

If I Were God...

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Joe Edmiston

When JoAnn first asked me to offer a few of my thoughts about what I'd do if I was god I began to come up with "Joe's Smite List", a list of the people I'd smite with pestilence or death-you know the ones: the homophobes, racists, and the ones who are just a little too nationalistic for my taste. I have to admit that creating that list was kind of fun. But then I started thinking that it wasn't going to really convince anyone that I was committed to peacemaking, non-violent conflict resolution, and diversity; and maybe coming up with that list meant I was more like those people than I cared to admit.

It's unlikely that many of you are as devout a TV junkie as I am, but maybe one or two of you remember the animated series "Futurama" on Fox. In one episode, the robot character named Bender manages to become stranded, floating in outer space where he has an experience with bacteria on his torso evolving into a civilization, very primitive at first but eventually becoming quite advanced. He becomes god to the people living on his torso. Ultimately, it turns out badly for everyone-ending in nuclear annihilation. Then Bender has an encounter with god (represented as a nebula that pulses when god speaks). Bender explained that when he did too much for his people, they became dependent upon him, and when he did too little they began to despair and doubt that he existed. God shares a trade secret with him; if you're doing the job right, no one knows you're there.

So, if I were god, my goal would be to find a balance between doing too much for people and doing not enough. And there's the rub. How much is too much, how much is not enough? I decided I'd end all suffering and death, because at first glance, that sure seemed like a good plan. But immediately I was confronted with what do to keep the world's population under control? If I don't do something, the population would quickly spiral out of control and the planet couldn't sustain it. If I prevent new offspring from being born, won't that stall creativity and evolution? Since creativity and evolution are things that, as god, I plan to encourage, I can't very well prevent new life. Try as I might, I just couldn't come up with a good answer. So, OK, maybe I'm biting off more than I can chew trying to deal with suffering and death. Maybe I'll just have to leave life and death up to chance, even though it isn't very satisfying having existence reduced to a crapshoot? Unfortunately, I don't know a better way to decide whose day it is to live and whose day it is to die, or who gets to eat and who has to be eaten?

Maybe I needed to start with something smaller than a coherent plan for life and death. How about a plan to let people know whether or not I even exist? Surely that should be doable. After all, shouldn't god be able to think outside the box? I could remind people that there is something beyond what they can see or hear when they notice the grace and unconditional love of their

four-legged friends; or remind them that they are experiencing the creative power of the universe when they hold some grass seed in the palm of their hand; or send them a messenger, a Southeast Christian-type no less, to remind them that this is the day that the lord has made. Unfortunately, that probably won't be enough to convince all the people that I exist, but if I do more I run the risk of turning them into mindless drones. I created them with a mind and I want them to use it. I'll have to convince them, somehow, that they need to use their intellect, reason, and creativity (which I'll give them plenty of) to solve their own problems; because as much as I might want to help, I've decided that, in the long run, they're better off if I don't interfere too much. I'd rather run the risk of having them doubt my existence altogether than have them surrender themselves to mindlessly worshiping me (as cool as that sounds to my human ego) and become paralyzed by dependency or guilt; or even worse, to fall into unsolvable, pointless disagreements and wars to try to prove to one another which group of people is my favorite and whose side I'm on.

Ultimately, I'm not entirely happy with my attempt at being in control of the universe. As in my own life experience, I'm left with a sense that god can and should do more. The problem lies in the tension between free will and god's sovereignty (or predestination, if you'll forgive this Presbyterian boy for using a good Calvinist term). If I have to choose one or the other, I'm going to err on the side of giving my creation too much free will. Then I'm going to cross my fingers and hope that people find creative ways to reach out to one another with kindness, love, and empathy.

Tiffany Taylor

Some of you have undoubtedly read the book "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," by Douglas Adams. Its slightly surreal pages feature many strange events and creatures, among them the Babel fish: a small, yellow, leechlike fish that feeds on surrounding brainwave energy. If you stick one of these fish in your ear, you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language.

The book says that "it is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mind-bogglingly useful could have evolved purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as a final and clinching proof of the NON-existence of God. The argument goes like this: 'I refuse to prove that I exist,' says God, 'for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing.' 'But,' says Man, 'The Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn't it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don't. QED.' 'Oh dear,' says God, 'I hadn't thought of that,' and promptly disappears in a puff of logic."

Along similar logical lines, my talk this morning could be extremely brief. You see, I don't believe in a God, or in many gods, or goddesses, or spiritual powers, beings, or entities of any sort. So... if I were God, then there would be no God: by my own definition, I wouldn't exist. Poof! I would disappear in a puff of logic.

But before I vanish, it's interesting to contemplate my world. A world that has no God ... that knows no God ... that expects no God ... that needs no God. A world whose citizens do not believe in, pray to, blame, praise, swear by, lean on, go to war in the name of, or even consider the possibility of a higher power.

GK Chesterton said, "If there were no God, there would be no Atheists." To be an atheist requires that there be a concept of a God that the atheist doesn't believe in. But my world would have no concept of a God; thus it would be populated not by atheists but by people who are entirely humanist.

There are those who claim that without the looming threat of hell or the glittering promise of heaven, all of humanity would run amuck in the streets, looting and murdering at random. However, neither that threat nor that promise apply to me or to millions of other atheist, agnostic, nondeist, and unchurched people in our current reality, but the vast majority of us are loving, caring human beings. Given a reality whose basis rests on the wellbeing of humanity rather than the dictates of any of a variety of supreme beings, I believe that society would be just fine.

True, there would be no churches: we wouldn't be divided into Presbyterians, Jews, Baptists, Methodists, Muslims, UUs, and so on. But we're a social species, and like would find alternate ways and means to gather with like: Perhaps instead of forming groups based on the way they worshiped or believed, people would coalesce around varying ideas of how best to serve the rest of humanity. My religion might focus on feeding the hungry, and your religion might focus on housing the homeless.

Unfortunately, people don't always make decisions that are good, or wise, or considerate. There would still be war, based on ethnicity or geographic boundaries or economic factors or warped leadership. But neither side's generals would be claiming that God was on their side; they would have to justify their bloodshed in other terms.

Most important, in my opinion, would be the fact that people would take complete responsibility for their own decisions and actions. Nothing would be "God's will." Things would happen-as a result of a conscious act, or a geological disaster, or a lack of foresight, or illness, or whatever. Things would happen, and people would cope, adjust, and move on.

Of course, people like guidelines. For millennia, millions have followed the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and similar dictates from other holy works. So, before vanishing into my cloud of logic, I would offer the following list, which is a modification and combination of some things I've read. I'd imprint these nine suggestions into the minds of humanity for their contemplation:

1. You have only one life; use it wisely.
2. You have only one Earth; treat it kindly.
3. Remember that you are responsible for your actions, good and bad. Act with prudence and thought.
4. Know yourself.
5. Remember that you are an individual with your own capacities, goals, and needs.
6. Don't murder, hurt or cheat people unless they are putting you or your loved ones in danger.
7. Respect others, and don't create unnecessary antagonism. Compassion and good will are usually easier than hostility.
8. Don't lie to other people, but rather stand up for the truth.
9. Live your life to the fullest. Don't make the world your personal hell: If there is a heaven, it has to be here on Earth.