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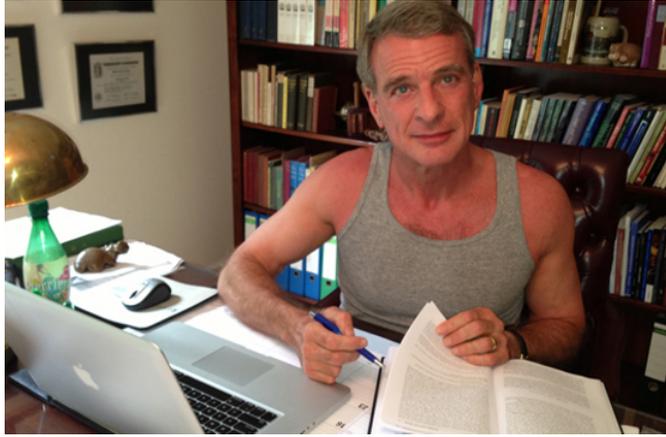
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7 HABITS OF A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PHILOSOPHER

by Nathan Schneider

Life lessons from the Christian apologist William Lane Craig.



William Lane Craig, from his July 2013 email newsletter.

Nobody—or just about nobody, depending on whom you ask—beats William Lane Craig in a debate about the existence of God, or the resurrection of Jesus, or any topic of that sort. During their debate at Notre Dame in April of last year, New Atheist author Sam Harris referred to Craig as “the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into many of my fellow atheists.”

Over the course of working on my book about how people search for proof of God’s existence, I had the chance to spend a generous amount of time with Craig, both in the Atlanta area where he lives and at Biola University, an evangelical school on the outskirts of Los Angeles, where he teaches a few weeks out of the year. For the book, I’ve gotten to write about ideas like his “kalam cosmological argument,” one of the most-cited ideas of its generation in philosophy of religion, which fuses medieval Muslims with modern cosmology. I also tell of his entrepreneurial savvy in turning the Evangelical Philosophical Society into an academic organization that moonlights as a slick-as-a-banana apologetics platform for changing hearts like yours and mine. But none of that quite captures the man’s role as a sage and exemplar, in which he renders something like the upbuilding service Oprah provides to home-bound American women, except that his acolytes are the precocious set among conservative, evangelical, young-adult males. He makes me almost wish I were that kind of conservative evangelical myself—which is, to him, the point.

Craig dresses impeccably and professorially, often with a buttoned shirt and a patterned blazer, sweater, or sweater-vest. His dimples hint at a basic innocence that can be startling when it pokes through the frontage of logic. I find in Craig the decency associated with an era I am too young to be nostalgic for, and which I’ve been taught to imagine was imperialistic, sexist, homophobic, narrow-minded, or otherwise regressive. His rationalizations of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible can sound like he’s okay with genocide. Yet none of these accusations quite sticks to him; none

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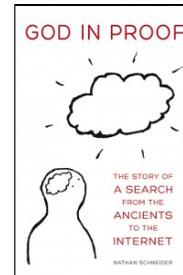
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is even comprehensible in the cosmic snow-globe within which he expertly thinks his way through life, whose sole and constant storyline is bringing more and more souls to a saving knowledge of the one true Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I live in a different snow-globe from Craig's. Nevertheless, I've gained a lot from the lessons I learned with him, and from his carefully crafted advice, and from his answers to my questions. ("I may not answer, but you can ask!" he once warned.) They've improved my productivity, and my relationship with loved ones, and my physical fitness. It would be selfish if I did not pass some of these lessons on, in synthesized and practicable form, to you.

1. Do Everything Like It's a Ministry

Each day during the two-week, winter-session course that Craig teaches for master's philosophy and apologetics students at Biola, he begins with a short devotional reflection. On my first day sitting in on the class, the text he recited came from Howard Hendricks, a famed professor at Dallas Theological Seminary: "Men, don't study for a class, study for a life of ministry." That it was addressed to "men" was almost appropriate; of the 15 or so people in the class that day, only two were women—one, a visiting significant other, and the other, a retired housewife. But, for anyone, the message is the same: Pursue the higher calling of serving God, and success will follow.

What, though, should we think of as success? This was the subject of other devotional reflections during that fortnight of classes. Craig quoted Bill Gothard, minister and founder of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, as having said, "Success is not measured by what you are compared to others; success is what you are compared to what you could be." While one might be tempted to take this maxim as license for lowered expectations, Craig's interpretation was, of course, wiser. Consider this "humility for the proud," he said—for where much is given, more is expected—and "encouragement for the discouraged."

Another morning's reflection offered yet another view on success, this time, from 1 Corinthians: "the foolishness of God is wiser than men." Craig was surely speaking from his own experience when he warned his students not to hope for academic respectability above all. "Don't seek the praise of men, but the praise of God." And: "You're not really ready to be used of God," he warned them, in typically antique syntax, "until you're ready to be seen a fool for Christ." Here he speaks from experience; "my burden is evangelism," he once told me over lunch. Preaching his gospel has often conflicted with mainstream academia's expectations, but by the standards of ministry, he's been an eminently faithful servant.

