

If I Were God

Gay Taylor

I OFTEN MUSE WHAT I WOULD DO IF I WERE GOD: Would I first stop wars, eliminate hunger and disease, make people loving and caring? I think not. Though the prospect is appealing, I know that we are here to work out problems. If we had no walls to climb, no boulders to move, we might as well have stayed in heaven and be done with it. I would consider, instead, some of the things that God is alleged to have done or commanded us to do. Which would I approve of, and which would I not — if I were God?

If I were God I would, as many claim he did, create the world and then give us a few billion years to work out our own salvation, possibly with a nudge here and there to keep us on the right track. How interested he must be! There have been some odd results along the way, for example, the 300,000 species of beetles, the praying mantis alone accounting for 1,700. British scientist J. B. S. Haldane, famous for his work in genetics and biometry, when asked what the products of creation had revealed to him about God, quipped, “He had an inordinate fondness for beetles” (in Lewin 1982, 134).

Another mystery I have wondered about is the curious impulse of a bean vine to curl to the right around a pole. If you try to change its course, it sulks and hangs down. The best gardener I know did not know the answer — he hadn’t even noticed the phenomenon! So I asked my brother, Keene Dimick, the genius chemist who developed the technology of gas chromatography. “It’s called the coriolis force,” he explained. “Any body in motion, like a hurricane or the water going down the drain, or a bean vine, will swirl to the right in the northern hemisphere and contrariwise in the southern hemisphere. It’s due to the earth’s rotation.” Nothing to quarrel with there.

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Anthropologist Loren Eiseley in *The Star Thrower* tells of a sparrow hawk he captured which put up a fight to give his mate time to escape. The next morning Eiseley took the bird into his hand, careful not to startle him.

He lay limp in my grasp and I could feel his heart pound under the feathers but he only looked beyond me and up. I must have had an idea then of what I was going to do. I just reached over and laid the hawk on the grass. He lay there a long minute. In the next second he was gone, straight into that towering emptiness of light and crystal. I could not see him. The light was too intense. Then from far up a cry came ringing down. I was young then and had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry my heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I had captured. Straight out of the sun's eye, where she must have been soaring restlessly for untold hours, hurtled his mate. And from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down to me across the years (1979, 91).

I imagine God must be pleased with the progress of creation, both man and bird, at moments such as these.

A young ex-nun friend told me once that all through her growing up years she had imagined God as a tapioca pudding. I didn't ask for an explanation. It's hard to get a handle on the infinite. For my part, I view God as an evolved me. If I could be all-loving, all-forgiving, kind, helpful, humorous, playful, cheerful, growing in wisdom, joyful, compassionate, creative, nurturing, tolerant, knowing the secrets of life and death, without guile, envy, jealousy, hate, or anger — all raised to the Nth degree — that would be Father in Heaven. Tone down the creativity a bit and increase the nurturing capacity and that would be my view of Mother in Heaven.

To clarify nurturing I inevitably think of my mother, who had an instinct to nurture in the best ways, including unending scorn for laziness or half-effort. "What are you ever going to amount to?" was the question we dreaded. She extended her concern to all around her and enlisted us in this cause. In fact, my most vivid memories of Christmas day are gathering at my grandmother's with our cousins from up and down the street and leaving with a good deal fewer things than we had arrived with in the morning. "That would do for Ruthie," Mother would say, pouncing on some nice little trinket. Across to a delighted Ruthie it would go, and we soon learned to value the glow of sharing more than our trinkets and toys. The careful tasting of the spoon of warm food before offering it to the baby, the warm iron wrapped in flannel for our cold feet, the cool hand and sip of water in the night when a fever raged — these are the nurturing things I remember and anticipate finding in the nurturing female, the Mother in Heaven.

During my eighty years of living, I have often wondered if people — from the earliest records down to now — know what they are talking about when they say our nurturing heavenly parents did this or want us to do that. When I was about nine years old going to school in the little Mormon town of Bancroft, Idaho, I learned in religion class, held after school every day, that to take the Lord's name in vain (meaning profanity, though I have since heard that it means perjury) would draw down dire consequences, and "damn" and

“hell” were just as bad. So whenever my kind, helpful, funny, tow-headed younger brother would say one of those words I would cry. One day we were running around under the quaking aspen trees on the hill when he stubbed his toe and exclaimed “Damn it!” He then looked straight at me and grinned, expecting my usual lecture. Instead, this time I asked myself, “If I were God, would I punish such a darling boy for that?” Never would I, so God wouldn’t either. I have used that yardstick ever since.

