

ONE

The great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov once said, “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.”

If you will keep that in mind for a moment, I will relate a very old story:

There once lived a beautiful young girl, one of three sisters, named Psyche. This young girl was so beautiful, she caught the jealous attention of Aphrodite, goddess of love, who was afraid Psyche was just a little TOO beautiful.

Aphrodite called on her son, named Eros (the Romans called him Cupid), to put a spell on Psyche, and Eros, who as you know always carried a quiver of arrows, mixed two potions as he always did, and went to visit Psyche.

Eros found the sleeping Psyche and sprinkled one of the potions on her, the one his mother wished him to use, a potion which would make all potential spouses loath her. As Eros turned to leave Psyche’s bedroom, one of his arrows slipped from its quiver and struck Psyche, startling her awake. She fell instantly in love with Eros.

Eros was so flustered about what had happened that, in his rush to grab his arrow, he pricked himself on it, and fell instantly, hopelessly in love with Psyche. Feeling guilty about having followed his mother’s orders, Eros anointed Psyche with the other potion he carried, one that granted life-long happiness.

Sure enough, no one would marry Psyche, and, while Psyche cared not a whit and felt completely content, her worried parents insisted that she consult an oracle. The oracle said that no mortal would ever marry her, but that there was one hope—a mysterious creature who lived at the top of the tallest mountain. He would marry Psyche.

And so, because her parents wanted it so badly, Psyche climbed the mountain. And what did she find there but a magnificent palace. And she felt a presence there, and it said, “My dear Psyche, I will love you forever. But I will only come to you in the darkness, and you must never, ever look upon my face.”

(As you might suspect, the mystery man was in fact the great god Eros.)

Psyche and her mysterious lover lived in complete contentment in the beautiful palace, until one day Psyche’s two sisters came for a visit. When they saw the beautiful palace, and when they saw how radiant and happy their sister was, instead of sharing her joy, the sisters felt jealous. And they taunted her: “You mean you’ve never SEEN this mystery man? What if he’s a MONSTER? You don’t want to be living with a monster, do you? I’ll bet he has some pretty disturbing plans in mind for you!”

Well, Psyche grew quite concerned, and consulted her sisters on the best course of action. “Put a lamp by the bedside,” they counseled, “and when he is fast asleep, light the lamp and take a look to see just what he is.”

That night Psyche followed the advice of her sisters. When her lover was fast asleep, she lit the lamp and looked into his face—and what should she see but the most beautiful of the gods, Eros himself. But at that moment Eros started awake, and seeing what Psyche had done, he dashed for the window and flew away.

And just as suddenly, the palace . . . disappeared.

“Psyche” means “breath” or “animating force” in Greek, and came to designate the term that in English we call “soul,” a word derived from Old English and etymologically tied to the word for “sea.” It appears that when Christian missionaries began talking about the psyche in extreme Northern Europe, people there translated it as “sawol,” because they believed the dead lived on forever in the sea.

Notice that it is very easy to attack ideas about “the soul,” even to deny its existence, when the word comes fraught with all its clichés. It isn’t quite so easy to argue there is no such thing as an animating force in us, a breath—anyone who has been with the dying knows that moment when the animating force goes away.

“Psyche” took on even more baggage in the early Twentieth Century when the fledgling field of psychology got ahold of it. But I would like this morning to bracket the word, to wash off some of the barnacles that have stuck to it, and go back to the Greek story.

Back to the story of a young person who is worried about finding a way into her society, worried about how to conform to the values and wishes of her parents, which is what marriage meant to the Greeks of that time. Psyche is just trying to do what she’s SUPPOSED to do. She has no idea that her beauty, her mere being as she is, irritates one of the gods. She can’t help it. She isn’t trying to be threatening to the goddess of love and beauty. She is merely . . . being. It is through the clumsiness of a god that Psyche receives her vision of perfection for a mate. When Psyche fails to conform to her society’s dictates, she consults a religious figure, the oracle, and she does what the oracle says. Tragically, she also allows others to influence her, with extreme consequences: She loses it all.

