

Holy Resurrection!? What Should We Tell the Children? April 12, 2026

Thank you to Kelly and the worship committee for inviting me into the conversation. Thanks also to my non-Christian wife, also a psych professor, for her patience with my late-life conversion and for insisting that I make sense. And thanks to all the people who sustain this vibrant community on committees, tech, flowers, bulletins, opening and closing, and other countless behind the scenes things. And thanks to all of you for your singing. Our family attended a missionary Mennonite church in Bolivia for a year when I was 8. They had a hymn-request part of the service and my hand would always pump up for “Low in the Grave He Lay.” What a thrill to hear it today for the first time, decades later.

Holy Resurrection—what should we tell the children? My suggested answer is, IT MIGHT ALSO MAKE SENSE! I’ll begin by describing shared features of many wisdom traditions. Next I’ll describe how three basic human motivation systems might account for those features. I’ll end with some personal reflections on resurrection, salvation, and making sense.

Why emphasize making sense?

First: When I shared some of these ideas with my 14yo daughter Ruby a few weeks ago, she blurted in exasperation—why don’t people say that! She asked me to say more. So here it is.

Second: There is a projected 50% decline in liberal church membership over the next ten years. Maybe it is time to experiment with how to make more sense in a scientific, multi-faith world?

Third: Inability to make sense left me kind of wandering for 40 years—from when I left home at 18 until only a few years ago. As a Baptist preacher’s kid I loved everything about my childhood church. It really was an extended family. I still have joy dreams about it. But it never made sense, so I was never baptised. My heart was not hard—its egg-carton was wide open. I even took courses at a seminary for a year. But my mum was a science teacher (before getting ordained) and my Dad was a paleontological research scientist. Making sense was important in our family.

Let’s start by zooming out beyond Christianity to shared features of the salvation arc in many wisdom stories, from Gilgamesh to Plato, Buddhism, and Erikson. The four features begin with letters that form the acronym, FIAT.

- **F is for the fallen state of Frustration**, characterized by experiences of anxiety, uncertainty, alienation, boredom, shame, and conflict. Frustration is portrayed as arising from uncertainty about or wanting the wrong things. Ignorant desire—Trishna, Sin, usually related to over focus on pleasure, success, and approval. It is characterized in various wisdom stories as a state of being trapped, enslaved, exiled, lost, oppressed, dis-integrated, exhausted, separated, dead to life, betrayed, violated, shackled in shadows, blind, lame, ashamed, surrounded by hostility and conflict. Characters initially react to by becoming aggressive, selfish, ambitious, and controlling, all of which cause more conflict and distress. And all of this chaos is further exacerbated by death awareness. Life is Dukkha suffering, and then you die. Why bother? F is for Frustration.
- **I is for Inspired Commitment**. People feel buoyed up and saved from despair by the simple act of devotion to an abstract path or ideal of moral goodness, most often revolving around Grace,

sometimes (though not always) personified as God. Mere commitment to the other-worldly ideals/Gods provides such surprising vitality that people want to yoke to and have their Being defined by them. This yoked commitment makes people feel joyful, born again, renewed, illuminated, enlightened, and energized with enthusiastic courage, gratitude, and generosity. Anxieties, resentments, and defenses that used to get in the way, now just melt away. Undistracted wilderness time (commonly under trees) and receipt of grace are often catalysts for this shift to inspired commitment.

- **A is for Actualization (and Avatars).** In this newly clarified state inspired commitment and relief from frustration, an Avatar of the ideals makes contact and shows people how to actualize the abstract ideals in concrete life. The avatar is a role model, teacher, prophet, or God incarnated with special knowledge of how to live with courage and integrity, inspired by the ideals, unfazed by death and frustration. Sometimes the avatar IS God incarnated, and sometimes is a conduit, mediator, or reflector.
- **Finally, T is for Thriving.** The inspired commitment and actualization bring peace, joy, hope, generosity, charisma, forgiveness, and compassion. Heaven on earth. A warm sense of well-being releases self-preoccupation and brings other people into focus in a new way. A spirit of unconditional love emerges, and relationships flourish with new intimacy and vitality.

With this FIAT arc in mind—frustration, inspired commitment, actualization, and thriving—now please consider a motivation-science account of why FIAT themes in wisdom stories might feel so moving and true. I might be wrong, but let's explore it by zooming into how three of the brain's most basic motivation systems interact—the anxiety, wanting, and liking systems. If you can bear with this next bit of relatively tedious explaining, your efforts may yield an ahaah! when (if) it all comes together at the end.