To find out why I developed such an independent streak, we have to go back to my beginnings. I was lucky. While I wasn’t actually born in a sheep camp, I was certainly conceived there and except for the first four days of my life at my grandparents’ home in Soda Springs, Idaho, under the care of the famous Dr. Kackley, I lived in that same sheep camp for the next three years.

I digress here to talk about Dr. Ellis Kackley, a man I would be proud of, if I were God. Born in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee in 1871, Dr. Kackley graduated from the University of Tennessee and within three days of reading an advertisement in a medical journal arrived in Soda Springs. In a letter to Mrs. Sadie Mickelson and her husband, of Lago, Idaho, printed in 1958, he wrote:

It was a fortunate day in my life when I stopped in Soda Springs, it was an unopposed practice one hundred by two hundred miles. There wasn’t a bed pan south of the Oregon Short Line Railroad, and if there was one north of the railroad I never saw it, but we could cut off a board and lay it across an old milk pan.

He went on to say,

We hear so much about taking the baby through the abdomen, that is considered a very major operation in a modern hospital, but we did it then with no more help than those good [Relief Society] women. . . . The Relief Society is the only society that I have ever wanted to join, to me it is the biggest thing in your church or any other church.

Dr. Kackley died in 1943.

When stricken by illness or wounds in our family our modus operandi was to trust God, castor oil and turpentine, homemade “canker medicine,” and “sticky dope.” The only time I ever saw Dr. Kackley again was when he was pushing a caustic pencil into a wart on my eight-year-old heel while Papa held me down. I consciously and deliberately screamed as hard as I could. Papa always used his magic touch to take off our run-of-the-mill, ordinary warts, but why, oh why, hadn’t it worked with this one!

With a third child in that sheep camp learning to walk, my family built a log cabin in a beautiful little canyon leading out of the Bancroft Flats, 6000 feet above sea level, a great altitude for developing lung power, covered with snow eight or nine months of the year but burgeoning with life the rest. Three more children were born in that cabin, aided by Mrs. Aston, midwife to the whole county.

Watching the struggle for life in all the plants and creatures in those rolling hills, I gained an understanding of the interwoven order of things. If we killed

off the coyotes that bayed lonesomely through the moonlit nights and took one of our lambs now and then, the squirrels and rabbits would move in to eat the grass that the lamb's mother needed to survive. If a sheep got his hide ripped on a barbed wire fence, the flies moved in to lay their eggs and raise their little maggots. The chicken hawks ate the little birds, and the little birds ate the maggots.

When the squirrels overpopulated, Papa intervened with his poison, which not only killed the squirrels but his best sheep dog who had eaten one of the animals. My cousin Ruth was visiting us that tragic summer, and we were assigned the task of cutting off the tails of the decomposing animals. The county was paying a bounty of a penny for each tail. Armed with pail and scissors, we traveled along the fence where the poison had been spread and clipped away. Ruth was handicapped by not having any shoes. Her father was a prominent sheep man and a senator in the Idaho legislature, so it was not that she had no shoes, but that she had none sufficiently awful to wear in the hills. So instead she wore a pair of my mother's high-heeled slippers which kept falling off. We were also both put off by the smell, but nonetheless we did get quite a bucketful of tails. Experiences like this give one a philosophical turn of mind.

I also learned early the truth of the statement that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Before the advent of tough Siberian wheat, frost would destroy the crops of the kind, good man as well as the neighbor who made slaves of his children and wife and beat them besides. On top of that I was a great reader and by age ten had read everything I could find at home or in the little library the MIA president kept in her home. I devoured the usual fare: Louisa May Alcott, Jean Stratton Porter, Hawthorne, the Bröntes, Dickens in part, Harold Bell Wright, Zane Grey, Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *Arabian Nights*, and a book of Norse mythology. I couldn't help but notice, especially in the Norse myths, that good did not always triumph.

