

Dialogue With My Daughter: Part V

The Magical World and Weirdos

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A few people have contacted me and indicated that while what I write is interesting and useful, it is far too long and uses language that is too technical. They have accordingly encouraged me to try to follow the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle. Accordingly, I am experimenting with recording some of the conversations I have with my kids and am as a result finding a more accessible presentation style. Some of the same people who asked for easier to read versions of my material have indicated this approach works for them. So, here is another conversation summary. As is the case with all of my pieces of this sort, most of the content of this summary is drawn from actual conversations with my older daughters (ages 17 to 22). However, lots of extraneous material has been excluded and I have taken some creative license to "smooth" things out. The conversation setting is in my car on the way to drop a daughter off at work. The content summarized here represents a small fraction of what we talk about.

Bob: What a day!

Daughter: Yeah. It's Spring at last! Did Mom tell you about my lunch with Bill the other day?

B: Yes. That sounded weird.

D: More than weird. I just had to get out of there. I'm glad Mom was near her phone when I called.

B: Tell me more about that. Mom didn't make it sound that bad.

D: Well, we were just sitting there having lunch and the conversation got more and more intense. Bill had told me before about these extrasensory experiences he's had.

B: Oh, I hadn't heard about those.

D: Yeah, he's had all kind of weird experiences. And he's really smart. He's a computer programmer – I think I told you that?

B: Yes.

D: He doesn't even solve his computer programs on screen. He visualizes the program in three dimensions, finds the problem and then goes into the screen and simply fixes it. I was actually really enjoying the conversation for a while. He

knows all kinds of things that I don't know about physics and world history. But then he got into this thing about how he can experience life in more than one dimension and has actually visited other dimensions. He said that he doesn't know quite how this is going to happen, but somehow through him, a being is going to come into our dimension and eventually save mankind.

B: Whoa! This guy is nuts!

D: He's definitely nuts, but there seems to be something real about what he is saying.

B: What do you mean?

D: Well, while we were talking, he explained to me this thing about subatomic particles that have counterparts elsewhere and that one is spinning in one direction and the other is the mirror image of the same thing, spinning in the opposite direction. They are, in fact, the same thing but somehow connected by forces nobody can really explain. He said that he is able to tap in to that and that lets him "check on" people who are a long way from him. He said that he does that with his son all the time, and right then, he told me that X (a small child in our family) was upset. I phoned home, and sure enough he was. That blew me away!

B: Hold on. This guy is sounding more and more dangerous the more we talk. First of all, the stunt you just described is classic "cold reading". So called psychics use that all the time. All they do is get to know enough about a person to be able to have a good statistical idea as to what may or may not be happening to them, and then they base their predictions on that. What time of day was it when he said that?

D: About mid-afternoon.

B: So at that time, X is either asleep or ...

D: Cranky.

B: Right. And the psychological studies in this area indicate that as long as the psychic is getting something like one in four guesses right, people think he's a psychic. There is something about our mentality that makes us overlook the misses and attach way too much importance to the hits these guys make when they are guessing. So if you're confident, bright enough to figure out probabilities and tell people that you are psychic, they will tend to believe you. Many successful psychic careers are built on precisely this sort of thing. What really gets me, however, is that Bill using that on you. He's obviously trying to put himself in a position of influence over you. I think that's very unhealthy.

D: So do I. That's why I called Mom and told her to come get me right away.

- B: Your description of Bill reminds me of something else I read a little while ago. There has been a lot of research done with regard to the kind of personality that it probably took to make a good shaman, medicine man or religious leader back in the olden days. A lot of people think that these people had a mild form of schizophrenia. They call it a "schizotypal" personality. Schizotypals are typically loners, often very smart and then tend toward a magical orientation. That is, they are often into ESP, extra-terrestrials, etc. Sounds a lot like Bill, doesn't it?
- D: It sure does.
- B: In ancient times, these people were often revered because it appeared that they had a connection to the spiritual realm that ordinary people don't have. Now most of those people are simply thought to be weird, and are marginalized in society. Accordingly, they tend to look for niches where they can flourish. And so they are often attracted to radical religious groups. Within Mormonism, the people that are attracted toward polygamous cults, or are always asking for blessings of health, etc. are sometimes of this type. The guy, for example, that kidnapped that Elizabeth Smart girl in Utah a year or two ago would definitely be of this type, given what I have read about him. There is another guy you probably haven't heard about, Dan Lafferty, who is in prison for killing a woman because she decided she didn't want to be part of his Mormon polygamous cult anymore. He believes that God told him to kill this woman and her baby. People who hear voices in their head and think that they are really dangerous. Joseph Smith had tendencies of this type as well. I hope you aren't going to see this guy again.
- D: I don't want to, but he has been calling non stop ever since I walked out on our lunch. He phoned twice yesterday.
- B: You should probably find a way to cut it off with him so that he'll leave you alone.
- D: I want to, but I'm not sure how. He finally got through to me yesterday by calling from a number I hadn't seen before. I told him I couldn't deal with him right then, but that I would phone him back.
- B: When you call him back, why don't you try just telling him that you're in a position right now where you can't deal with any relationships or even close friendships, and you don't want him to call again.
- D: That's kind of what I was going to do. But I am sure he'll tell me he just wants to be friends.
- B: In that case, you can tell him that you need space and that if and when you feel ready for some friendship, you'll call him. But he is not to call you anymore.
- D: That makes sense. I'll give that a try. I really hate to do this kind of thing. Most of the time, I think we could all use more magical thinking.

