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6 March 2006

Faith and Medicine

I thought my grandfather was crazy until one day in my high school biology class. We were reviewing basic evolutionary theory: Mendel, DNA, natural selection—the usual. I had learned all of this before and was not very interested, until my teacher started talking about religion.

My family was never very religious and still isn't. If someone asks, we're Jewish, but to be honest, other than the occasional holiday and perhaps a biannual trip to temple, we've never exhibited the traits of good Jews. I was not fortunate enough to go to Hebrew school or to have a Bar Mitzvah. If my parents didn't do it, then why should I? Instead, I just concentrated on math and science and listened to grandpa Viktor.

My grandfather believed in science. He grew up a smart boy, a lover of physics. In college he aced every class he ever took and graduated with the prestigious red diploma that signified highest honors at the Baku Institute of Technology in Azerbaijan. He went on to become the manager of a group of engineers that built machines for the government. My whole life, whenever I saw him, he was fixing one thing or another, and it wouldn't be long before he started showing me the inside of an air conditioner, the proper drilling technique, or his next big plan for improving the house. He helped me with my school work and told me about one famous scientist or another. He was one of the reasons I ended up at MIT.

One day, when I was in the fifth grade, while drinking tea at his dining room table, he started telling me about the famous pyramids in Egypt. It began like a normal conversation with grandpa Viktor.

"Those Egyptians were geniuses," he exclaimed, showing me how big their heads must have been. "Do you know anything about pyramids?"

"Yeah," I said, eagerly, surprised that I actually knew what he was talking about this time. I had just learned about the great pyramids in school. "They put pharaohs in there when they died."

"That's right," he said, flinging his index finger at me, as he usually did when I said something right. "You know how they were built? How they moved all those huge blocks of stone?"

"Yeah, they—."

"They figured out how to move objects with their minds! There are only a few people in the world now who can do this!" I sipped my tea, my puzzled eyes gazing over the cup at my grandfather. I thought they moved those blocks by rolling them on sticks, like they taught me in class. I mean, I had heard of telekinesis. But as far as I knew, that power was reserved for Jedi knights. I had never argued with him before, so I just kept quiet and let him continue.

"Do you know about their special properties?" he asked. I shook my head, but only partly in response to his question. I was stunned that my grandfather—the scientist, the engineer—was telling me these things. How could such a reasonable man assert such absurdities? It didn't end here either. Throughout the next few years, he told me numerous unbelievable stories about people who could levitate, walk through walls, and

read minds. Once in a while he would mention something so ludicrous that I would admit my disbelief. His only response was a disappointing look and a shake of the head. He thought I was ignorant. I thought he was crazy.

Then, during that biology class my sophomore year in high school, I learned about the evolution of religion. Apparently, as my teacher explained, not only DNA is involved in natural selection. Anything that helps a people survive can be selected for and religion is one example of such an environmental, as opposed to genetic, trait. I never really thought about why we have religions until that point. It just seemed like one of those things that everybody does because their parents makes them—like making the bed or going to school. But now I looked at the benefits of religion. I saw that it could bring people together and reassure them about the future. I realized that religion could really help a person—or a group of people depending on your favorite evolutionary theory—survive. Not to say that my grandfather’s strange theories and beliefs will have a cult following any time soon, but what religion doesn’t have its own unfathomable stories?

Viktor wasn’t the only one with unusual qualities: my grandmother, Nora, could predict the future. Not as well as some people in this world, according to my grandfather, but she had some talent. She always played solitaire, especially when something went wrong. If she won, everything would be okay. If she lost—well—I couldn’t really tell you. You see, if she didn’t like how the game was going, she would start over. As far as I know, she’s won every game and so far everything has been okay, so she deserves at least some credit. Most importantly, winning these games calms her and gives her hope for the future.

Nora, unlike Viktor, has always had a weight problem, which often caused other health issues. She was diagnosed with diabetes at an early age. As she got older, she had trouble walking and my grandfather had just as much trouble picking her up after several accidental falls. I tried to reason with her and urged her to walk more, to drink more, and to stop eating fatty foods. Unfortunately, my grandma's lifelong stubbornness and her undying love for sweets kept her from listening to me and kept her on a downward spiral.

I was surprised when my grandfather came to the rescue with another one of his wild ideas. He had read about a Russian "healer" in one of his tabloid magazines. This was one of those guys who called sick people up to the stage, made them lie on the ground in a trance, and finally, after charging up all of his chi, gave them a powerful, therapeutic kick in the ass and healed them completely. This particular healer could heal you from the comfort of your own home. His power was stored in the magnetic strips of video tape and could be transferred to people through a VCR—the DVD version had even more power (and special features). Using the right techniques, you could charge a whole bottle of water with his energy and heal yourself for the rest of the day. Another of his methods was to have the viewer stand up and reach for the sky to send away all her illnesses.

I remember coming over their house once in the middle of the show and seeing the magic. I tiptoed to the couch and watched as my grandmother put all her energy into standing up and raised her arms as high as she could. She did this several more times and when the show was over she was panting and sweating.

"Hey Dima," she said between breaths, sitting back, exhausted, on her chair, eyes closed. "Could you get a cup for your poor, old grandma?"

“Sure, Grandma.” She poured her charged water into the cup and guzzled it down. She poured another one. “You want something to eat?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m not that hungry.” I don’t think I had ever heard that last sentence come out of her mouth before.

“Grandma Nora, have you lost weight?”

“I sure have. That man on the TV can make your fat disappear. You should watch it with me sometime.” I nodded and smiled. But the smile was real.

I don’t think I’ll ever believe in that healer junk, but my grandmother has lost 30 pounds and has felt much younger since she started watching it, so why should I doubt it? In fact, why should I question any religion if it helps people stay alive and gives them reason to live? I’ll probably read a book on Darwin before I’ll read the Bible, but that’s just me. My grandfather will read his tabloids and will believe every word. My grandmother will watch her healer and will do everything he says. I’ve always heard that knowledge is power, but it looks like faith has won this round.