

A Doubting, Questioning Mind

This essay aired as a This I Believe segment circa 1954. Elizabeth Earle was sixteen years old at the time. For more information about Elizabeth and to hear the audio of this essay and an essay she recently wrote as an adult, please visit:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4538100>.

At the age of sixteen, many of my friends have already chosen a religion to follow (usually that of their parents) and are bound to it by many ties. I am still “freelancing” in religion, searching for beliefs to guide me when I am an adult. I fear I shall always be searching, never attaining ultimate satisfaction, for I possess that blessing and curse—a doubting, questioning mind.

At present, my doubting spirit has found comfort in certain ideas, gleaned from books and experience, to form a personal philosophy. I find that this philosophy—a code consisting of a few phrases—supplements, but does not replace, religion.

The one rule that could serve anyone in almost any situation is, “To see what must be done and not to do it, is a crime.” Urged on by this, I volunteer for distasteful tasks or pick up scrap paper from the floor. I am no longer able to ignore duty without feeling guilty. This is “The still, small voice,” to be sure, but sharpened by my own discernment of duty.

“The difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer.” This is the motto of a potential scientist, already struggling to unravel the mysteries of life. It rings with the optimism youth needs in order to stand up against trouble or failure.

Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan minister, resolved never to do anything out of revenge. I am a modern, a member of a church far removed from Puritanism, yet I have accepted this resolution. Since revenge and retaliation seem to have been accepted by nations today, I sometimes have difficulty reconciling my moral convictions with the tangled world being handed down to us by the adults. Apparently what I must do to make life more endurable is to follow my principles, with the hope that enough of this feeling will rub off on my associates to begin a chain reaction.

To a thinking person, such resolutions are very valuable; nevertheless, they often leave a vacuum in the soul. Churches are trying to fill this vacuum, each by its own method. During this year, I have visited churches ranging from orthodoxy to extreme liberalism. In my search for a personal faith, I consider it my duty to expose myself to all forms of religion. Each church has left something within me—either a new concept of God and man, or an understanding and respect for those of other beliefs. I have found such experiences with other religions the best means for freeing myself from prejudices.

Through my visits, the reasoning of fundamentalists has become clearer to me, but I am still unable to accept it. I have a simple faith in the Deity and a hope that my attempts to live a decent life are pleasing to Him. If I were to discover that there is no afterlife, my motive for moral living would not be destroyed. I have enough of the philosopher in me to love righteousness for its own sake.

This is my youthful philosophy, a simple, liberal, and optimistic feeling, though I fear I shall lose some of it as I become more adult. Already, the thought that the traditional thinkers might be right, after all, and I wrong, has made me waver. Still, these are my beliefs at sixteen. If I am mistaken, I am too young to realize my error. Sometimes, in a moment of mental despair, I think of the words, “God loves an honest doubter,” and I am comforted.