

There was a movie from 1950 with Nancy Reagan--Nancy Reagan! I didn't know she was an actress--called *The Next Voice You Hear*. About the voice of God coming to people on their radios. And not just a few crazy people. Anyone with a radio could hear the God Show. Nancy's husband was played by James Whitmore. He's the kind of guy who hits the snooze button a couple of times, then oversleeps, and then he has to rush through his shower, cuts himself shaving, then gulps down his toast and coffee, and then goes to the garage to start up his car. It's an old car, so it doesn't start so well. And he stomps on the gas, cranks the key, and he's cussing, and swearing...but when the God show is coming on, he gets up early, has time for a leisurely shower, has a nice breakfast, and when he goes to start his car, he turns the key gently...and it starts right up. And he says to Nancy, it's like a miracle; ever since God's been on the radio, my car has been starting right up. And Nancy says, there's no miracle; you're just doing things differently. And maybe the point to having God on the radio is not to give a particular message, or lesson, maybe God is just trying to get us to slow down, be conscious, be mindful.

If the voice of God came on the radio, what would it take to convince us that it was real, and not a hoax? I don't know. I don't know about God. I'm happy to call myself an agnostic; in fact, and I've said this before, I like that bumper sticker: "Militant Agnostic; I don't know, you don't either." I'll tell you the God I don't believe in. Every time there's a plane crash, and somebody didn't make the flight--they overslept, or their cab was stuck in traffic--they always say, God kept me off that plane. God must have a plan for me. Well, what about that poor sap that was on standby, and because you missed the flight, he got on the plane--and he was happy because he was going to see his family. God's plan for you better be a pretty darn good one, because he had to slaughter that poor sap so you could fulfill your plan. And what about the traffic jam? Of course, if God is all-powerful, there would be problem causing a traffic jam. Just bump two cars together and you can delay traffic for hours. But what about all those people who are late for work or miss meetings? And what about all those people on the plane? Well, it was their time. They were going to die anyway. When God says it's your time, it's your time. So what, does God plan everybody's death? Every stray bullet, every car crash, every case of cancer or heart disease? So what are we, characters in a video game?

And what about prayer? The preachers will tell you, God answers all prayers; but sometimes the answer is No. "If it's in God's plan, he'll grant your wishes." What a minute. If it's in God's plan? Does God need our help to make his plan turn out? Not much of an all-powerful god. God will grant your wishes if he feels like it? Then what's the point of prayer? I'm not a big fan of the god of the bible. (My mother should hear me. That's right, Ma, I'm not a big fan of God! But at least I'm in church on Sunday!)

What is the point to God? I'll tell you: God is there because randomness is unfair. I know what you might say, randomness is completely fair. Sure, if you're a coin. But coins don't have free will. Here we are, doing our best, being good to others, being compassionate, fair, generous, respecting the worth and dignity of every human being, and bad things still happen. Accidents, disease, problems at work...And the guy down the street; he's rude, egotistical, greedy, bigoted, and good things happen to him--he gets nominated to run for president! When bad things happen that are out of your control, you want someone to blame. And when good things happen that you didn't cause, you want someone to thank. If you're going to send a thank you card, you want to know the address to send it to.

And here's another reason for God: To enforce the rules. Rules are a good thing. Driving around at 11:00 at night, you get to a red light. You look left, you look right, there's no traffic. No cars coming from in front of you, no cars coming from behind you. Why not just run the red light? Well, maybe there's a cop hiding in the gas station. Way too much thinking; just stop for the red light. When I'm driving late at night, I'm thinking of too many things to stop and think about whether there are cars coming and whether to stop at a red light.

If you're at a store and the cashier gives you a twenty when the change should be a ten, you might think, well, it's ten dollars too much; but the store can afford it and I could really use the extra ten dollars; but maybe the store will punish the cashier if her drawer doesn't balance at the end of the night; but I hear that, if the amount is very small, stores don't always take the money from the cashier and anyway this store is a big evil corporation and they should pay the money... it's all too complicated. Just adopt a rule; It's not my money, give it back.

It's easy when rules are enforced by people other than you. When your parents say, "Make sure the dishes are done before I get home from work," you get the dishes done--even if it means sending one of your brothers upstairs to distract them and delay them while you finish up the dishes. And if your boss says, "Get this done by Tuesday," you get it done by Tuesday. You might know that it doesn't have to get done this week, or even next week, but the boss says, so you do it by Tuesday.

One of the hardest parts of working for yourself is that it's hard to convince yourself that a deadline is real when you know it's artificial. I can't tell you how many times it's happened that I've set myself a list of five things to do during the day; by the end of the day, with all the interruptions and phone calls, I've gotten four things done on my list, but it's 5:47 P.M., and I've got a frozen pizza and a bottle of Charles Shaw merlot waiting for me; and I know that this thing doesn't have to be done today, or tomorrow; it's really hard to get that last thing done. What I need is someone to enforce the rules; to get that thing done, to stop for the red light, to give back the money that doesn't belong to you.

But if you're not a fan of the god of the bible, what do you do? Who do you thank for good news and who do you blame for bad news? Who enforces the rules? What's a militant agnostic to do? Let's sing a hymn and when we come back I'll tell you what I've been thinking.

Here's what I've decided I like: Paganism. Not the neo-paganism that talks about an impersonal life force that suffuses all living things; although when you're walking through a forest, and you look up, through the branches and leaves, and see the blue sky, going on forever, it's easy to feel the life force flowing through you and all other living things. But no, I'm talking about old-school paganism: Polytheism. The Greek and the Roman gods. The Celtic gods. The Norse gods. I've used this line before, but I like it: Those are gods you can make a deal with. You take care of the gods, they'll take care of you.

