
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Doubt

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad to hear about how much you enjoyed being with your family over the Christmas break, and the sense of peace that you felt while talking to them at the dinner table and singing with them in church. I know exactly what you mean when you say that the feeling was almost overwhelming – in a good way.

And, no, I'm not troubled to hear you say that you aren't sure if you believe in God. Doubt rarely undermines faith the way that certainty does.

It might be helpful, though, to wonder out loud about what "God" you are thinking about. Sometimes, when people say "God," they are talking about someone who sounds a little like a magical friend up in the sky, ready to punish those he doesn't like. I don't believe in that "God" either.

Unfortunately, words about God always seem to come up short. I realize that it's not very helpful to hear people like me talk about God as Being, or as our ultimate concern, or as the source and ground of existence. Maybe it's enough for now just to say, as my favorite teacher once did, that God is a power and a presence that we encounter as the Other when we engage the world.

The truth is that faith is something that must be lived before it can be believed.

You can get a sense of this, perhaps, by going back to your experience with your family over Christmas. The feeling you describe of being part of what's happening, of being overwhelmed by it and losing yourself in it, sounds like the kind of thing that convinces many of us that God exists. Living out our faith is our way of taking these moments and making them part of our lives.

It's not easy, of course, but it can change you – in a good way.

As for your doubt, I read a poet once who said that "God calls some people to unbelief so that Faith can take new forms."

So, fear not, you have the rest of your life and maybe more for all of this to make sense to you!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames