

## AN ELEGANT EXPLANATION

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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“The blues is my business, and business is good.” Jamesetta Hawkins, born in 1938 to a 14-year-old mother who wasn’t interested in children and a father who had long since disappeared, knew everything there was to know about the blues. She once described her childhood as a series of one-night stands: she was continually passed from one relative to another. The only connective tissue in her life was music. She was a gospel choir prodigy at age five. By age fifteen, her vocal trio held the number 2 spot on the R&B charts with a salaciously raucous tune titled “Roll With Me, Henry.” By age sixteen, she was touring with Little Richard.

Etta James, as she came to be known, often lived indecorously and sometimes loved unwisely. She abused her body almost constantly. The men in her life—managers, singers, and family members alike—frequently took advantage of her: musically, financially, and sexually. Etta’s response to the chaos was to sing about her life with a fierceness and honesty that never failed her. She was a blues singer, rightly lauded as the best ever. Her incomparable voice was silenced by death this week, but her music will never stop.

In 1976, after a withering battle with heroin addiction, Etta launched a comeback with an album titled “The Seven Year Itch.” The most telling song on the album captures the paradox of Etta James: the power of her fierce spirit and the aimlessness of her fragile soul. In “I Got The Will,” she sings:

Let me tell you now  
What my mama told me, the old sayin’ is  
If there’s a will, girl, there’s got to be a way now  
Mama, I got the will but I can’t find my way now, oh no  
This is what you told me now  
You got the will, girl, you got the power now  
You got everything, good gracious Lord, have mercy

I got the will, I can’t find my way  
I got the will now, I can’t find my way now  
I got the power now, I got the will now...  
Can’t find my way now, mama, mama  
I got the will now, I can’t find my way now

Sometimes in life we have the will, Etta says, but we can't find the way. Other times, presumably, we know the way, but we can't seem to muster the will. In either case, getting from wherever we are to some place better is our biggest challenge in life. How do we get from here to there? How do we find both the will and the way?

At the start of each New Year, literary agent John Brockman poses a provocative question to more than a hundred leading scientists and science writers, and asks them to respond. Brockman posts the results on his website, *edge.org*. In years past, he asked: What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it? What are you optimistic about? What have you changed your mind about? What is your dangerous idea?

This year, Brockman asked: What is your favorite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation? In other words, what deep puzzle in the universe or in human life has been unexpectedly solved by applying a simple and elegant principle?

The answers include some principles you would expect, such as relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Granted, these might not seem simple to you and me; but to a scientist these comprehensive explanations of the universe in its largest and smallest dimensions are elegantly simple and deeply satisfying.

Other responses seem too obvious to qualify. For example, everything that survives survives. Or this: everything is the way it is because it got that way. Oh, really? My dad—who's not a scientist—would sometimes give a similar answer to my incessant questions about why this or why that. He'd say, "Just because."

My favorite among this year's crop of answers comes from Richard Thaler, a professor of behavioral economics at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business and co-author of the recent book *Nudge*. What's his deep, elegant and beautiful explanation? Commitment. He says, "It is a fundamental principle of economics that a person is always better off if they have more alternatives to choose from. But this principle is wrong. There are cases when I can make myself better off by restricting my future choices and committing myself to a specific course of action."

Thaler explains that the idea of commitment as a strategy is an ancient one. "Odysseus famously had his crew tie him to the mast so he could listen to the Sirens' songs without falling into the temptation to steer the ship into the rocks. And he committed his crew to not listening by filling their ears with wax. Another classic is Cortez's decision to burn his ships upon arriving in South America, thereby removing retreat as an option his crew could consider."

Thaler goes on to focus on this aspect of commitment, which has fascinated diplomats and game theorists for decades. A commitment can often be taken back. Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling grappled with this issue in his famous 1956 essay on bargaining. Lots of thorny issues can be solved—between nations negotiating a truce, for example, or companies negotiating a deal—only if both parties credibly commit themselves to the bargaining process, no matter the outcome. But how can I convince you that I will stay engaged, especially when my strategy is to bail out if I can't win the

upper hand? Besides, the opposite is also true: you know that I know that you might bail out too.

