

CHAPTER 2

Prophecies

We have a religiously divided house. Liz was brought up a Catholic and has a very strong faith. Once, when I called a family conference (only she and I participated since Elie had already fallen asleep on the couch), I was struck by one of the answers she had to a question of mine. Our family conferences, at least the few that we have had, take the form of a series of paired questions such as, “What are the five nicest things that you do for me and vice-versa.”

That night, one of the questions was, “What are the five most important things in our life.” Usually it is uncanny how similar our answers are and how well we know each other. Highest on my list was Elie, followed by our health (particularly Liz and the new baby), our families, our health care plan, and some semblance of financial security.

The latter answers I was quite sure would differ, but I knew Elie would be first and our families a high contender. Wrong. Liz’s list was, “1. God, 2. Our relationship, 3. Our Family, 4. Health, and 5. Friends.” God was first on her list and didn’t even make it into the top five on mine. I noticed that right away. Later that night when we were discussing it before falling asleep she

said she noticed that I hadn't put her name on my list. My list was missing God and my wife. How strange.

I tell the story to illustrate the fact that I come from a non-religious family. It is not natural for me to speak about God, much less write about Him. I never attended church growing up, and in college I was an active disbeliever in organized religion. Yet one summer in Alaska I became certain of God's existence. An image floats in memory of a fishing boat skipper swilling beer, throwing the cans over the side, swearing at us in words I had never heard, sweeping a huge bear paw across the vista of bay, glacier, forested mountains, waterfalls, then pointing a finger at me and spitting out, "You honestly don't believe in God when you look at this." Me muttering something bookish but thinking if someone this putrid and low could be so certain of God, maybe I better take a closer look.

Belief growing from there. The waterfalls. The bear mid-river, catching salmon in their jaws. The mountains. God's mountains. And then the people. The goodness in people. And that little bit of faith took hold and grew through my college years into a firm and unwavering belief in God, the existence of God. The still unsettled question from there became "What form does God take." The All-Powerful. The Merciful. The Cosmic Humorist. The Great Plan. The Unknowable. The Man.

Asked as a question. Or all of the above?

Before Elie, the question of religion was one of the most difficult aspects of our marriage. I do not understand Catholicism, the many rituals and mysteries. To me, it seems contrived, ponderous. Teleologically, I find it difficult because of its adherence to the next world at the expense of this one. The mountains. The streams. Creation. Why would I want to focus on the next life when this one is so awesome?

I have since come to understand better the saying from Archbishop Fulton Sheen: "There are not over a hundred people in the U.S. that hate the Catholic Church. There are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church." It is an easy religion to misunderstand and even easier to misrepresent.

Marriage, two people becoming one flesh, requires unity in the most fundamental things. For Liz, religion is one of the most fundamental, and it has always troubled her that it is an area about which we could not agree. I remain respectful, but I keep my distance. I attend church, but I have no desire to become Catholic. When she asks what religion I call myself, I consider my non-religious past, the fact that I sit in church every Sunday with a beautiful girl on my lap, and I respond that I must be a lapsed agnostic.

One of our neurosurgeons said that there are no atheists in the pediatric neurosurgery waiting room. Touched by that sudden need for support, we carry the belief in God beyond the crisis. Understanding that faith will ebb and flow over time, those who have been baptized by the fire of intense suffering and loss never totally forget that relationship built with God in the hours endured with a child lying on a hospital table, her tiny skull opened, out of reach.

And yet before any of this happens, we feel inklings of our religious needs. I am always surprised by the response of children to religion. When I was six or seven I remember wondering why my family didn't dress up and go to church like the other families around us. I also remember wanting to go and even asking my parents about it sometime near dawn one Sunday, "Dad, are we getting dressed to go to church today." I still remember the astonished face of my father as he sat up on the pillow and rubbed his eyes.

I am not alone. A friend's eight year-old boy, Anthony, approached his father one day as his dad and I sat on the porch. Out of the blue and to our mutual surprise, he said, "Dad, I think I want to become a priest." Then he wandered off again to play in the yard with his little brother and sister.

The reason these events surprise me is that the child's intuitive response to religion is so often positive. Up to a certain age, children in healthy families have not yet been programmed to be critical, to doubt, to disbelieve or mock. Their positive response, their will to believe seems to argue to me that the relationship to God which religion can represent is something that comes to us a priori. After hearing Anthony's comment, I drove home wondering if my own inability to be religious is a programmed response that blots out my better, natural impulse.

One winter evening in March 1994, I sat in a rocking chair, staring out the window of our living room. The night was black. There was no moon, but the sky was full of stars. I could just discern the lower limbs of the spruce tree outside the window. Liz was putting Elie, nearly seven months old, to bed, and I had been thinking all evening about religion and Catholicism. It struck me how important it was to Liz. Perhaps I should be more open to the possibility of religious feeling in spite of my lack of inclination. I decided to leave it up to God, so I sat in the chair and prayed: "God, if it is your will that I become a Catholic, if Christ has some relevance to me, and if religion is something that I should embrace, give me some kind of sign."

I stood and moved to the window, half-expecting a shooting star or some other dramatic event. I watched intently. The night was as black and quiet as any. Snow blew lazily over the drift just outside the window. There was no special sound, no unexpected movement. Nothing happened. Soon Liz called from the back and broke my reverie. She needed a clean diaper... could I help? I smiled at my moment's fancy and dropped back into my life as it was. How silly I was being, I thought. Soon, I forgot my request of God amidst the more mundane clutter of daily life, changing diapers, work, writing articles in the evening, fixing the house. It was easy to forget my prayer when nothing happened.

One month later, we found out Elie would die from a brain tumor.



On April 20, Liz had an appointment with an eye specialist near our home. She had noticed that Elie had trouble seeing things at times and that one of her eyes tended to wander. We had read Doctor Spock, and were very concerned she might have a weak eye. Things seemed to get much worse when the doctor who examined her said he thought she might be cortically blind. He wanted us to see a specialist in Ann Arbor.