Papa was also a reader; in fact, he read to the family every night while Mama darned stockings and we ate apples, carefully putting the peels on top of the stove to perfume the house. Papa memorized easily, especially verses from the Bible or Edgar A. Guest. We heard every day about the awful fate of scribes and pharisees or those who were like whitened sepulchres, beautiful without but full of corruption within; or that on no account could a rich man get to heaven. (I like Ishmael's remark in Melville's *Moby Dick*, "How cheerfully we all consign ourselves to perdition!")

My father had an Irish wit and loved to tell stories. He ran a shearing operation a couple of summers in a place called Hole-in-the-Rock outside Soda Springs. He hired the shearers and a cook and brought in food, sheep dip, wool sacks, and other supplies. I remember the cooking shack and bunkhouses, but the main attraction to us kids was the ramp leading up to a platform just big enough for a sheared sheep to stand on. The sheep was then encouraged to go down a slide which dumped him into a trough about fifty feet long filled with creosote sheep dip. As he swam along he was poked under now and then to take off ticks and other parasites. Father garnered some good stories from

these summers. The cook brought out a pie one day and set it down on the table. "Raisin!" the men shouted enthusiastically. "Custard," corrected the cook as with a flick of his towel he shooed off the flies. Another time the cook warned, "If anyone complains about the food, he'll be cook!" It wasn't easy to bake in an oven heated by sagebrush; it was either too hot or too cold. So inevitably one morning a fellow slipped. "Burnt on both sides and dough in the middle," he muttered. Then he added hastily, "But it's just the way I like it!"

I remember in the shearing camp that although the men were paid a lump sum, they worked like fury to be the one with the most pelts at the end of the day. If I were God I would be proud of those fellows.

Mama and Papa never took us to church except to be confirmed after baptism, but we learned a lot of the Bible from Papa, in selected bits, and, as I said, we did attend a religion class after school. Here I learned those great ennobling concepts revealed to Joseph Smith: We were with God in a pre-mortal existence. As we are, God once was, as God is now, we may become. There can be eternal progression, but it is earned. The redemptive love of Jesus marks the path, but faith without works is dead.

About the age of ten, in a fit of religious excitement, I decided to read the Bible from beginning to end. Here began my questions. If I were God, raised to the Nth degree in all the positive attributes and virtues, would I condone, let alone command, all those killings?

Having a good grounding in the ways of Loki and Thor and other pagan gods, I could regard a great many of those Old Testament stories as myths. After all, Samson could not have held on to 300 foxes while he set fire to their tails and turned them loose to burn up the corn of the Philistines. Watching one bull tear up a pasture convinced me that Noah would have had a problem getting pairs of all creatures onto a boat. These were surely tall tales like the stories of Paul Bunyan and Jack-the-Giant-Killer.

But what about the stories that seemed to be historical incidents? The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah seems to be supported by archeologists. Surely there must have been ten children below the age of eight who were righteous. Now I concede that maybe the children weren't being counted, but at age ten I had a different perspective. Besides, suppose Abraham had gotten together with Lot who had two daughters with husbands, and maybe they added four righteous servants and all stayed in Sodom, might then the place have been saved? Or, I wondered, was it simply an earthquake that people laid at the foot of God?

Then I came to the sacking of Jericho, killing and burning animals, children, men, and women — except for the harlot and her family. Yes, I know why. The Israelites needed that city out of the way. But does that make it proper to blame the carnage on God? If I were God, I would resent that presumption as much as I would resent the modern armies who claim he is on their side.

Whenever anyone begins to tell the story of Abraham and Isaac as a stirring example of obedience, I have to leave the room. To me it is the most horrify-

ing story in all literature with the exception of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" — another story of sacrificing a human to please God and thereby bring prosperity to the community. If God wanted to know if Abraham would follow orders in all things, could he not look into the heart of the man? Does the story not lead us to see God as a bit of a sadist? I have read several explanations for this story, but common sense tells me God had nothing to do with it.