1. The **anxiety** system responds to frustration. Its job is to make you feel stressed, negative, restless, and vigilant when goals get mired in conflict or uncertainty. The conflict can be imposed, or from within the self, as when one wants incompatible things. Phasic states of agitated vigilance and anxiety are adaptive because they encourage switching to more promising goals or behaviours. When this anxiety system gets shut off by drugs or lesions, we get become less able to change course as needed. [Bart Simpson and electric cupcake]
2. In contrast, the **wanting** system kicks in when goals are clear and going well. It rivets single-minded focus to current goals, as in a flow state. The glare of distracting thoughts and feelings is filtered out, as if with polarized lenses. Ambient anxieties fade from awareness. This results in clear, confident, strong, and vital feelings with high-arousal and an edgy tone. Cocaine turns the wanting system on high, if that helps you imagine it. Normally the anxiety and the wanting systems inhibit each other and toggle back and forth as needed to keep viable goals on track.
3. The third is the **liking** system. It rewards the attainment of basic survival and mating experiences with a warm and mellow rush of pleasure. Its three hot buttons across species are food, sex, and homeostasis. Heroin and other opioids turn the liking system on high, if that helps you imagine its feeling tone. Crucially, however, in primates and especially humans, social cues related to cooperation and friendship also activate the liking system. Harmonious laughing, working, or singing also activates

it. Genuine smiles and friendly eye-contact spike it. Think of the feeling you get when Kelly Craiker smiles at you! Or Andrea Charette welcomes you at a soup event. Or Mark Weber effuses compliments to you. Even just imagining such rewards can activate the liking system. Importantly the liking system also mutes the anxiety system. Our human nature evolved this way, pulled by the adaptive advantages of capacities to tend, befriend, and cooperate.

How do the anxiety, wanting, and liking systems help make sense of salvation stories and the resurrection? We are almost there. The unique human capacity to think abstractly and self-reflectively enables commitment to values which are essentially long term goals, like “being a loving person,” or, “making a difference,” “or reflecting God’s unconditional love.” Capacity for abstraction also allows multiple goals and values to operate simultaneously in our imaginations. Importantly, abstract values activate wanting-system circuitry. This can be a massive vulnerability if values are unclear or conflicting, and personal goals are dissipated. Internally chaotic goal and value systems cause chronic activation of the anxiety system because the jumble of goals are mutually incompatible and frustrating. But on the other hand, merely thinking about authentic and clear personal value-commitments, aligned with other goals, can activate the wanting system to bring a surge of confidence and courage, and relief from ambient distress and defensiveness. Integrity pays motivational dividends—what Ghandi referred to as Truth Force!

Hundreds of published experiments over the past 30 years (several from my own lab) attest to this strange power of values. We frustrate research participants or induce them think about death to arouse anxiety, and then direct them to describe their most important value-commitments. Focusing on values eliminates their anxiety. It also makes them more graceful, truthful, inclusive, and less rigid, defensive, and punitive. This is because anger, aggression, power, control, impulsivity, rigid extremes, and self-enhancement all activate the wanting system. Anxiety makes defenses rewarding because the defenses (temporarily) mute anxiety. Proactive commitment to values, however enables a frustration-inspiration reflex to supplant frustration-aggression, frustration-coercion, frustration-compulsion, frustration-self-preoccupation habits. In the words of William James, religious rapture and moral enthusiasm incline the sand and grit of selfhood to disappear.

The last important bit here is that when describing their value-commitments, almost all participants describe love-related values. The few who don’t, don’t show the benefits. So, focusing on loving values has this strange and unique capacity to mute anxiety and make people graceful and truthful. From a brain chemistry perspective, commitment to loving values mutes anxiety by activating both the dopamine circuitry of the wanting system and the opioid circuitry of the liking system. This gives something like the kind of combination high that in the drug world is described as *lightening in silk pajamas*. But it doesn’t require dangerous drugs. Yoking to the inspiration of value commitments—what Joseph Campbell referred to as “following our bliss”—naturally infuses us with a strangely vital and mellow power.

To conclude—I submit that religious stories move us because they track motivational truths about human nature. A surprising and powerful kind of salvation comes from committed faith in loving ideals. This power can change lives, and give courage to live out ideals on earth as they are in abstract heaven.

Is resurrection a metaphor used in many religions because it describes the very real experience of being buoyed above a kind of anxious psychological death, to new vitality through commitment to values like God's unconditional love? Does this way of making sense help or hurt our ability to communicate a credible account of our faith in a multifaith world? For me, the Grace is more amazing and accessible when it also makes sense. Having this sense come together is part of what finally allowed me to go all-in with my own Christian faith, after 40 years of wandering.

The other piece was that my mother died in 2019. Writing her eulogy crystallized the loving essence of her Being, in my imagination. A few months later my sisters and I each had what felt like gentle visitation experiences from her inspiring essence. They were lovely and joyful. Her essence was abiding with, and inspiring us. She became an avatar.

Over the next few years frustration and stress hit with Job-like ferocity. A child-health trauma, COVID home-schooling three kids, while striving to excel in a new and more challenging job, and looking after my Dad with dementia until he died in 2021. All this felt a bit like hell. But buoyancy from faith felt like it kept me stronger than I could have been on my own. I wouldn't have been enough. The Buddha is said to have taught that enlightenment arises when three kinds of wisdom converge: from scripture, critical analysis, and experiential understanding. For me, the critical analysis piece was a weak link. When it all came together it was a beautiful thing.

So, what should we tell the children about salvation and resurrection stories? I might be wrong, but my inclination would be to say that they are beautiful and psychologically true, they reflect motivational dynamics of our evolved human nature, psychological interpretations make them multi-faith and scientifically compatible, and they can still fill hearts and communities with joy and generosity. So, even if physical resurrection claims are well-meaning word-of-mouth or editorial embellishments along the way, let's still triumphantly sing "Up from the grave he arose." Let's just also strive to explain what we mean in ways that make as much sense as possible.