The Chasm

I was reading a curious story on Wednesday. It was the story and final recollections of a man suffering from advanced ALS. He ultimately made the personal decision to die via medical assistance. ALS is a terrifying way to go, and I felt moved as I read it.

For some reason, I found his twitter feed. As I looked at the final post written by the man (his family wrote some more tweets after his passing), a terrifying thought gripped me: I am going to also die someday. Its unavoidable, as much a part of life as birth.

I think we all sort-of have a vague understanding in the back of our minds that it must happen. We causally think about retirement one day, we sit down and write wills, we imagine a far future that we implicitly know we will not be a part of.

That night, for some reason, it struck me in a deep way I’d never felt in my life before. It hammered down my spine, left me feeling clammy, alone, and terrified.

My fight-or-flight response saw my end, and did its job. Historically, that vision would be a bit more immediate and avoidable: a stalking tiger, a roaring bear. The death that is “acute” in a sense, a fate that if you, just for a moment, push all you have into your legs, process all incoming information in a hyper-focused manner, disposing any extraneous information.

Which is very useful for 2-5 minutes. But I was in this mode, off and on, for almost 72 hours. The tingling chill turns into a vague clamminess, the hyper-focus makes it impossible to let go of the terrorizing idea, which haunts you like a specter. You sleep fitfully, wake up early, and probably have nightmares.

Its at this moment that everyone’s mind is going to go a different route.

## Leaving the Faith like losing a friend

Its one thing for a Christian to leave the faith in a single, active moment. I genuinely respect these people, though I do mourn their decision. The thing is, that almost never happens in practice. Speaking from experience, I see most ex-Christians realizing their status after they’ve long made the practical changes. Church visits stop, prayer grows superficial, loses its connection and becomes mere words, which soon enough ceases outside of the occasional performant act done in the presence of others who you still need to “keep up appearances” for.

You start to adjust your worldview, and the zeitgeist soaks into your brain. Religion is outdated – it was useful when humans were first figuring things out, because it was a good story that encouraged reproduction and cooperation in a way that meant religious out-competed the non-religious, meaning that it was selected for as a result of long-term evolutionary pressure.

That’s what the thinkers of the day say, at least.

But in the moment of terror, that is a cold comfort. Secular learning channel Kurtzgesagt expresses the worldview people fall into in this mode, called “Optimistic Nihilism”. Basically, yeah, this is what it is, might as well make the best of it. The ultimate answer to the question, “why?”, is simply, “well, why not?”

It works pretty well, day-to-day. Its quite freeing, in many ways. There’s no point, no morality, so live however you want! If there’s no morality, the only reason whatever you desire is bad is that its evolutionarily counter to reproduction. And who cares about that? Why should we?

It ironically made it easy for me to fall into a cycle of chemical anesthesia, an inoculation against the infinite chasm that lurked in the corner of my mind. And a lot of very smart people have laid out some very, very excellent arguments in favor of it. After all, it is a “complete” explanation requiring no faith.

## The Doubt of my Doubt

But I realized, that isn't true. The secular zeitgeist does have assumptions, but they’re sort of stated casually and cast aside. Namely, it sneers at the idea that anything is truly unknowable. The implied belief is that anything we don’t know is a hole that just needs to be penciled in. Anything but the most pessimistic view has a faith of its own. See, for example, Issac Asimov’s “The Final Question”. It offers a hope for a future that somehow extends beyond the heat death of the universe. Or any sci-fi with faster-than-light travel.

These hopeful stories, popular anchors of the communities I frequented, were sources of hope for those that abandoned the old hopes.

And I began to wonder, if I had walked away from my faith upbringing because it ultimately relied on a trust that cannot be verified by us in our current state… shouldn't I also reject these futures?

What was left was terribly bleak. I’d argue that any truly, fully-committed ex-theist that left the faith because of this “leap of faith”, must be either internally inconsistent, or depressed to the point of apathy, maybe even suicidal.

## The re-kindling

So, after two days of cold, fretful, desperate flailing, I reached out for a ridiculous hope. I pulled open my beside drawer and extracted the dusty, forgotten study bible given to me in High School.