Reading that lavishly beautiful book of Job, again I pose my usual question, "If I were God, would I put all those troubles on a righteous old man just to win a bet?" If we omit those arguments with the Devil, which some Bible scholars say were not in the original book but were added by some pious theologian, the story stands as a commentary on the greatest mystery of life: God's inequities. God does not explain. He simply reminds Job that the secrets of the universe are known only to Him. He asks: "Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom? . . . Doth the eagle mount up at thy command? . . . Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth . . . [and] the morning stars sang together?" (Job 39:26–27; 38:4, 7) In other words, bear the burdens you were sent to bear; live the life you were sent to live.

Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," suggests that our choice of paths largely determines our soul's development:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; . . .
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference (1963, 429).

But would it? If I had gone to a different school, followed a different career, married a different person, lived in a different country, would it indeed have made all the difference? The differences, I think, would be merely superficial, not essential. In the long run, our soul's growth is measured by how we react to our circumstances. We could change them around in a dozen ways, branch off on any number of paths, and still come out the same way. After all, we have only to learn two lessons, as I recall a wise rabbi once saying: "We need to learn to love God and love our fellow man — all else is commentary."

When I was thirteen, my family moved from Bancroft to the larger town (5000) of Nampa, Idaho. We lived near a church and began attending the services. I advanced quickly. By fifteen I was secretary of the Sunday School and was giving readings in what we called "conjoint," a once monthly Sunday evening meeting where all the auxiliaries took part performing music, poetry, and skits. I also became a Beehive girl. I had by now settled my thoughts about the Bible stories but certain Church teachings posed other dilemmas for me. For example, I was told that only married women would go to the celestial kingdom; the single women would be handmaidens forevermore. Since I had freckles, was skinny, and spent most of my spare time in the astonishing Carnegie library, I thought my chances of marrying were nil. Now was that

any reason to be a handmaiden forevermore? Again I asked myself, would I treat a person that way if I were God? Of course not.

I did not then and have never had any trouble with the different roles of men and women in the Church. If I were God I would send directives exactly as it seems to me he has done.

To the male I would give the priesthood that carries with it 80 percent inventiveness and creativity — the thing that enables him to imagine such useful things as lines down the middle of the highway or a windshield wiper. To the female I would give the ability — 90 percent of her — to nourish, nourish a child within her body, then nourish a family, a nation, and, given the chance, a world. The other 10 percent of her would be creative intuition. Deep within, women know what life is about.

I am afraid I am doing what the pope objected to. When he visited San Francisco during the summer of 1987, he remarked that the Catholic Church was not a cafeteria; his flock could not pick and choose what edicts they would follow. My impertinent reaction to that authoritarian statement was, why couldn't they?

There is a story from the wise men of India:

Once upon a time when God had finished making the world, he wanted to leave behind him for man a piece of his own divinity, a promise to man of what he could become, with effort. What man could find too easily would never be valued, so he ruled out as locations the high mountains, the depths of the earth, the middle of the ocean, "for," he said, "I have given man a brain and he can learn to conquer all those obstacles too easily." Then he smiled, "I'll hide it in the place he will never think to look. I'll hide it deep inside man himself."

Why can't I listen to my own divinity? Even though that singing divinity within me might be so corroded with greed, lust, envy, hate, and other negatives that the music may go unheard for a time, sooner or later Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven, traditionally assumed to be Christ, but who I suspect is the Divinity within us, will chase me "down the nights and down the days" and "down the arches of the years" and catch me up, and I will have to listen.

This is not to say I should not heed the wise counsel and admonitions of those in whom the divinity glows far more brightly than in me. I should attempt to, and I do.

My husband, Samuel W. Taylor, is a writer. (Whoa! I did get married after all, no handmaiden me. And he even likes freckles.) His office is about fifty feet from our house. When I want to toll him in, I turn a handle on a World War II field phone which buzzes on his twin phone. He signals back and heads for the house. He doesn't know what he is coming in for — a telephone call, a visitor, a meal — but he says to himself, "The little woman has a reason for calling me."

When my divine self buzzes me, I hope I will answer its summons as readily, understanding the real meaning of the questions put to me and not be like the little boy, lost in the supermarket, being carried on the shoulders of someone who keeps asking, "Do you see your mother?" and he finally responds with some exasperation, "No. No. I keep seeing my father."

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