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Faith, Doubt, and Reason - Conclusion and Epilogue

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Conclusion

Faith, Doubt, and Reason

THE MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIAN, MONK, and archbishop Anselm of Canterbury famously described the task of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”). The commitment, or the leap, or the ultimate concern always comes first, in response to being grasped by the ultimate, infinite reality (what Christians call “God”); the life of faith, then, consists in making sense, with the aid of doubt and reason, of just what it means to have faith and in living ever more deeply into that relationship between our own finite being and the infinite reality to which we pledge ourselves in trusting hope. Centuries earlier, in the *Confessions*, Augustine reflected on his circuitous and sometimes tortured path toward his ultimate realization that the God he had so desperately sought his whole life was there all along, nudging him and luring him into a genuine relationship with God. For Augustine, that path took him to many different places—geographical, intellectual, and spiritual—but it all began with a question, and this persistent question turns out to be the most basic question of all: as Augustine put it, “I have become a question to myself.”¹ Each of our journeys begins with a question, and we can never hope to find our way toward our destination until we realize that we’re lost. We have, each of us, become a question to ourselves, and it is our life’s work to engage that question in search of an answer.

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, 216.

What Do We Love When We Love God?

Another way Augustine framed this most fundamental question of his existence was to pose it in terms of his relationship with God: “But when I love you [my God], what do I love?”² In this question beats the heart of what faith, doubt, reason, and the meaning of life are all about. We can break it down into even smaller, more basic questions. Who am I? What do I love? Who are “you”? Who or what is “God”? And in what sense is this God *my* God? What does all of this mean for my life? Notice that the questions here are irreducibly relational. I can’t love you until I know you, and I can’t love you unless I love myself. I can’t love myself until I know myself, and I can’t know myself until I know the source and goal of my being. I can’t know and love God until I know and love myself.

John Caputo, in his book *On Religion* (which, he confesses, is really a book about love), asks these same questions and he comes to a rather startling conclusion about the nature of Augustine’s question: when it comes right down to it, is love another name we use for God, or is God another name we use for love? Which is the predicate of the other? Or is the meaning and the passion to be found in the not-deciding, in the letting-play of this fluidity between love and God, God and love? Another way to ask this question is to ask what gives my life its “salt”: its flavor, intensity, and sustenance.³ What do we love in a way that is “worth its salt?” What do we love unconditionally, without reservation, with a fierce and passionate love? Whatever it is we love in this way, that is really our God. Or, as Luther put it, it is the faith and trust of the heart that make both God and idol. We love all sorts of things in our life, but there is always something that we love above all else, something we love totally and unconditionally, something we love with a love that never dies. In Tillich’s language, this is our ultimate concern, our faith. Our faith can be genuine or it can be idolatrous, but we can never be without it.

When we love an infinite reality passionately and unconditionally—when we love “God”—we love without proof that our love is well-placed. We love without guarantee of reciprocity or reward. This love, with which we commit ourselves totally and completely, without reservation or condition, to a reality that will always exceed our understanding, opens itself

2. Augustine, *Confessions*, 183.

3. In the ancient world salt was such a vital staple that each Roman soldier was paid a *salarium*, which was money the soldier needed to buy his ration of salt (*sal* in Latin). It survives in our word “salary.”

to profound insecurity, suffering, and loss. This love drives us beyond ourselves, beyond our own fears and desires, into the infinite reality, the ground of our being, that loves us and accepts us before we even begin our quest. Our faith is always a response to a prior sense or intuition or realization, or maybe just a hope or a hunch, that there is more to our lives than we ever thought possible, that more is going on in, with, and under the world than we ever dared hope, that at the bottom of it all is a deep and abiding loving presence. We will experience fleeting glimpses of this loving presence, but we can never own it as a possession. In fact, we can never be absolutely sure that it's really real. But we leap into that unknown with trusting confidence (Latin for "with faith!"), accepting the risk of loving without condition and without measure. In Tillich's language, this is the self-transcendence born of existential reason that accepts the uncertainty and risk of existential doubt with liberating courage.

