

Pippin, me, and God

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For reasons he knows well and chooses to forget, today my cat has been quarantined in the bathroom to keep himself out of trouble in the afternoon until I get home in the evening. I think of it as akin to a medieval King being rushed down into the cellar by ladies in full dresses and bespectacled men nervously wringing their hands during some threat of besiegement. The king waits there impatiently, fist shaking at the perceived loss of dignity, and then, at the go-ahead of those sworn to protect him he prances out, head held high, cheeks flushed with indignance. On returning when I open the bathroom door and let him out Pippin, like the king, is once again the ruler of the apartment and we can for the benefit of us both forget those few moments when he *hadst* allowed me to believe myself in control.

Pippin is named after royalty. I remember releasing this gangly white bundle with eyes and ears humorously too big for his tiny frame into my apartment for the first time. I watched him take his first steps, cautiously treading the alien terrain, keeping low to the ground and familiarizing himself with his new world and I waited for the perfect name for this creature to come to me. I went through names that I liked and that had positive connotations, Buddha, Krishna, Shiva, Rama, Noah; too grandiose and not nuanced enough to compliment his unrelenting mischievousness and curiosity (maybe Krishna came the closest what with the butter stealing and all). I remember watching Pippin crouch using his newly discovered muscles into a pre-pounce position across the room. His haunches swayed from side to side as he prepared himself for propulsion and leapt into the air landing with a plop on the carpet he nearly blended in with, and running like a bullet to the other side of the room. The little white blur continued to bound from one corner of the room to the next making sharp zig zags, knocking his tail on the lamp. This free little burst of energy shamelessly following the impulses of his body. In mid-run he let out a meow the vibrato of which oscillated with his movement, sounding like the cat version of a person holding a note while jumping up and down.

Watching him, I remembered a song from a musical I saw in middle school. The musical's namesake and main character, Pippin, is a prince who leaves his kingdom in order to find himself. Before he embarks on his journey he sings a song called *Corner of the Sky*. I played the song and watched the kitten take short rests from running. He would stop suddenly, look me in the eyes, and flop onto the ground to take a long extended stretch before going at it again with a chirpy meow. The song and the male voice performing it was as pure as I had remembered. It had a beautiful playful melody and an unapologetic, poetic simplicity to the lyrics.

*Rivers belong where they can ramble, eagles belong where they can fly. I've got to be where my spirit can run free. Gotta find my corner of the sky.*

It was perfect, and I knew that this cat was Pippin. The words are so simple, and perhaps, when applied to a cat their meaning is allotted the spiritual levity they deserve. The image of a cat leaving the luxury of his birthright in order to find his place in the world and discover the nature of his soul is downright adorable. I conjured an image of him with ringlets of long Jesus-esque hair, sporting a pair of bellbottoms (the musical is from 1972), in a manner not dissimilar to the dressing up of the Jack Russell Terrier in the television show *Wishbone*; trekking up a mountain with great fervor and purpose. Maybe a reason it's so damn cute is that in a way we already know that a cat is living as its true self in the way that animals are just who they are. But hold those same lyrics next to the standard of a person and our reactions become harsh, cynical, mocking. How dare you think that there's something so special about you that you have the luxury of finding out where you belong? No? Maybe that's just me then.

When I arrive home, after releasing his highness, Pippin declares that it is time for him to be fed, immediately. But I know, that he has to wait a couple more hours because this is the schedule we keep in order for him to feel satisfied throughout the night. He sits next to me and jumps on my lap and the second I talk to him he leaps off so excitedly and darts next to the counter where he knows the food lives, meowing expectantly. Each time I don't follow him, he dejectedly wanders back to me and paws at me again, not giving up easily. Listening to him cry I tell myself that I know better, that's it's for his own good and that I wish he could understand.

There is something intriguing in the air between us, some curious interconnectedness which feels poignant. He doesn't know when the food's coming, he has no idea that I am aware of his longing, feeling for him, and also waiting for the right moment for his own good. I find myself wondering, do I take on the role of Pippin in the dynamic of a relationship to a deity in my life, some omnipresent caretaker in the ether? Is there something looking down on me (at me, through me) when I am feeling desperate or wronged or impatient and feeling the same compassion I feel for Pippin, wanting to tell me it's for my own good and knowing that we don't speak the same language, wishing we did?

