

## My Answer to the Question: What is The Role of Faith in Your Life?

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In July at the end of my Panama presentation on “Significance Beyond Success,” I was asked *What role has faith played in your life?*

It’s a great question, but the short crisp answer required in the public meeting runs several dangers: being unintelligible jargon, or false to my experience, or the appearance of an attack on the listener’s faith.

My audiences are quite diverse. Some are devotees of a religion with strong beliefs and demanding practices. Others consider themselves unbelievers, agnostic or atheistic, perhaps having “lost the religion” of their youth. And many tell me they are spiritual but not religious, often reflecting a journey not yet complete.

Back home from the trip, I decided to answer the question as accurately as possible. My faith and its evolution has made me who I am to a significant degree.

If you define faith as your **narrative** of reality, the **attitudes/values** it supports, and the **behaviors/practices** you attempt, we all have a faith.

About that faith you can ask two interesting questions. First, **is it true** to reality? If so in what sense: scientifically provable? Historically accurate? Mythically wise? Second, **is it adaptive?** Does it make life better, work more effective, relations positive? Does it lead to a good society?

The difficulty of knowing whether the narrative is true led me instead to ask from high school on whether my faith was adaptive. And over the years I’ve come to believe that this test suggests a person’s “real faith” is more the attitudes and behaviors shaping their lives than the narrative of reality and dogmas in their mind.

At the risk of oversimplification, I remember my past in three different faith epochs, each roughly twenty-five years in length.

### Youth: Religious Conservative

I was born into a family in the Evangelical branch of the Protestant world, a part of Western Christendom. My white Anglo parents were very religious, missionaries, trying to live and share their faith in Latin America. By the end of High School, I had internalized this faith as my own.

The core “narrative” or theology of this faith is based on the Bible. God created man and a good world. He both knows and loves each one of us. The world is hard with much suffering because a fallen angel of God, Satan, led our ancestors Adam and Eve into disobedience and still tempts us. God, however, so loves each of us, that 2000 years ago he sent His son, Jesus, as a living example of what He wants and as a sacrifice to permit forgiveness of our sins. When we believe, He sends his Holy Spirit to help us.

God has a set of “behaviors” He wants from us. Some like “thou shalt not kill, lie, or commit adultery” are plainly stated in the ten commandments. Some like no fighting with sibs, no premarital sex, are derivatives. The overarching rule for living is to “love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Many of the values and behaviors in my family were shared by the larger society of Costa Rica and the U.S but a few, like “no movies, no dancing, no drinking,” made us feel a set- apart minority. A few, perhaps like tithing 10% of our money and time for others, may have made us admirable in society’s eyes. My mother interpreted generosity to mean that on Christmas Eve, we take all but one of the gifts received from friends in the States, to distribute to poor children in our neighborhood.

This early faith shaped my attitudes/values profoundly. My life was important. God not only knew me by name but had a mission for me. He wanted me to fully develop my talents. Everything I did should be done “with all my heart, soul and mind.” It meant being the best I could be as student, or athlete, or friend. When faced with adversity it meant avoiding victimhood and asking what God was trying to teach me. When overwhelmed by tasks beyond my capacity, I could pray for God’s help.

This “faith” made me a hardworking student in high school and college, truthful, eager to learn, enthusiastic, and resilient when faced with adversity. It turned out to be very adaptive at getting me good grades, and ultimately a scholarship to Harvard Law School.

### **Midlife: Agnostic Disbelief**

As early as grade school and certainly by High School, I began to suspect that rules weren’t as simple or absolute as they were taught. Tell the truth is a commandment, but

you need to learn to balance it with tactfulness. Misbehaviors have many causes, but it is not acceptable to say, as my brother once said, “The Devil made me do it.”

Two significant personal experiences, I’ve described in my memoirs<sup>1</sup>, also made me begin to question aspects of Christianity. One was in High School trying to “bless roommates” where I learned that showing interest in them was the sort of “love” they wanted, not trying to convert them, nor pious sermons. The other was selling door to door in college, where I learned that God did not answer prayer as I’d been taught to expect, that perhaps He wanted me to do things on my own.

In college I stopped assuming I could fully trust preachers and dogma. I began to trust my own experiences over the authority of established religions. My wide reading and courses in science, philosophy, psychology, biology and history introduced me to alternative “narratives” that seemed to fit the facts a bit better than the religious dogmas of my childhood. The “big bang theory” and “Darwinian evolution” explained the formation of the universe, the creation of man, suffering, and much more.

This alternative narrative suggested a God not squeamish about suffering and extinctions, not focused mainly on humans or me personally. While science doesn’t prove the non-existence of God, it certainly casts doubt on any literal interpretation of the Biblical narrative.

Furthermore, history didn’t suggest religions were all that positive. Religions have motivated wars, been used to justify slavery and contributed to customs not that adaptive. I began to develop a strong allergy to all dogmatic fundamentalist religions and often their political agendas.

I also became aware that political, economic, and cultural institutions matter hugely. Billy Graham’s preaching seemed “naïve” in suggesting that the solution to all our problems starts with “getting right with God.” People may be shaped more by their environment than their religion. Economic and political systems matter. My health, education, and the trajectory of my life is hugely shaped by whether my country is communistic or capitalistic, by whether I live in a time of war or peace.