As human beings we alone, as far as we currently know, have the unique capacity to take a step back from our lives and wonder what they really mean. We have the capacity to commit ourselves totally and unconditionally to an ultimate reality from which we expect ultimate fulfillment, but because we are finite creatures we can never be certain that what we take with ultimate seriousness is really there to catch us when we leap. For most of our daily lives we don't consciously think about these things (unless we're professional theologians or philosophers!); most of us simply live our lives the best we can and take one day at a time. We fill our lives with work and play, family and friends, meetings and vacations, civic obligations and hobbies, appointments and routines. None of these concerns is inherently bad or unworthy of our attention, as they are all good and noble pursuits. But when this is the sum total of our lives, we soon discover that we are spending our lives skating on the surface of life rather than plumbing the depths of what really, ultimately matters.

The Surface and the Depths

In the 1940s Tillich preached a sermon titled "The Depth of Existence" that encapsulates so much of what this book is about. In this sermon he reflects on the metaphor or the symbol of *depth* as an important clue or revelation of the existential, spiritual heart of our lives as human beings, and he contrasts this depth with the surface where we spend most

of our lives. All of those daily concerns mentioned above occur on the surface of our lives, rarely providing us with any deeper meaning than checking another item off our to-do lists. So often we confuse having a busy life with living a meaningful life, and perhaps that's no coincidence. We feel more comfortable on the surface of things because we feel that we can control what happens on the surface. For the most part, we determine our schedules. We have some control over how we engage with other people and carry out our daily routines. We have some say in how we spend our time and what we decide to do each day. But when we spend all of our time on the surface of our lives and assume that this is all there is to being alive, we miss so much of what gives life its salt, its passion, and its meaning.

Sometimes, though, the surface breaks open and reveals a depth to existence we didn't realize was there all along. Sometimes we can open up that rupture ourselves through reflection, meditation, study, or prayer. But more often than not, the surface breaks open when we least expect it or want it to. We experience a tragedy or we are confronted with our own mortality. Sometimes the daily grind loses its capacity to satisfy us and we ask what is missing in our lives to make them really mean something. When we gaze over the edge of the surface and peer into the abyss, it looks terrifying. As Nietzsche said, "If you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."⁴ We will do anything to make this abyss go away and get back to our pleasant, comfortable, superficial lives. But there's the rub: the only way to genuine meaning is through those terrifying depths.

Tillich tells the story of two people, both going about their daily lives. One is a mechanic and the other is a promising student of philosophy. Each of them goes to work and completes their task every day, the mechanic by performing manual labor and the philosophy student by studying the questions and ideas and perspectives of the great thinkers of the past. We might assume that the philosophy student is closer to the meaning of life than the mechanic, but we would be wrong. Everything depends on the attitude and the perspective of each person. In Tillich's telling, the philosophy student is content to learn the ideas and insights of other great thinkers but never asks the questions for himself and never makes these ideas and insights a part of his own life and quest for meaning. The student assumes that knowing what other people have thought about meaning passes for his own meaning, but he never breaks through

4. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 89.

the surface of things to experience the depths of life and its meaning for himself. The mechanic, on the other hand, does her job each day but suddenly steps back to reflect on the meaning of it all. She asks herself what it means that she spends her days doing manual labor and what that job contributes to her neighbors and to the world. She wonders about what really matters in her life and she resolves to do her work and live her life as conscientiously and meaningfully as she can. The mechanic, not the philosophy student, is on the way to depth and meaning because she has asked the really significant questions about her own life.⁵

These questions often cause a rupture in our lives, and for good reason: they are big questions! We sometimes call this experience an “existential crisis,” like the crisis Faust had when he realized that he had spent his whole life learning what other people thought about life rather than genuinely and authentically living his own. When that rupture breaks the surface of our lives we often experience this as a catastrophe and a disaster. Here the etymology of these words is particularly instructive. The Greek root of “catastrophe” means “overturning,” and the Latin root of “disaster” means “a bad star,” referring to the ancient practice of navigating a ship by the stars. Both terms imply a loss of certainty, a feeling of abandonment, a sense of being set adrift without an anchor or a beacon to keep us on track, safe and secure. The surface was familiar and comfortable and easy, and now it’s all blown to hell! Suddenly we’re face-to-face with a yawning abyss with no discernible bottom and nothing to lead us to safety, and it’s absolutely terrifying, just as Descartes discovered when he put everything he thought he knew into radical doubt and just as Job realized when everything he thought he knew about God and the world was suddenly shattered by the pain of undeserved suffering. Some of us will do anything we can to avoid the depths and get back to the familiar surface as quickly as possible. We would very much rather avoid gazing too long into the abyss.