It isn’t difficult to see why psychologists have gone to town on this myth. All of us have gone through what Psyche experiences. All of us have been in an Eden until a subtle snake came along to ask us a few questions. . .

TWO

Psychologists in the Twentieth Century did not spend a great deal of time talking about the gods or potions. After all, it's pretty clear that the human psyche can get herself into lots of trouble, without divine intervention. We have images of the ideal, how we want things to be, and we—unlike the Psyche of the myth—are discontent when reality doesn't meet our expectations. And a little thing like curiosity can destroy our happiness. The Greeks also gave us the story of Oedipus, after all—a person who just could not leave well-enough alone. There are things, the Greeks thought, that we REALLY don't want to know.

On the other hand, also in the Greek islands at the time these myths were told, lived people calling themselves “physikoi.” In their conviction that everything has a demonstrable, physical, explanation, they insisted that no knowledge is forbidden. This is the tradition of philosophy, reason, and scientific inquiry. It is the tradition that would object to my solution of the chicken and egg problem that I demonstrated earlier. Unfortunately, as Isaac Asimov pointed out, “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.”

If you will, please hold these two ideas in your mind for awhile.

The scientific tradition has led to the discovery of a gene, VMAT2 (Vesicular Monoamine Transporter 2), which geneticist Dean Hamer has named the “God Gene.” If Hamer is correct, the human spiritual impulse is preferred by natural selection because of its tendency to give us hope and get us outside our own heads and into community. Now, I don't claim to be a geneticist. I don't understand that field any better than I comprehend the difference between ninety-nine billion and nine-hundred-ninety-nine billion. Yet, for me discoveries such as this deepen my sense of awe at the mystery and beauty of our existence.

I suspect the term “god gene” came from the book's marketing department. Clearly the brain's chemical rewards for altruistic action do not prove the existence of God. Yet tendencies toward altruism and cooperation clearly do have survival value. So do our capacities to see patterns and our propensity toward hope—or, you can call it “faith,” if you will. These too, I think, are religious values based in evolution. After all, when the Big Bad Wolf comes and blows your straw house down, it is helpful both to see that it may be the nature of Big Bad Wolves to blow houses down, and therefore a stronger house is necessary, and it is also useful—rather than despairing over the destruction of your beautiful straw house—to have the hope provided by the idea that perhaps a Higher Being had this disaster in a larger plan, and that it is this Deity's will that you rebuild your house, perhaps out of better stuff. These propensities add survival value, just as does the opportunity to run down the road to your brother pig's brick house.

No, our brain structure does not prove the existence of a Higher Power, but it does show that those impulses we often shunt off and bracket off with the descriptor “religious” are our essence. They are the treasure of our human story and the mechanism by which we negotiate survival and flourishing. If there is a god, I believe god must be in THESE details. I

emphatically reject any notion of god that requires us to steal or hate or kill. But I will joyously sign onto any program that helps us empathize, protect, and love.

I'm agnostic—I don't know if there is a god or not. I'm still waiting for the evidence. I do know, however, that I do not believe in a god who merely supports my prejudices.

THREE

The story of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee illustrates these religious values we have inherited from the long human struggle for existence. Martha Sharp and her husband the Reverend Waitstill Sharp helped found the Unitarian Service Committee during the Second World War. On their first trip to Europe they beat the Nazis to Prague, Czechoslovakia by one month. There they helped Europe's growing refugee population. For that, they got on the Gestapo's Most Wanted List, and they had to flee back to the United States. Self-preservation definitely argued against going back to Europe. But, undeterred by their Most Wanted status, Martha Sharp and Reverend Sharp went to occupied France, where they helped hundreds of people escape. Martha Sharp was particularly adept at distracting Nazi attention as people crossed borders with falsified documents. Documents that were quite clearly fake. Reverend and Mrs. Sharp are two of only three US citizens to be designated "Righteous Among Nations" for saving people from the Nazi Holocaust.

