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## Finding Faith in the Unknown

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We make it down the rickety steps and onto the beach. We had finally made it. The beach spanned for miles and met with the ocean amicably in dark contrast. It was low tide and all of the small tide pools were overflowing with shells and salty water. Edging ever-further into the sands the breeze is gone. The wind is not, however. Out of nowhere, the wind came at us at full force, almost bowled me over. The wind and sand together created a hypnotizing rolling effect that made the beach look even more open and desolate than it was. I planted my feet more firmly in the sand this time and set out to my father who was hundreds of feet in front of me, seemingly heading to the middle of the ominous water.

“Where are you going?”

“WHAT? I CAN’T HEAR YOU OVER THE WIND.”

I give up on my attempt at communicating with him and push through the harsh winds. As I get closer, I can see that my dad had finally stopped, so I walked as quickly as I could whilst bracing myself against the winds. That’s when I saw it. Sitting in the middle of the sand was what looked just like a jumble of garbage, but upon further examination was the outline of a shipwreck. On it was a barnacle-covered sign that had been bolted down years ago.

“The Crested Eagle”.

This ship, decimated and forlorn, rested in front of me in a heap. There had been real soldiers here, real parts of the war, and here it was just laying amidst the shores of this isolated beach. The plaque spoke of the perils of the war, but also of the brave men who risked their lives in Operation Dynamo saving more than 300,000 soldiers. I am overcome by all of the intense information that has been thrown at me and am unsure of how to process it all. We had made it, the Malo-les-Bains, and all I could do was stand and picture the endless lines of soldiers on the sand desperately waiting for anyone, while the Germans mercilessly attacked them. But now it was just us. The lines of soldiers were gone, some having returned home, and some in this very beach. We were alone with nothing but the history surrounding us.

## **Finding Faith in the Unknown**

*Rachel Morand*

I couldn't reach the microphone. They had to bring out a small stool—which looked horribly out of place on the austere altar—just so I could see over the podium. As I stepped up to begin speaking, I looked out into the countless pews and saw the beaming faces of my relatives. I didn't know why my First Communion was such a big deal. I was also unaware of ever having agreed to deliver the first Bible reading; my mom must have volunteered me. My assigned verse came from the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. The section was about how the word of the Lord is more fulfilling than bread, but all that stood out to me was the mention of serpents and scorpions.

As I began to recite the words, I thought about how, in a few minutes, I would receive the wafer and wine that my parents had explained to me were Jesus' own body and blood. Suddenly, I was filled with doubt about the ceremony. I wanted to jump down the marble steps and take refuge in the parking lot, but it would be many years before I would work up the courage to actually act on my uncertainty.

I didn't realize it then, but that uneasy feeling was a self-realization: I don't want my views spelled out for me. Instead, I yearn to discover the great mysteries of existence based on my own life's journey. However, I find myself relentlessly chained to those beliefs which have been imposed on me since childhood. My personal struggle has shown me that all humans seek to understand the gravity of their individual universes, yet it is intensely challenging, if not impossible, to completely undo the tethers of worldly influence and explore the vastness of our own minds.

It's hard to pinpoint an area in my life that Catholicism hasn't affected: my eldest brother is going to be a priest, my dad proposed to my mom in church, and we all went to a religious camp for seven years. I was completely immersed in the faith. One of the main ways this devotion impacted me was through religious education. Every week, I would go to my church and learn some aspect of the catechism. I heard Bible stories until they were second nature, reeled off saints more easily than presidents, and formed

my sense of morality from the Ten Commandments. I never even considered anything else to be the basis of what I regarded as ethical. It wasn't until middle school that I started to form independent thoughts concerning philosophy and justice, and I found that I didn't agree with many of the Catholic teachings that had been presented to me.

My old youth group leader once explained to us that people of other religions cannot reach salvation. When I questioned my mother about this exclusivity, she told me that only the Catholic faith is the truth, and everyone else is misguided. One time, I attended a Mass during which the priest spent the majority of the service asserting that tolerance is evil because it excuses sin. Another instance, at a retreat, a deacon asked us to pray for the sanctity of marriage, since the sacrament was being corrupted by the manipulation of Satan. As I reflected on these experiences, and many others, I wondered how a religion that worships a God of love and believes everyone is made in His image can be so unaccepting of other people and their differences.

The more I unpacked my misgivings about Catholicism's hypocritical perspectives, the more uncertain I became about everything I had been taught. I wasn't sure if my concerns were valid or if the devil was trying to lead me astray—I was always told Satan was the sower of doubt. I was stuck between wanting to live my own truth by respecting the diversity of all people and trying to live by the principles of my birth faith because I was too scared of losing the world I grew up in to completely let go. The universe, as I had been conditioned to see it, no longer made sense. For my entire life, I had leaned on the crutches of other people's beliefs, and one day, as I began to comprehend my deviation, that support vanished. I felt like Atlas: I was suddenly alone in holding the colossal weight of my world.

I didn't know where to begin in trying to untangle the web of my newfound ideas. One concept that stood out to me as a priority was loving and seeking to understand all people, but it felt as though I would be betraying my family and my background. It was a terrifying and isolating experience; I was torn between the comfort of the doctrine I had grown up with and the tremendous mystery of concepts I had not yet explored. Everything I had accepted, for so long, as the truth was no longer definitive. I entered a mild identity crisis: I knew that I wanted to seek an intimate understanding of my existence, but after more than a decade of being told where to look, I didn't know how.

I often found myself falling back into the patterns of reasoning that arose from my childhood lessons; I would use Catholicism as the standard against which my actions and judgements were measured. Despite these past setbacks, I still strive to look objectively at life's questions and form my own, untainted answers. However, I'm starting to recognize that the pure, impartial mindset I desire is extremely elusive.

It is incredibly difficult to truly free one's mind from the clutter of connections built up from the past. We all have some preconceived notions that we are condemned to carry. This struggle might make a quest to discover a personal insight into existence seem fruitless, but I believe that it is better for everyone to attempt to explore the metaphysical perplexities that are often presented by religion than to embrace for fact an interpretation that someone hands to him. Even though we are undeniably influenced by outside forces, we are still individuals. Each of us experiences life a different way. We endure unique trials, celebrate particular successes, and react in distinctive ways. Reality is subjective. It is not reasonable to apply one rigid set of principles to a group of people and expect perfect contentment. There will always be discrepancies in thought because humans are naturally diverse.

Nevertheless, as I saw firsthand, it is not easy to find one's place in the infinite spectrum of ideologies. The reality remains that we are all tied to external opinions that impede our journey toward insight. We cannot ignore or hide from these shackles. Instead, we must acknowledge our attachments and work to move past them. I have found that the problem lies not in our inability to pursue liberation but in our unwillingness to do so. It is easy to remain complacent in a single standard of reasoning; the sense of familiarity can mask dissatisfaction. We, as humans, are innately frightened of the unknown, but exploring this fear is the only way discoveries can be made. In order to understand what the universe means to us, we must let go, unconditionally, of everything we know. If we can achieve this break from our prejudices, we can reach the almost-unattainable goal of seeing life as only we can see it.

I have not yet fulfilled this objective, and I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to. Catholicism is so thoroughly embedded into my mind that pieces of the faith could reside in me forever. Still, I will try my best to distance myself from the biases I have acquired and delve wholeheartedly into the expanse of my own reflection. The microphone is finally within my reach; I will profess words that I choose, even if I don't yet comprehend what I'm saying. When I realized that I was holding up my own world, I was completely overwhelmed with the burden. Now, I think that in order to be free, I need to let go and trust that amidst the chaos of the fall, I will find what I'm looking for.