overwhelm them with unity and purity and a common voice. Some of the Mennonite legalism, like kicking people out of the church for wearing a tie or buying a TV or getting a divorce, seemed like very poor representations of love. Also, what does it mean that Mennonites were the "quite in the land" while slavery and Jim Crow ravaged the country, and that pacifist Mennonites ended up farming land that was taken away by violent force from the Native Americans. Why do I quietly accept so many benefits from the "privilege" of being white, middle class, and a civilian of the most militarized empire in the history of the world? Again, there is no place for judgment. If I had been born into a southern slaveholding family, there is a very good chance I would have behaved just like they did.

Theological & Historical Difficulties

As I grew older, I started running into an increasing number of theological conundrums and feelings of revulsion about parts of Church history. I think one of the first theological walls I ran into was the concept of Hell. While my upbringing was focused on God's love, I had enough exposure to the concept of Hell to question how it was presented. For parts of the evangelical world, it's a fairly straightforward proposition that who don't accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior end up in Hell, maybe with a few exceptions for those how never heard or were mentally disabled.

But I just could not reconcile a loving, merciful God with the idea of eternal torment. If at God's core is love and grace, how can finite sin be punished infinitely? To my mind it sounded like the Church was saying, "God is love, and loves you more than you'll ever know. But if you don't love God back, God has no choice but to burn you in Hell forever." HmMMM. Among us humans we would call that psychological manipulation, at best, and at worst, extortion. That seems to put God in the same camp as the Mafia, since they also love their own.

Around the end of high school I had a friend that was questioning his faith more honestly than I was at that point. He once declared his position on Hell by telling me a story that finished with, "Given all the awful things Christians have done, if God condemns a good Muslim man to hell, then I'm going down with him, cursing God and shaking my fist all the way down." After a split second recovering from his bluntness, I surprised myself by saying, "Me too. I'm going down with you." But I was such a good Christian boy, that in my mind I thought, "Well, I wouldn't actually curse God." Instead I thought, "Sorry God, Jesus told us to love our enemies, so if your not going to love them, I guess I will have to do it for you." Talk about heaping hot coals on God's head. I wasn't being self-righteous. My reaction reflected that I understood the inherent absurdity of the proposition.

Another theological concept that troubled me was the related substitutionary, penal atonement theory that Cindy eloquently talked about a couple Sunday's ago. Deep in my heart I knew God would not require the execution of a sinless Jesus before God could forgive us sinners. If at the core of God is not pure grace, but a demand or need for perfection and for violence, then God is not about unconditional love after all. The doctrine of the Trinity helped me, at least temporarily, because from the Trinitarian perspective it's not God demanding someone else be killed, but God taking the sin of the world upon Godself. The cross then becomes God's pacifistic "No" to our violence. As Richard Rohr reminded me during my sabbatical, God doesn't change on the cross. It's us humans who now have an opportunity to change, not only our behavior, but our understanding of God.

Church history also became a serious source of doubt. Because you know it so well, I won't recount the bloody history of Christendom conquest and exploitation, or some of the highly questionable doctrines created, or the times the church was embarrassingly wrong for persecuting people for ideas that turned out to be right. To quote the Indigo Girls, "Galileo's crime was looking up the truth." Let's just say it ended up destroying for me the idea that God is unavoidably, directly working through the church as God's main guardian of the Truth.

Biblical Difficulties

So what does one do when the existence of ambiguity is obvious, and when one starts to doubt the content of many faith stories? Unfortunately, the admonition that the best way to combat doubt is to spend more time in God's Word backfired in my case. The more time I spent in the Bible, the more questions and angst I had. Even back in my youth I maintained a Christocentric understanding of scripture in order for it to be acceptable to me. But it was too late for my literalistic mind, for even my interpretive models didn't work in the long-term to keep me from discarding the idea that God directly controls history and has chosen to reveal objective, universal truth through written text.

Here are a few of the issues that started haunting me. Remember the Exodus, *the* definite moment of the Hebrew scriptures where God liberates a people from slavery and forms a covenant people? The event for which God is blessed over and over? It starts with God teaching the powerful Pharaoh a lesson by killing the first born boys, presumably numbering in the tens of thousands, of mostly poor Egyptian peasants. But God is not unfair, so as an equal opportunity killer, today's scripture from Jude (1: 5-7) reminds us that God killed thousands of the Hebrews in the desert too.