I mentally berated myself for my weakness. *All the other ex-theists have faced this terror and weathered the storm, yet you go back to fairy tales. You clearly aren't smart enough.*

But that wasn't *really* it. I found myself probing that thought deeper, ironically, following the rationalist impulse and cognitive behavioral therapy training I knew. Come on; not being smart enough? Intelligence has nothing to do with this primal fear.

*If you do this, you will be putting yourself on the side of the terrible, simple-minded bigots. The ones that voted for politicians that want to persecute people like you and your friends for your sexual orientation. You* ***traitor***.

That was a more serious wall. Its true, the election of Donald Trump, and the populist movement that seemed to coast on the rails of the modern evangelical apparatus, is something that deeply troubles me. But I knew from my days of believing in college that I had already found a faith clearly described by the Bible which did *not* match what I saw on cable news. That was a problem, but it wasn't the issue of the moment.

*Fine. You personally may not be part of that group, but the groups of friends you now hang out with? They won’t know that. They will* **reject** *you*.

That is closer to the truth yet. But there was another level to this; I had a childhood that unfortunately made me very experienced with rejection, and I knew how to move on, and not value myself purely by the external beliefs of those around me.

Shivering in the fetal position, I knew my answer: *You have always believed. It was just easier to justify your sin by papering over that belief.*

Well… crap. Now I’m terrified *and* ashamed.

I cried out a desperate, sobbing prayer. “Please, God. Just take away this fear. Please, give me peace so I can sleep. Please… forgive me.”

I felt utterly, desolately alone. I would never pretend to fully understand the abandonment Christ felt on the cross, but I think I had just the slightest taste. I believed I had left God, and in turn, God had left me.

## The Lie

This, my friends, is a form of the terrible lie told to us by the evils of this world. It seduces us with what seems like a free life, a life where you are unburdened by “outdated ancient customs” that was the source of all war, the justification of prejudice, the hand-wave that allowed atrocities.

So you follow that happy lie, away and away from the path you once walked, focused on a portrait of a world happier and freer that the one you have forced yourself into.

And then the portrait is smashed, and you see you are inches from stepping off the edge of a cliff into an infinite chasm of death.

At that dark moment, the lie is nearly complete in its snare. It suddenly swaps, going from the sweet song encouraging you forward to the dark, laughter that now bars your retreat.

*You did this. You have no right to return. God watched you walk away, and any possible path back will be arduous and strict. You might find a lesser sort of salvation - if you don’t make a mistake ever again.*

My friends. This is so untrue its laughable in context. God and his prophets knew this was the core lie, and therefore left us many stories countering this. The history of the Israelites is one of God raising up his chosen people, the people walking away, abandoning God, then being brought back to his fold. Over, and over, and over.

Jesus, tells us the parable of the prodigal son, who demands his inheritance and squanders it, and crawls back hoping to live as a slave in his father’s estate. The father, of course, *runs* out to his son upon seeing him, has him dressed in fine clothes and jewelry, and plans a feast of celebration.

Jesus himself, after his closest friends on Earth abandoned him wholesale in the darkest moment of creation, even denying their association to him multiple times, returned to them, greeted them as friends, and rights their wrongs, empowering the apostles to go on and grow the early church with fearless courage.

## Casting out, and reaching out

I had made this mental journey, but I still feel the physical aftershocks. Looking back, I find myself noting a moment in retrospect, when the terror stopped being *my* terror. This was the terror of something inside me that had taken root, and realized it had been found and revealed, and was to be cast out, totally powerless to act.

## Scared, but hopeful

So I’m still washing the waves of terror off as I write this. But I had already been given hope, even before I knew to ask. Shivering, terrified, I asked for forgiveness, and I asked for peace. I also asked for a friend. I was so tired, so afraid. I asked God to send someone to reach out to me in that moment because I didn't have the energy to do so myself. This was sometime after midnight.

I eventually fell into a restless sleep.

I woke up, and the terror was gone for a moment, but began to descend again quickly. I reached to my phone as a distraction. A text had come in the night before, around 11:30 PM. My friend and college roommate, who hadn't talked to me in six months, had sent me a text.

“Hey, we should hang out. A lot has happened in my life, and I want to catch up.”

God has answers to our prayers before we know to ask them.