But we are missing a powerful and indeed irreplaceable opportunity for meaning if we avoid the depths. The depths are frightening and traumatic, but there is no way to real meaning and joy without going through the depths. Job certainly came to realize this, as we saw in the chapter on doubt. The Psalms traditionally called the Lamentation Psalms teach this same lesson. The Hebrew Prophets all understood this as they reflected on

5. The philosophy student is a contemporary stand-in for Faust’s assistant Wagner, who wanted nothing more than to understand what other thinkers have thought about the meaning of life, without ever asking that most important question for himself.

the impending destruction of Israel and Judah. Jesus himself understood this when he endured suffering and death on the cross. Martin Luther also understood this when he suggested that no one can truly become a theologian until they've suffered.⁶ The Buddha understood this as well, so much so that the first of his Four Noble Truths is the simple realization that all life is suffering, and everything the Buddha taught was meant to help us make our way through the depths to discover true meaning and joy.⁷ So many of the world's great religious thinkers come to the same conclusion: that it is only by going through the depths of suffering and despair that we become capable of making real meaning in our lives.

We US-Americans live in a culture that expends enormous amounts of energy doing everything we can to avoid the depths of existence at all costs. We as a culture are terrified of death and dying, so we deny the reality and the finality of death. We as a culture avoid asking difficult and potentially life-altering questions because we are far more comfortable skating along the surface of our bourgeois consumerist lives. We've become experts at presenting idealized versions of ourselves on social media and we equate likes and retweets with validation and meaning, without ever letting anyone see who we really are. We fear vulnerability and pain and loss, so we pretend that we can somehow avoid these inevitable parts of life. We cling to the surface for dear life because we are terrified of what lies beneath. As Tillich puts it in his sermon,

Most of our life continues on the surface. We are enslaved by the routine of our daily lives, in work and pleasure, in business and recreation. We are conquered by innumerable hazards, both good and evil. We are more driven than driving. We do not stop to look at the height above us, or to the depth below us. We are always moving forward, although usually in a circle, which finally brings us back to the place from which we first moved. We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth. We accept ourselves as we appear to ourselves, and do not care what we really are. Like hit-and-run drivers, we injure our souls by the speed with which we move on the surface; and then we rush away, leaving our bleeding souls alone. We miss, therefore, our depth and our true life. And it is only when the picture that we have of ourselves breaks down completely, only when we find ourselves acting

6. Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation."

7. "The Buddha's First Sermon: Setting the Wheel of the Dharma in Motion."

against all the expectations we had derived from that picture, and only when an earthquake shakes and disrupts the surface of our self-knowledge, that we are willing to look into a deeper level of our being.⁸

We are fed a constant stream of distractions and advertising and self-help nostrums encouraging us to remain on the surface, there to find true meaning and joy. But the most we can hope to receive from the surface is fleeting comfort and happiness. True meaning and joy are not to be found on the surface; they are to be found in the depths of existence. Artists and poets and musicians and writers and philosophers and theologians and activists for centuries have encouraged us to dig beneath the surface to get a glimpse of the depths, of the profound things that really matter. They take it upon themselves to shatter the illusions of a calm, still surface. In our own times, abstract art, atonal music, minimalist poetry, avant-garde theater, postmodern theory, the LGBTQIA+ Movement, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo Movement all perform the prophetic task of uncovering the depths churning beneath our safe and easy surface. More often than not the masses find these works and movements unconventional, unsettling, inscrutable, or even offensive. Perhaps that is simply an aesthetic judgment, but more often than not it is an unconscious, existential resistance to peering beneath the surface and into the depths exposed by these prophetic voices.

