

A couple of summers ago, I went swimming with my niece, Eloise. She was seven years old. We were near the shore outside my parents' house, which is on a lake in northern Wisconsin. My father had built a tug boat that year, so Eloise was imitating it, scooping bilgey water into her mouth and then spitting it out the way that a tug sprays water at a fire. She showed me how she could float like a jellyfish and kick her legs, pressed together, like a mermaid. Then she dog-paddled contentedly around the nose of the dock and straight into a patch of towering, slimy weeds. She didn't stop until she was in the middle of them. Then she raised her face from the water, sputtered for a moment, grinned up at me and said, "Sometimes I like to create little problems for myself."

That moment is one that I think about when I am burdened by stress, when I doubt my judgement and my capabilities. I remember the joy on my niece's face as she built for herself a challenge that she could overcome, as she pushed out and met more of life than she had ever met before.

There is another story that walks into my mind, like footsteps down a corridor in a frightening movie, when my doubts are about the existence of a God who is good. It is a story that involves another seven year old girl, a story that I read in a newspaper fifteen or twenty years ago. I will never repeat it to anyone because what happened was evil and the girl died, and I would never want to plant the seed of that story anywhere. It is a story that causes me pain and doubt because of the terrible suffering of the girl and because of her innocence. I think about this unrepeatably story, and I can't come up with a justification for it.

I wanted us on this morning simply to meet and to sit with our doubt. So the only Bible reading that I included in our worship was the story of Jacob wrestling. It is one of my favorite stories in the Bible, perhaps my very favorite. It is mysterious, more opaque than just about any other tale in the Old Testament or any of the parables of Jesus. Jacob is on his way home after many years away. He has sent his possessions ahead of him, including his wives and children and servants, as a gesture of peace and remorse to his brother Esau, from whom he had coerced a birthright and stolen a blessing when they were young. Jacob is alone at his campsite, at night. And, without preamble, a man appears in the darkness and wrestles with him.

In Minnesota, of course, we are fans of wrestling. Much of modern professional wrestling was born and based here, and I remember watching, not the bouts on TV, but my brother watching the bouts on TV when we were kids. He would lie belly down on the carpet in the family room, his face close to the set on the floor, fascinated by these huge men in spectacular, shiny outfits and stylized hair, good guys and bad guys pouncing and pounding on each other with vaudevillian precision. To me, the shows were tense and upsetting, but I watched them because I liked to be with my big brother.

When I wrestled, it was with my father, and it was called “wrassling.” It was usually a three-on-one affair—two girls and one boy against one man—and it was not allowed in the living room. My dad’s standard, winning move was the stubble rub: black whiskers against a bare tummy. It was like being tickled by lake weeds: a problem that I had created myself and reveled in, even without solving it.

As a metaphor, we understand Jacob wrestling in the night, for that is when our most terrible thoughts come, when we lie alone in our beds, and our rooms are dark and quiet around us. We wrestle with them as the hours pass, and they will not let us go. We can be wounded by them. We think about the people who don’t like us and whom we don’t like, about the car that cut us off in traffic, about the health insurance that we can’t afford. We think about how fat we are, and how the roof needs replacing, and the fact that we never get anything done. We think about how we can’t seem to help our children, the world is inhospitable, and are going to die. When the sun rises on Jacob and the man, the match is at a draw. Jacob has been injured: he walks with a limp. But he has also been blessed, and he believes that the mysterious man with whom he has wrestled was God.

I knew a man who wrestled with God. He was in his forties, small and silver-haired. He had been raised Catholic. For some years, he had been a monk. He was gay. And he was the first person who ever told me that he was an atheist. He told me that he could be a moral person without practicing religion. He was angry. Standing in a bookstore on an uneventful afternoon, his eyes narrowed, his gestures sharpened, his words tumbled out vehemently. I didn’t evangelize. He knew what he knew about the church. But I felt perhaps the most profound and shocking sense of pity that I have ever felt for anyone, a sort of coldness in my stomach, because I can not imagine being bereft of God.

Before I say anything further, let me point out that I am a woman who has reached middle age without ever having been married. I am outside of an institution that many people consider to be the most tangible, fundamental good in their lives. People pity me. I know that they do because not infrequently someone will say to me something like, “I was at my aunt’s wedding this summer. She’s sixty-four and she just got married for the first time. So there’s always hope.” They say these things out of love for me, wanting to give me something that they can’t imagine being bereft of, and they don’t know that I have observed marriage and come to conclusions that are different from their own, that, not only do I not require their pity, but that I may pity them.

I know that the atheist does not require my pity, and that he or she pities the conclusions that I have reached about the existence of God. I also know how much I value being in conversation with my married friends, being privy to their joys as well as their disappointments. As a society and as individuals, it is good that we wrestle with each other, and that we welcome skepticism of our own beliefs. It is a blessing that moves us forward into the parts of life where we have never been.

The word “grapple” is a wrestling word. It means to struggle without a weapon. Wrestling may be the sport that is most about relationship and least about winning or losing. It is about holds—about embracing what is before us. In professional wrestling, the pleasure is in the ongoing drama, not the outcome of a particular match. And relationship is the magic that occurs when a parent wrestles with a child or when I now wrestle with my recently adopted dog, who weighs fifty-seven pounds and can easily knock me over and pin me down. He doesn’t want to win; he wants to play. When our prayers seem to go unanswered and we scream at God in our heads, we are in relationship with the divine. And often when we walk away, in sin or righteousness or doubt, it is part of a longer story that includes coming home again, as Jacob did.

Doubt is a problem that we create for ourselves to make our relationship with God—or the world or whatever we believe exists and is powerful—more deep. In examining the stories in our lives that are the hardest to think about, and questioning God’s presence or absence in them, we develop a stronger understanding of the life force. Doubt is part of our religion. There is lamentation in the psalms, and misunderstanding in the disciples about who Jesus is and what he is saying. Last week, the high-schoolers and I studied Moses, who was so tired of

wandering in the desert that he asked God to kill him. Moses had become doubtful of the Lord. But the two were in conversation.

To practice religion is to engage that part of ourselves that we call the soul. To say simply that we are spiritual, as is common in contemporary parlance, is no more illuminating than to say that we are emotional or physical or mental. Of course we are. The question is, what do we do to nurture our spirits? Emily Dickinson stayed home and thought of God as she listened to the birds sing. William James philosophized until he decided that it was pragmatic to believe in God, that doing so offered more benefit than harm. They are just two of religion's beautiful doubters. If you are like me, if you have stories that trouble you, then we are sixty or eighty more. When we come together to worship, in all of our states of confusion and wrath and faith, we affirm that we care about the animating spirit, whatever it is, and we knit ourselves into relationships that make the world a more loving and peaceful place.

Family Sunday Sermon
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The Consolation of Doubt
The Consolation of Doubt

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J. Anderson