Surely we can use every chastisement we can get against careerism, and every encouragement to make service our business. It's the job of each of us to discern the ministries we have to offer and to carry them out as such—foolishly if necessary.

2. Make a Covenant with Your Wife

This lesson should come as no surprise from an evangelical of Craig's stripe. But among philosophers, who are notoriously solitary creatures, it definitely bears repeating. "I am not a philosopher of mind, so I don't have any great insight into the properties of persons," he once noted, while evading an esoteric question from a student in class. More to the point, though, is his hope "that you not become so work-oriented that you let the other be neglected and you put your career in front of this person that you've pledged yourself to love and care for." The first section heading on his curriculum vitae is "FAMILY," under which are listed his wife Jan and two children.

He tells stories about times that he has struggled in this with Jan. While a graduate student, he used to buy a lot of books for himself, even though the family didn't have much money. Jan finally had had enough when he came

home with a copy of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*; she reprimanded him for the alleged waste. From then on, he committed himself to buying only books that were assigned for class, and to this day he buys very few of those.

He recommends to his students, "Make a covenant with your wife." Promise her that you will not "sacrifice your relationship on the altar of academic success." Make sure she knows that you're willing to give up your career entirely if she needs you to. Once he promised that to Jan, Craig explains, she became far more tolerant of his need to focus on work, because she knew that ultimately her needs mattered more to him. Craig instructed, also, that "when you talk to a woman it's very different than talking to other guys." While making your covenant, look her long and hard in the eyes.

One of the students that year had just become engaged to be married, and over the course of the class he and Craig had an ongoing exchange—in philosophical terms, of course—about whether God singles out a particular person that we're supposed to marry or whether, in the student's words, God wants us to "just pick a woman and love 'er." Craig, who is a defender of a sixteenth-century theory of God's foreknowledge known as Molinism, argued for the former—that God knows exactly who is right for each of us. God's criteria for this determination, furthermore, are not simply a matter of the person who will make you happiest—God isn't out to make life "a bowl of cherries"—but about finding the person with whom you will bring about the salvation of the most souls.

To this end, Craig especially encourages his students to consider marrying a missionary. He, for one, met Jan while they were working together for Campus Crusade for Christ. "These single women on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ are really choice women," he explained to me. "They are young, single, intelligent, university graduates, *very* attractive, independent, and capable of managing their own finances and a ministry." If everything is a ministry, after all, so is your partnership.

3. Organize the Day

There was a time, says Craig, when he began to worry he was losing his knack for philosophy. "Honey," he remembers telling Jan, "I don't know what's the matter with me. I just can't seem to concentrate anymore. I used to be able to study all day long, and there was no problem, and now I find I just can't concentrate anymore. My mind wanders, and I'm tired." He was tempted to despair.

"No, no, don't be ridiculous!" she told him. "You just need to organize your day."

As usual, she was right. She put him on a new schedule: starting the workday with the hardest philosophical work in the morning, then lighter material, like his writing for popular audiences, after lunch. He doesn't look at his email until late afternoon, "when my brain is really fried." (For fear of being bombarded with mail, he doesn't even share his email address with his graduate students.) Soon after trying this regime, he regained his philosophical powers completely.

The couple's life together, at home in the suburbs of Atlanta, is a picture of (a certain kind of) teamwork. Craig wakes up each morning at 5:30, and begins the day with devotional time, reading from the Church Fathers and the New Testament in Greek, and then he prays for the spread of the gospel in some benighted part of the world, with the help of the *Operation World* handbook. Soon, Jan is up. They have coffee together (which he dislikes, but recommends for the health and social benefits), after which he goes down to the weight room for an hour of exercise. By the time he reemerges, she has a hot breakfast ready and waiting—sometimes as elaborate, he says, as ham and eggs and pumpkin waffles with whipped cream and strawberries. ("She's a fabulous cook.") He'll return downstairs for an intensive morning of scholarship, and reemerge for the hot lunch Jan has prepared. Then, he's

back downstairs for the lighter work of the afternoon, culminating in emails, which he responds to in longhand and she has often been the one to type out and send, since his rare neuromuscular disease—more on that in a moment—renders him unable to type. Between meals and typing sessions, Jan plays the stock market. Before long dinner is ready, and they eat, and spend the evening together, watching TV and drinking red wine (which he also dislikes, but also recommends for the health and social benefits).

“She’s not an intellectual herself,” Craig says of his wife, “but she appreciates the value of what I do, and that’s what matters.” One would hope that this is true, because she has typed out all of his papers, books, and both doctoral dissertations. Would that we all had such devoted help, though it may be untenable in the present economic climate for those scholars among us unable to garner five-figure speaking fees. We can at least hold off on our 5/r email for a few hours—which I have since done, to enormous benefit.

