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WHY DO THE QUESTIONS KEEP COMING?



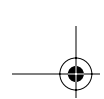
Passages between the seasons of life have a way of provoking questions to answers we take for granted because we've been living with them for so long. When change occurs, old questions often take on critical importance again.

For many people religion provides answers (or at least a sense of security) to the big questions of life. For others the absolute claims of religion raise more questions than they answer. I have lived on both sides—and in some senses I still do. My path of faith has wandered through both doubt and belief, often at the same time.

Doubt doesn't have to tear down belief, however; it can purify it. When it does, the beliefs on the other side become more certain. This is why I would like to affirm that it is possible to find God even while you are still asking the big questions.

The pivotal points in my own pilgrimage have occurred when I crossed thresholds of change—from inherited beliefs to intense questioning, from intense questioning to discovering what I truly believed and disbelieved. It is not an easy thing to let go of what is comfortable to make room for what is uncertain, but human life is a suc-



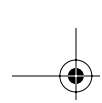


cession of such passages, from childhood through old age. I now find myself on such a threshold once again—and it is forcing me to both discover what I truly believe and examine whether I am truly living what I do believe.

As I approached my sixty-fifth birthday a few years ago, I experienced a strong urge to return to my religious roots in a new and fresh way—thoroughly reexamining what I believe and why. In part my motivation is a response to the many discussions I have had with secular friends and colleagues in which they inevitably ask, “So what do you really believe?” Indeed, the questions I have chosen to address in this book are some of those that keep coming up in these discussions. But this time I want to explore them with the same dedication I have brought to my vocation as a physician and medical journalist. The skills I have acquired in my scientific and journalistic experience should allow me to look more critically at my religious beliefs than I could have while in seminary forty years ago. But perhaps most importantly, I want to “cleanse” my beliefs to reveal their bedrock: to rediscover what I really do believe and then decide honestly what it means for how I live the rest of my life.

For nearly three decades I have been known to many television viewers as the medical editor of ABC News, on call for *Good Morning America* and other network news programs. As a physician I have committed my professional life to healing and wellness. A broadcasting career extended that commitment in ways I could never have foreseen. But my public work is only a small part of who I really am—or rather, who I want to be. This book is, in a sense, “the rest of my story.” I hope that you might find in it some help and encouragement for your own process of spiritual exploration—whether or





not you agree with the answers I affirm. Ultimately, you must find your own answers; other people's answers are never enough.



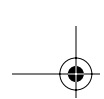
My story begins in Rockford, Illinois, in a fairly typical middle-class family—at least for Rockford in the 1930s. My family was very religious—in our case, members of a small Protestant denomination. The Evangelical Covenant Church originated in Sweden in the 1800s and was transplanted to this country, mostly to the Midwest, in the migrations of the latter part of that century. Our church in Rockford was a very big force in our family life, and my brother and I grew up knowing that God was a reality to be loved and trusted and that Jesus was the embodiment of God. My mother, particularly, was vocal about her faith—both verbally and musically—and radiated a deep trust in the goodness of God and the goodness of her fellow men and women.

So far, so good.

After graduating as valedictorian of my high school class, and much to the dismay of my high school guidance department, I chose to go to our church-sponsored college in Chicago, North Park Junior College. After the two years I transferred to Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. I majored in history and minored in philosophy, debated about what I wanted to do, and then decided to become a minister. Given my Christian upbringing and my writing and speaking abilities, it seemed like a perfectly natural choice.

Rather than proceeding immediately to our denominational seminary, also a part of North Park in Chicago, I went first for one semester to the University of Chicago Divinity School, sensing that it





might be wise to gain a perspective different from the religious tradition I had been immersed in since childhood. I had no idea I would be challenged to the very core of my belief and being.

As I embarked on seminary studies, it struck me that if I were going to preach this stuff, I had really better believe it. But when I examined the claims of the Christian faith with that in mind, I found much that I couldn't easily accept or believe. In fact, under the challenge of some very bright and skeptical teachers at the University of Chicago, I began to doubt almost everything I had pretty much taken for granted: that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus was the Son of God and that God rules the universe (not to mention our world) and has a plan for it and for me.

In fact, I was so plagued by doubt that I became physically ill—not in a way that required medical treatment, but with symptoms of anxiety (sleeplessness and loss of appetite) caused by my “loss of faith.” Fortunately, I was able to make contact with Dr. Granger Westberg, a Lutheran minister and a pioneer in the hospital chaplain movement, who at that time was serving on the faculty of the divinity school and the staff of the medical center. I won't detail my path of spiritual recovery except to say that with time and the help of Dr. Westberg and several other persons of deep faith I encountered at the University, I slowly came to understand what I could believe—and to live with what I couldn't understand.

Ever since that time I have been comfortable with intellectual and spiritual doubt—and now I welcome it as a companion that stimulates me to think about what I really believe. I find that I need to continually explore the basis of my religious beliefs, that I cannot simply accept the teachings of theologians or the dogmas of the





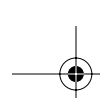
church. I have also been acutely aware that others who are very spiritual may have very different views than mine on the specifics of religious belief.

