

## Atheist Alternatives

### On Things You Can't Explain

by Jeffrey Thomas

A sunny day of golden leaves in the Russian fall, at an Orthodox monastery east of Moscow. My wife Shellie and I came here for a project that touched on Andrei Rublev, the great painter of icons. The monastery had doubled as a military fortress in the 1400s, when Russia was fighting off the Tatar armies. Today, it is overrun by armies of Russian tourists and pilgrims. In the courtyard, they queued up in a long line to fill soda bottles and any other containers they might have with them from a well whose water they believe can heal.

Our pilgrimage was for art, so we got ourselves directed to a chapel in one corner of the monastery. Its walls, we were told, are covered with paintings from floor to ceiling. Another long line inched into the chapel. Why this tiny chapel would be such an attraction was a mystery to us. Was everyone there, like us, for the art? No. In an antechamber, you can buy a thin, beeswax taper for a ruble (which at the time was worth a tiny fraction—1/120<sup>th</sup>—of a penny). There were expensively dressed men there with their wives, or friends. As bored as schoolboys, they bought their tapers. I fancied some of them were mobsters. Who knows—they were that cynical, but then, boredom is armor against impressionability.

Shellie and I made our slow progress into the chapel with the rest, the families, the maybe mafiosi, the old men and women. We all lit our tapers and stuck them in the sand in a circular tray. Only the project of lighting the taper held any interest whatever for the men. Shuffling like a chain gang, we entered the chapel proper and circumambulated the tiny, square space. The paintings were so darkened by the centuries of candleblack that night seemed to cover them.

In the far corner, one or two priests gave blessings, absolutions, maybe a bit of counseling. Above the muttering of pilgrims and priests, a hymn rose from a handful of old women, jammed into the opposite corner from the priests. They were all terribly spare, their faded dresses and thin cardigans hanging on them, their faces hollowed. Yet from their wizened mouths came ethereal harmonies that altered the chapel and our relationship to it, like wings lifting us ever so slightly from the floor as we circled wordlessly through with the rest. (Even words like “wing” and “lifted” are too hard, too specific in meaning. Compared to what we felt there, those words bind the experience like pinning a butterfly to a board.) Shellie and I sensed something in that tiny chapel, but we didn't know what.

Walking out into the great courtyard, still not having said anything, Shellie and I had the same question for each other: Did you feel that? What happened? Was it simply the beauty of choral music? Was it the shared belief of the people packed in there or the devotion of the women singing? It couldn't be what we don't believe in, could it? Not knowing how to find the answer, we dropped the subject.

My evolution as an atheist involved turning a skeptical eye first on the devotional and myth-creating religions such as Christianity, then on my own more-abstract belief in some kind of transcendent, immanent existence. Before I made that turn, the things that spoke most deeply to me of such a universe-suffusing level of being were great rocks and cliff faces, such as a pyramidal rock monolith in Arizona that as far as I know is nameless, and the red walls that flank hikers in the canyons of Zion National Park with arias in stone. If there were a god, those rocks would be its image. I wonder if the blocks of jade that Chinese intellectuals traditionally keep in their studies have the same significance, as boulders, cliffs, massifs in miniature.

Does atheism spare the awe but remove a dimension that it is not so easy to stop yearning for, a sense of something greater than the physical universe? Judging by myself, apparently not—I still am touched by experiences and things I don't understand (and by their impalpable dimensions). What am I sensing when I am so affected by a group of singers, or by an immense cliff face of red stone? Are these expressions of one thing, or of different things? Am I simply not understanding something, or are there things that my atheist-austere world view cannot compass?

In Arizona's Canyon de Chelly is a spire hundreds of feet high. The Dine people call it Spider Rock. They hold it to be the home of a mythical figure called Spider Woman, who taught Dine women to weave. As I

looked on it from the edge of the canyon, that great rock reached right into me. Touched me in a place inside that I know nothing about.

The Spider Woman of dreamtime makes perfect sense to me: A Dine woman (how many hundreds or thousands of years ago? having watched spiders make their webs for how many years?) makes the imaginative leap, whether in a sleeping dream or in the waking dream of imagination, the ageless dreamtime of every day that coincides with being awake. It is a dream character, Spider Woman, who shows her the human use of the spider's vocation.

But is there also something outside of physical existence that I am not recognizing? Or do we go wrong in thinking that what we can't explain must be supernatural, or must arise out of a spiritual dimension, and that what inspires awe must point us at the theological? Assuming the necessity of a spiritual level denies that the natural world by itself can inspire awe, that the power of those frail sopranos' piety or the bell-like purity of their voices could by itself lift one's spirit. It denies that without a nonphysical reality, a divinity, you could feel love and gratitude to those bits of the world that give to you by touching you in a way that you cannot capture. Such affection for that which is outside and greater than yourself may be part of the religious impulse.

Do we need a god when we have a small choir lifting a chapel, red-rock masses reaching their curving lines of fracture across the universe's vast structures and lives, and desert canyons whose internal space suggests that we are enlarged by what we don't know?