

## Get it in Writing – Imagination and the Source of Moral Life

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### Sermon

Many years ago I was visiting Las Vegas. And while I am not a degenerate gambler, I do enjoy Las Vegas for short periods of time, I think because of the hyperactivity of the place. Life is definitely short, and if there's anyplace on earth where people are trying to condense as much experience into as little time as possible, Las Vegas has to be as efficient a use of time as it gets. Gambling, drinking, theater, gluttony, shopping, neon lights, heat stroke, sleep deprivation, fortune, financial ruin, and travel are all rolled into an intense experience. It may have been be the brain child of organized crime, but you've got to give credit to the imaginative process that created this surreal landscape and the attraction that it has for so many people.

On this particular trip, my 5-year-old daughter Sara was with us, and we found ourselves at one of the most popular attractions in town, the hourly Pirate Ship battle in front of Treasure Island Casino, literally next to the traffic on Las Vegas Blvd. If you've never seen it, a pirate ship does battle with the English navy in a large moat directly in front of the hotel. Both ships are manned by appropriately costumed casino employees. The battle, such as it is, is a choreographed outdoor stage show with canned dialog, sound effects, pyrotechnics and sailors leaping into the water. It's a totally campy melodrama, but even when squeezed into the on-looking mob, it's a lot of fun. And since it's Vegas baby, the Pirates always win! I've actually wondered if it's a subliminal message - conditioning tourists to cheerfully give up their money.

I stood there carrying my daughter. I'm sure many of you have had this experience with small children: as the show progressed, she watched in complete fascination and began squeezing my neck harder and harder as the drama in front of us became more intense. The grand finale of the battle consists of a barrage of cannon fire and huge explosions in back of the ships. The explosions are fireballs of burning natural gas and

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you can feel the heat from them pouring over you. At this point my daughter was gripping me as hard as she possibly could and I was fussing at her for choking me.

She turned to me as asked, “Daddy, is this real?” “No. This is all pretend,” I answered. But she wasn’t satisfied with my answer. “No, Daddy. Is this really happening?” “No,” I answered again, thinking that if she knew it was just a show she wouldn’t be so afraid. At this point I could tell she was getting more frustrated. Again, she said, “No. That’s not what I mean. Is this happening right now?” I then began to give a technical explanation of the fireworks, but by that point, I was beginning to wonder if I had really understood her question. She didn’t seem at all interested in any of my explanations of what we were watching.

Children have terrific imaginations. In fact, our culture seems to spend a lot of time and money trying to cultivate that imagination and cash in on it as well. Good parents are obligated to read to their children, even before birth in some cases. My daughter absolutely loved the “Golden Books” and could not possibly get to sleep without two or three of them being read to her every single night.

I didn’t think much about it at the time, but most of those stories were similar only in that they were wildly fanciful and usually completely disconnected from everyday experience. These books were probably her first exposure (outside of TV) to thoughts and ideas outside of her immediate experience. This would be a tremendously formative experience for anyone, and yet I wonder if we, as children or even parents, are fully aware of this.

My own childhood memories of books include vivid memories of my mother reading me the classics - *The Cat In The Hat*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *Babar the Elephant*. I remember the characters as occasionally mischievous, but basically good and caring. But after that early period, I don’t remember reading a single book until I was 13-years-old.

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The year was 1967, and I was living in Paris, France. France was pretty cool, even for a 13-year-old. But to my great horror, there was no English language TV. So, out of complete boredom, I started picking up books that my father had read. So, what was my introduction into real adult literature, the imaginative minds of adults?

From *Babar the Elephant* I read .....

- ♦ *In Cold Blood* (Truman Capote)
- ♦ *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (William Styron)
- ♦ *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (Irving Stone)
- ♦ *The Valley of the Dolls* (Jacqueline Susan)

Up until this point, I thought adults were pretty boring! But these books weren't boring at all. There was sex, lots of violence and all sorts of other interesting things that big people did. I had no idea what I had been missing.

Books suddenly became cool because they could take me to places, times and people that I never would have reached any other way. One of the main reasons I've become increasingly disinterested in movies and TV is that they're boring. They're boring because they ignore the most interesting thing there is – namely human actions and motivations. From my perspective, movies and TV dramas are caricatures of human drama - car chases, explosions, gun fights, endless cops and robbers stuff. We're a lot more interesting than that. And we have been from the beginning of human history. And as soon as every culture figured out how to make them, we've recorded our interesting ideas and stories in books.

In Bart Ehrman's book, *Misquoting Jesus*, he notes that the development of the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all closely tied to **written** books that told and explained the stories associated with those faiths. Prior to Judaism, the many polytheistic cults that surrounded the Mediterranean had almost no written stories at all. Although we know of these cults, our knowledge is very limited to oral

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histories, art, and ceremonial rituals that were practiced over the generations. Without exception, these non-literate cults were either absorbed into the monotheistic faiths or perished. Is it a coincidence that the rise of the dominant monotheistic religions in the world today is unrelated to their utilization of the written word? I don't think so.