Good intentions of leaders do not save their people from the damage of flawed strategies or defective institutions, as the Castro revolution in Cuba or the U.S. intervention in Vietnam dramatically illustrate. “Salvation” has an important communal aspect. It requires smart political, economic, cultural carpentry. This sort of thinking led me to get

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<sup>1</sup> Finding a Path: Stories from my Life, (2011)

further education in law, politics and economics and ultimately to business rather than to seminary.

My transition from an evangelical faith to agnosticism was not sudden. It occurred in the decade after law school in which the list of what I “no longer believe” grew. By my 30s I had stopped active church going and calling myself a Christian, although I remained loyal to my missionary heritage.

Many of my behaviors, unmoored from a religious narrative, I shed very easily without guilt. I discovered I enjoyed movies, dancing, drinking and playing cards. Others, like most of the values reflected in the commandments, struck me as necessary for a good life in society and I tried to cultivate them.

Some behaviors, like giving to others 10% of my earnings and time, I continued out of habit. Perhaps intuitively I felt that if I focused on creating the most value for society (my clients, the economy, the country) this would also result in success for myself.

And some attitudes which I suspected were illusions, like the idea that I had a mission in life, I kept as adaptive “distortions of reality.” They gave meaning to my work and relations.

### **Maturity: Eclectic Spiritualism**

As I approached mid-life several things began to change my narrative and make me aware of my need for a wiser narrative more open to the possibility that reality has a critical spiritual dimension.

My ten years working in Central America to bring about development sobered me. My faith in economic and political systems began to seem as naïve as Billy Graham’s faith. Civil rights legislation hadn’t by itself solved racism. The welfare programs of the Good Society hadn’t broken the cycle of poverty. U.S. aid and advice hadn’t resulted in Central America’s development. And evidence of how strong religious minority communities were successful in creating social mobility convinced me that good systems must be supported by a culture/faith that is adaptive.

I also became aware of inconsistencies between my narrative and my attitudes. Newtonian physics, reality as “matter in motion,” suggests that the physical future is 100% determined by the past. While I may in my head believe that this is true every day I act AS IF I and everyone else has some degree of free will. I note that even people who claim to be determinists do the same.

As I read more deeply in science, I became aware that Einstein's theory of relativity not only allows more dimensions to reality, but string theory appears to require them. Quantum theory appears to have a built in "randomness." Our knowledge of reality is incomplete. Reality could have a "spiritual" dimension that underpins the time space bubble in which we live. The scientific difficulty of deriving both complexity and consciousness from physical theories allows me to hope my life and the universe has direction and a larger purpose to it.

What most changed me, though, were three personal "crises" in the 1989-1992 period as I passed my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Contrary to surface appearance, much in my life needed fixing. My body was breaking down. Shortly after a hip replacement I suffered a heart attack which required a triple bypass. My marriage was failing, both of us unhappy and discussing divorce. The company in which I had risen to a senior position and on which my financial independence depended was imploding, largely as a result of conflict between founders and active partners.

Facing these challenges, I used a consultant's rational tool kit to identify problems, collect data, analyze options, develop "external" strategies to solve my problems. But I also realized I needed to take an "inner journey" to really understand how and why I'd contributed to my problems and what were the changes required for survival and success in the future. My secular "faith" had not proved that adaptive. I needed to be open to alternative narratives and attitudes. In the three year transition period I discovered that many of the ideas and practices that were most helpful to me came from faiths, who took the spiritual dimension of reality seriously.

A narrative which helped me on this inner journey came from Carl Jung. It involved recognizing that beside my persona, the person I think I am, there are in my unconscious other parts of me, a shadow, an unacknowledged feminine part, fragments that I needed not just to acknowledge, but somehow integrate.

Getting to know those unconscious parts of me and addressing their wounds and needs, I found that practices like meditation, compassion, love, forgiveness were critical. In visualization therapy I met an inner guide, a hunchback gardener named Smiley, with a wisdom beyond rationality.

When I had to finally decide on divorce and asked Smiley what I should do about my wife, he told me "Harry you need to learn to love her ... and leave her!" I instantly recognized he was right. I had never loved my wife as she needed to be loved and I

needed in our divorce and future relations to care for her. However, we both were better off separating and getting a divorce.

This inner journey ultimately led to major changes in my life. When we active partners negotiated a buyout of the firm we were able to build it into a great company on new values. My insights and our therapies led to an amicable divorce. Without leaving Bain, I moved into a new career in Central America with an ambitious but flexible life plan. The key changes also involved some fundamental changes of orientation: not pushing rocks up a hill; not working with people I don't like or respect; letting the markets help me focus my efforts; eliminating hostility and really trying to learn to love others and find win-win solutions. I adopted practices of meditation, of awareness, of focusing on others, of letting go of ego, of practicing compassion that I learned from various religious traditions.

These changes over the last twenty five years have been far more successful than I ever expected, whether success is measured secularly by business growth, financial profits, or social impact, or whether it is measured in spiritual terms such as joy, health, good relationships or personal integration.

