

Faith, Hope,
and a bird
called George

A Spiritual Fable

SAMPLE

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and a Bird Called
George

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SAMPLE

Prologue

My husband died fifteen years ago. Our house was too big for me on my own, so with the help of my five children I took up residence eight years later in the retirement community where I now live.

It has been a good move for me. I must say, though, that I had thought the “retirement” part would mean a far more leisurely pace of life. I have discovered it really means involvement in trips, social events, games, hobbies, and a host of other activities.

Two activities stand out for me: First, visiting speakers who expand our knowledge on a wide range of topics. Second, computer classes that have introduced me to the Internet and e-mail. What a world of learning this has opened up for me.

I found it quite extraordinary, in what I considered to be the last cycle of my life, that I was

learning more about life and about the world than I could ever have imagined.

Little did I dream that four years ago, events would take my learning even further, beyond anything I might have had in mind.

In the community we have small groups in which we meet and share whatever we would like to share about life, past and present. Normally I would have no hesitation about sharing something new I had learned, but what began four years ago I have kept to myself, since no one would have believed me. In fact, my friends here would have thought I had lost my mind, because the learning came through conversations with Faith and George.

Everyone knew Faith was my cat and George my parrot.

Oh, yes, I am certain we did converse. But when you think about it, it's not so strange, is it? Many people talk to their pets and many people even think their pet is like a guardian angel or a special companion in life for them. And parrots do talk.

I named my cat Faith simply because “faith” and “hope” go together, and I’ve carried my name, Hope, through seventy-nine years of life.

George? Well, that’s quite different. George was owned by a Catholic priest for many years. When the priest died, I was asked to care for his parrot. I named him after a clergyman I knew for many years whose name was George. That particular George was fond of quoting authoritative sources, much like a parrot, so when I received the bird to go with my cat, “George” he became.

It was Faith who started our evening conversations. Well, at least it was Faith who started to respond to me first. I should mention that I had talked to Faith and George about many things over the years, just sounding off—you know how it is when you are alone at home and you need someone to talk to, someone to listen. It was quite a shock, though, I tell you, the first time Faith answered me. I can remember the occasion very clearly. It was night time, long after I should have been in bed. I was worrying about a close friend of mine...

In the beginning...

I had received a call early that evening from a dear lifelong friend, Jack Robinson. Jack's wife, Elsie, and I had gone to school together from kindergarten through the end of high school. I remember so fondly and vividly the excitement of the post-school years, when Elsie and I continued to share our hopes and dreams. We were probably most excited when each of us fell in love the first time... and the second...and the third. Can anything in life be more precious than having a friend with whom you can share the deepest joys and hopes and the pains of your heart? Elsie became more than a close friend. She was life companion, lifeline, anchor, inspirer, and Rock of Gibraltar all my life.

Jack called to tell me that Elsie had pancreatic cancer, and in all likelihood had twelve months or so to live.

You know in your heart these calls are going to come. You don't get to be in your late seventies without experiencing quite a number of such calls. But Elsie? And this news was so unexpected.

That's why I was up late that night, way past my usual bedtime. Memories of the joyful and tough times Elsie and I had shared captivated my attention and made the minutes and the hours speed by. All the while Faith was on my lap and I was gently stroking her. George sat silently, waiting, I guess, for me to say "good night" and put the hood over his cage.

Faith would have been accustomed to me giving voice to my thoughts as I sat with her each evening. She would have heard my reactions to news items on the television, would have been told to whom I was speaking on the telephone and what the call was about, would know what I was planning to do the next day, or what we were about to watch on television or listen to on the radio.

Nightly she would have heard me say to her and George, “OK, you two, time to close the eyes and have a good night’s sleep.”

This night I told her about the phone call. As we sat together in the hours that followed and I recalled life shared with Elsie, I must have muttered, “Oh, dear!” many times. Eventually my thoughts and emotions welled up into a sobbing exclamation.

“Faith, it’s just not fair. I just cannot understand how such a good, loving woman who put her faith in God has to die this way. Elsie deserves better from God than this.”

That’s when Faith first spoke to me.

I know I was in a state of shock and distress. I also know people would have said—if I had told them—that I must be losing my mind if I really believed my cat spoke to me. However, what began that night was as amazing, and as real, and most of all, as enlightening, as any spiritual experience could be.

Faith asked, “God? Who is God?” She asked this like someone would ask, “John? Who is John?”

Trying to explain God to anyone is difficult enough, but you might imagine the degree of difficulty when your mind is reeling and you find yourself responding to your cat.

Struggling for words, I said, “God is not someone. God is, um...God is...well, God *is* someone. But God is not a human person. Um...God is like a spirit. You cannot see God. He made everything that exists.”