I know we all shudder when we read in 1 Samuel (15:3) that God commanded Saul, "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." Isn't that what we consider genocide? Am I supposed to worship a baby killing, war-crimes criminal?

Even the 10 commandments (Exodus 20), supposedly the cornerstone of our moral compass, contain serious problems. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). You see the problem? The reason you even have the opportunity to covet your neighbor's wife in the same way you might covet his house or donkey is that the wives were the property of the males who are being addressed. I should note, however, there is nothing that says you can't covet your neighbor's husband, so there is some leeway there for those of you attracted to men. Soon after giving the 10 commandments, it gets worse, as God also gives instructions in the right way to be a slave owner and the right way to sell your daughter into slavery (Exodus 21). Obviously, God would never have said these things, as She would have known that they would be used to justify the oppression of women and the institution of slavery, two disgusting practices the human race invented.

I could go on listing the sins of scripture, but I'll stop here. There are many other things that dislocated my faith, and that present serious problems to conscientious people everywhere. I could talk about the fact that for most modern readers, the liberal use of spectacular miracles in the stories is quite alienating. For others faith comes across as blind, mindless adherence to a pre-modern worldview, as when Christians today still try to turn the Bible into a scientific text, which it is so obviously not. For many the bigger problem is the scandal of particularity, since the text basically presents a God focused on one particular people in one small part of the world, for the most part ignoring the rest of the world, despite its best effort to claim the universal scope of God's concern. I could go on, but I won't.

What I will share with you is that at some point, it finally hit me like a brick between the eyes that the Bible is a human book, period, from front to back. In fact, I came to the weighty conviction that if the Bible is the story of how God works in the world, perfectly recounted in every case, then I would have the moral duty to hate God. If God is all powerful, knows all things, including the future, and chose to intervene in history in a way that made it so easy to justify slavery, imperialism, exploitation, sexism, homophobia, and especially violence, then God is not worthy to be worshiped. God could have done so much more. This interpretative dilemma is not new, of course, but in our modern times has reached an epidemic in the West, and people have voted by walking out the church doors. I hate to remind us that only 3% of Europeans attend church, and our mainline churches are slowly dying in the US.

So why is doubt a gift?

So, why do I consider doubt a gift? To some it would sound like it has destroyed my faith. But to me, I feel like I've been born again. Doubt rightly understood forces us to be humble, and opens us to the mystery of life, and forces us to search for God and the truth while never claiming to own it. It is the reality we live in, and it keeps us from ever seeking to use revelation to dominate or exploit others. I think it is unfortunate that so many people have misunderstood this fact, and far too often throughout history it has been those most confident in their knowledge of truth and righteousness that have used violence for colonial exploitation or acts of terrorism. Maybe the bumper sticker is right, "Believe those that are searching for the truth. Doubt those that have found it."

Doubt is also what allowed me to come to see the scriptures as amazing theological metaphors produced by humans like us who were struggling to make sense of this broken world. In this paradigm, scripture and other religious texts come alive, especially those sections that are clearly an inspiration to us even today.

As you approach lent this year, know that there is no part of you, including your doubts, that you need to hide from God. To paraphrase the apostle Paul (Romans 8:38), I have no doubt that there is nothing in all of creation, neither life nor death, not even your doubts, that can separate you from the love of God.

The Message:

Oh, BTW, as far as having the mysteries of faith revealed to you, you can keep your \$20 dollars. It turns out that we already knew the truth and the good news. Sometimes its just hidden in plain sight, and we just need to be present to it.

So what is the mystery that has been revealed?

- The Word of God is alive. Alive. It's not buried in a tomb. It's not engraved in stone.
- God is with us, Immanuel, present and available to every person. So be present to God.
- What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.
- Act justly and love mercy
- Love God with all your heart, soul, & mind, and love your neighbor as yourself
- If you want to know how God acts in the world, look through the Cross. It's through weakness and love, not through violence.

- Creation is unfinished, continually evolving, presenting the possibility for a new creation. God invites us to live in the Now as if the new creation was here, as it's the only way to get there.
- God loves you, just as you are. Period.

You know the message. Go live it.