Altruism. The god gene. The psyche, the soul. The limbic system. Faith and hope.

They risked their lives because they saw that as the right thing to do, despite personal danger. Empathy and community.

As many of you know, the flaming chalice, symbol of Unitarian Universalism, originated as a symbol used by the Unitarian Service Committee. The original chalice was drawn by an Austrian refugee, Hans Deutsch, a man in mortal danger for drawing un-flattering cartoons of Adolf Hitler. No, drawing cartoons or designing a logo for the USC was not going to destroy Nazism, but Hans Deutsch risked his life to do the right thing as he saw it. We can say of these brave people that their limbic systems rewarded them for altruistic and cooperative behavior. Or we can say they committed themselves to a higher purpose. However we explain their actions, I hope you agree that those actions were laudatory. And tales of inspiration for us, on our own religious journeys.

CONCLUSION

Isaac Asimov said, "The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom." Let's consider the end of Psyche's story:

Psyche was devastated at the loss of Eros. So, she prayed at the temple of Aphrodite and said she would do anything, anything, to get Aphrodite to forgive her. And so Aphrodite assigned Psyche three tasks.

The first task was separating a barn full of grain: barley from wheat, rye from oats. Billions and billions of kernels. Aphrodite knew Psyche could not accomplish the task, and Psyche despaired, but Eros intervened and ants came and did the work. They helped because they knew that Psyche meant well.

Aphrodite was furious as she assigned Psyche yet another task—bringing back a handful of the Golden Fleece. These sheep were not like normal sheep—they were very violent, and Psyche was afraid, but the shepherd had pity on Psyche and advised her to wait until the sheep slept in the noon day sun. And this worked. The shepherd helped because he knew that Psyche meant well.

Aphrodite was furious and assigned a truly impossible task: bring back a cup of water from the River Styx, the great river of death. Psyche walked to the river, and peered out on the violent water, and despaired. But an eagle saw her and had pity and took the cup and flew high up to a water fall and filled the cup, bringing it back to Psyche. The eagle helped because she knew that Psyche meant well.

Aphrodite was furious, because she knew that Psyche could not have done these tasks alone. “One final task, and all will be forgiven,” Aphrodite said. “You will need some makeup for the wedding, when you marry my son. Go to Persephone, wife of Hades, and ask for some.”

Psyche, despite her terror, trudged deep into Hades, and a surprised Persephone, remembering her own daughter, handed Psyche a box. “Here, child,” she said, “take this. But whatever you do. . .do not look inside.” Persephone helped because she knew Psyche meant well.

Psyche trudged back through the depths of Hades, but as she walked, with each step, her curiosity grew stronger, and stronger, and stronger, and, finally, she could resist no more. Psyche opened the box. Inside was only darkness. The darkest sort of darkness. And Psyche slipped into the deep sleep of death.

Eros saw what had happened and rushed to his mother. “You must, you must save by poor Psyche,” Eros said. “And if you don’t, I will never go to earth again; I will never shoot another of my arrows. And the human race will never feel passion and no more children will be born and soon there will be no one left on earth to worship you, mother. What will you do with yourself then?”

Aphrodite could see that Eros meant business. So, exasperated, she sent for a cup of Ambrosia, drink of the immortals, and sent the cup to Psyche, who awoke to immortality. And mighty Zeus united the couple in marriage there and then. And Eros and Psyche lived forever in bliss. And they had a daughter they named Voluptua, which in English, means pleasure.

And so the human essence, the soul, the psyche, is immortal, despite the jealousy of the gods, because we have love.

However we tell that story—the poets or the physikoi, in faith or skepticism, in the way of myth or the way of reason, the story is about reaching out. May we find both the knowledge and the wisdom to do that.