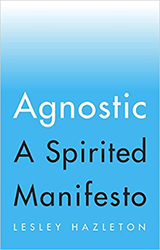
**Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto**By Lesley Hazleton  
Riverhead Books, New York, 2016

Lesley Hazleton does not like the word “the”. At least not when it’s used in discussing matters of religion, faith, or spirituality, such as *the* meaning of life, *the* soul, *the* universe, *the* afterlife, and worst of all, *the* truth.

In her latest book, [*Agnostic: A Spirited Manifesto*](http://www.amazon.com/Agnostic-Spirited-Manifesto-Lesley-Hazleton/dp/1594634130/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1462861532&sr=8-1&keywords=agnostic+a+spirited+manifesto), she explains that the presence of “the” before each of these nouns or phrases implies they are well-defined, well-understood and that there is only one of each. “The” puts an end to discussion, debate and exploration. It’s quite a little tyrant, that “the”.

For an agnostic like Hazleton, this is very troubling. The definite article, she says, over-determines whatever it precedes when in fact those things are not determined at all and may not even be determinable.

Hazleton, a.k.a. [The Accidental Theologist](http://accidentaltheologist.com/), is a psychologist and writer who lived in Jerusalem for thirteen years before eventually settling onto a houseboat in Seattle. She’s written books about the origins of Islam and biographies of the biblical figures Jezebel and Mary. (I wrote a post about one of her earlier books, [*After the Prophet*](http://www.amazon.com/After-Prophet-Story-Shia-Sunni-Split/dp/0385523947/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1462981210&sr=8-1&keywords=after+prophet+hazleton), [here](https://hskatz.wordpress.com/2010/11/06/book-review-after-the-prophet/). I should also note that I once took a non-fiction writing class she taught at the University of Washington, though I take full credit for any mistakes and ineptitude in this present piece.)

In *Agnostic*, Hazleton explores different facets of that varied collection of beliefs, practices and traditions we call “religion”, including God, belief and faith (they are different), mystery, and meaning from an agnostic perspective. Hazleton weaves together history, philosophy, theology, and epistemology with colorful strands of her own biography. This combination of in-depth research and personal reflection makes each topic lively and approachable.

I liked the third chapter, In Doubt We Trust, the most. This chapter is about belief, faith, conviction and the over-riding importance of doubt.

“Abolish all doubt,” she says, “and what is left is not faith, but absolute, heartless conviction, a blind and blinding refuge from both thought and humanity.” [p. 66]

Maybe I liked it so much because my educational background is in mathematics and computer science and my career has been in software and this chapter includes a discussion of the relationship between faith, science and doubt.

If doubt is often a companion of faith, it is a critical element of science. Hazleton quotes Stuart Firestein, a neuroscientist at Columbia University:

“Being a scientist … requires having faith in uncertainty, finding pleasure in mystery, and learning to cultivate doubt.” [p. 76]

And Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman:

“It is imperative in science to doubt. It is absolutely necessary to have uncertainty as a fundamental part of your inner nature …” [p. 76]

Hazleton concludes this chapter with one of the book’s clearest statements of what it means to be agnostic:

“This is the agnostic’s faith: not in answers but in possibilities. It’s in the way doubt opens up thought instead of closing it off – in the vitality of a mind intrigued, challenged, dancing with uncertainty, instead of being plagued by it. That’s why, as an agnostic, I place my faith in inquiry. “ [p. 79]

“Faith in inquiry” really resonates with me. Perhaps that’s because my own beliefs have evolved over the years from my Jewish heritage and upbringing towards atheism. Faith in inquiry implies I don’t have to settle on some final answer. A final answer may not even exist. Rather the whole point is to keep looking, to keep learning.

That spirit of inquiry runs through *Agnostic*, coupled with the willingness to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty, and the humility to accept that “I don’t know,” might be the best answer for now.

*Agnostic* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book, but don’t expect any sort of “complete system” of practice or belief. Hazleton doesn’t even mention the [Agnostic’s Prayer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creatures_of_Light_and_Darkness#The_Agnostic.27s_Prayer). Instead, as she herself admits, the book is a rather strange kind of manifesto:

“… one that makes no claims to truth, offers no certainties, eschews briskly confident answers to grand existential questions. And if this makes it a peculiarly paradoxical creature, that is exactly what it needs to be, because to be agnostic is to cherish both paradox and conundrum. It is to acknowledge the unknowable and yet explore it at the same time, and to do so with zest, in a celebration not only of the life of the mind, but of life itself.” [p. 21]

*Agnostic* is also very much about language. Hazleton spends a great deal of time delving into the origins and meanings, plural, of the words we use when we talk about religion. I found this a really helpful aspect of the book. Those words – God, belief, faith, mystery, and so on – mean different things to each of us and the lack of a common understanding of what we mean when we use them is so often a source of disagreement and conflict. Hazleton isn’t proposing that any particular definitions be adopted by everyone. On the contrary, by exploring various possible meanings for these terms she highlights the fact that they are indeed not settled, not entitled to a prefatory “the”, and more importantly she models for the rest of us the agnostic’s desire for and delight in a deeper search for understanding that acknowledges but is not bound by the beliefs and doctrines of others.

Hazleton is an exuberant agnostic. She rejects the binary choice of being either a believer or an atheist. She refuses the pity of believers who consider her a lost soul, and faces down bullying atheists who would accuse her of being a non-committal fence-sitter. She hasn’t come to this position reluctantly or out of some dour rationalism that says neither the existence nor the non-existence of God are provable therefore agnosticism is the only logical stance to take. No, instead Hazleton embraces and celebrates agnosticism for its open-mindedness, its questioning and its questing.

There’s openness, humility, playfulness and sharp wit on display throughout *Agnostic*. It’s a heartening change from the fundamentalism, extremism and strident certainty we see so often these days on all sides of religious and political debates. In fact, it’s one of the strongest refutations of fundamentalism I’ve ever read.