We often avoid dealing with the deep things of life by assuming or insisting that they are too sophisticated, too complex, too difficult for ordinary people. But this is a self-serving dodge and a cowardly cop-out. The depths are not too sophisticated or too difficult for anyone to grasp; in fact, the depths are quite simple and straightforward. The problem isn't that they are too sophisticated or difficult; rather, the problem is that they are too unsettling or painful for us to deal with, so we excuse ourselves from the important and necessary work of plumbing the depths of our lives by insisting that it is all too complicated or sophisticated for us. It is far easier, and far safer, to remain on the surface, blissful in our self-imposed ignorance. As Tillich puts it in his sermon,

The mark of real depth is its simplicity. If you should say, "This is too profound for me; I cannot grasp it," you are self-deceptive. For you ought to know that nothing of real importance is too profound for anyone. It is not because it is too profound, but

8. Tillich, "The Depth of Existence," 55–56.

rather because it is too uncomfortable, that you shy away from the truth. Let us not confuse the sophisticated things with the deep things of life. The sophisticated things do not concern us ultimately and it does not matter whether we understand them or not. But the deep things must concern us always, because it matters infinitely whether we are grasped by them or not.⁹

If we allow ourselves to be grasped by these deep things, if we seek our meaning and our purpose and our value not on the surface, but in the depths of our existence, we are well on our way to genuine faith. Faith means having an ultimate concern, committing ourselves totally to an infinite, ultimate reality that has the capacity to provide us with genuine meaning and fulfillment. In the Christian tradition this reality is identified with the symbol of "God." But if that symbol has too much baggage, has too many negative connotations, don't use it; find something else to express your ultimate concern, your experience of the depths of existence. Tillich again:

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him [*sic*]. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He [*sic*] who knows about depth knows about God.¹⁰

Genuine faith is our total commitment to the infinite, ultimate reality (whatever we might call it), as opposed to idolatrous faith, which is total commitment to a finite reality that can never support the weight and intensity of our ultimate concern and can therefore never provide the ultimate meaning and fulfillment of our lives. Finite realities skim along the surface of our lives while infinite reality is encountered in the depths. Finite realities are fleeting and transient, which means they will

9. Tillich, "The Depth of Existence," 60.

10. Tillich, "The Depth of Existence," 57.

inevitably disappear and disappoint us, but the ultimate, infinite reality is eternal and is thus fully capable of supporting our commitment while always remaining beyond our grasp and comprehension. This is why genuine faith requires existential doubt as a permanent, necessary element, because we will never be certain that the object of our faith will deliver ultimate fulfillment and meaning. But we take the leap anyway, trusting that this ultimate reality will sustain us and support us in the end.

Idolatrous faith is content to live on the surface of our lives, engaging with what is fleeting and temporary and ultimately doesn't matter. Living this way is arguably easier and simpler, but it is ultimately unfulfilling and will inevitably disappoint us. Genuine faith breaks through the surface of our lives and plunges us into the depths, where things are much more uncertain, ambiguous, and even unsettling. Genuine faith leaps into the unknown with courage and trust, hoping that something is there to catch us despite the uncertainty that this is so. When we break through the surface and make our way into the depths it is only natural that we will experience a good deal of doubt, because nothing in the depths is clear, or certain, or secure.¹¹ Suffering, death, and despair are real threats to our wellbeing. But in many cases such suffering and despair function as refining fires, burning away the idolatrous elements of our faith to reveal the genuine, risky faith at the center of our being. The German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann, a contemporary of Tillich's, has this to say about genuine, risky faith:

Those who want to have faith in God as their God must know that they hold nothing in hand in which they can believe; that they are, as it were, poised mid-air and can demand no proof of the truth of the word that has been spoken to them. For the ground and the object of faith are identical. Only the one who abandons all security can find security, only the one who—to speak with Luther—is prepared to enter into the inner darkness.¹²

When all else is gone, when everything we've constructed to support us is taken away, when we have nothing left but pure trust and hope, we

11. Anne Lamott expresses this well when she writes that "the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." *Plan B*, 256–7.

