

A Rationalist Confronts Magic

UAC

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First, let me say that I have been considering this topic for several years, probably since 2002. Therefore, I want to thank you for the opportunity to organize my thoughts a bit in order to present them, hopefully understandably.

Next, I had better let you know who is telling you this so you might appreciate the magnitude of the revelations, as they were.

I began my association with Unitarian Universalist churches in the middle 70's, when I was in my early 30's, at the suggestion of my staunchly Methodist mother who just wanted me to attach to something. Prior to that, I had been stateless, as far as churches are concerned, since about 1969. However, until I was in my early 20's, you could justifiably describe me as strongly Christian in my religious orientation; right up until encountering the Scottish philosopher David Hume and his treatise dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.

Oops.

My apple cart was severely upended. I was religiously stateless until around 1975, when I joined the UUA. But, even with that affiliation I did not solidify a religious or Life philosophy, if I have now. Today, I suspect you could accurately describe me as a born again rationalist/humanist/Buddhist. I put my trust in our ability to come to reasonable conclusions about Life's mysteries through the enlightening processes of science, most often in cooperation with others. Doubt and uncertainty, when it comes to unresolved mysteries are requirements of Life; to be lived with. Magic is not an option. The trick, often, is to have sufficient patience to live with doubt. I agree with the

Dalai Lama who said that whenever there is a conflict between science and religion, you have to go with science.

Now, for the rest of the story.

Most of you know that Sharon and I and our kids spent two and a half years in Cambodia prior to settling in New Zealand. In our family, I suspect Sharon is the most sensitive to the suffering of others and has a need, a compulsion, to try and make it better. Our job in Cambodia was to use our physiotherapy skills (Sharon was a qualified physio before she became a midwife) assisting the field workers in a Quaker sponsored community-based rehabilitation project. Most days we would accompany the workers, Sharon going one way and I another; and each day Sharon came home crying. The magnitude of the societal problems in Cambodia is almost impossible to effectively communicate to the uninitiated, but we dealt with it daily. The most common refrain from Sharon was, "Dave, there are so many problems and they are so bad, how in the world will we make any difference?" Then she would cry some more. She was miserable, and I wasn't in great shape myself. My sensitivities did have an advantage because I had worked in 3rd world countries before. Sharon hadn't.

Then, one day, she was distraught when she came home. We went to our regular evening outing at the Melting Pot, a backpacker hostelry in Sihanoukville, for dinner that night and she poured her heart out about the situation she came across that day, a man with a broken leg, which had been untreated for 2 years, unable to walk or support his family of 7 children and wife. Sharon had brought him from his village to the local rehabilitation center, but was rebuffed, by a very nice Cambodian fellow whom we liked a lot, because the center could not take a man with a broken leg for treatment. If he had been a woman or a child the center could have helped. His leg needed to be amputated below the knee because the lower portion was withered and non functional. If the man had already had an amputation, the center could take him, but not

with a broken leg. Side bar --- there are literally thousands of NGOs in Cambodia, providing 50% of the country's public services to the population, and each has rules to live by. That creates a safety net with holes big enough for many, many people to fall through. This man and his family fell through. Sharon discovered that the local orthopaedic specialist would do the amputation in his private clinic for \$150 (USD). We didn't have it, living on subsistence wages. We were stuck, the man and his family was living in a house with 3 walls and half a roof, no toilet, no kitchen, no work, no future, 7 kids. Sharon was beside herself with grief and poured it out at the dinner table.

Toward the end of her exasperated tearful discourse, a German fellow, named Rudy, introduced himself saying he had overheard Sharon's agony. He said that he was a health care professional himself (an ER nurse in Germany), in Cambodia on holiday, and then put \$25 on the table saying he was not sure if that could help but he felt the need to do something.

We could not believe it. I think the Kiwi term is gobsmacked, and we stuttered our thanks and sat there looking at one another for a while. Then we got up, put Rudy's money in a hat (literally), went around the restaurant explaining the situation and when we left we had \$40. That was a Friday, at the end of December, 2000, and by the end of the day the following Tuesday we had \$200. To complete this story, the man got his amputation through other resources; so, because of the generosity of others we were able to help him repair his house, obtain a new fishing boat (he was a fisherman at the time of the accident that had broken his leg), put a kitchen on his house, and after his amputation he attended the local rehabilitation center where they made him an appropriate prosthesis and attended to his rehabilitation. We have, somewhere, a picture of him standing in the doorway of our office, on 2 legs, after discharge from the rehabilitation facility.

