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# A Salmon's Tale: Science, Religion and the Search for Origins



By Clay Farris Naff

The science/religion fault line has built up tremendous pressure in the last few decades, and people on both sides of it feel deeply shaken. Maybe that explains why so many can't see straight.

Many theists continue, against all reason, to try to jam the 11-dimensional square peg of science into the round, bottomless hole of religion.

Many atheists continue, against all reason, to assert that they know for damn sure God doesn't exist.

This senseless standoff is worse than a waste of time. If the only choices human beings have are to believe in a magical, supremely perfect CEO in the sky, or a universe burped into existence by a false vacuum collapse with amazingly fortunate consequences, then it is clear to me at least that superstition's stock will be a strong buy for decades, if not centuries, to come. If civilization is to survive, this must change — fast. Just as importantly, a willful refusal to look beyond Stephen Colbert's witty ditty "Yaweh or No Way" may blind our search for the probable truth about the most important question we can ask: *Why are we here?*



The phenomenal response to my essay "[How Science Can Solve the Puzzle of God](#)" was deeply gratifying. It showed that people really care about this subject. More than 1,400 readers took time to write on Huff Post, and many others responded on other sites that carried excerpts. I am grateful for all the responses, and especially for the thoughtful criticisms. I love criticism. It's the only way to shed error and get closer to the truth.

I was also pleased to learn that my ideas are as unsettling to atheists as they are to religious literalists. It gives me confidence that I am bringing something fresh to the table. However, it was disappointing to find so many critical reactions were attacks on tired old ideas that have nothing to do with me. It is clear that expository prose alone is not sufficient to reach everyone. Perhaps a parable will work better. Allow me to present:

### **The Amazing Existential Adventure of Rushdy Salmon**

Imagine, if you will, a salmon named Rushdy who has turned philosophical late in life. He has big questions, such as "Where did we come from?" and "Why are we here?" He turns to his friends for answers. Most of them offer traditional religious answers: God created the world and put salmon into it so that they could obey his laws and earn a reward. One of his friends tells him that the reward phase of God's plan is ready to go. This idea excites Rushdy — until he talks it over with his skeptical friend, PJ:

"Uh oh. Rush, have you been listening to that puffer fish again? The one who's always yapping about the Farther, the Fry, and the Holy Coast?"

"Look, I don't think you should be so disrespectful. Rev. Right says fish who don't believe are doomed to broil for all eternity."

"Yeah, like I'm gonna bite on that one!"

"But if you believe in the Fry with all your heart and you've been preselected by the Farther, you can get taken up in the Capture."

"Don't tell me you swallow that!"

"The Farther sends down his holy net and, whoosh! All the chosen fish get taken up to a better world. There, you get to meet the Fry and worship the Farther — forever!"

"Sounds bow-ring."



“But what if it’s real? I’ve heard the Capture is already beginning! They say over in the Pacific all the chosen salmon have already gone up in the Capture.”

“You think getting hauled up to the surface in a net is a *good* thing? Man, that’s just crazy. Life down here is what it’s all about. Here, lemme show you a few home truths from the Dawk on my i-Phin.”

PJ introduces Rushdy to [the writings of Richard Dawkins](#), who has an answer to many of Rushdy’s questions: Natural selection.

*Accepting, then, that the God Hypothesis is a proper scientific hypothesis whose truth or falsehood is hidden from us only by lack of evidence, what should be our best estimate of the probability that God exists, given the evidence now available? Pretty low I think, and here’s why. Natural selection is not just an alternative to chance. It is the only ultimate alternative ever suggested. Design is a workable explanation for organized complexity only in the short term. It is not an ultimate explanation, because designers themselves demand an explanation. If, as Francis Crick and Leslie Orgel once playfully speculated, life on this planet was deliberately seeded by a payload of bacteria in the nose cone of a rocket, we still need an explanation for the intelligent aliens who dispatched the rocket. Ultimately they must have evolved by gradual degrees from simpler beginnings. Only evolution, or some kind of gradualistic ‘crane’ (to use Daniel Dennett’s neat term), is capable of terminating the regress. Natural selection is an anti-chance process, which gradually builds up complexity, step by tiny step. The end product of this ratcheting process is an eye, or a heart, or a brain — a device whose improbable complexity is utterly baffling until you spot the gentle ramp that leads up to it.*

PJ and the Dawk convince Rushdy that the world doesn’t show any signs of being owned and operated by an all powerful Farther. After giving it a lot of thought, he accepts that natural selection is the best explanation for the amazing variety of life on Earth, and after reading a Fishypedia [article on abiogenesis](#), he’s even prepared to accept that it probably didn’t take any magic to get life started on Earth — although it certainly took a very unlikely combination of events. But unlikely things do happen — every day.

However, all this leaves him unsatisfied. The Dawk and his school have no idea why the universe got started, although they claim it must have been something very simple, like a false

if you have enough spontaneous bubbles you eventually get one that is really interesting does not satisfy his curiosity to know why. In any case, Rushdy realizes that if evolution works on Earth, it could also work in the Cosmos, and that it could be either spontaneous or the chosen method of someone wanting to get some creative work done.

None of this seems convincing or satisfying to him. The puffer fish's stories about a magical creation that comes with a whole bunch of laws that you must not break if you want to get a special reward and avoid the eternal fish fry — they just don't seem plausible anymore. On the other hand, the new stories about a world that came about by spontaneous accidents with laws that you *cannot* break seems pointless.

Frustrated, he takes a big leap. After years of just swimming around in the ocean, Rushdy goes upstream. And there, a new possibility dawns on him. Maybe he's been gazing too far ahead. Maybe some of the answers lie closer to home. Maybe, he thinks, I'm here because someone like me made sacrifices to bring me into existence. After all, I've seen some fish become parents. We salmon don't seem to have any, but it could be, couldn't it?

But then, he wonders, why aren't they here? Why didn't they leave us any answers?

Several strenuous leaps later, he realizes that it might not have been possible for them to do anything more than give him the best start in life they were capable of providing. Sure, it would have been nice to have parents around, and sure the world could be a better place for salmon — no pesky bears, for one thing — but maybe the parents just did the best they could. As these thoughts take shape in Rushdy's mind, he comes across a patch of newly laid eggs and acting out of deep instinct, he fertilizes them.

That done, he lies exhausted in a shallow pool. All color drains from his skin. The realization comes over him that he is dying, yet Rushdy is content. Although he has not answered the ultimate question, he has learned that it is unanswerable. Whether religious or scientific, the answers are liable to infinite regress. Yet, he has answered the biggest question — why are we here? Our purpose, he now knows, is to keep life alive.

As his gills haltingly pump for the last time, Rushdy sends a message to his offspring, a message he knows they will not receive, yet one he feels confident they will figure out: life is good.

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