For example, during my study at the University of Chicago I first became both intellectually and emotionally aware of the real differences and profound similarities between Judaism and Christianity. I had been exposed to the stories of the “Old Testament” as part of the Christian Bible, but I had never really been exposed to the depth and beauty of Judaism until my time at the university; that exposure has continued throughout my life and has greatly influenced my spiritual perspective. The relatively short period of time I spent at the University of Chicago had a profound, lifelong impact on the way I look at religious claims of all kinds, including those of the tradition I was raised in.

After my semester at the university I returned to our denominational seminary and completed my divinity degree there. As part of the typical seminary training of that time, I spent time in a hospital setting. There I became increasingly drawn to the field of medicine and the way doctors could definitively and so often quickly be of help to people. The result was that two years after graduating from seminary I began medical school at age twenty-nine, fully expecting to become a family doctor and practice medicine in a small town the rest of my life.

But life held more surprises than I could possibly have imagined. Just weeks before graduating from medical school, I sat down one evening in the student lounge to watch the evening news on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*. That particular day in the spring of 1969, the newscast reported on an American Medical Association (AMA)





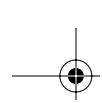
news conference announcing the organization's opposition to the proposed appointment of Dr. John Knowles as Assistant Secretary of Health Education and Welfare. He was then head of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston (as you might guess, they disapproved of his "liberal" views on health care). The AMA trustee who conducted the press conference was so inept that when the program came back to Huntley and Brinkley, they were laughing out loud, and the newscast had to divert immediately to a commercial break. (I once asked the late David Brinkley, who had a long and distinguished tenure at ABC News, if he remembered that episode. There were so many incidents to laugh at in his career, he responded, that he couldn't remember that particular one.)

The very next day, by sheer coincidence, I received a form letter from the AMA inviting me to join the organization as a soon-to-be new doctor. On impulse I pulled a pen out of my pocket, wrote on the form letter something to the effect that if what I saw on the news the night before was any indication of their competence and policy, I wasn't interested. I mailed it back to them.

Much to my astonishment, several weeks later I received a personal letter from the executive director of the AMA, further outlining their opposition to Dr. Knowles. Much of what was said in the letter sounded off base to me. Again on impulse I sent the AMA letter to Dr. Knowles, whom I had never met, thinking he might be interested in what the AMA was saying about him.

It turned out that Dr. Knowles was very interested, and he wrote me back, asking permission to use the letter in a book he was thinking about writing. Several years later when I ended up working as a physician in Boston, I took the opportunity to meet Dr. Knowles per-



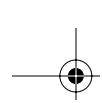


sonally, which led to an ongoing friendship. That happened to be just at the time that he was part of a group of Boston citizens who were taking over the operation of the ABC affiliate in Boston, WCVB-TV. At Dr. Knowles's request, I agreed to host a morning talk show on health and medicine for the public when the station went on the air in the spring of 1972. I continued to practice medicine and do part-time television work, joining *Good Morning America* when it started in 1975 and agreeing to join ABC News full time in 1984.

So the way I look at it, if I hadn't watched that particular newscast in 1969, I wouldn't be doing what I am today! I have thoroughly enjoyed my work in television, which has been stimulating and creative, and I have been blessed to work at a network that has given me enormous professional freedom. I would also like to believe that I have helped regular viewers of ABC News programs to live better and healthier lives. However, at this current season of my life—euphemistically described as the “onset of fall,” perhaps more realistically described as “early winter”—I find myself swimming in waters with many conflicting currents: the continuing need to find answers to the big questions of life that are both intellectually and spiritually satisfying, a growing fascination with both the hard-nosed demands of scientific reasoning and the dramatic spiritual and ethical ideals found in the teachings of Jesus, and a growing anguish born of being materially privileged in a world of terrible suffering caused by poverty.

I am also aware that I am in a critical passage in my life for making decisions about how I will live the rest of it. Some of this uncertainty is undoubtedly age-related. But much of it arises from a growing conviction that I have not lived up to my own spiritual expectations, and therefore I should make some changes while I still have time. Thus





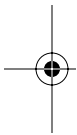
this endeavor is far more than an intellectual or academic exercise for me. I feel as if this exploration is vital to my own spiritual health—and that it may trigger some unexpected changes in my life as a result. I am more eager than anyone to see how this all comes out!

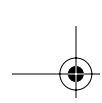
I should confess right at the start that I have two strong biases, which may seem contradictory. On one hand, I really do want to believe that there is a God we can know and understand to our personal benefit. I am convinced, from both personal experience and the growing scientific data on the subject, that people of genuine religious faith and practice are likely to benefit from such faith in very practical ways, including better mental and physical health. But I also regard many of the claims made in the name of religion with an operative skepticism born and bred from my scientific training and experience, which has taught me to question any and all claims for “knowing the truth.” These biases are not unlike what I bring to my attempts to evaluate claims for medical truth: I want to believe new claims of discoveries that might improve the human condition, but because of my long experience with premature or unfounded proclamations, I am inclined to be skeptical of them.

A second major bias consists of two basic assumptions I make about God: that we all have access to knowing God and that God is the author of all truth.