12. My translation of a passage from Bultmann's 1952 essay "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung," translated into English as "On the Problem of Demythologizing."

will discover what really matters. When we're distracted by the superficial things in life it can be easy to assume that these fleeting superficial pleasures are the sum total of our existence, but the ruptures in the surface remind us that this is an illusion. The depths remind us of our need for something far beyond our own capacities to give us meaning, something that eludes our best efforts to understand and control. According to Tillich, it is only in and through the depths where we will find true meaning and joy:

Eternal joy is the end of the ways of God. . . . But eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God. The moment in which we reach the last depth of our lives is the moment in which we can experience the joy that has eternity within it, the hope that cannot be destroyed, and the truth on which life and death are built. For in the depth is truth; and in the depth is hope; and in the depth is joy.¹³

In this quest to plumb the depths of our existence, in our hope of discovering meaning and purpose, we come to appreciate more fully the role of faith, doubt, and reason in our lives. As human beings with the gift of existential reason we have the capacity to step back from our lives and ask what they really mean, which is the capacity for ultimate concern, or faith. Being grasped by an infinite reality that transcends our finite concerns, we respond with total commitment to something beyond finite reality to support us and to provide that meaning. But this commitment requires leaping into an abyss, into the inscrutable depths where we can never be certain there is anything there to catch us as we leap. The question of the meaning of our lives will remain unanswered as long as we live, as it is our blessing and our curse to be able to ask the question but to be unable to determine the final answer. We take the leap anyway, trusting that there is a deeper meaning to be made out of the trajectories of our lives. But we recognize at the same time that we are leaping into the darkness, and we question whether this faith is enough to sustain us and to give us the meaning we so earnestly desire.

So much of our lives is consumed with superficial efforts. We live as finite beings in a finite world, so naturally we will spend most of our time engaging finite reality with finite concerns. We want food and

13. Tillich, "The Depth of Existence," 63.

shelter and companionship, we want meaningful work and relationships, we want comfort and pleasure and happiness. And all of these are good and important things that should be available to all, without exception. But when we dig deeper we realize that there is more going on in our lives. We have deeper concerns, deeper questions, and deeper desires. We yearn for real and lasting meaning and joy. Superficial things will never provide that lasting meaning and joy, so we take a leap into the infinite reality, whatever we happen to call it, trusting that this leap will provide ultimate meaning and fulfillment.

Faith, Doubt, and Reason

This suggests that faith, doubt, and reason are universal human faculties, the tools we use to make sense of our lives and to give them meaning and purpose. Faith is far more than religious commitment or identity, although many people express their faith in specific religious symbols within specific religious communities. Faith is the total commitment of our entire being to whatever it is we take with absolute seriousness and from which we expect ultimate meaning and fulfillment. When the object of our ultimate concern is finite, we have an idolatrous faith that will inevitably end in existential disappointment, with no hope of meaning and fulfillment. But when the object of our ultimate concern is infinite (whether we call it “God” or something else, using religious or secular language), we have a genuine faith. We have the capacity for genuine faith in the infinite, ultimate reality because we have the gift of existential reason, the capacity for self-transcendence and for freedom, creativity, wisdom, and meaning. Though we ourselves are finite creatures, we discover that we are grasped by something more, something beyond the vicissitudes of our daily lives and the finite world around us. Our faith is a response to this infinite reality that grasps us and lures us beyond our immediate concerns and into the depths of our lives.

But because we are finite creatures, we can never hope to understand just what it is we’re committing ourselves to in trusting faith, so there will always be questions about the object of our faith and its capacity to give us meaning and fulfillment. This uncertainty is expressed as existential doubt, which is a permanent and necessary element of genuine faith, and it is indeed a confirmation that our faith is genuine. Although this doubt can sometimes be unsettling or uncomfortable, it is something we must

accept with courage as it is a consequence of the risk of faith. These three faculties—faith, doubt, and reason—therefore need each other to be what each of them ought to be. They support one another like the three legs of a tripod; without one of the legs, the tripod collapses.

If, as Tillich has suggested, faith is an act of the total personality and therefore includes all of our human faculties, then a healthy, genuine faith will not produce conflict within ourselves. If we find that there are contradictions between our faith and what we know through reason to be true about ourselves or about the world around us, or if we find that our faith compels us to ignore the doubts or questions that will inevitably arise in the course of our lives, then we should not dismiss these warning signs that something is going wrong. We must embrace the doubts and questions that will inevitably arise as indications that we're on the right track, and if we assume that we must choose between our faith and what we know by reason, we must submit our faith and our use of reason to critical scrutiny to be sure that both are remaining within their proper "spheres."

