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Lest My Eyes Should Deceive Me

I am fascinated by evangelists. I admire their conviction. For as long as I can remember, my dad commandeers the couch each Sunday to troll the morning political talk shows. During the commercial breaks, he flips to the mega-church sermons delivered by bipolar ministers that move fluidly between manic, grandiose gestures to possessed motionlessness. The phone number to donate money scrolls across the bottom of the screen which inevitably launches my dad into a tirade about the hypocritical position of Christianity and how religion is at the root of every major war across every era of history. My dad was raised Catholic, but he has since renounced his Catholic upbringing, preferring to seek spiritual solace in the woods. I listen to my dad, intermittently acknowledging his points, but I am weirdly transfixed by these people. The minister commands the crowd with an eerie sense of bravado and overconfidence. When the minister’s voice drops to barely a whisper, I watch the crowd move to the edge of their seats, lean in to hear every word. Then, a sweeping proclamation! His voice booms, the microphone carries out this life (soul) saving message to every corner of the rich, ornately decorated walls of the church. Hands from the congregation reach up towards the ceiling as if pulled by some invisible master puppeteer. They are as transfixed as I, but it is for different reasons the minister holds our attention. They believe him; I don’t. I study him like an animal caged at the zoo.

I watch Sunday evangelist TV because they have what I am in desperate search of: belief in something. I tried believing in the Christian God. Some of my earliest memories are at church. In fact, my first completed piece of writing was about going to Sunday school in second grade. All of the kids were released from the boring adult sermon early, our youth the pass we needed to skip out to a room behind the sanctuary and watch Veggie Tales rendition of all the classic Bible stories, make Jesus-related art projects, and go to Fellowship for cookies. I enjoyed it. I perfected the social niceties of church, but I had a nagging feeling early on I was missing the point. It felt like pretending. Even in second grade, I felt weird about admitting I went to church, praying, and proclaiming my faith. At any rate, when I was in about fourth grade, my pastor got caught embezzling money from the church and my youth pastor turned out to be a sex offender. I never went back.

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Enter academia. I placed my faith in a different kind of religion: the hard sciences. I studied chemistry, biology, physics, and kinesiology. I loved it, especially kinesiology: the study of human movement. It was a hard science I could *see*. There was a direct application and its importance was undeniable; its facts, unshakable. My dedication to science came to be how I defined myself as a person. As it goes, when you fervently believe something to be true, you run the risk of closing your mind off to other perspectives, thinking your own points of truth to be superior. Still, I think we choose specific beliefs because we have to. We don’t hear our heart beat or the blood run through our arteries or our neurons fire or our intestines break down food. We would go crazy. Instead, we have a bone that covers that part of our ear so we can listen for the important stuff. We select for ourselves, out of all the ideals, perspectives, and principles out there, a set of core values to call our own to inform the thousands of micro-decisions we make every day.

I’ve been trying to figure out for myself how to pick things to believe in. Church didn’t work out. As of late, academia hasn’t either. I’ve felt my college education distort into a marathon Miss America pageant on a 24 hour loop. The other night, I was at a meeting for a study abroad program with 160 other people all vying for the same site. After listening to the site leader talk for an hour about the trip, we were asked to say something memorable about ourselves that would set up apart from the group. For the next hour, I sat back in my seat in disbelief as a growing nausea moved in peristaltic waves up my esophagus. Church mission trips, volunteering with disabled children, multilingual, tutoring kids in Detroit, raising money for sex education in African countries, resident advisors, fundraisers, citizens of the world, participants in racial and socioeconomic intergroup dialogues. It looks worse when I see it in print than when I heard it. I was in disbelief. How did all of these things matter to all of these people? Altruism? Debatable.

College is a weird space in life. It’s these four years where people my age basically have a free pass to explore your interests, make mistakes, and “find yourself.” The thing is, when you go looking for yourself you have to already have some idea of where you want to be found, whether it is approaching the bench in a courtroom, bedside in a hospital, in front of a classroom of kids, or under the stage lights. We spend these four years half-heartedly engaging in all of these extracurricular, each one a line on our resume which is one more step on our self-constructed ladders to success. I don’t think that there is anything to be found. I want to lose myself.

But that’s an aside. Back to the science; there was a definite change when I entered 300 level classes this year. My motor control professor finally assumed juniors and seniors knew something about the subject matter and we became privy to the unabridged version of information he had been nesting on. A ready example is the visual pathway in the brain. Freshman year, light entered the eye through the cornea and was focused on the foveal part of the retina. Sophomore year, light traveled back from the retina to the optic nerve, crossing over at the optic chiasm to become optic tracts that travel back to distinct brain structures for processing. Junior year, topographically organized nuclei break down every facet of the image and after processing, reconstruct the image to project out along the dorsal and ventral streams to brain lobes that become “what” and “where” information about the image. The thing is, there are still a lot of open endings in there (theories) and a lot of it is just generally accepted because no one else has any better idea about it. The parallels between science and organized religion are ironic, really.

 In a particular eight thirty AM motor control lecture, my professor said that no two people see the exact same color. I could believe that. I was firmly convinced I looked awful in red and therefore I refused to buy that color; my roommate was firmly convinced I already owned a bunch of red shirts (they are orange, for the record, or maybe burnt sienna…). The visual pathway stuff was next. Did you know there are neurons that respond specifically to orientations of objects in space? Or neurons that fire exclusively for facial recognition?

 What really stunned me, on a philosophical level even, was the fact that we don’t see the world in real time. How could we with the layers and layers of visual processing that occur in our brains every second? Everything we see has already happened because my entire world, everything I know and value and ascribe meaning to, is deconstructed by my brain and those little, tiny neurons that tell me what color something is, how it’s oriented in space, if it’s accelerating angularly or linearly, if the texture is rough or smooth, if I’m looking at a face or a flower. Everything I know relies on my interpretation and reconstruction of the world. What if I’m seeing the world wrong? What if my neurons aren’t showing me how it is? Do they know that I’m thinking about them---that I’m on to what they do?

How can I even believe what I see right in front of my face? Fragile construction, socially and neurologically. Believing in something you can’t see, like God or Allah or forgiveness or love, is on about as much faith as you can believe you are correctly seeing the words on this page. I still want to believe in something; I want something to hold on to when everything is interpreted and described and experienced through the limitations of sight and neurons. Our beliefs can’t be warped by diseases or brains. We root ourselves in the intangible because it may actually just be the most steadfast thing we have in a constructed world. Someday, our bodies will break with age and our worlds will be limited by more than just sight and language. You better believe in something because we are all just a stroke or a lesion away from seeing music or tasting colors.