B: Magical or spiritual thinking is great in some cases. We've talked about this before. The experiences that old shamans, prophets, etc. had are a very useful guide to our own interior world. Carl Jung recorded the fact that the images that come from the dream life of a broad variety of normal people have a lot of common with the deranged, waking visions of schizophrenics. In metaphor, this stuff is great. However, as soon as a person begins to believe that their dream world (whether waking or sleeping) is an indication of physical reality that should cause them to act in one way or another, we are into serious problem. I think I told you about the Heaven's Gate cult, didn't I?

D: I think so, but I can't remember.

B: Well, they all committed suicide because they were sure a spaceship was trailing in the wake of a comet called the Hale-Bopp Comet. They believed that they had received communication from these people instructing them to wait until the comet was at its point closest to Earth, and then they were to "get rid of their earthly containers" so that their spirits would be released and could be sucked up somehow by the spaceship. So these people all committed suicide. The same kind of thing happened in Jonestown, when Jim Jones persuaded his followers that it was time to all go to a "better place". It seems most likely that what Jones experienced was the result of government authorities closing in on his commune and probably going to break it up. At the subconscious level at least, he likely concluded that if he could no longer be in control of that group of people, no one would be. He took his own life along with them. The last little while before they all died was bizarre. It was just like a Mormon testimony meeting. They all got up and told stories about what a wonderful person Jim Jones was, how he had helped them in all kinds of ways, etc. and then took their poison. In the background you could hear other people struggling as they died. They thought the poison would cause a painless death, and were wrong. The best thing to do is to stay as far away as possible from people who claim special and amazing insight into reality that can't be proved in any way except by their say-so and by the confirmation of other people who also claim to have seen what cannot be replicated by others. This is why the scientific approach is in general much better than the spiritual when we want to find out about reality. The spiritual approach, as I indicated a minute ago, is really useful if we want to get in touch with our interior world, but dangerous if we are trying to understand what is going on around us.

D: The world sometimes seems like it's upside down.

B: I suggest you stay away from anyone who makes you feel that way. Most of the world is not upside down. But both you and I have had the pleasure of having to deal with many people who do make it seem that way.

D: True.

B: Lets come back to this magical world idea again. I was reading some more

things the other day that I think you might be interested in.

D: What?

B: Well, the idea is that magical thinking is really an attempt to make people feel more secure in an uncertain world.

D: That does not make sense. What is certain about magic?

B: This is a particular kind of magic. Let me give you a little background. There is some interesting research that I think is relevant to this question. I have told you about Karen Armstrong before, right?

D: I can't remember.

B: Former Nun; one of the world's most respected religious historians. In her book "The Battle For God" she tells the story of how in our uncertain modern world fundamentalist faiths are increasingly attractive to a segment of the population who as a result of genetics or social conditioning have a greater than usual need for certainty. The desire for certainty causes some people to adopt a magical worldview that include the kind of bizarre stuff your friend was going on about, or other things that are less bizarre like that there is literal God who communicates His desires to mankind through the little voices we hear in our heads. Mormonism is one of many of these belief systems that allow their members to believe in a spiritual world invented by one group of leaders or another. These worlds invariably include clear rules about what one must do to be saved and enjoy wonderful things after this life. This restores certainty. However, there is no way to test whether the world that these religious leaders talk about is real. Their word must be accepted on faith, and on the basis of the emotional experiences that the religious leader can create for his followers. So, behind the certainty that the leaders say is there, and that the followers believe is there, we find a great deal of uncertainty. Ironically, much more uncertainty is here than we have to deal with if we focus on reality. The difference is that in the faith world, the uncertainty is hidden, and we both know a lot of people who would simply rather not know about the hard things in life, don't we.

D: We sure do.

B: So, anyways, think about how the of the basic Mormon model. It asks us to assume the following things:

- There is one and only one God, and He has certain characteristics that include favouring one people as His special people.
- God gave JS his exclusive authority in modern times.
- Joseph Smith, at God's command, translated the BofM.

