I Am Afraid

Robert Harvey*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1947 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
I Am Afraid

Robert Harvey

Abstract
I am afraid... Yesterday I was afraid and the day before that...
I Am Afraid

Robert Harvey

I AM afraid. Yesterday I was afraid and the day before that. I have been afraid for several years; I expect to be afraid for years to come. Not every second of course, at least not consciously. I forget about it for days at a time, maybe weeks. But it is there, deep in some dark corner of my mind, waiting until all is quiet to creep out and whisper to me, and titter to itself because I cannot sleep. It is not physical fear that dries your mouth, and makes your hands clammy with sudden sweat. This is no fear of anything I can reach out and touch with my hands. This is a shifting, formless fear that takes a hundred different shapes and vanishes and forms again even as I watch it.

Why am I afraid? Because while I cannot believe the little preachers yelping down from their tall pulpits, I have found nothing else to take their place. And I cannot rid myself of an almost instinctive fear that the punishments they tell of may be true. I wish I could believe them entirely. It would be very comforting to have my way of life ordered for me in advance, so that you know if you do the one thing you will be granted eternal happiness, but if you do the other you will be eternally damned. It would simplify life, and banish all doubts and contradictions.

I am afraid because I have found nothing that I can believe in, not even myself. Everyone has to believe in something, true or false, important or unimportant. I have not found that thing.

I am afraid I can see no purpose in life. There should be a purpose. If life has no ultimate design, if there is no high goal toward which mankind is striving, what is the use of it all? A game with no rules and no winner is a poor game.

If only I felt no need to believe I would be happier. Then I could sit back and take a morbid pleasure in the spectacle of mass futility which is our present life. But I do feel the need to believe in something, some power greater than I. Call it God, call it a Cosmic Plan, call it a Life-Force, call it what you will, I feel the need to believe. And yet I can find nothing in which I can believe.
What can I do? I can’t talk to other people about it. It doesn’t come up in casual conversation. What do we talk about to the people we meet? The weather? What we did today? What they did today? How hard the last test was? Dozens of subjects, just so they don’t require any thought. But what would the average person’s reactions be if I went up to him and said, “I’m afraid. Are you afraid?” No, I can’t talk to other people about it. For all I know I may be the only person with this fear. Other people show no signs of it. The vast majority seem content with religion. Others have thrown out religion and are happily prostrating themselves before the whirling atoms of science. Some have disposed of everything and are basking in lovely nothingness. None seem dissatisfied or troubled with any serious doubts. I wish I knew if they really believe, and are as content as they seem, or if they are merely paying lip service and are inwardly as confused as I.

I am like a man in some dark corridor that endlessly twists and turns and doubles back on itself. I grope my way slowly along, my only light a flickering match. The old myths tell of the corridor lighted by the tall, ever-burning candles of religion. But the candles have long since gone out, and I cannot find them, nor do I really believe they are there. But though I do not believe in the candles, I still fear the pitfalls mentioned in the myths. So I go fearfully, at any moment expecting the floor to tilt beneath my feet and plunge me down into unimaginable depths. It is dark, and cold, and my match is burning out. I have no more matches.

I am afraid.