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Leap of Faith

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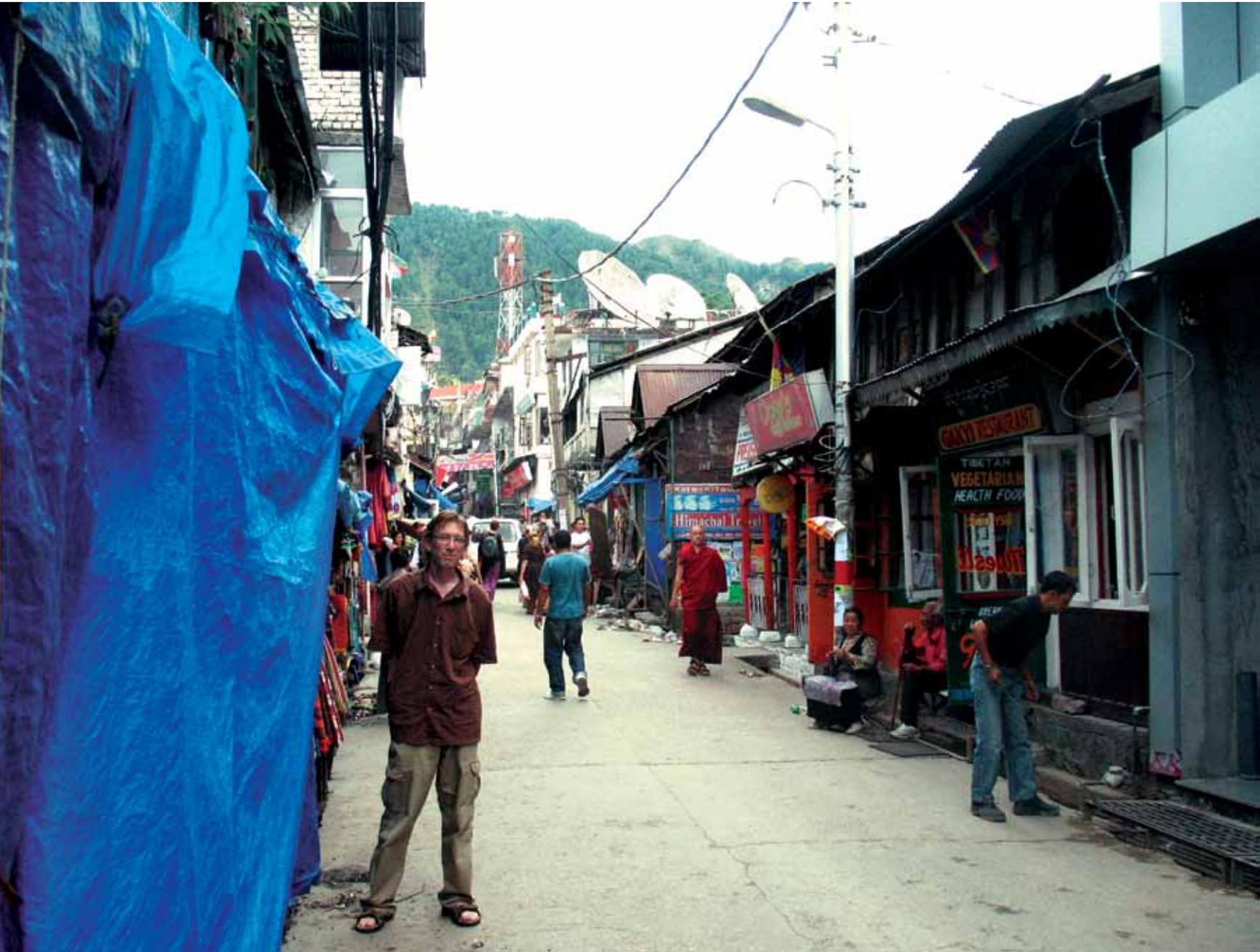
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*After trying to make sense of the world
from an intellectual point of view,
Paul Wallace now tackles the tough questions
from a spiritual perspective.*

LEAP



OF FAITH

By Andy Peters

Paul Wallace spent a decade teaching Berry College students about quantum mechanics, general relativity and the history of astronomy. Before he became a professor, Wallace received training as an experimental nuclear physicist on a particle accelerator at Duke University, where he earned his Ph.D. He later worked alongside NASA scientists analyzing data gathered from a gamma-ray observatory.

