



A Boomer Thinks about God

by Jim Krosschell

First, some definitions:

“A Boomer” - I doubt that my parents, bringing three boys into the world in the 1950s, knew that they were contributing to the healthiest, wealthiest, most self-indulgent and individualistic generation in the history of the world. Pete and Kat hoped they were contributing their principles – love of God and country (mostly God) – to the cause of peace on earth; but it didn’t quite work out that way in my family, and my parents must have been bewildered at the devolvement of their principles into my “lifestyle.”

Of the famous American 76 million, I’m concerned here with a narrow cohort: those who were in college in the late 60s and early 70s; those whose politics occupied that space between radical and liberal; those who traversed the 80s and 90s with a tinge of conscience, however small; those who were never quite sure of their standing in the Western tradition; those whose parents didn’t understand but tried not to judge, seldom succeeding, and who loved their children (mostly) anyway; those who were legends in their living rooms. This definition leaves out, I realize, the biggest part of the generation, those who went back to the faith of church and state after however brief a fling with doubt, those who never left, and especially those many members of the second half of the Boom, the so-called Generation Jones, born in the late 50s and early 60s and raised in the full flower of the keep-up-with-your-neighbor dream.

“Thinks about” – A Boomer like me thinks “about” things, i.e., goes around a problem, looks at it from several sides but doesn’t go too far in. He keeps options open. He may be “into” something, which implies a way back out, but not “in” - that’s far too personal and intimate and stationary and restrictive. He doesn’t “believe in” God, for example. These prepositions are important. People whose hopes are hampered by H-bombs and assassinations and meltdowns need to separate their verbs from their objects. I’m certainly not equipped in this discussion to dispense with prepositions entirely. An essay called “A Boomer Feels God” is way out-of-bounds.

“God” – I may wish he were otherwise, Buddha or the Tree of Life, but the deity in question here is Judeo-Christian one, and a Protestant one, and a Calvinist one, usually male. It’s my own cramped tradition, to be sure, but I hasten to say that it’s the foundation of the country as well. America tolerates other religions, knowing they don’t really matter: John Calvin still lies under the floor of all of our boardrooms. Religion and state and business are separate in theory and wedded in practice. As in old Geneva, Protestant Calvinism has proved the best petri dish for our culture.

So: This part-generation, this small wedge of the American pie to which I belong was bred in righteousness, raised in ceremony, and launched into agnosticism. It wasn’t just my own family. Almost everyone I know at least went to church as they grew up: were

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baptized in a white gown of innocence and holy drops (or baths) of water; were instructed by prelate and parent in doctrine and deportment; attended Sunday school and Sunday sermons, catechism and confirmation classes; were anointed as one of the saved in those weird, coming-of-age ceremonies called "Public Profession of Faith" or "Confirmation" in which children of twelve, in the blink of an eye, become believing adults; were hectored in high school by the threat of good deeds. I remember all of this structure but, surprisingly, without particular pain or anger. The shards of my broken faith aren't very sharp. They're just pieces of crushing boredom, empty phrases, meaningless rules, and a little warm guilt on Good Friday. The sharpest were sex-related: the awkward aches, for example, of paying for late Saturday petting in a park by early Sunday praying in a pew. Then at the age of eighteen, finally an adult of sort, I went to college and real life could begin. God didn't take. I left my parents behind in the gloom of church basement socials.

Was it progress or merely an escape? It's tempting to think that my break was only cultural, part of the larger fabric of rebellion against the military-industrial complex and the US Congress and lily-white town burghers, all of whom preached righteousness in consistories and war rooms even as they secretly worshiped money and power, that these were all bogeymen at the same level, casting a huge net of hypocrisy that kept all of us, but youth especially, from our true potential. It seemed that way then. We were equal-opportunity rejecters. Rules were made by hypocrites.

My early religious life was more intense than most, to be sure. God was in my face from the day I was born (exactly nine months after my parents were married, by the way), and not just trumpeting his standard sacraments of baptism, catechism, profession of faith, and communion. My family went to church twice every Sunday, plus all the religious holidays and the occasional Wednesday night prayer service. I went to Christian schools all the way through college, and God washed through the entire curricula, little lapping waves in math, major tides in Bible classes and chapel. My father prayed before and after every dinner, thanking God for bounties, asking forgiveness for sins, etc., and got a Bible reading in as well while the mashed potatoes cooled. We went to Daily Vacation Bible School for two weeks in the summer. I was instructed how to pray: on my knees at the side of the bed, for at least two minutes. Once a year the minister and an elder or two from the consistory visited our house ("huis bezoek," in the Dutch phrase) to examine the faith of each professing family member. (Younger ones in pajamas were introduced, eyed, then scooted away to bed.) My sex education (approximately as detailed as "the man puts his penis into the woman") happened because I got a boner in church and my mother made my father finally stop putting off "the talk." I wrote a Jesus-fawning essay for the national church organ *The Banner* as late as age 16. My father was my principal all the way through high school.