“So what has God got to do with Elsie being sick?” asked Faith.

I was tempted to say that God is in control of everything, but something made me pause. I did not want to suggest we are just pawns in God’s hands.

“Well, everything is in God’s care. We call it ‘providence.’ It means that God is caring and knows better than we do what is good for us and that whatever happens in life is for our ultimate good.”

“Even pain and sickness?” asked Faith, in a tone clearly indicating this was a bit hard to believe.

“Well, yes...it has to be, since God...um...since God permits everything to happen.”

It was then that the night's second surprise was sprung on me. George spoke.

Now, George didn't hesitate the way I had. No, George stuck his chest out like he'd been waiting all his life for this moment. George had the answers.

"It's like this," he said with absolute certainty, "way, way back when God made the first humans, everything was peaceful and there was no sickness and no death. But the first humans thought they were better than God and disobeyed him, so God punished them with the loss of peace and health. Therefore sickness and death are not God's fault. They are the fault of human beings."

I was so proud of George that it overcame the wonder of hearing him speak. George had obviously heard people with some knowledge and authority speaking on this topic.

Faith, however, looked puzzled.

"George, this God character...I'm confused. Hope says he's caring and arranges everything for people's good. But you're saying he also gets upset and punishes people if they disobey him. Does God

have emotions and changes of mind and mood the way Hope does?”

I didn't much like the idea of my emotional ups and downs being brought into the conversation. I guess it was not really surprising that Faith would have been acutely aware of my feelings in the preceding months as I had wrestled with getting older and less independent. But then I thought, *What a great question!* I looked to George for his response.

George looked thoughtful.

“I have heard that God can change his mind and that he certainly did so on occasions, but it seems that God does not have emotions like human beings do because God is a spirit.”

That made sense to me. I have always understood that emotions are somehow linked with our human bodies and our minds. However, the very fact that it made sense raised a problem for me. I had always thought of God caring and loving like a father or mother, but also sometimes a bit angry with me. My father and mother were sometimes

annoyed with me, so I never had any trouble thinking God was like that.

“George,” I said, “something is wrong here. The Bible says God gets angry; he remembers wrongdoing; he punishes; he cares; he loves; he is disappointed when people are not faithful to what he wants. We believe that God is like a person who notices and hears and responds. Doesn’t that mean that God has feelings and changes in mood?”

“No. Definitely not,” said George. “God is a spirit. God does not have a body, so there are no mood swings.”

I was about to say, “But the Bible says...” and talk about some of the passages where the Bible makes clear that God got angry, when Faith spoke again.

“George, I’m having trouble understanding this person you are calling God. You said he punished human beings with sickness and death. Hope says something called the Bible describes God being angry and disappointed. And you tell me this God is not into emotion and mood changes. That doesn’t

make any sense at all. And how come you know so much about him anyway?"

George took time to explain how he'd listened in on clergy conversations for many years. He clearly believed hearing the clergy talk was just one step away from hearing God talk.

"Well, if you know so much," said Faith, "tell me where this God lives."

"God does not live anywhere," said George. "I've already said that God is a spirit. God is everywhere. He holds everything in existence because he created everything that exists. Without God there can be nothing. That's why everything that happens is linked with God in some way."

"What about heaven?" I asked. "I've always believed that God lives in heaven and that when I die I will go there if I'm good enough."

"Heaven is not a place," said George. "I heard the clergy talking about a statement from the pope saying that heaven is not a place. Some clergy at this discussion said that if heaven is not a particular place where God is, then heaven must be everywhere be-

cause God is everywhere. I distinctly remember several of the clergy saying this. They said it is a mistake to think that God lives up above us somewhere.”

Well, you could have knocked me off the sofa with a feather when I heard that. All my life, I thought that when I died I was going to go to some place “in the heavens” where God lived and that there would be a judgment about whether I would get in or not. George, it seems, had been listening in on clergy conversations that were not reaching the pulpit on Sundays.

“Do you mean to tell me, George, that when I die I’m not going on a journey to somewhere else where God lives?”

“That’s what these men said. They seemed rather unsure of just what happens when people die and where they go, except they believed that people will meet God when they die, wherever God is.”

I’d never thought of that before. I’d have to think about it a lot more. I could sense that Faith wanted to keep the conversation going, but I’d had a long, long night, and it was time for bed.

I knew I wanted to talk a lot more about God, especially whether God wanted Elsie to be sick or not. A host of other issues about God and suffering came to mind—whether God really does get angry and just where is God and...but there was only so much my aging brain could take in.

Faith and George talking to me. Imagine that!
God is everywhere.

Death is not a journey to God somewhere else.
Imagine that!