

The End Game

Years after I retired, my friend Del Edwards became ill. He had spent his adult life serving his church and was respected by all its members. He believed and taught that faith in God meant peace in the heart and a home in heaven. Yet when death's footsteps were within earshot, he was troubled. After several visits, sitting with Del in his comfortably appointed living room, Del said a friend gave him a book, "90 Minutes in Heaven," by Don Piper, the story of a man who died in an automobile accident. Medics, after determining the man was dead, covered his body with a tarp and moved on to help survivors.

The man had been lying there for an hour and a half when a minister stopped at the scene of the accident. Seeing the tarp, the minister asked the medics if it would be okay for him to pray over the body. They saw no harm in it. As the minister prayed, the man under the tarp began to sing the hymn, "Amazing Grace." After 90 minutes of being counted dead, Don Piper was alive.

Believing he would be judged insane if he told anyone his story, Piper said nothing. Finally, he shared it with a close friend, and eventually he put it in writing, "90 Minutes in Heaven." Piper's story, fact or fiction, opened a door into Del's mind and spirit. Del was at peace—not the ethereal meanderings of a deranged person, but a simple peace and calm. Del's sense of the divine came not from the church or from a Bible, but from a book given to him by a friend.

Of my own experiences, the one that has affected me most profoundly I call my FoodMaxx story. Years ago, after paying the clerk at FoodMaxx, I turned my grocery cart to head for the exit. Suddenly I was filled with a sense of God, not as a theological concept but an actual presence. I wasn't meditating or thinking about God. No lightning flashed; I didn't fall to my knees. I simply knew. What I accepted intellectually for much of my life quietly slipped over the threshold of my mind and dropped into my heart. I knew God.

There at the exit of FoodMaxx, God disappeared, not by leaving, but by coming too close. I think of it like this: for a camera to "see" an object, there must be space, however small, between the subject and the lens. Between me and God, that space was gone.

I eventually coined a word: GodPresent. I experience the divine in every aspect of life, from the most mundane to the most esoteric, from the sublime to the base, from checking out at FoodMaxx to celebrating the birth of a newborn. GodPresent, in the circumstances and events of every day and every hour of each day, has given me a

new way of looking at life. Whether times be good or bad, whether I'm acting the part of a saint or a sinner, whether healthy or in the dying process, awake or asleep, God is present. GodPresent says only that God is, and God is present. Nothing more.

My FoodMaxx experience convinced me “correct” or “incorrect” beliefs are of no interest to the divine. Why should GodPresent worry about how we split theological hairs and double dog dare anyone who holds a different view? When I used the Bible as an idol, did it throw GodPresent into a tizzy? I doubt it.

I describe life with GodPresent like the voyage of a sailor boarding a ship with a broken sail and broken rudder, weighing anchor at midnight on a moonless night with neither chart nor compass, and, leaving all behind, launching out into an unpredictable sea, the only fixed point being the North Star, which is always present, but not always visible. Then, add that the sailor is blind and mute.

Neither sound nor sight was necessary to experience GodPresent. And the joy is indescribable. Sometimes I feel like someone who has crossed a nameless river and entered an exciting world where the language, customs, and culture are new and strange. The difference GodPresent makes for me cannot be quantified, analyzed, or examined. It's not like a baby, whose DNA can be traced. My ongoing experience has no defense, and needs none, because it's not a part of some finely reasoned system. It just is. “God” disappeared, and I couldn't be happier.

Once my fixed image of God was gone, the Bible, the church, and my theology all looked different. None of them was intrinsically bad or evil. But I no longer thought of them the way I had for most of my adult life. Adherence to a creed, membership in a religious organization, the hierarchy, gatherings, donations, the Bible and prayer—I saw them all differently.

For GodPresent, a creed is inconceivable. Its membership is the entire human race. Because all people are as close to GodPresent as is conceivable, there is no room or need for a mediator or for a hierarchy. If the divine is everywhere, there is no place to hide or run from God. Any place we turn to, God is already there. Nor could God turn from us. How could God “go” some place God already inhabits? God became mysterious, unfathomable, indescribable, with no arms, legs, face, feet, or other body parts. I couldn't assume God sees me, as if God has eyes, or hears me, as if God has ears. No throne would be great enough to accommodate God, and earth would be far too small for a footstool.

I met a man at my gym who told me his brother remembered a conversation the two of us had decades ago. His brother, who taught math at Bullard High School in Fresno, said my words were a major influence on his life. They are still three of my favorite words: Always question assumptions.

Explorers in search of the unknown are motivated by questions, not by answers. Asking questions is what opens our minds and hearts. It has proved to be more important and more exciting to me than finding answers.