And the doctrine I was taught was pretty severe. We had to memorize the Heidelberg Catechism, no walk in the park that, but Calvinism itself is worse. Some semi-poetic Dutchman summarized Calvin's teachings in the acronym TULIP. Warning: Turbulence ahead. Buckle your seat belt.

Total Inherited Depravity. All humans have inherited Adam's sin. Not only that, but we also enter the world totally depraved.

Unconditional Election. Since we're totally depraved when we're born, it is impossible for us to choose to serve God. Therefore, God must arbitrarily choose who will be saved.

Limited Atonement. Since God arbitrarily chooses those who will be saved, Jesus died for those individuals only.

Irresistible Grace. God's chosen have no choice or participation in their salvation. The Holy Spirit overwhelms them, even against their own will.

Perseverance of the Saints. Since people initially have no say or participation in the procuring of salvation, those whom God has called will continue in faith for the remainder of their lives.

Did you locate your barf bag yet?

TULIP is the theological basis for Calvinism, but predestination, that infamous conundrum, the one that turns your brain to mush and ties your stomach in knots and heaves, summarizes the implications for daily life. If God is the only answer, then God must know and control everything, in advance. You believe in God, therefore you are saved by faith and are among the elect, that finite number of people chosen by God in advance to share eternal life. But you, being merely mortal and full of sin, cannot know this for certain; besides, you are allowed to have free will. So you have to live your life *as if you could be saved by good works*. But of course, it doesn't matter, since you have been damned or saved long before you were born. You just have to feel saved.

Countless Christian commentators, believers, and apologists have tried to downplay this doctrine. But it lives on, in spite of its grandly illogical corollary argument that if God controls all, he must therefore be the author of sin, in spite of the fact that even Calvin acknowledged that beyond predestination, God is utterly incomprehensible. It lives on because it has found a powerful home in America, in hearts and wallets. It's a most excellent foundation for capitalism, which of course focuses on money-grubbing disguised as good works, on testifying to freewill and low taxes, on the certainty that no matter what you do, in Iraq or in bed, you are justified and saved

Carry this training forward into a life. In my teenage years I could easily have believed that this contradictory mess was not something to be taken seriously or wrestled with, but merely was a social construct, one that would be strong and true my whole life, a cocoon for births, weddings and deaths, safe routines of Bible classes in school and catechism classes on Saturday and two rounds of church on Sunday, especially after profession of faith, standing in your suit and clip-on tie before the whole congregation, as a first initiation into the adult world, when you could at last take communion and resolve in the body and blood of Christ your nagging tension between freedom and ritual, money and charity, sex and love. One didn't really

have to believe in God. It was taken care of.

But I took it seriously, and logically, and naturally rejected it. The tangle of doctrine went the way of the brush cut, the sanctity of marriage, and the military draft.

Forty years later, this particular escapee from the plains of righteousness remains impressed with Calvinism for its excellent fit with hypocrisy and patriotism. If you're persuaded that you've been elected, then almost anything goes in your personal, professional, or political life. It explains most American sins, from greed and pride to manifest destiny and policeman of the world. La Rochefoucauld said that hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue. In other words, hypocrisy is the great leveler, making my rejection of religious belief (or bourgeois capitalism, or heterosexuality, or whatever my cohort was decrying) as easy as the rejection of Vietnam policy.

Or is it as easy? The rules for my flavor of Boomers work well enough in times of riches. We assume that our green ways, our democratic principles, our passions ("lifestyle!") are enough in themselves and will carry through until the end. Our lives will be long. There will be time to overcome setbacks and disappointments, and if we don't find fulfillment in our work or family or beliefs, then surely we'll find it in retirement, in some preposterously golden blooming of golf and horticulture, travel and grandkids. Boomers don't go back; we are always pushing for the future, for the new. We can do anything we put our minds to, we will transcend our culture and our biology and make our marks somewhere (oat cell carcinoma, Indian motorcycles, Civil War re-enactment, journal publishing), we changed the world once and can do it again. We seem especially afflicted with mobility and independence. We want to be prisoners of no church or state or philosophy. We think we are still the reformers of yore and the rebels of lore, even as we mow our lawns and hoard our IRAs. Everything is still possible.

But, being spread so thin, and considering all things, we run the risk of nothing being suitable. Enthusiasms fade and things go wrong, the world hardens into fundamentalism even as it seems to be falling apart, and sometimes, when my knees ache, my book doesn't get published, my children leave, my parents die, I can't help but conclude that we've reached the end of possibilities. Life at those moments seems a little empty. What's left as I age?

Note at this point that I've successfully put off actually discussing God, i.e., asking the Big Question. It's much easier to think about religions.