- Anyone who reads the BofM and prays to God with sincere intent will be told by God that the BofM is His word, thus confirming that JS did speak with God etc.

- Anyone who does not have the experience just noted after reading the BofM either did not have sincere intent, or is subject to sin of some kind (lack of humility is enough in this regard) that prevents him from hearing God's voice.

The conclusion that follows logically from these assumptions is that everyone who accepts the Mormon Church has heard God's voice, and everyone who does not either has not had a full opportunity to do so, or is subject to sin and so can't hear God's voice. So, if you accept the things Mormonism wants you to assume, the conclusion makes sense and if you don't think about it carefully, the conclusion seems to confirm that the things you have assumed are correct. And, the assumptions are designed not to be testable. You have to accept them on faith or not at all, and this allows all of the emotional stuff that we have talked about before to be brought to make us feel like we have had a special experience from God that should make us believe.

D: I remember talking about the emotional stuff.

B: Here is the problem. There is an unfortunate side effect of accepting the story Mormonism tells. Once a person believes that the little voices in our head are sometimes God speaking, is that as Armstrong indicates, this allows man to simply project use the idea that his own little voice is God talking, and so justify all kinds of bad behaviour. Or as Goethe said "As man is, so is his God, and thus is God, oft strangely odd". Think about your friend again. He is listening to little voices in his head, isn't he?

D:: Yes.

B: Do you think he is lying to you?

D: I don't know. But he is scary. I think he is a little crazy.

B: So, it doesn't matter much if he is lying or not, does it? He is a little crazy, and you certainly do not want to be relying on him, do you?

D:: Of course not.

B: This is my point regarding magical thinking people in general, and the space religious or magical belief creates for them. And to make sure you don't misunderstand, I should say again that the metaphoric use of religious belief works just fine as far as I am concerned. It is when people start talking about literal, real worlds that they have come to know through spiritual means and begin to control others on the basis of their "visions" that I think it is time to run the other way. Your friend Bill might have ended up with his own religion if he had lived a hundred of so years ago. The sledding is tougher for people like him

these days.

D: Thank goodness.

B: So, anyway, what starts out as a method of controlling people by creating the appearance of certainty, and having them believe that God speaks through a particular group of religious leaders and believe that God will confirm that reality to them by way of little voices in the head or burnings in the bosom, can easily morph into God communicating all kinds of other things to the individual. The only difference between your friend and religious leaders like Joseph Smith is that your friend is not using the language of God Smith used. Your friend is using a new agey, scientific kind of language that fits into the mystical realm as it is now defined. But all the same, really weird and bad things can come from people like that. I read part of a book by Jon Krakauer called "Under the Banner of Heaven". Krakauer is the guy who wrote "Into Thin Air" – remember that one?

D: Yes.

B: In "Under the Banner of Heaven" he described at one point how a guy named Lafferty, who was a polygamous Mormon, decided to murder a woman and her child because she had decided to leave his religious organization. He felt that God told him to do this – those little voices in the head and feeling of peace or certainty in the heart again. This mentality lies at the root of Jonestown, the Heaven's Gate mass suicide and many other tragedies. It is clear that power corrupts. Combine some power, whether within the home or on a larger scale, with the belief that the voices in your head are God telling you to do what you want to do anyway, and bizarre behaviour becomes in my view much more likely to emerge from any given population of humans.

D: This is sick.

B: I agree. The "rational" worldview, flawed though it is, in my view is much more healthy than the God-that-speaks-to-me-and-tells-me-what-to-do point of view.. The rational model points me toward the cause and effect rules that govern life and that science attempts to help us get to know. These rules give me something to test the little voices in my head against, and even help me to understand where those little voices come from. The laws of cause and effect teach me about the uncertainty by which I am surrounded, and help me to learn to deal with it. That is one of their virtues. They do not hide uncertainty, and so make me think I know things that I can't know. For example, the idea that I can fly may make me feel great until I jump off a cliff to enjoy my non-existent abilities. Reality is much more useful in most cases than fantasy. If anything can be reasonably said to constitute anti-wisdom, it is a philosophy that teaches us to ignore the wisdom produced by science and all other cultures in favour of the untested version what our often irrational, individual minds come up with. We are not inherently rational beings, and the more fear and uncertainty we face, the less rational we are. Ironically, the least rational voices in our heads are also

those most likely to be mistaken for God by those so inclined, because those voices come from our brain's reptilian core and so are connected to our most primal hopes and fears.

D: This is getting awfully heavy. I'm glad we're home.

B: Sorry.

D: That's OK. What do you have to do tonight?

B: Nothing. Just hanging around the house.