Surly I'm projecting far more of my own neurosis here than I care to identify, but I can't help but wonder if God sees me the way I see Pippin; looking into his little face, eyes cast longingly in the direction of the food cabinet. Do I appear just as convinced from above of what I want, just as sure of how things ought to be?

The introspection begged for such a question is not always a pleasant task. There's a foggy chasm in my mind between the things I want to believe exist, and the things I have difficulty allowing myself to believe. This hazy no-man's land is where I bury the thoughts too painful to deal with, the conclusions I've come to that are too ambivalent to bear. This section of the subconscious is

cultivated by large plots of shame and fears interspersed with other tilled soils of hopes and dreams. I guess on a good day it's a land where the many colorful characters in the motion picture of my mind move through me like fantastical tricksters akin to those in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at worst the land becomes a haunted forest so dark and ominous that everything feels meaningless, if not intentionally cruel.

Like most of us, my case for a benevolent and generally loving God, oneness, universe or whichever name you prefer, is made in times when I feel pretty sound in my ability to do things without one. Those times in life when there isn't at present an earth shattering fissure that leaves me desperately talking to the sky for some relief that I'm willing to beg for. I'm best able to connect to God at either end of these extremes; when things are pleasant enough for me to muse about the nature of existence, stake-free; and at the opposite end of the spectrum when my sense of self has been critically shaken. In those moments I stomp up to God like a stubborn child, fists balled, chin high and back turned defiantly, grunting, 'I need you but I'm not going to like it'. Then turning to look over my shoulder mumbling, 'Don't let me go'.

It makes me wonder why I so desperately want to believe there is something who knows what is best for my well-being and parcels things out to me thoughtfully and with purpose even if I do not understand it at the time. Why I want to believe that something mothers me in movements larger than flesh and blood, watches out for me and protects me.

As a young girl I was raised quite religious and growing up I knew just as plainly as rain falls from the sky that God loved me. I knew we were all children of God, and firmly believed that the people who didn't believe that just didn't know it yet. I would bow my head and fold my arms at church and imagine all the prayers God must receive from all over the planet, millions and millions every minute, every second. And what about all the other planets? How could he (she, they) answer them all? How could he have in mind a plan for all these people who were asking for help? How could he expect us to believe this was even possible? I didn't know exactly how but I couldn't be rattled in my conviction that he did.

I can remember spending a lot of time in my room after church with my scriptures cracked open, mimicking my father's 'thinking look' by rubbing the knuckle of my index finger to my upper lip, and puzzling over these questions. In contemplating the impossibility of understanding these connections, my mind would lap against an inevitable helplessness. At certain points it would become so overwhelming for me that I would begin to bargain with God. My mind tried to help me gain leverage over these seemingly unanswerable questions by leveling with him. This eventually developed into some type of pinky promise that I made with God in order to make living a life on this earth, probably without ever finding out the truth, worth living. I began to promise myself that someday this would all make sense. I would say, 'God just promise me one thing, that when I die you will reveal it to me, just

for a moment even if I have to forget’.

Sometimes though, as it does in life, things got little too real to even be comforted by God. At moments, when the silence became so existentially haunting and cold, then I would go to my second best, my mother. I would inevitably explain to her my frustration, my confusion, and ask her if it was still ok, if it was right to still trust God while also not knowing what he was doing, or if he even knew.

Growing up I loved Disney movies so I’ll use a metaphor from one of my favorites, *The Lion King*. My mom, for me, was the Rafiki to my Simba. She was the mystic, quick as a whip, brandishing colorful necklaces with matching earrings who could make me believe in the purpose of misfortune. She had a way of grounding the painfully confusing in the wacky and whimsical. Because after all, wasn’t it all coming from the same God who would let out a deep belly laugh along with me at one of her crude jokes? If she was just a mere reflection in the eye of the almighty, with her immense intelligence, her sparkling smile that lit up my world when she bared her slightly crooked teeth of which she was extremely self-conscious; if this was just a fragment of God and she could make this much sense, then I knew God was good because he had made her. He had brought her to me to help me make sense of things, and he had brought me to her to help her make sense of things. And that was the most loving act I could imagine.