Well, then....I had my epiphany in college, a dark sleepless night in which my mind finally caught up to what my body was saying, that these systems of belief were stultifying, that I had to get them out of my life. But I never got around to the next step: denying the existence of God. To me it was bad enough the way we humans thought about him, the crap that was done in his name, the fawning, hypocritical, sycophantic certainties. It would have been easier, surely, to think of him as some kind of sick slumlord, haul him into court, and sentence him to die. But logically, there might very well be Something Out There, as billions believe, maybe the author of evil and

destruction, maybe the Forgiving Father. I didn't know and didn't choose: I just denied he had anything to do with me.

Am I now re-considering agnosticism? No, and yes.

No, because nothing will ever convince me that church service and burial service and any other God services are anything more than the enslavement from which the word "service" derives, a way for some people to work out the essential unknowable-ness of the world, the lip service of heaven, if you will, against the fear and trembling of hell. Religion of any kind is a book of bile and it doesn't matter if there's an author. We have sufficient trouble with the proclamations to worry about the King.

Yes, because my very certainty, that religion is the root of all evil, could be the product of my upbringing and culture and age and therefore has little to do with the existence or non-existence of God. My Boomer-ness may be blinding me. What if he does exist? Other people, like radical Muslims and right-wing commentators and nice people in Minneapolis, seem certain of their beliefs. Not having their inspiration, nevertheless I might go so far as to say that someday, when Boomer-itis is cured, say, I might think differently. I might dispense with the prepositions.

To bridge the predestination gap John Calvin tortured himself, literally. He had no interest in things of the body and fasted regularly for the sake of purifying his mind and intensifying his prose, and therefore, of course, he suffered throughout his life from migraine, kidney stones, pleurisy, consumption, gout, and hemorrhoids. Even the great novelist Marilynne Robinson, in the haunting, aching prose she uses to defend Calvinism in *The Death of Adam*, has no recourse but to say that from an early age she was "aware to the point of alarm of a vast energy of intention, all around me." She had the emotional knowledge of God.

This is the sticking point. On my infrequent trips to Cleveland to visit my mother, we'll go down from her apartment to the benches by the water, where the big lake and its far, invisible, illimitable shore seem to provoke her version of "the talk." Long past the point of anger, my father having died, we gently argue, and when she finally says, bravely, probing the ultimate question and dreading the answer, that I must never have felt the power of the spirit, I have to agree. This lack of emotion, this lack of calling and feeling, seems inexpressibly sad to her, as if in this son, and her others as well, Grace has proved to be resistible.

Fortunately, if you haven't been touched by the love of God, then it's likely you won't have the hatred of God. This is hard to accomplish when a phone call announces that a dear friend has been diagnosed with a malignant glioblastoma in his brain. Evil's personal approach does make me wish sometimes that there's a God to curse. I have a moment or a night of despair but it can only be directed against some vast injustice. Sorry, God, nothing personal.

The answer, if there is one, when things go wrong, or (I really should say) when things go right, cannot be religious but spiritual. It's

churlish to deny that spirits live in human song and loon calls and the perfect shape of a pointed fir. There's evidence of inspiration and love even in the monstrosities of their opposites. And yet, agnostic for the nonce, I should qualify that by saying there's Spiritual, and there's spiritual. I posit that it's possible, even probable, that a supreme being exists, but that's not what's important. Clearly, if it does exist, it is disinterested in the world, and so it's the qualities traditionally associated with such a being, kindness and hope, for example, that exist and form the intentional, universal prerequisites of being human. At the same time I try to allow for the narrow experience of this American culture, for worldwide hate and cynicism, not to mention for earthquakes and tsunamis. There's a reason we call it human "nature." We seem to have deep-seated flaws in our crust.

I'm trying not to wimp out about this. To fall back on Spiritualism in the face of despair is an old trick, the transcendentalism of the Concord crowd, the bleary madness of Yeats' old age, the borrowed sub-continental mysticism of the 60s all substituting one system for another. If I were forced to choose something, I'd say that the Native Americans had it right, belonging to Nature and believing in Spirit while making up distinctly human stories to explain them. Unfortunately, that's a tradition ruined by several centuries of European logic. Everything else rings hollow.

Maybe all I can say at this time is that my own feelings of awe (the point of religion, after all) come from watching the moonrise over Penobscot Bay, or trading stares with a deer standing stock-still on a lane in the woods. And I pray that I can translate awe into things that Boomers are not famous for, humility and balance and the poetic connection of body with mind, a kind of bastard Calvinism in which I act as *if there were a God*. I'd even like to think that such words and deeds will prove strong enough to overcome any panicky re-consideration on the eve of my death.

Jim Krosschell worked in science publishing for 30 years, starting as a 29-year-old production assistant, avoiding the real world until then by grad school, Peace Corps, travel and TESOL teaching. He has mostly retired now, writing essays and a blog [One Man's Maine](#) and dividing his time between Newton, MA and Owls Head, ME. His essays are published in *Louisville Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Contrary*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *The Common*, and many others. His book [Saving Maine](#) is available online.

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