

The Location of Uncertainty and the Finding of Peace

If there is any wisdom at all in growing older (my 44th birthday next week is a timely reminder) it involves a recognition that **life is uncertain**.



There is **outward uncertainty**: I cannot control much of what happens to me. There is much about my health, wealth, and wellbeing that is outside of my plans. At some point, we all come to grips with the simple reality that life is not as we imagined it would be. We may paint a picture for the next 10, 20, or however many years we have left, but what will emerge will not be what we think. This uncertainty can create anxiety, but we must face it; it is simply the way things are.

There is **inward uncertainty**: I, *myself*, am not the person I thought I would be. Usually, I am not even the person I want to be right now. I am weaker, wearier, more broken than I imagined I would be. There is more, much more, beyond my understanding and capacity. Yes, my life's experience grows, and there is increasing familiar ground, and I have come to "know myself" more than I did years ago. But I also have come to know that *I* am uncertain, and anything that I have, or have achieved, is grace more than it is deserved reward; I am owed nothing, given much. I cannot guarantee my own growth or stability; I have come to the end of myself too much. This uncertainty can create anxiety, but we must face ourselves; it is simply the way we are.

President Kennedy famously had on his desk a plaque a prayer taken from the words of a poem. It is a timely reminder, life is uncertain:

O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small.

Uncertainty is often where we come undone. When faced with life's uncertainty we shore up our defenses: we seek to protect ourselves and our loved ones. We scramble to control our environment. We take what is precious to us and we place it in the safest pair of hands we know: and in these lonely uncertain days, the safest hands we see are our own. The safest hands we know is the pair attached to our uncertain selves. Our external uncertainty feeds into our internal uncertainty and so it circles and accelerates until we unravel.

We seek to control our uncertainty, and so we come to the end of ourselves.

The same thing happens when it comes to religion. There's a form of populist "faith" that seeks to reduce life's uncertainty by trying to make life more controllable. It is found in different theological colours:

A **legalistic** form of religion seeks to simplify the game of life, and make it winnable. Life's experience is reduced to a set of known rules: criteria for safety, commandments for victory. "Do and don't do this, and you'll go to heaven; mess it up and you won't." It's all on *you*, but life has been made graspable, achievable, controllable. Your hands are safe.

In the image of the little boat on the big sea, it has attempted to make the boat bigger than it is.

A **relativistic** form of religion seeks to simplify the game of life, by making the game go away. Uncertainty is deflected: *you are the only reality, it's everything else that's moving*. You can't lose, because you have already won! If life feels uncertain, then reimagine it on your terms. Explore everything else as mystery, and you will find that you yourself are the certainty. Your hands are safe.

In the image of the little boat on the big sea, it has attempted to reduce the sea to a puddle.

What I see countering this is not religion, but *faith*. I don't mean "faith" in the abstract (like the way people say "he believes in the Christian faith"), but faith in the concrete sense of *trusting*. To have faith in God, is to *trust* him. **To have faith is to trust another pair of hands.** To have faith in God is to trust God's character, God's size, God's intention, God's purpose, God's word, God's present spirit.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35-39

What does faith do? What does trust do? **It allows the uncertainty to remain in ourselves,** and then entrusts ourselves to the safe hands of God. Life is uncertain, but he is not. I am uncertain, but he is not. I will wobble and fail to understand, but he will not. Life will let me down, but he will not. *Nothing* will set separate us from the love of God.

Time and time again, in my life, in the lives of others, and especially in the corporate life of the church, this is the battle we face: the battle between control and faith. **Will we try and seize control, and deflect the uncertainty away;** will we reduce God to something he hasn't said, or pretend he hasn't said anything at all? **Or will we exercise faith, and**

entrust our uncertain selves to our trustworthy Father; will we exercise the humility of relying on him?

In one direction lies the way of striving, where all depends on me. In the other direction lies freedom, freedom to live and move and have our being. In that direction we rest in someone bigger than ourselves. Uncertainty remains, but it is surpassed. In that direction lies peace.

*Thy sea, O God, so great,
My boat so small.
It cannot be that any happy fate
Will me befall
Save as Thy goodness opens paths for me
Through the consuming vastness of the sea.*

*Thy winds, O God, so strong,
So slight my sail.
How could I curb and bit them on the long
And saltry trail,
Unless Thy love were mightier than the wrath
Of all the tempests that beset my path?*

*Thy world, O God, so fierce,
And I so frail.
Yet, though its arrows threaten oft to pierce
My fragile mail,
Cities of refuge rise where dangers cease,
Sweet silences abound, and all is peace.*

– Winfred Ernest Garrison

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