So much of the conflict that we experience in our quest for meaning can be traced to our tendency to idolatry, to our habit of elevating finite realities to the level of ultimacy. Part of this tendency is rooted in a failure to distinguish clearly between the finite and the infinite realms. If there is strong evidence for or against a particular proposition, then we are dealing with beliefs, not with faith. If we can definitively answer our questions and settle our doubts, we are dealing with beliefs, not with faith. If we can logically determine the factual truth of the matter, we are dealing with beliefs, not with faith. And if there is no evidence to support our truth claim, or if there is strong evidence against it, and we nevertheless insist on its factual truth despite its being illogical or irrational, then we are still not dealing with faith, but with bad beliefs. Elevating anything finite to the level of ultimacy and expecting it to provide us with ultimate meaning and fulfillment will inevitably lead to disaster, to despair, to the breakdown of our lives. The quest for genuine faith requires a constant awareness that, as John Calvin reminds us, the human mind is a "factory of idols." And this is so because we are deeply uncomfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty, and a lack of clear answers. We are far more comfortable clinging to easy answers and false security than taking the leap into the unknown depths, but until we take that leap we will never know true meaning and joy.

The life of faith must include honest self-awareness and self-criticism, tasks that can often be inconvenient and even distressing. But the effort is worth it because genuine faith is the only way to genuine meaning and joy. Healthy faith, doubt, and reason contribute to the deeper meaning of our lives because these are three of the faculties that make us fully human. When we cultivate a deeper appreciation of the meaning and scope of faith, doubt, and reason, we are liberated to throw ourselves completely into our lives without fear, to live and to love and to experience all we can of this weird, wild, wonderful world. These three faculties encourage us to seek out new experiences, to love our neighbors and our world, to embrace our mortality without fear, to pursue justice and peace, to embrace the big questions, to wonder at the incredible mystery of it all, and to live in humble gratitude for the improbable gift of being alive. Genuine faith has the capacity to keep us grounded while also propelling us with confidence into an unknown future, to provide meaning and purpose and value, to open our eyes and our minds and our hearts to what is really important in our lives. Genuine faith will embrace the big questions as opportunities to reflect deeply on matters of profound significance for us and for the world. Genuine faith will give us the lens we need to make sense of our experiences of the world, of our loves and our desires, even of our inevitable end, without fear. Faith, doubt, and reason open for us the way to deep and lasting joy.

The Liberal Arts

The pursuit of meaning and purpose with the aid of faith, doubt, and reason never happens in a vacuum because we always pursue meaning in the context of our actual lives, with all of the ups and downs, triumphs and failures, good times and bad. We have many concerns, and it is good and right that we live our daily lives with full awareness of the many concerns that shape and guide our lives. But we also want something more, something that transcends our daily lives and concerns. We seek truth, beauty, and goodness. We want to live lives that really matter to us and to others, and we want reassurance that we didn't waste this one beautiful life. We want an ultimate touchstone for the lives we lead here and now as best we can. And it turns out that we have at our disposal ancient and venerable traditions to guide us in our quest: in the academic world we call this approach to life and wisdom the liberal arts.

The liberal arts have their roots in ancient Greece and Rome, where a broad and deep education was assumed to be necessary for the cultivation of a free (*liber* in Latin) citizen who would then participate meaningfully and responsibly in public life. With the founding of the great medieval European universities, the liberal arts eventually took more specific shape and were divided into the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music theory). A student who gained proficiency in the basic themes of these disciplines was awarded the degree Bachelor of Arts, while a student who mastered all of these subjects was awarded the degree Master of Arts. These disciplines were also considered necessary preparation for advanced study for terminal degrees in law, medicine, or theology, at which point one would be a doctor (literally a teacher).

In today's higher education landscape, the liberal arts comprise disciplines that are more purely academic as opposed to technical or professional degree programs such as pharmacy, business, or education, just to name a few. Universities always contain a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the specific name varies by institution), and in the United States there are also hundreds of smaller, private colleges whose entire curriculum is devoted to the liberal arts (these are known as liberal arts colleges). Today when we refer to the liberal arts we often mean subjects like literature, languages, history, philosophy, religion, anthropology, classics, biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, environmental studies, psychology, sociology, economics, gender studies, area studies, art history, and music, subjects that are not primarily intended to train students for specific professions but to give them a "well-rounded" education in preparation for informed citizenship and the lifelong cultivation of wisdom. To put it another way, the liberal arts are often pursued for their own sake, simply for the love of learning and the joy of discovery and growth as a human being with a commitment to live justly and responsibly in community with our neighbors and with the natural world.

The liberal arts sometimes get a bad rap these days because they are often seen as impractical or difficult to translate directly into a career path (how many times have you heard the bad joke about an English or Philosophy major flipping burgers at a fast food restaurant after graduation?). But this denigration of the liberal arts is a singular failure of vision and imagination, as in our culture we've grown accustomed to thinking of education as little more than job training. While it's good and necessary to have gainful employment and a living wage, there is also something

noble and beautiful about learning for its own sake, about delving deeply into the riches of the human experience, about asking challenging questions and engaging new and surprising ideas, about falling in love with thinking deeply and passionately about whatever it is that we take with absolute seriousness, with whatever gives our lives depth and breadth and zest and meaning.

The liberal arts invite us to shed our presumptions and check our biases for the sake of genuinely understanding and appreciating sometimes radically different perspectives. The liberal arts encourage us to drink deeply from the well of human experience and wisdom, to see the world from many different angles, to value and celebrate the incredible diversity of the human quest for wisdom and meaning. The liberal arts train us to see beauty all around us, to discover the common ties that bind all of us together, to delight in difference and uniqueness, to appreciate the vast treasures of human civilizations, to be inspired by the search for understanding and meaning, to put our learning into practice in pursuit of truth, wisdom, progress, and justice. Faith, doubt, and reason are indispensable tools in this pursuit, regardless of the particular discipline or field where we find ourselves most at home. The liberal arts compel us to set our sights higher, above and beyond immediate, quotidian concerns in search of something more, something *meaningful*. The best tools we have at our disposal to reach for these transcendent goals are faith, doubt, and reason, and therefore these quintessentially human faculties are the foundation of any quest for a life well-lived in pursuit of wisdom and meaning.

The liberal arts are so often maligned these days because we have become conditioned to think in the short term, thinking only of our jobs and our bank accounts and the next few pages of our calendar. But life has a way of intervening and disrupting those finite concerns, and if we're not prepared for these moments we can find ourselves lost and adrift, unable to make sense of what we're experiencing here and now. Faith, doubt, and reason push us beyond these immediate concerns to consider the deeper meaning of our lives, and they help us navigate those pregnant moments, those experiences of the peaks and the valleys of human life, in a way that invigorates rather than overwhelms us. The liberal arts are the best resources we have at our disposal to guide us on this journey toward depth and meaning in our lives, with all their unpredictability and mystery, beauty and joy.

John Caputo, in his book *Philosophy and Theology*, writes eloquently and passionately about the power of the liberal arts to evoke this sense of wonder and awe at the sheer improbability and mystery of our being here at all, of our being privileged to be able to ask and seek the answers to the deepest questions that inevitably arise in the course of our lives. He speaks here of philosophy and theology within the context of the liberal arts, and we can extrapolate from his reflection the abiding significance of faith, doubt, and reason as the keys to unlocking the deeper meaning of our lives:

Philosophy and theology are for wounded souls. Indeed those of us who take up the study of any of the humanities, of language and literature, history and art, philosophy and theology, or any of the natural sciences, have been pierced to the heart by something precious, beautiful, deep, and enigmatic that leaves us reeling. We know that the doctors are not telling us everything, that the wound will not heal, that we are not going to recover. We have suffered a blow that has destroyed our equilibrium; we have been shaken by a provocation, by something that has left us breathless, pursued by questions that we cannot still. We have been visited by some affliction that results in tremors . . . but also has this other oddity about it—this disorder induces an affection for our affliction, so that the patients have no wish to be healed, to close this wound over, to arrest these tremors. For we live and breathe in the tremulousness of our lives, exposed to the questionability of things, made vulnerable to love's wounds, visited in the night by questions of elemental power, shaken to the core by voices that will not be stilled.¹⁴

Being struck by the beauty of the turning leaves in autumn, watching a child delighting in discovering something new about themselves and their world, being devastated by the news of a loved one's illness, finding ourselves weak in the knees at the intensity of a partner's love, feeling the goosebumps at the swell of a powerful musical performance, savoring a particularly poignant turn of phrase in a poem or novel, relishing the satisfaction of solving a difficult puzzle, being inspired by a new discovery about the natural world, treasuring an experience of a different culture, achieving a victory in the pursuit of justice, glimpsing ever so briefly the power of the transcendent in a religious ritual, coming face to face with our own mortality and the unspeakable beauty of being alive

14. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, 71.

at all: all of these deeply human experiences, and many more like them, are enriched and enhanced by our capacity for faith, doubt, and reason. We rely on these faculties to stake out what is true, good, beautiful, and meaningful in our lives and in the world all around us, and the liberal arts provide the context and resources for making sense of these wonderfully human experiences, without which our lives would be woefully diminished. God bless the liberal arts and keep them safe. Long may they live and flourish to enrich us all.

Epilogue

WHAT IS IT, FINALLY, that gives your life meaning and purpose? What is it that you take with absolute seriousness, without reservation? When you take a step back from your life and reflect on the bigger picture, what do you notice? What questions arise as you ponder what it means to be human? Where have we come from, and where are we headed? What, ultimately, will make all of this worth it? These are the questions that keep us up at night, that knock us off our pins, that whisper in the deep, dark recesses of our minds. These are the questions that cannot be stilled because these are the most human of questions, the questions that remind us that we are beautifully, tragically finite human creatures. These are the questions that give life its salt. As we saw earlier, Elie Wiesel wrote in his novel *The Town beyond the Wall*, “It isn’t easy to live always under a question mark. But who says that the essential question has an answer? The essence of [humanity] is to be a question, and the essence of the question is to be without answer.”

Here in a nutshell is the significance of faith, doubt, and reason. What do we take with absolute seriousness? What leaps into the unknown are we prepared—or maybe unprepared—to take? What questions insist and persist at the edges of our certainty? What sense do we make of our lives as we take a step back to reflect on what it all means? Are we comfortable accepting that these questions might not have answers that we can ever understand, or that they might not have answers at all? Can we make our peace with always living under a question mark? Can we finally discover truth, beauty, and goodness in the questions themselves, in the relentless, endless quest for the meaning, purpose, and significance of our lives?

As we’ve come to the end of our reflections, I want to leave us with a word of profound wisdom from one of my own teachers, Louis

Hammann, with whom I studied religion as an undergraduate at Gettysburg College. At the end of each class, Lou would ask us if we were confused. For the first few weeks we would always insist that we weren't confused and that everything made sense. Lou would just shake his head and walk out of the classroom. One day, several weeks into our course, Lou asked if we were confused and one student finally blurted out, "Yes!" A smile stretched across Lou's face and he replied, "Good. Now I know you're paying attention. Because if you're not confused, you're not paying attention!" Suddenly everything shifted for all of us. The confusion we experienced as a result of digging deeply into these most profound questions of human meaning was not something to be avoided or ignored; it was something to be embraced, celebrated, and cherished. The confusion we were experiencing meant that we really understood the deeper point of what it was we were trying to figure out together, that the deepest, most significant questions of human existence are far beyond our capacity to understand, let alone answer.

Faith, doubt, and reason help us navigate the confusion we will inevitably experience as we plumb the depths of the human experience. It is a good thing to be confused, because it means we're paying attention to the profound insights and questions and provocations toward meaning and purpose that will inevitably elude our grasp, but it is precisely this confusion that reassures us that we are on the right track, that we are taking things seriously, that we have come to understand, appreciate, and maybe even celebrate the awesome wonder of the perennial human quest for meaning. In these moments of uncertainty we learn that the questions themselves have inherent and lasting value, that our uncertainty and instability is a gift, that our perpetual unknowing will compel us to spend the rest of our lives on the quest for meaning and fulfillment. We come to realize that the whole point is the questions, the uncertainty, the wonder.

The unanswered and unanswerable questions are indeed a precious gift to us. Without this gift of unanswerable questions, we would never rise above or dig below our daily concerns to reflect on what is ultimately meaningful and significant in our lives. May we always embrace these unanswerable questions. May we always be confused. And in the midst of that confusion—and perhaps even *because* we are so profoundly, richly, blessedly confused—may we leap confidently into the unknown, trusting that therein lies all the meaning and the passion.¹

1. This final thought is paraphrasing the conclusion of John Caputo's *Philosophy and Theology*, upon which I couldn't possibly hope to improve.