Wallace chose that career path because, according to friends and family members, he has always been preoccupied with figuring out how the world works.

But over the past decade, Wallace gradually realized that those intellectual pursuits weren't answering the questions that he really wanted answered. Specifically, he decided he wanted to combine his academic foundation in physics with his Christian faith in an effort to reconcile science and religion.

In a nutshell, Wallace wants to know the answers to life, the universe and, in general, everything. "I felt like I had gotten from science all I could get from it," he says. "The questions I wanted to address weren't really answered by science, questions of meaning and purpose. I don't think scientific understanding is the only understanding that is important."

So Wallace, a 1990 Furman graduate, did what his professional colleagues and many family members least expected of him. In 2008 he quit his tenured job as an associate professor at Berry to enroll in divinity school.

The career switch doesn't include plans for Wallace, a 42-year-old father of three, to take a steady-paying job as a church pastor or a hospital chaplain, even though he will be ordained as a Baptist minister in 2011.

Instead, he wants to pursue a ministry that primarily involves writing for his blog, "Positive Science/Negative Theology," which, among other things, engages its readers in dialogues about how they reconcile their Christian faith with evolution and other theories of science, and takes a critical look at pseudoscience, such as creationism. He plans eventually to convert the ideas, discussions and stories on his blog into a book. Visit the blog at <http://psnt.net/blog>.

Wallace, an Atlanta native, says his wife, Elizabeth Sides Wallace '91, "thinks I'm crazy. Some family members do, too." But he also points out that Elizabeth believes in him enough that she left her own job to return with him to his hometown while he enrolled in seminary.



Through an Emory University program, Paul Wallace traveled to India to share his knowledge of physics with exiled Tibetan Buddhists.

Keith Pierce '88, a Furman friend who is married to Wallace's sister, Kristen, says, "Paul gave up the kind of security most of us dream of for the leap of faith in which he still finds himself. It was a scary move, and most people I know couldn't sacrifice that kind of security to follow their call."

But another of Wallace's Furman friends, Jerry Salley '90, isn't surprised by the unorthodox career move. Nor is Salley flummoxed by his friend's apparent lack of concern about what people think of his decision.

"Without even mentioning a name, if you had told me about a physics Ph.D. who was leaving his tenured professorship to enter divinity school, I would have said, 'Hmm, that sounds like Paul Wallace,'" says Salley, who was Wallace's bandmate in the punk-rock group Biffen Gjaney that formed at Furman in 1989. "As far as I can tell, Paul never fit anybody's exact model of anything, nor was he particularly concerned with doing so."

Wallace uses his blog to display an unwavering tolerance of ideas from all corners of intellectual thought, from cutting-edge particle physics to the attempts by the Creation Museum of Kentucky to disprove the theory of evolution. His goal is to try to answer the ultimate questions about our existence.

By happy coincidence, less than two years after he dropped his gig as a professional physicist, Wallace was asked to put into direct application his fascination with how science and religion interact.

After leaving Berry, Wallace enrolled in Emory University's Candler School of Theology. In 1998 Emory, through its longstanding relationship with the Dalai Lama, established the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative to "expand the horizons of knowledge for Tibetan monks and nuns" and to provide a comprehensive education in Western science, according to the university. To carry out that mission, the university regularly sends faculty members to India to teach science to the Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who are living in exile from the People's Republic of China, which occupies Tibetan territory.

Through Candler School connections, people involved in the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative became aware of Wallace's background in physics. When an Emory faculty member who was scheduled to travel to India as part of the 2010 summer program backed out because of a professional conflict, Wallace was asked to take his place.

Once again, he found himself teaching astronomy — only this time his classroom was located near the village of Dharamsala in the Himalayan foothills of northern India, and his students were Tibetan monks who dressed in dark red robes and sat on the floor. Wallace's lectures, about the life cycles of stars, were translated by a Tibetan interpreter.

Wallace spent two weeks in India, where he ate plenty of Indian food and tolerated two four-hour taxi rides between Delhi and the village near Dharamsala in which the taxi driver attacked the roads as if he were playing a video game.

The India trip was especially poignant for Wallace for another reason. Long before his visit there, he had developed a profound and in many ways uncomfortable fascination with Buddhism. Many of the posts on Wallace's blog deal with his exploration of Buddhism and his interest in interfaith dialogue.