She was the first to make a case to me for unflappable compassion. If I didn't always see it in the people at church, I heard it in her stories. She would express understanding for cruel things and people in a way that stretched the boundaries I thought were possible, even in the case of her own abusive relationship with her mother. She would tell me stories about my grandmother who could very easily have been painted as a witch, or a cruel sadist. There were the stories of the the way that her mother had forced her to weigh herself in front of her friends and encouraged them to laugh at her. She’d reason, *she was an extremely hurt soul, she had a lot of self hatred and was deeply wounded as a child in ways she was never able to deal with due to her extreme poverty*. She would tell me about grandma going to school embarrassed, longing for longer skirts to help cover the large purple welts on her legs put there by her own alcoholic father.

One story in particular was very difficult. Mom told me of a day she had come home from school to find her mother waiting for her in a dark room. She was told to go and pick a switch from outside, knowing she was in for a beating. When she brought back a small one thinking that would make it less painful, my grandmother grimaced at her, laughed and said, “you stupid bitch, don’t you know the small ones hurt the most”? Seeing my anger at my grandmother I remember mom telling me, *she had been through much worse then I can probably imagine. She took it out on me, it wasn’t right but she didn’t know any better. Please don’t hate her, she’s your grandma*.

Through my love for my mother and my hatred of her pain I developed an eye for the opposing forces inside me that could make me have so much livid hatred towards someone and love them

unconditionally at the same time.

This was a formative element that led me to study the Holocaust and other historic examples of genocide and violence. I began to understand that these examples of cruelty in my own small world also existed in larger ways in society, like in the demonization of one group of people by another, or the usurping of power by a military dictator. I was fascinated by the dialectic balance like a knives' edge; these violences were unjustifiable and yet the conditions and events which created them were real, human and thus, understandable. Most importantly able to be learned from.

I've dedicated a lot of my life to imbuing meaning and the potential for understanding toward horrific acts of human depravity. This fascination and insistence of the importance of this understanding is, I suppose, in some way an expression of me trying to make sense of why God would let these things happen. To stare down the uncomfortable truth that any one person has the potential to do terrible things under the right circumstances. To cut out the middle man and try to do some of the grunt work myself.

Later in my life, when I had long since diverged from the faith of my youth and was exploring new expressions of spirituality, a teacher of mine gave me a zen cohen to ponder. It read, *everything in my life is a perfectly timed expression of God's love*. I found this did not easily reason with things in life which in no way could be described as a gift. I thought about incest, rape, mass murder, I thought about the gruesome subjects that I had devoted so much time and energy to understanding.

When I thought of these things it made me wonder if considering everything as a gift or at least on purpose is a valuable, not to mention possible, belief to hold. Is it useful to believe that God would have people suffer horrible traumas for a reason? Is it valuable to believe his hands are clean?

After a significant amount of tries Pippin usually relents and goes to wait for dinner on the windowsill. When the times comes to feed him I feel a relief as I'm finally able to use my sing-song voice to call him over and it's not a tease. Look, I want to say, I'm not always lying to you, I wasn't trying to torture you.

I think I've come to believe that God is very pluralistic with the way he allows us to look at things that happen. The greatest gift and most terrible thing God has afforded people is our freedom and our free will. One person may need to believe that a terrible event that happened to them was God leading them to channel a newfound strength they didn't know was possible. For another it might be better to imagine that God had nothing to do with it, had wanted to stop it. For another it is a randomness, and nothing to do with a God or purpose whatsoever. Any and all of these, I believe are correct.

In a terrible, brilliant way, anything is correct, just not all the time. The only tool we have to navigate this insane obstacle course of life is our power of discernment and with some luck, sanity.

As people we are prisoners to our minds, or at the very least not able to forcibly escape them. It's not so simple as *to be where our spirits can run free*, as Pippin would say. It is sometimes even more difficult to come to an admittance that we even want freedom. That we might just deserve it. That we don't know how to get it, that we have ideas that might not work, that we want to try. I think that's why the image of something larger than me keeping an eye on me pawing at the food cabinet, waiting for the right time to let me at it is such a comforting image. Imagining this allows me to channel a part of myself that is open-hearted in order to deal with the parts of me sabotaging myself and dragging my feet, because in order to do that I need to imagine what someone wiser, with a deeper well of compassion might say.

And maybe it's as simple as I need to think there's someone somewhere putting up with me and valuing my tiny progresses the way only a mother could, in order for me to take another shuffle forward. For me, if the baby steps can't be valued, I'd just assume to never learn to walk. I have to believe it. Simple as that. It's a belief that allows me to find meaning and, if I'm lucky, some enjoyment. And right now, as Pippin reminds me, that means to take some pleasure and feed him.