First of all, the old gods are not all powerful--if you want rain for your crops or your garden, you go to the rain god. If you want a sunny day for your picnic, that's a different

department; you have to go down the hall for the sun god. With a narrower scope of responsibility, the old gods are closer to their customer base.

The old gods are fun; the god of the bible is not fun; he's amazing, but he's not fun. There is a god of wine; the Greeks called him Dionysus, and the Romans called him Bacchus. Then there is the Celtic god Lugh or Lud; he's the god of sun, water, nature. If you walk through that forest and look up and see the forever sky, that's a gift from the god Lud. Lud represents everything that is not our life today. On call 24/7, tethered to all these devices; Lud is the god of goofing off. Here (throw phone down stairs) I'm a Luddite! And the Norse had a goddess called Freya, who rode around in a chariot pulled by housecats!

Now, the pagan gods can be dangerous. The ultimate is the story about Paris, the prince of Troy, son of the king of Troy. He was out walking in the woods one day, and he came across three goddesses, who asked him to judge a beauty contest. He picked Aphrodite, and she rewarded him by giving him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy. She was married to Menelaus, one of the kings of Greece. He got his buddies, the other kings of Greece, to invade Troy. After a ten-year war, the city of Troy was burned to the ground, and all the leading citizens, including Paris, were killed. Not a good result. If you're walking through the woods, and three goddesses ask you to judge a beauty pageant, take Nancy Reagan's other advice, and just say No.

And you don't want to get between gods when they're fighting. If your favorite god is Apollo, and he's feuding with Poseidon, the god of the sea, don't get in a boat. Poseidon will cause storms, he'll shipwreck you, and our men will be eaten by a Cyclops, or a sorceress will turn them into pigs. But other than that, the old gods were pretty cool. As long as you recognized that they were divine and you were not, you didn't have the sin of pride that the Greeks called hubris, you were OK. And they pretty much gave you what you asked for. And if they didn't, you were entitled to be disappointed or even upset with them. They were kind of like your parents. If your parents said, "Clean your room and we'll go to the park," and you cleaned your room, and your parents said, "Sorry, something came up, I have to...whatever," you were entitled to be upset; and they felt guilty; and they made it up to you. "Oh, that's OK, tomorrow we'll go to the zoo." The old gods were very human, and you could trust them to act in predictable ways.

So I've welcomed three goddesses into my life. My job takes a lot of smarts, and I have to make wise decisions, so I have a statue of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, in my office. We have apple trees in our yard that I want to do well, and I make cider that I want to turn out well, so I have Pomona, the Roman goddess of the orchard, on my desk at home. And I'm married to a lovely wife who has heard all my jokes and stories, has had to witness all my rages against technology, and for some reason hasn't yet left me; so I have Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, on my nightstand.

Here's a story. A few years ago, evil monster rabbits attacked our four apple trees and chewed through the bark, all the way around the trunk. This is called girdling, and it can kill the tree. There's a grafting procedure that you can do, involving slicing branches the long way and tucking the ends inside the cut ends of the bark. So I did that, wrapped the trees, and then I asked the goddess Pomona for help. The next spring, three of the four trees revived, they are all

flourishing and this year two are producing apples. Now maybe the grafting procedure worked; maybe it was direct supernatural intercession by a divine being. Or maybe trees are just good at recovering from damage; I don't know. And you don't either. But I do know that I thanked Pomona for my good fortune.

One day this past winter, I checked my calendar for the next day's court and saw that I had a status hearing on a case on which I had done nothing. I was working with another lawyer as co-counsel and I called him, but couldn't reach him, and I thought, this is bad. I'm going to have to explain to the judge that we haven't done anything to move the case along, it's going to be a disaster. And I had another case with the same judge where he was going to be deciding two issues, each of which meant tens of thousands of dollars to my client, and one involved his home. The case was fully briefed, and the judge was ready to make a decision. The law was very close on either side, and I was dreading having to call the client and explain how he was going to lose all this money if we lost. So I was not looking forward to this day. The next morning I get to court, and there's my co-counsel, and he says, "I talked to the bank and they owe us a bunch of information; I talked to the IRS and they're on board, and the SBA is going to work with us." And I said, "Good work! Just what I would have done." And in the other case, with the two issues, the judge ruled in our favor on both issues. So what could have been a terrible day turned into a great day. I got to the car and called my client and told him that his money and his house were safe. And when I got to my office, I thanked Athena for my good luck.

And every morning when I wake up, and my wife is still there--she hasn't fled in the dark of the night, I look over at the nightstand and thank the goddess of love.

And the old goddesses are good for enforcing the rules, as well. When I'm thinking about the apple trees, and hoping that the apples do well, there's Pomona, on the shelf above the computer, saying, "So, turn off the cat videos and go out and spray the trees; or put down mulch, or whatever." And every night, when I check my alarm, before I turn off the light, Aphrodite is right there, saying "So, tell her you love her." Which I do.

And when it's 5:47 at night, and I'm at my office, and I have one last thing to do on my list, There's the statue of Athena. And I say, OK, the frozen pizza and two-buck Chuck can wait. And I get that last thing done.

So I heartily recommend that you welcome some of the old pagan gods into your life. Will they really cause miracles? Eh. But for taking out your frustration when things don't go well; for someone with a real identity when you feel thankful; and for another party to the conversation when you're trying to talk yourself into doing what's right, they're pretty handy. Maybe Nancy Reagan was right; the purpose to having gods is not to believe in something you can't prove, but to get focused, to be more mindful. Thank you, and may the gods bless you and grant your wish--even if it's to be turned into trees.