It felt so good, and it, and a Buddhist parable, taught us a huge lesson in Life. The parable is of the ancient, wise monk and his assistant on a storm ravaged beach looking at the devastation. There are thousands of starfish squirming on the beach, having been washed up and left high and dry by the storm waves. The monk immediately bends over and with great difficulty, picks up a squirming starfish, trundles slowly over to the water and tosses it in, turning to repeat the process. The assistant can't believe what he is seeing and earnestly asks the monk what he is doing, stating that he can't possibly make any difference with so many starfish washed up on the shore. The monk simply bends over, ever so slowly, picks up another one, walks to the water and says, "It makes a difference to this one", and tosses it in. The parable, and the outcome from our spontaneous intervention, got us looking at trees instead of forests. We started on a 2 year odyssey we called the Starfish Project. Our rules were simple: help whomever needed it but verify the need, require the recipients' participation in some fashion, each project is a 1 off - no ongoing support, all of the donated money goes to the project, if there is no money for the project we can't do it, be ready to fold the Starfish Project up whenever we are finished.

Now we get to the magic part. The emphasis of the Starfish Project was to assist people for whom there is no other assistance available, which means we did all kinds of things, from sending kids to school, buying school uniforms or materials, to building dwellings for families to live in. We used the travelling staff to vet the people asking for help since they knew the language and the territory, and Sharon and I scrounged for donations toward the projects. We talked to backpackers travelling through, sometimes suggesting they come with us to the villages for a peek at the real Cambodia and requested a \$5 donation to Starfish for their ride. Most gave much more than the \$5, most said it was the high point of their travels, all of the money donated went to whatever project had been agreed upon, and since we were going out to the

villages anyway, there were no additional costs associated with the project. Win, win, win, win.

We have a friend, Deirdre O'Shea, who was one of these backpackers, who came, took a ride with us, went back to the States, sold her car, sublet her NY flat, brought her assets back to Cambodia and started the Starfish Bakery making western baked goods. There was no western bakery in our tourist town at the time. She modelled her bakery on our rehabilitation project by hiring and training disabled Cambodian women to bake. Our project had disabled women who were trained staff to do community based rehabilitation work. FYI, women are low on the Cambodian social scale, and women with disabilities are even lower. So, for a disabled Cambodian woman to have a job is extraordinary in the extreme. The bakery became the focal point of Starfish Project work; entertaining western travellers, organizing our impromptu tours, receiving donations. As a matter of fact, Deirdre continued with the project after we left. During the 2 years Sharon and I were directly involved with the Starfish Project, we received and distributed over \$35,000 in donations for projects. It was the most fun I have had in a long time. My Cambodian work was the best job I have ever had, largely because of Starfish.

Now, here is the slightly spine chilling aspect of this whole story. In our 2 years with Starfish, and the couple of years that Deirdre subsequently managed the project, whenever there was an approved project, the money was there to support it. Many, many times when we would agree to help someone with a difficulty, and I can give you example after example at another time, the money was there. This is all donated money from travellers passing through. The recipients are people most often in desperate need. Often, we would agree to help without the money ready to accomplish the project. A few times, the deadline for getting something done would arrive, and on that day, someone walks into the bakery and plunks down the cash. It happened enough times to give me goose bumps. We never had a project that went unfunded. Those of

you who have been involved with the latest project, Yav's house, can begin to appreciate what I am saying because all the money has arrived, plus \$15. Out of the hundreds of funded Starfish projects in our 2 years we had 2 projects fail their objectives. The success rate was phenomenal. And, all got funded, to the point that the regularity of the rescue events allowed me, Sharon, and Deirdre to come to rely on it. Our intention was pure, the money never went anywhere other than to support someone in desperate need, and it always showed up. It was magic. It still gives me goose bumps. It is a mystery. I love it.

Amen