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## I DON'T KNOW EVAN HANDLER

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### **I Don't Know**

When I was twenty-four years old I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia and told it was "incurable." However, instead of dying, as I was led to expect, I'm now considered to be long-cured – and I'm less than six months away from turning fifty.

Due to my history of illness and unexpected recovery I started getting asked my views on complex issues when I was only about twenty-five. That's a young age for philosophizing about life and death, even for a theologian. Me, I'm an actor.

Sometimes the questions would come from friends, but often from mere acquaintances. The inquisitors might be my age, or two or three generations older. Do you think things happen for a reason? I'd be asked. Do you think you can alter your own destiny? Does prayer really work? Do you think life has a meaning? Is there a higher power?

I don't know.

A very common question, when I was a kid, was whether or not you believed in God. It came up all the time, and it was used as a kind of introductory identity test. Almost like asking a stranger from what tribe they hailed, the question flew in quick succession to several other standards.

"What religion are you?"

"You like the Yankees or Mets?"

"How long can you hold your breath?"

"Do you believe in God?"

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I've always had an odd relationship to that last question. For me, the answer has always seemed straightforward and inevitable, and it's always been the same. I don't know. I just don't know.

I don't mean that in a passive sense. I don't mean it as a cop out from contemplation. I've tried to live my life from a position of being open to all possibilities, with great curiosity and wonder over what, to me, can never be known. To the possibility that there is meaning beyond what's easily seen; to the possibility that there's not. To the possibility that there is some form of intelligence guiding the intricate systems that sustain us, and to the possibility that there's not. But if you're going to ask me what I think the situation is, when I close my eyes at night and dream, wondering if I'll get to wake up again, or if it matters whether I do or not, then you'll hear what, to me, is the most sensible refrain: I don't know.

Still, I am fascinated by our conundrum as humans living on planet Earth. I've said to friends, probably more times than they've wanted to hear, "We live in outer space. Do you know that? Can you believe it? We live in outer space." It's a crucial thing to remind myself, because it justifies and enhances my choice to remain committed to philosophical non-commitment. We do not know where we live. We have no idea of our own address.

As many maps as have been produced, with all the stellar observations and radio frequency surveillance, we have no idea what substance contains us, where it came from or where it's headed, if it has a purpose or what it might be, how it started, or how long it will last. We do not know. Whether we admit it readily or not, the most advanced of our species are, in relation to the universe beyond our planet, identical to tribes that have no conception of the world beyond their rain forest.

I don't mean to endorse atheism. I embrace that point of view no more than the idea of a deity. My favorite argument in favor of a guiding force came from my brother when I was seventeen. I was involved in my first sexual relationship with my first requited love, Kathleen. When somehow the topic came up, my brother surprised me by declaring, "Of course there's a God, Evan. Why do you think your thing fits inside hers? You think that's an accident?"

Now that gave me pause.

But I've remained a fairly "I don't know" guy. Not in the passive, desultory manner most would imagine. I've made a conscious, emphatic decision to remain undecided.

I once heard a story told by a songwriter who recounted having a new song criticized by a peer. "He hated it," the songwriter said. "Hated it! He told me he thought it was maudlin and sentimental."

The songwriter's reply was splendid. "Well," he said. "All I can tell you is that it came from an extremely heartfelt place."

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It's a perfect response, I thought upon hearing it. It takes all questions of quality, and even taste, away. It brings the discussion back to the heart and soul of the writer, who has communicated both his pleasure at having been true to himself, as well as his commitment to his point of view. "It came from an extremely heartfelt place."

I feel a great kinship with that songwriter's philosophy. When it comes to the questions I've been asked about suffering and existence, about patterns versus chaos; when it comes to life and death, or light and dark; the millions who've died early, suffered unjustly, or been inexplicably blessed. Why others succumbed and I escaped, or a plane crashes killing hundreds while Mr. Smith decided not to fly.

Do I think there's a God? I don't know. A reason we're here? I don't know. Is there a spirit that survives, or do we disappear? I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

It's not that I don't wonder, I just don't know.

But what I can tell you is this: I don't know from an extremely heartfelt place.

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