First, any entity worthy of that name must be available and at least partially knowable to all human beings, even though the “ways of knowing” might be quite different in various times and places. In short, a real God must be available to everyone, rather than merely a god of certain select or special people.

Second, I assume that God is the author of all truth—including





new discoveries of all kinds. It would be highly unlikely that such a God would allow all other kinds of truth to unfold and expand in terms of our human understanding but insist that religious truth be completely understood only in one particular time or place. In other words, just as past medical knowledge was developed in the context of the culture and knowledge available at the time, so past religious and spiritual truth was developed in the context of that time. And just as medical knowledge has been updated and expanded by new knowledge and discovery, so I would expect that spiritual knowledge can also be enhanced in each new time and place. Depending on how these assumptions are interpreted, they can be quite controversial in some religious circles. But I am committed to seeing where they take me in the course of this writing.

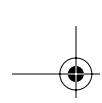


Frankly, I am often surprised by some of my friends who basically have not thought about their religious beliefs since childhood and seemingly have no interest in doing so. They have essentially decided that what they learned in Sunday school or from official church teachings is good enough when it comes to religious beliefs. It reminds me of the attitude expressed on a bumper sticker to the effect of: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." Most professionals would never dream of taking that attitude in presuming that what they learned decades ago in medical or graduate school is still adequate. But when it comes to religion, they seem to have concluded that the less they expose themselves to new ideas, the less they will rock their intellectual or spiritual boats, and the better off they will be.



Personally, I cannot imagine ignoring or avoiding modern scholarship of any kind, whether in medicine or religion. That doesn't

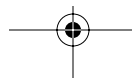
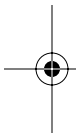


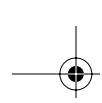


mean I agree with everything churned out by either scientific research or religious scholarship. But it does mean that I believe the God of truth expects us to be open to new ideas and new research, and honor the path of truth-seeking wherever it might lead. During the past ten years I have spent most of my spare time reading on a wide range of modern scholarship regarding the Christian religion, the Bible and modern science. Indeed, my biggest problem in writing this book has been to stop reading and researching—which could stretch out indefinitely—and just do it: write down what I believe and know at this point in my life. Those who believe they have all the answers to religious questions, and those who think there are no answers, won't be interested. But if you are like me, I would guess that you want answers but remain skeptical about many of the answers you have heard. I hope you will find it helpful to dive into some questions with me.

This book is organized in three sections that basically follow the way my mind has always worked in coming to conclusions about my spiritual beliefs. First, I begin by examining whether or not it makes intellectual sense to believe that our world is designed by a creator God rather than completely the result of chance. Therefore, the next three chapters deal with the way we might discern God through the study of nature, the phenomenon of life and the moral instincts and relational drive of our human nature. If I can conclude that at least it's not unreasonable to believe in a God of creation, then I am more comfortable exploring the specific claims of my own religion, the Christian faith.

Indeed, in today's world where so much evil is done in the cause of religion and the name of God, it is mandatory to explain what our



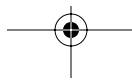
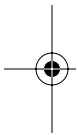


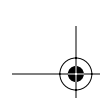
“belief in God” means in more specific terms. Many American polls indicate that the majority of our citizens “believe in God.” But as current world events so dramatically illustrate, the kind of God we believe in can differ astonishingly from one person to another.

The second section of this book is my way of explaining how I come to the specifics of my own belief in God. I will discuss some of the controversies surrounding the “historical Jesus” as well as his possible meaning for us today. I will also discuss some traditional Christian concepts and language that are often confusing to people with no background in the Christian faith. It doesn’t help that Christian tradition, past and present, is rife with arguments and even violence among Christians who disagree with each other over doctrinal issues. How does a thoughtful person work through key questions about Christianity when Christians themselves fight over where to draw the lines around their claims for absolute answers?

After walking through the conclusions I have reached about a creator God and the significance of Jesus, the next major question concerns what such beliefs mean for the way I live my daily life. The third section explores practical implications arising from my own personal faith—with potentially life-changing challenges.

I firmly believe there are no more important questions than the ones I wrestle with in these three sections. Think about it: If there is a Creator who knows us and cares about how we live, then our lives should be profoundly affected. If there is a “history of the universe”—and if we have a personal “history” that continues after the termination of our earthly existence—then this experience we call “life” should take on a totally different meaning, far different than just surviving on earth for as long as and in the most luxurious fash-





ion possible. In short, if our earthly life is only a small part of our journey, then shouldn't we be focusing on a much bigger picture than just our daily existence?

None of the sections in this book is even close to being exhaustive. It's not my goal to set forth a complete defense of religious belief, but simply to invite you to walk with me in a key season of my ongoing spiritual journey. I hope you find at least some of it helpful in coming to your own conclusions.

Finally, although this book is mostly about how to think through such questions, I believe it's the choices we make in our daily lives that tell our true story and reflect what we really believe. And if the truth be told, I have much less confidence in the human mind to figure out the mind of God than I did forty years ago and much more confidence in the mercy of God to tolerate our human explorations on these matters—maybe even to smile with satisfaction as would any good parent watching a child trying to figure it all out.

