

Listening to Forgiveness

There we were, licking ice cream cones together, and just like that, the deluge of questions began: “*Mama, what happens when you die? Do you know when you’ll die? What is God? What does love mean?*”

This stream of essential questions was not altogether unexpected from my loquacious 5-year-old daughter. Lately she had been inquiring about the nature of reality, spurred on by Halloween figures popping up everywhere: ghosts, zombies, mummies, vampires, and more. She was trying to distinguish what was real and what was not as she encountered so many costumes and masks.

That summer she’d spent stretches watching bright orange koi fish glide through the murky water of a friend’s pond. She had decided to become one of them this Halloween. Like those ethereal koi, up until then I had glided around her questions, eliding the thornier parts.

Yet her questions had snowballed, gaining momentum toward fathoming mortality. Around this age the gift and curse of human cognition is made apparent: the realization that life seems to end, and our own is no exception. But we know that these aren’t questions of empirical observations, don’t we? Steeped in science and myth, we break down life into the sum of its parts, talk of heartbeats and braincells, assume some Cartesian separation.

I took my daughter’s questions seriously. How could I address them in ways that felt true to my beliefs while helping her feel safe? I’d stepped into a void. I wanted so badly not to deter her seeking, not to defer to the literal, not to trot out pat truisms as if I *knew* what happened after death. I needed to share with her not what I know or don’t know—but what I believe. *What exactly do I believe?*

We licked our ice cream cones down to the crunchy nubbin filled with melted sweet cream, savoring those last bites. I told her I needed time to think, and that we would talk about all her questions soon. This type of off-putting answer didn't suffice in most scenarios, but at that moment she accepted it and we moved on with our day.

Later that evening, I turned on the bath water, adjusting the hot and cold mixing handle by sight to approximately the same place I do most every night. Preoccupied with these questions, I went through the motions to give her a bath. "*Mama, the bath is too hot,*" she told me, refusing to sit down in the tub. I quickly dipped my hand in the water, which felt fine to me. I asked her again to sit, to which she replied "*No, I'll just stand.*" Sometimes she says it's too hot when she doesn't want to get in, I thought, as I toweled off my tough-skinned hands.

As she stood in the bath my thoughts returned to her questions, mentally milling them into a fine powder. Ever since I had children, I occasionally lie awake at night. A momentary shudder comes over me, a temporary sense of fragility. I have so much to lose, I will lose, but I can't quite fathom it in this life stage. I pray my own way, making promises to treasure my family tomorrow even more than I have today. If only I can cherish them perfectly, I hope.

I think of my parents, the answers they gave me—for my father, it has seemed, comfort is couched in religious orthodoxy: repeated prayers, eternal answers carved in stone. For my mother, it is mystery: iterations on a theme, notes that float through air, each time heard differently. Their love has always been there, before me. Lately I find more of my father in myself, in my desire for certainness, my growing willingness to believe. As a child when I had nightmares he soothed my fears by saying "God is protecting you while you sleep." To my own children, I have taken to saying the same.

My husband stays with uncertainty, his skepticism roaring to life when theological topics are broached. In ancient Greece, the skeptics were revered for their intellectual rigor, reasoning away at matters of faith. All he knows is that he does not know, and that mushrooms eat you when you die. I wonder myself how the beauty remains intact.

In the bathroom by the tub, I sat down on the closed-lid toilet with a pen and notebook, lost in thought, oblivious to my daughter's ongoing standing in the bath. She took her toys from the sill and dipped them in, creating a soothing, sloshy din. I tapped the pen repeatedly, unsure where to start, hoping to formulate my list without forming false authority. I have long been enamored of expansive ideas from disparate times and places, scanning them for what resonates, what is repeated, what Aldous Huxley called "the perennial philosophies."

But she is only five, I reminded myself, her grasp on the world is in primary colors, it's concrete. Cocooned in trust that her bed is warm, her belly full, and the sun returns each day. I think of the stories we tell children. The myths we reshape, translations of translations until their source is obliterated. The confusion that I felt as a child about their strange elements, something always out of place. Stories that feel as though they've been pulled up from their roots and gathered into a bouquet. Once glorious, the flowers now wilt, shedding petals, their meanings decay. I read stories like this to my children now, and these questions linger.

I write, "God is like Love. Life is filled with the spirit of love." No, this won't do. I need to make it concrete. I write, "Your grandma loved me, and I was her baby. Your grandma's mom loved her, and she was her baby. And her mom, whose name I do not know...." I stop there, struck by how our lives are made possible by these roots we've never seen. Our stems suspended, sustained by them.

Like a koi fish swimming in circles, my own answers are imbricated with circularity. Seasons return us here. Cause sometimes appears that way. The calendar hanging on the wall disguises this, its pages torn away in straight lines, repeated months making new promises. But how can I convey our connectivity without obscuring the mystery, without rendering it *too* concrete? Maybe I can tell her about the side of the moon we see. The other side remains, hidden from our view. The tides, life cycles, keyed to its tune. She used to always notice the moon, but so often nowadays we are inside when it rises.

I write, “Humans are good and want to be loved.” I frown, fearful of essentializing in a culture of “bad guys” and “superheroes.” I write, “But life is also hard. It will not stop being hard, but it’s filled with goodness and pleasure, too.” None of this will be news to her. At five, she already knows life is hard when she does not get her way, and if we don’t learn to let go, the magnitude of this only increases as we age.

I write, “We should always try to be honest. And to do the next right thing. Remember the Golden Rule!” Ah, the Golden Rule, perhaps the only guidance that we can all agree upon. I write, “Love is shown through actions. By giving our attention. By being present.” I think, but do not write: it also fails us sometimes. We struggle and have to find ways to keep going. How can we cope with our inevitable shortcomings, our own and others’ mistakes? I stay with this pause, knowing there is something important I have left out....

One of those bright orange koi fish wriggled through my mind, catching light. My daughter had asked what love means, and I was circumnavigating a response, just as I had wished not to do. Feeling smug from tying up tidy strings, the irony of my orthodoxy was lost on me.

Splosh! Splash! Suddenly I was aroused from my reverie by a bathtime tsunami. I see that she is still standing, which defeated the point of her bathing. I told her she wouldn't be able to clean herself well enough unless she sat down. She emphatically replied, "*well, I can clean myself with this washcloth!*" She then dipped the cloth in the water and slapped it onto the glass shower door to make it stick. As it hung there, suspended by moisture, I impulsively decided to join her in the bath. I stood up, stripped down, and stepped in.

I instantly felt the hot water scald my feet but kept them planted as my skin adjusted. It was the kind of bath tough-skinned grandmas revel in, surely too hot for her baby soft skin. My empathy bloomed through the haze. I hadn't listened when she'd told me, I didn't realize until I got in.

I turned on the cold tap, mixed in the cooler water, paddled it towards her. She rejoiced as she finally sat down, saying "*oh, thanks, that's better Mama!*" She smiled and sighed. I beheld her face: rosy, beatific, beaded with sweat. For these moments, a soothing We.

But I still felt a hot shame scalding me. How many minutes had passed as I dreamily wrote my manifesto, unaware of the conditions right in front of me? I told her I was so sorry for having made it too hot, for not having listened to what she told me.

She replied, "*that's OK Mama, you don't need to apologize, it was an accident! I forgive you!*" I apologized again to her anyway, but she had already moved on. Despite her smiles, despite how quickly it seemed forgotten, I apologized again and again, listening to myself say it until I believed that I was forgiven.