While this conundrum may be a concern for diplomats and dealmakers, it's not the elegant part of Thaler's response. Here's the simple part of the truth: things get done in this world because someone makes a commitment to do them. As explanations go, they don't get more elegant than this. If you have the will to commit yourself, you can find your way in life. As 20<sup>th</sup>-century American poet Theodore Roethke says in the title poem from his Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *The Waking*, "I learn by going where I have to go."

Some of you attended the Heart and Soul Auction at Christie's on Tuesday evening, when Dr. Paul Farmer received the Forrest Church Award for Humanitarian Service. You may also have attended Holly's program on Dr. Farmer and Partners in Health last Sunday after services. What's the key to Farmer's success in treating destitute people in Haiti and around the world? There's a single elegant explanation: commitment.

One of six children born to a nomadic father and an uncomplaining mother, Paul Farmer's homes as a child included an old bus, numerous trailer parks, and an old boat. Even so, he won a scholarship to Duke University, where he studied anthropology and graduated with highest honors. After graduation, he traveled to Haiti, where he was appalled by the poverty and suffering of the Haitian people. He found that he simply could not turn his back on them. In the little village of Cange, one of the most impoverished and diseased regions of Haiti, Farmer decided to set up a small clinic and get to work.

About the same time, he entered a joint M.D./Ph.D. program at Harvard. His fellow students soon began calling him Paul Foreigner, because he spent most of his time in Haiti, showing up back in Cambridge just in time for exams. As Farmer commuted between Harvard and Haiti, he began to notice that religious faith, which was disdained at Harvard, was profoundly important to the poor. Farmer says, "I was taken with the idea that in an ostensibly godless world that worshipped power and money or, more seductively, a sense of personal efficacy and advancement, like at Duke and at Harvard, there was still a place to look for God, and that was in the suffering of the poor. You want to talk crucifixion? I'll show you crucifixion."

Farmer says he has designed his life around what he calls areas of moral clarity, situations where what ought to be done seems perfectly clear, regardless of the difficulty. In the language of liberation theology, Farmer embodies a preferential option for the poor. Tracy Kidder writes of Farmer in his book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*: "He said patients came first, prisoners second, and students third, but this didn't leave out much of humanity. Every sick person seemed to be a potential patient of Farmer's and every healthy person a potential student. In his mind, he was fighting all poverty all the time, an endeavor full of difficulties and inevitable failures. For him, the reward was

inward clarity, and the price perpetual anger or, at best, discomfort with the world, not always on the surface but always there.”

Farmer simply refuses to accept any excuse, no matter how reasonable, for not treating the poor. He once spent a small fortune to Med-Evac a young Haitian boy, who had a rare form of cancer, to a hospital at Harvard. He once hiked seven hours over rough terrain just to check whether one of his patients had taken his AIDS medication at the right time. He had. For Paul Farmer, there is no such thing as trying too hard.

After following Farmer around for a number of months, Tracy Kidder wondered what could drive someone to such efforts. Farmer responded simply, “The problem is, if I don’t work this hard, someone will die who doesn’t have to.” He laughs off people who call him a saint, but then says, “People call me a saint and I think, I have to work harder. Because a saint would be a great thing to be.”

Today, Partners in Health employs more than 11,000 people in twelve countries around the world. How did this happen? Paul Farmer made a commitment to the destitute people of Haiti. He made a commitment. And he never looked back. He had the will, and he found the way. As elegant explanations go, this is one of the best. Things get done in this world because someone makes a commitment to do them. You learn by going where you have to go.

To those of you whose decision to join All Souls we celebrate this morning, I commend you. You have made a commitment. You had the will, and you found the way. No one yet knows how your life and our world will be different because of the commitment you have made—any more than the people of Haiti could have known the difference Paul Farmer would make. But they soon learned, as will we. Your commitment will become the elegant explanation of the difference you will make.

And what about the rest of us? What if you happen to be singing the blues today? For my part, I believe Etta James sang more truth than she realized. To have the will is to know the way. To have the power is to see the path. We learn by going where we have to go. So get going.

Ask yourself where in your life you need to stop waffling and make a commitment. Ask yourself where you need to start going and make progress. Things will get done in your life because you make a commitment to do them. You learn by going where you have to go. Explanations don’t get any more elegant than this.