It seems that everyone, even thousands of years ago, loves a good story. And if you can get that story in writing, there's no telling what influence it might have. For some, their stories became Holy Scriptures. They almost certainly started as something less. But through the passage of time, conflict, and reflection, stories about the beginning of the world, human nature, and God were forged into a semi-coherent anthology that transcended normal everyday activities and attempted to describe the nature of the divine.

Before I proceed, I have to confess that I have never actually sat down and read any of the various Holy books of any faith, cover to cover. I've read parts of them, or I'm familiar with some of the main stories. I've read *In Cold Blood*, but I've never read the *Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)*, *New Testament*, *Koran*, *Book of Mormon*, or L. Ron Hubbard's, *Dianetics*.

It's interesting to note that it was during the period in my life when I began reading real literature that I stopped attending church. I'm not sure the two are connected, but looking back on it, I wish I hadn't. At the time I thought that religion was well intentioned, but a bit silly and irrelevant. And worst of all, the stories weren't true! We've got Noah's Ark, Jonah and the Whale, burning bushes, virgin births, resurrections, and the Trinity. And that's barely scratching the surface. Why bother with make believe?

In Daniel Wallace's novel, *Big Fish*, a grown son attempts to connect with his dying father. He wants to engage his father in serious conversation, but his father only wants to rehash jokes and tall tails. In fact, his father always wanted to spin his yarns of great

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adventure at the expense of everything else, and the son comes to resent his father's lack of seriousness and inability for emotional intimacy.

I thought that religion wasn't serious too.

If you're a devout believer, these stories are the inspired word of God. If you're **not** a devout believer, such as myself - a devout agnostic, these stories may not be as compelling.

Maybe they were great in their day, but literary styles have changed quite a bit in the past 2,000 years. I mean, I struggle reading the Bible (any translation), but I couldn't put Nat Turner down.

That's beginning to change, however, because - at age 51 - I'm beginning to consider religion differently. Before, the big question was always, is this true?

- ♦ Did God hand over the 10 Commandments on stone tablets?
- ♦ Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
- ♦ Is Mohammed the Messenger?
- ♦ Is Joseph Smith the Prophet?
- ♦ Is L. Ron Hubbard on to something, or is he just milking us?

Is it none of the above?

I sometimes catch myself making sarcastic remarks about various religious beliefs. Just a couple of weeks ago, I found myself tossing out a sarcastic comment about Scientology. But I know next to nothing about Scientology, other than John Travolta and Tom Cruise are its two most famous members.

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I'm beginning to realize that religious texts and stories may not be all that different from any other writings. And this is meant as a compliment.

But a non-religious person will often get distracted by the physical or historical inaccuracies of the story. Religious liberals are as guilty as anybody in this regard.

A religious conservative, on the other hand, will examine different stories as if they were trying to tell the same story. For example, we have multiple faith traditions with texts that describe God's relationship to men. They're all talking about the same issues. Which one is correct?

There's a scene in the movie *The Big Chill* where two people are watching an old gangster movie on TV. One of the characters has sat down at the TV after the movie has started and keeps asking questions about what's going on. The other person finally becomes aggravated with the questions and says, "You're so analytical! Sometimes you just have to let art pour over you."

The point I'm trying to make is that every story is different from every other story. More to my point, even if they say they are telling the same story, they aren't. They're never the same.

For example, consider the first four gospels of the New Testament: Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. They are all supposed to be accounts of Jesus' life and death. But there are differences in these books about the nature of Jesus and what he said. Most of these differences are minor and inconsequential. A few of the differences are major, particularly relating to his divinity and his relationship to God. The first Gospel, Mark, is very unclear about this, at best. The last Gospel, John, is much clearer.

Which one is correct? The answer to this question is that it's not a very good question.

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Every story is a product of an imaginative human mind, a creative process that differentiates us from all other creatures. It also differentiates us from each other. And it's this imaginative process that lies at the heart of every spiritual life.

In my life I've read about:

- ♦ Elephants that play croquet and have high tea with rich old ladies
- ♦ Slaves that rebel and kill their masters
- ♦ Self-centered, drug-addicted blond bimbos
- ♦ And God

I have experienced these characters and forces and examined their work. I understand something about their ideas and feel their motivations. I believe this is the definition of a religious or spiritual life. It's a willingness and ability to explore outside of your immediate surroundings and expose yourself to stories other than your own.

When I was a child, I don't remember having discussions with my mother about the truthfulness of *Babar the Elephant*. It's a wonderful story, and I understood it perfectly.

Emily Dickinson was right. Our souls are frugal, and there are frigates to take us everywhere we want to go.

And looking back on that short conversation with my daughter in front of the Treasure Island Casino, I wished I had told her, "Of course, it's real!...Every good story is real."