

God cares nothing for our algorithms

Embracing the random can open us up to the agitations of the Holy Spirit.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [September 2024](#) issue

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In my teenage years, I was a baseball-career-pursuing, video-game-playing, city-dwelling, six-foot-tall (even taller in my mind) consumer of the world around me. That world was the South Side of Chicago. Every day I woke up, rode my bike to the field to practice to make the White Sox, came home and watched the White Sox game (sometimes they won!), and Sega Genesis'd myself into the late night pretending I was on the White Sox. It was a good life, and in what we'll graciously call a chaotic childhood, it provided a much needed rhythm and stability.

And then my mother told me I was going to camp. It was actually worse than being told: she asked me in a way where I couldn't say no—a mind trick I'm still learning as a parent—and I was devastated. Here I was, this seven-foot-tall specimen of a

human, about to lose my summer; here were the White Sox, about to lose a statistically significant portion of their fan base. I didn't ask for this. I didn't want it. And when I returned home, I was certain that this experience had changed my life.

I had a ball! And even better: it set in motion events that have changed and remain part of my life. (Y'all, I hike now!) All of this from a seemingly random experience I wouldn't have chosen for myself in a million years.

As church leaders, we should be random sometimes. I say this not because *trying new things is key to church innovation*—yuck—but because camp and a few other “random” encounters have given me holy knowledge, in addition to what I've gleaned from 14 years' experience as an eight-foot-tall pastor.

In recent years we've come to use the word *algorithm*—imprecisely, technologists point out—to refer to what is really an ancient practice. Netflix suggests shows we might like based on what we just watched; Spotify only needs you to play one song before it can play you 50 other songs just like that one; and we tend to choose food, people, and careers that are in reasonable proximity to the experiences already inside of us. It's not a bad thing—this is how cultures are born—but if we're not careful it can become a little incestuous.

In worship we sing what we know, and then we sing another song that sounds like that one. We preach what our people will hear, and we like to listen to sermons and engage with liturgies that “fit.” I see no problems here: ritual and repetition are how a community comes to know itself. Plus, we all know and have had science back us up on the power and potential of safe space, on the healing properties of stability, even on the ways brain development relies upon patterns and consistency. As a child of the Black church, I argue its history as a hush harbor for slaves to sing familiar songs and pray ancestral prayers is one of the primary reasons Black people psychologically survived the genocide, so I'm not being flippant about routine. The Catholic Church developed a standard mass for a reason, and it wasn't just so they could scale up like McDonald's all over the world. This hour on Sunday morning is, for millions of people, the only thing they can count on. So don't go messing it up with your riffraff, no matter how tall you are!

The algorithmic nature of our lives causes us, by design, to miss some experiences that we absolutely must have for a full and faithful life. There's comfort to grow, and there's being so comfortable we miss those agitations of the Holy Spirit. God sends

Jonah into Nineveh—and when he refuses, into other places, which makes my argument. Jesus calls disciples out of their boats and calls them to look at the table in a different way; Priscilla and Aquila are led to start gathering people in their homes. There are these moments when God says, “Do this instead,” the people do it, and something remarkable happens, even if the remarkable thing is just that they learn something new about themselves.

It’s this kind of openness to mystery that feels missing in a lot of church spaces these days, spaces where the unknown and uninvited can be received as wrong or strange. But this refusal to embrace the random is coming at a high cost: people are being left out. What’s more, we’re missing a key facet of our relationship with the Divine: God cares nothing about our algorithms.

The question is, how can we, as church, create more encounters with spontaneity? Different songs? Different speakers? Sure! Let’s press harder. Next February, instead of saying, “Hey, remember Black people?” what if we shifted worship to embody some practices born of the Black church, which would mean—gasp—being in better relationship with Black people and letting them lead it? Or doing an all-Spanish liturgy in the fall for National Hispanic Heritage Month, or having an LGBTQ dance group come and vogue during June? That would be “so random,” and it would also teach us a lot more about Pride than our ecclesial statements often do.

Some people will be upset because they “needed something different.” But the truth is we don’t always know what we need, and I wish the church could become a safe space to push us on being so safe. There’s nothing in our faith that requires it, and too much has been lost in our pursuit of it.

Instead of just responding to the unexpected, what if we were to move toward the random and uninvited? What would happen if we curated experiences full of care without worrying about being so careful? I bet not only would we not die but we’d live a little more. I bet we could better help people embrace the strange and the stranger.

Our trusty technical and cultural algorithms, however, have grown better and better at building the silos. I needed baseball, and I needed camp, but only one of those did I ask for. God did miracles with both, and algorithms can’t predict that.

By the way, it was a church camp.