

# Faith versus science

by Paul McKellips

Unashamedly, I confess I'm a man of faith. I subscribe to Judeo-Christian principles and the notion of a personal relationship with God. I was raised in a Protestant church-going family and, often to my teenaged chagrin, there wasn't a Sunday meeting I missed.

Though I knew more than my fair share of Bible verses, I never had a handy scripture verse at the ready to blindly solve deep philosophical questions that had no practical answers. I never wanted to be so heavenly minded that I was no earthly good. So my favorite theological answer was often, "I don't know."

Early on I decided that my hands and my work should serve as God's reflection in my life. I wanted to do unto others as I would have others do unto me. I didn't want to judge anyone's life—the actions they took, the decisions they made or the lifestyles they led—lest other people judge me, too. I never wanted to cast the first stone.

When I got to college, I had a double major. Broadcast journalism fed my desire to use communications to bridge cultural divides with the power of images and words. World religions fueled my convictions that all people, all religions and all cultures share a common kinship.

For the first 54 years of this life journey I have embraced faith and, unashamedly, science as well. Scientific discoveries and explanations don't diminish my faith any more than a treasure hunt diminishes the treasure. For me, scientific discovery expands the man-made boundaries of my faith, boundaries drawn by my inability to think more deeply or to comprehend a God that's greater.

Faith and science haven't always coexisted so well together; just ask Galileo—the father of modern science—or the investigators

who did Pope Urban VIII's bidding during the Roman Inquisition. We often hear people of faith scream, "Heresy!" when scientific minds get a big bang out of seven days of creation. Likewise, scientists who live in a world of data, evidence and proof often assert that one's opinions about faith should be kept personal, private and far removed from scientific method. But faith and science don't have to be mutually exclusive. The power of sheer belief can be just as great as the power of pure knowledge. The placebo effect has confounded scientists and medical professionals for years, as 30% or so of desperate patients routinely let the power of the mind help them get over whatever was the matter by taking an inert substance they thought was pharmaceutical.

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Belief is a powerful medicine.

The miracle of insulin or stents is no less amazing to me than a jaunt over a parted Red Sea or water transformed into vintage red wine. I'll take a miracle anytime one is offered, and I don't care if it's delivered by lab coats or clergy robes.

I've been in many hospital rooms over the years, sitting at the bedsides of those dying or desperately ill. Without exception, the last days are filled with family members who bring love, doctors who bring help and ministers who bring hope. It is the gathered family in the hospital room whom we try to reach when we contemplate outreach. We solicit their support as biomedical research moves from the benches of discovery to

the bedsides of recovery. It's this family who pleads with us to explain complex life-saving science in simple life-giving terms. And it's this family who knows that when hope in medicine finally ends, faith in God really begins.

I was sent to Mosul, Iraq, in 2006 to help Coalition Forces re-open an old museum of science and history that had fallen into ruin before American soldiers restored it. One exhibit really caught my eye. There were three full and two partial skeletons of enormous fish, something akin to whales. Through our Arabic interpreter, I asked the museum curator, an elderly Iraqi man, why the skeletons of whales were housed in a museum in northern Iraq, surrounded by desert.

The old professor explained that large fish once routinely navigated up through the saltwater of the Tigris River from the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

"Have you never heard the story of Jonah and the fish?" the curator asked me. "It's the same story for Muslims, Jews and Christians. Mosul is in Ninevah Province. God brought Jonah here inside a great fish, perhaps even one of these."

That moment helped me realize that I was satisfied with placebo effects around the more inexplicable aspects of faith. It's okay to believe in things you can't explain. But my faith is not at risk if science proves the story of Jonah to be nothing more than allegory. Likewise, I believe in science and my faith in the scientific method is not at risk when experiments fail, hypotheses fall apart, proven drugs have side effects or wonder drugs escape our grasp.

Each day I have faith—and, dare I say, pray—that science will get us another step closer to the miracles we desperately seek. Because belief is a powerful medicine.

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