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Faith, Not Confidence

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Faith, Not Confidence

“I have confidence. I am all confidence.”

“You have youth, confidence, and a job . . . You have everything, . . I have never had confidence and I am not young.”

—Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

Where does confidence come from?

I’ve just come from Facebook stalking, where I’ve once again witnessed supreme confidence. I thought postmodernism was supposed to have broken our confidence, but by the evidence on the Internet, people’s confidence has never been higher. They know who the heroes and villains are, they know they are on the side of right, and they know nothing can change their minds.

What I want to know is, where does this confidence come from?

Confidence must largely come from experience. We learn what gravity is by experience and come to expect it to act in certain ways; we learn the ground will support us when we walk, that the form of a solid chair will probably sustain our weight.

This is the Newtonian world of falling apples, a complex clock that can be precisely predicted. I’ve always thought of dictators and despots and colonels as the most confident people. They know the laws of the clock-world; they take action—kill a dissident, wipe out an ethnic group, cut off an ear—and fully expect an equal and opposite reaction: fear, silence, consolidation of their power.

Postmodernism, thanks to the theory of relativity, was supposed to have given the clock-world a case of the bends. When the apple falls, it’s mainly predictable, yes, but not exactly. We can’t quite believe what we see, can’t quite be sure about things.

This unknowing, however, opens us up to a postmodern space of evil. Because we think we can’t know things for certain, we tend to throw up our hands. We buy things far downstream from where they’re made so we don’t have to see the taint that goes into them. We don’t ask the questions we should about the particular leaf of the historical tree on which we find ourselves. “Who can know these things, really?” we ask.

As such, we open the path for dictators and despots and colonels, for unjust laws and abusive practices and corporate crime.

Thus, the confident and the under-confident work together.
Most days, I think of myself as under-confident, and I think of this as a virtue. Last fall I was stopped for a minor traffic violation. My heart beat a little faster: I was afraid of getting a ticket. I don’t think of myself as confident in that situation.

Recently I was talking with a Colombian-born friend of mine about traffic stops. He was recalling the outright challenges his father, who is white, gave police when he got stopped. My friend himself, a doctor, said he would never consider such a response. Confronting an officer is the last thing my friend would think of doing, he said, and not because he fears getting a ticket.

“I am all confidence,” says the younger waiter in Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”

“You have youth, confidence, and a job,” answers the older waiter. “You have everything.”

I have always identified with this older waiter, who says he has “never had confidence” and who is therefore in practice less arrogant, more empathetic. Using the traffic stop as a measure, however, I was born into confidence.

I grew up thinking faith was about confidence too. Consider the confidence of martyrs, for example, who in all the stories refuse to renounce their faith and go willingly to death because they know they are right.

But recent events have changed my view. Martyrdom happens when you’re killed for your very being-in-the-world. “Here I stand, I can do no other” means exactly that: this is who I am, and if that offends you, then you’ll have to kill me.

And confidence does. Those who make martyrs proceed from a place of confidence.

No, faith is different from confidence. And it’s not based in experience.

When Peter steps out of the boat to go to Jesus on the stormy sea, he’s flying in the face of all the experiences he’s ever had, which tell him the water will give way. It’s faith that gets him out of the boat, not confidence. For the disciples, faith had to look absurd. Take what you know—the Pharisaical law, the promised political future of Israel, the very constitution of the natural world—add Jesus, and you get “Step out of the boat.”

Evangelicalism has had its heyday of confidence. It’s a movement conceived centuries ago in the “Here I stand” moment. Sometime in the last century, however, evangelicalism grew to a place of confidence. Now that confidence is being shaken, as evidenced by the divide on what evangelical even means, and that’s a good thing.

I was born into a place of confidence, a white male evangelical Midwesterner. It means when I get pulled over in a traffic stop, I worry only about my wallet, and I try to look penitent enough to avoid a ticket. I’m probably batting .500. In the stop referred to above, I got off with a verbal warning.
I cannot—emphasis on my inability to—imagine what it’s like to feel my very being-in-the-world called into question during a traffic stop. Sitting in my living room and saying, “I can imagine what that’s like” is a lie, and it’s an excuse. Instead, I have to step out of the boat. I have to leave a place of confidence to listen to my friend’s experience, read a book like *Between the World and Me*, join a protest, write letters to an inmate, build a friendship with a neighbor outside of my narrow demographic. If this sounds like a pep talk to myself, it is. I lack confidence.

But a lack of confidence can be the birthplace of faith. “Help me overcome my unbelief!” a man cries out to Christ, and Jesus does.

But it doesn’t stop there. Faith steps out of the boat of experience onto something that’s a lot less sure.

That’s why it’s so difficult to do.

And so essential.