

Atheist Alternatives

Many who believe in a god believe that that god is necessary for the existence of, is a necessary referent for, or was the origin of the substance of many of our traditions, values, and activities.

“Atheist Alternatives” is an occasional series of essays that look at how a non-believer might approach these pieces of life. The essays in this series do not argue against belief in a deity; they merely present alternatives.

On Unseen Craft

By Jeffrey Thomas

During the building of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., a stone carver put the very best work he could into shaping leaves that are inaccessibly obscured by their place in the building. An article in the April 1980 *National Geographic* tells how a friend asked the stone carver why he was going to such pains. Who will ever see these little masterworks? You know what’s coming, of course. “God will,” said the stone carver.

That appeals to me, perhaps to what friends call my contrarian streak. Actually, though, I would like it better if he worked with such dedication in a cosmos in which there is no god to see it. In that case, he would be putting all of his ability, expertise, translation of his visual knowledge into the sense of touch, fingers caressing the surface as he created it, simply to achieve excellence, without requiring any other justification. The act of carving would be an apotheosis of his artistry, an expression, within his vocation, of the best that humans are capable of. He could be doing it without regard for the result except as the result is part of the act. There would be, as there probably was anyway, a faith simply in the value of the act and of the carved leaves themselves.

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