In this journey I became much more comfortable with paradox and began to see the underlying "unity" of reality. My continued reading in science seemed to support this narrative. Competition and cooperation are both part of Darwinian evolution. We may think we are separate individuals, but the reality is we are deeply interconnected and interdependent. Rarely is anything wholly good or bad. All life ends in death and out of death comes life. And love, however hard to define, as all the great religious traditions teach, does appear to work magic in the real world.

As I gravitated toward a "unity" narrative, I chose to accept the reality in which I lived as, if not good, part of a whole that is good. I saw all of my life, including my Dad's painful death, in a new light. With all the mistakes and potholes my life had not been a disaster. Quite the contrary it had been deeply blessed beyond anything I deserved.

I had left College believing that "liberal Christians" were people who had lost their faith but were unwilling to admit it. They clung to the religious trappings but without any real content. When I fell in love with Sandy, a modern liberal Christian, I had to give up that arrogant prejudiced belief. Sandy and her community had a robust faith in God but a mythic way of interpreting Christian dogmas. Her faith had led her to spend her adult life living in community, in poverty, doing development work all over the world.

I started reading the history of American Liberal Christianity and popular writers like Marcus Borg. My journey seemed very similar to that which had led the deepest theologians to different types of liberal Christianity. All of us face the challenge of integrating science with faith, attitudes and behaviors that make for both a successful personal life and a good society.

One relatively new school of theology based on Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics I found intriguing, mind-blowing. I also discovered in America among Catholics, among Jews, among Christians, among Buddhists and Hindus a whole group living a faith that was inclusive rather than exclusive, non-violent, intelligent. Many from different faiths shared this perennial philosophy." It recognized the Mystery at the core of reality, an intelligence inviting us to be cocreators of our own and humanity's future.

This new **narrative** of mine is still very incomplete and probably misguided in many ways. It has reinforced **behaviors/attitudes** of humility, compassion. But it has emboldened me to tell consultants working for me or other young professionals as I did in the Panama speech, *"You were born with a unique set of capacities, you live in a unique moment of history. That gives you the potential to make a unique contribution to others and society and in the process live a happy successful life. Take your life seriously. Do everything you do with all your heart, soul, and mind. Be significant as well as successful in whatever realm or role you choose."*

In my own life I continue to do a lot of eclectic religious reading from a variety of religious traditions. I try to mediate. I even pray, not asking God to violate natural laws, but to help me live out of love. I still have a long way to go on the spiritual journey, but I feel more integrated. And strangely I believe the land of faith I live on would be one my parents and grandparents would find comfortable.

### **The Future: Unfinished**

When I began this project six months ago, I envisioned an answer that would be like a museum of three rooms: Youth, Mid Life, Golden Years. The pictures on the walls via stories would reveal the back and forth dynamic between narrative, behaviors, and life's feedback.

My expectation was that in a couple of afternoons I'd have a first draft of 4 or 5 pages that would communicate to all audiences. Ten drafts and six months later, I realize what I

wanted to do is probably impossible. My journey, much of it forgotten, is far too complex to be accurately captured. No doubt the many vesper services at Hampden DuBose Academy, where I rededicated my life in a euphoric spirit, have left some sort of important residue I no longer remember. I can't put my finger on the growth in the middle period that came from consciously "no longer believing" something I had previously taken for certain. And it is still a mystery to me which of the many things I tried in the transition of 1989-1992 led to the successes of the last twenty-five years.

Today nearing my eight decade my immediate task is the narrative that is going to guide me into the future and how I translate it into attitudes and behaviors. The important question is "What is my faith right now and what role is it going to play going forward?"

So I add a fourth room to the museum, The Future. The walls of this room are still largely empty but there are a few pictures I want to put up.

My **narrative** which includes modern science, the big bang, evolution, the complexity of history, and the wisdom from the past, I hold lightly. I'm aware it is incomplete and could be wrong. Humility makes me a bit agnostic. But since I have to live, I choose to do so AS IF at the heart of reality or undergirding the universe is intelligence, mystery and love. I am not perfect, but loved, accepted. In personal terms that means that life is meaningful, going somewhere. I am a co-creator of the future in my tiny, tiny part of the cosmos.

I want to live with an **attitude**, not of fear (ego protection), but of love (respect, compassion), of joy (enthusiasm, gung hosity, fun), and a sound mind (awareness, realism, thoughtfulness, humility).

I want to translate this into **behaviors** that include care of self (eating, exercise, quiet times), care of others (Sandy, family, friends, colleagues, mentees), good stewardship of assets and talents (\$, network, speaking and writing), and enjoyment of life ("gosando la vida", humor, beauty, books, TV, Sports, poker) and some contribution to the larger world.

And I want to live with awareness that life is dynamic, that experiences (my own and those I acquire from reading and listening to others) should continue to modify my faith, my narrative, attitudes and behavior.

To the older man in Panama, a closing word. *Thank you for the question. I hope I haven't offended you. I'm sorry I can't give you a better answer. But tell me – "How has your faith influenced your life?"*