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The Logic of Love

Chapter 7: The Danger of Faith Based on Anecdotes

One day Diane asked her mother, “When you prepare roast beef for baking, why do you always cut the ends off of it?”

“Well, that’s how your grandmother taught me to do it. And since hers came out perfect every time, I have always followed her instructions to the letter,” Diane’s mother explained.

Diane went to her grandmother and asked her why she always cut off the ends of the roast beef. Her grandmother responded, “I learned how to make it from your great grandmother, Diane. She taught me when I was just a little girl. People didn’t go to restaurants very often, back then. That’s why daughters took great pride in learning how to cook from their mothers. It was a very special mother-daughter thing to do back then.”

Fortunately, Diane’s great grandmother was still alive. So, she called her great grandmother to ask the reason for cutting off the ends of the roast beef. Her great grandmother answered, “Well, in my day ovens were not nearly so big as what you have today. I had to cut the ends off so that it would fit. Why do you ask, dear? Is there something wrong?”

When I was in college, my friend Danny had a terrible car accident. A drunk driver entered the highway from an exit ramp and plowed into him head on. Fortunately, Danny was wearing his seat belt; it saved his life. Though he has recovered very well from the accident, he did sustain serious injuries. You can be spared the details of those injuries, but he could not be. When I saw him in the intensive care unit shortly after the accident, the reality of it all hit me hard, and it hurt me. Through the suffering that I experienced with Danny, I learned a few things.

First, I learned to wear my seatbelt. (I already knew to not drink and drive. Otherwise, that would have been the first lesson.)

Second, I learned that I was the kind of guy who had to have one of my dearest friends almost killed in a car accident before I would learn to wear my seatbelt. This scared me. It scared me because I knew that I had already had plenty of life experience to bring me to the decision to wear a seatbelt. I realized that I had been slow in learning to see to my own safety. The acceptance of this self-administered critique led to an appreciation of the danger of using anecdotal experience for reaching general conclusions.

In this particular instance the anecdote leads to what I still believe is a good habit. But, the emotional impact of Danny’s accident also reminded me that, even though emotions may at times be a catalyst for making a good choice, they can also cloud judgment. Powerful anecdotes make it all too easy to overinflate the importance of a specific outcome. What if Danny had died with his seatbelt on? Would that experience have caused me to undervalue the use of seatbelts?

What if I made this whole thing up? What if I didn’t? Why should it matter whether the story is true? *Knowing* what actually happened to Danny is not nearly so important as *understanding* what could happen to any of us. Sometimes the important information for making a decision is an awareness of the possibilities and probabilities. The decision to wear a seatbelt should be based on what can generally happen to us in cars, not on what specifically happened to Danny.

Danny's story is a good story for promoting the importance of wearing seatbelts. It happens to be true. However, when it comes to making decisions that are regularly reaffirmed, it is better that we should get the lesson from the more stable foundation of reason. The fickle foundation of anecdote-related emotion can lead to making unwise decisions. I do not mean to discount the value of personal experience. Rather, I wish to emphasize that the use of reason serves us well in reaching decisions that are regularly reaffirmed. By using reason, rather than waiting for experience, we can more quickly enjoy the benefits of embracing good lifestyle choices. Additionally, this approach offers wisdom that can be shared with others more easily because it generalizes, rather than individualizes, experience.

There is no place this principle can be better applied than to the decision that is the primary subject of this book—whether to have faith in God. This is not to suggest that we should be unemotional about the topic of faith, but the decision to have faith in God should not be based on emotion. Faith in God is not something to be fickle about. When chosen, faith is supposed to enjoy a lifetime of reaffirmation. The best hope for a lifetime of faith is to build it on the more solid foundation of reason and life's most universal experiences.

The use of anecdotal experiences for promoting faith in God is a little bit more complicated than an issue like wearing seatbelts. If Danny were ever to say, "Trust me. Seatbelts save lives. I know because a seatbelt saved my life," a reasonable response would be, "It is not that I don't trust you, but this is an issue where we can get statistical information relevant to making a reasoned decision. Even though what you say makes sense, a better source of information for reaching this decision is the available statistics. Therefore, trusting you should not even be an issue. There may be other areas of life where trusting you would be appropriate. This just doesn't happen to be one of them."

A conversation about having faith in God goes down a little differently because we cannot turn to statistics. Instead of statistics, the appropriate resource is one's own inner experience. If I say to someone who does not have faith, "Trust me. God saves lives. I know because God saved my life," a reasonable response would be, "It is not that I don't trust you, but trusting your experience as the basis for my sense of reality is not appropriate. This is even recognized by most of the world's religions inasmuch as they celebrate rituals marking a child's entrance into spiritual adulthood around puberty. The acceptance of personal responsibility for one's faith reflects mature self-empowerment. If I choose faith, it should be an expression of me, of who I am. There may be other areas of life where trusting you would be appropriate. This just doesn't happen to be one of them."

Giving testimonials has proven to be an effective way of winning converts, especially when the testimonial involves an extraordinary event or a claim that a miracle occurred. But the use of such tactics can lead people to think of faith in God as something that is situation-specific. For example, some people say that there are no atheists when the plane is going down. I do not wish to discount the value of turning to God in times of crisis, nor do I wish to take a position on the truth of all the testimonials offered by people over the course of human history. Trying to convince people that they should have faith in God because they should trust the truth of someone's story is not the best approach. It can lead to two mistaken conclusions. The first is that there is no better reason to give for having faith in God. The second is that God's grace is random or, even worse, that God plays favourites.

Faith in God need not be based on anecdotal experiences. When faith is based on a unique experience, it fails to offer a good example of a path that is equally accessible to all. In contrast to this, when the basis for faith is a commitment to love as the highest value, then faith rests on the bedrock of an enduring spiritual value with universal appeal. If faith can be seen as a reasonable extension of love, then there is no need to look for a better reason.

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