His engagement with Buddhism has become so intense that he calls himself "a Christian with a Buddhist resonance." Moreover, the way he describes his religious beliefs has

changed over time. In earlier blog posts he said he was a Christian in practice and a Buddhist at heart.

"I never wanted to be a Buddhist. I'm embarrassed to say how fascinated I am with Buddhism," Wallace says, adding that sometimes he feels as if he's "sleeping around" on Christianity.

Wallace says he and the Buddhist monks enjoyed interesting exchanges about theories of physics. Although the monks had been exposed to modern science during their childhood years, some concepts were completely new to them. Wallace's description of subtle points of Einstein's theories of general relativity and special relativity prompted one monk to tell him, "You are in error." Wallace was later able to explain the concepts to the skeptical monk's satisfaction.

But the monks were receptive to many other theories of physics and astronomy, such as the existence of black holes. Part of the reason they were so receptive, Wallace says, is that scientific tenets don't challenge the principles of Buddhism.

"None of those things conflicted with their Buddhist beliefs," he points out. "They don't have a problem with the idea of a time machine."

Wallace's interest in Buddhism is rooted partly in its similarity to science. Buddhism has a "pragmatic, empirical, no-nonsense" approach to daily life, he says, and the Buddha didn't ask questions like "Where is God?" or "Where did the world come from?" because those questions didn't help him reach his goal of relieving the suffering of others.

While Buddhism may not be concerned with these types of metaphysical questions, Wallace is. He wrestles with them on his blog and plans to address them in his book. Having tried to make sense of the world from the intellectual point of view, he now wants to tackle those questions from the spiritual perspective.

"I'm a dig-down-deep kind of person," Wallace says, "and purely scientific questions are not what captivate me anymore."

Instead, he is now more interested in how the religious beliefs of people of faith are affected — either positively or negatively — by the discoveries of modern science.

As is evident throughout his blog, Wallace doesn't have much patience with the purveyors of pseudosciences like creationism. In one of his postings, he compares a passage from the Institute for Creation Research about Earth's position in the universe to an absurdist skit from the English comedy troupe Monty Python. The comparison isn't meant to be flattering.





A meeting with the Dalai Lama was a highlight for Wallace and his fellow teachers and translators.

The Institute for Creation Research, a Dallas-based group that promotes Biblical creationism, tries to make the argument that the Earth's position in the Universe is "located at a very special location by design."

"That's a big no-can-do, crackerjack," Wallace writes. "The people who write this stuff know that their arguments are nonsense. They're much too smart to believe this stuff. It's politics, folks, not science."

But Wallace's blog is far from limited to poking holes in ideological warriors like the Institute for Creation Research, although when he does sharpen his knives, he douses his critiques with an ample portion of humor and wit. Many of his posts are personal and discuss sensitive topics, such as the reasons he abandoned Christianity while at Furman, the conversations he had with believers while still in college, and how those conversations helped him return to his faith.

Nor is "Positive Science/Negative Theology" confined to the musings floating around in Wallace's brain. Many posts find him responding to intellectual ideas from a wide range of sources, such as one entry about the philosopher-psychologist William James' descriptions of mystical experiences. Wallace is also engaged in an ongoing on-line discussion with an atheist in Tokyo about whether to trust your own mystical experiences.

Some of his blog writings provide evidence that Wallace is a prime example of a Furman student who really took the concept of a liberal arts education seriously. One post explores the notion of symbolism by seamlessly fusing ideas from the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte with the mathematical equation from quantum mechanics used to describe the wave function of subatomic particles.

More than anything, though, Wallace uses his blog to display an unwavering tolerance of ideas from all corners of intellectual thought, from cutting-edge particle physics to the attempts by the Creation Museum of Kentucky to disprove the theory of evolution. His goal is to try to answer the ultimate questions about our existence.

The task is one that many people, of course, would find intimidating and daunting. Good thing there's someone like Wallace who is willing to take on the challenge, says Jerry Salley, Wallace's bandmate and friend at Furman.

"Science and faith don't always seem to mix together very well," Salley says, "but if there's one person I'd trust with both of them, it's Paul." |F|

The author, a 1992 Furman graduate, is a reporter for the Fulton County (Ga.) Daily Report. Photos courtesy Paul Wallace.