Young minds

by Carol Zaleski in the November 22, 2000 issue

Five-year-old Andy is in the shower looking for ways to use an entire bottle of blue, no-tears Aussie shampoo (the kind with the kangaroo on the bottle) without washing his hair. “I’m getting clean for Easter!” he calls out.

John, his 13-year-old brother, pops in: “Did you know that you have 2,000 red blood cells being replaced every second?” Me: “That’s pretty exciting.” John: “And I have probably 1,000.” Me: “That’s exciting, too.” John: “Maybe a humanologist could keep track of them—‘there goes another one.’”

Andy is singing in the shower, “I’m gonna make my garden grow!”

John pops back in: “You know, my Latin is helping me with my science, because I know why *flagella* is the plural of *flagellum*.”

Andy: “Zap, zap, zap, boom! Rayman watch out! Bzzyou ya ya ya doo da, here comes Batman!” He dives against the glass shower door, crashing it open and leaping forth naked and dripping to proclaim, “I’m done with my shower!”

John runs down the stairs at top speed, then runs back up the stairs with a radio—the Red Sox are playing—having finished his math, science and social studies homework in 45 seconds.

All the while I have been sitting in the bathroom admiring the astonishing swiftness with which young minds assimilate new facts and make of them instant metaphysical landscapes. I remember the sensation, when I was quite young, of feeling my mind outrace itself. But then think how fast God’s mind must be. God can outrace us all and be back at the beginning of things before we have even set out to make a world. Our minds are old; God’s mind is ever young. Every correlation, coincidence and connection; every syllogism, *modus ponens* and prior probability; every paradox and pun in every language real and fanciful; all these occur instantaneously to the mind of God, who must, I imagine, take in them an analogously youthful delight. Our Ancient of Days is surely also a Youth of This Morning, to whom all times are present, who dwells in the garden of beginnings and

freely grants us a share in the power of creation, and who with every new child creates an image and likeness of his eternal presence.

How strange, then, that there are people who believe that the power of the scientific human mind to comprehend the universe should count as counterevidence for God. Where did we ever get the idea that unbelief is the sign of a freethinking spirit or a sharp mind? “I’m from Missouri, show me” is fine for dealing with patent medicines, but to withhold belief in divine providence when we are living from moment to moment on providential handouts is downright churlish.

When we are disposed to think gratefully, God’s existence seems self-evident. As John Donne puts it, “He must pull out his own eyes, and see no creature, before he can say, he sees no God; He must be no man, and quench his reasonable soul, before he can say to himself, there is no God.” Faith leaps to this conclusion, but reason should be no less quick to give assent.

The inclination to doubt, on the other hand, is something we experience as a drain on our mental and moral powers, and as a spiritual trial: “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.” In 1963, J. R. R. Tolkien wrote a letter to his 43-year-old son Michael, who was feeling depressed and suffering from “sagging faith.” The creator of Middle-earth had this to say about the trial of unbelief:

> In the last resort, faith is an act of will, inspired by love. . . . But the act of will of faith is not a single moment of final decision: it is a permanent indefinitely repeated act . . . which must go on—so we pray for “final perseverance.” The temptation to “unbelief” (which really means rejection of Our Lord and His claims) is always there within us. Part of us longs to find an excuse for it outside us.

“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.” The temptation to unbelief is always within us, and we are always looking for reasons outside us. Yet the forms in which unbelief appears vary from age to age. Our ancestors were tempted to doubt God’s providence; we are tempted to doubt God’s existence. Our ancestors worried about whether God regarded them as wicked; we worry about whether God regards us at all.

For this affliction, I have found a remedy in the straightforward letters of John Chapman, abbot of Downside, the great English Benedictine Abbey near Bath.

Chapman was constantly contacted by laypeople seeking his informal spiritual advice. Many wrote to him expressing anguish over their lack of faith and dryness in prayer. In a 1923 letter Chapman writes that the characteristic “trial of our contemporaries seems to be the feeling of not having any faith; not temptations against any particular article (usually), but a mere feeling that religion is not true.”

The best defense, according to Chapman, is to pay no attention to the impulse to unbelief. It is merely a feeling, and if it causes distress rather than indifference, that is proof that faith is strong. At its fiercest, the trial of unbelief may be what the mystics call a dark night in which God is working secretly in the soul, testing and teaching us, purifying our motives and above all making us realize we cannot live without faith. God is a quick study, and even in our youth he outruns us.