4. Turn Weakness into Strength

One of the defining facts of William Lane Craig’s life is the aforementioned Charcot-Marie-Tooth syndrome, which has afflicted his nervous system since birth, causing atrophy in his hands and feet. His case is relatively light, but debilitating nonetheless. As a boy, he couldn’t run normally, preventing him from excelling at sports.

“Children can be very cruel, and make fun, and call you names,” he told me, curling his brow in sincerity, but without losing his poise. “That makes you feel like dirt, like you’re worthless.”

In early 1980s, Craig traded a friend apologetics lessons for some sessions in marriage counseling with Jan, and it was only then that he realized the effect those memories from his childhood have had on him. “Emotions welled up within me and I began to cry,” he said. “I didn’t realize just how bad I still felt. I still had these feelings inside of me.” Those sessions helped him understand that his drivenness and determination as an adult are also a result of those early frustrations.

“Well, I’ll show them,” he imagined himself thinking, beneath the surface. “I’ll make something of my life, and they won’t make fun of me anymore.”

That’s why he first started debating in high school. “I was no good at athletics,” he told me, “but I could represent my school by being on the debate team.” There, he excelled, and traveled across Illinois for competitions, debating all four years of high school and through his four years at Wheaton College as well. “The Lord has used this in my life to help me,” Craig can now say about his disease. And now, in his early sixties, exercising six mornings a week (all but Sunday) means he’s in better shape than when he was in his twenties.

“Bodily exercise profiteth little,” went the text of one of the morning devotions in his class—a passage from 1 Timothy. “But it doesn’t say there’s *no* profit!” Craig continued, as if relieved, and then proceeded to outline his exercise regimen for his students, recommending Mayo Clinic newsletters and bodybuilder Bill Phillips’s *Body for Life* program.

Craig once noted that he really likes the idea of how plate tectonics and volcanoes and earthquakes are part of what God used to make life on Earth possible, spewing up the necessary elements from underneath the crust. It’s the same logic he applies to his own life—trauma transformed for a higher purpose. Even the Christmas tsunami of 2004 “would be *great*,” he said, if God could use it to bring more people to Christ. In that case, “Thank God for the suffering.”

GOD IN PROOF



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5. Be Prepared

Confronting horrific suffering so philosophically, and so spiritually, takes practice. Part of the two-week course concentrated on the so-called problem of evil, which deals with whether God can be consistent with the experience of so much pain and cruelty in the world. “The study of philosophy can help prepare one for suffering,” Craig told his class. Such study helps one see the work of God in the world, or at least trust in God’s unsearchable providence. He promised, “This has real devotional bite.”

The arena in which Craig’s penchant for preparedness is especially on display is, of course, debating. Throughout any given debate, often against a valiant atheist challenger, he never seems to lose his unflappable confidence, except to venture into ridicule. He has an answer ready for every objection, with a relevant quotation in his notes to drive it home, as if some of God’s Molinistic foreknowledge of the opponent’s moves is wearing off on him.

Really, though, the process is very straightforward; it’s one that he learned back in the debate team on high school and practiced for years even before he later took to debating about religion. In advance of a debate, sometimes for months ahead of time, Craig makes sure to read through the opponent’s oeuvre, and to “scout the Internet” for videos of the speaking style and mannerisms he’ll be up against. In some cases, he’ll even hire assistants to read through the opponent’s writings and prepare synopses that he can skim. He methodically lays out what he thinks the opponent will try to argue, and what objections might be raised to his own arguments, and then prepares rejoinders accordingly, filing notes on each so they’re at the ready during the debate. Otherwise, he says, “I have great difficulty remembering this stuff.”

Nota bene, if you’re preparing to face him and can somehow turn his meticulousness to your advantage. It’s hard to imagine how, though, except by even more of the same. Even the cleverest of zingers tend not to phase him.

6. Remember That Time Is Everything—and Nothing

There is no weapon that Craig wields more effectively in a debate than the clock. When I asked for his secrets, he told me, “The ability to know how to say something succinctly, to get to the point and move to the next point, is really, really important.” He plans out exactly what he intends to say and proceeds through it methodically, making sure that he can get from the beginning to the end, without rushing or skipping around from point to point and back. When his opponent proceeds to bounce back and forth through a few objections and fails to reply to each of the points Craig made, Craig can remind the audience at the end how many of his points remain standing, uncontested.

He does this in just about every single debate, and it’s so effective that people complain. He defended himself to me: “Now I think you can see, Nathan, that’s not a rhetorical trick! That’s not a clever device!” It’s just a *technique*, and it works.

Time, however, is not always on William Lane Craig’s side. During the class’s discussions of temporality, he quoted the passage from *Macbeth* about the shortness of human life as “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“This really resonates with me,” he said.

In his telling article “On the Argument for Divine Timelessness from the Incompleteness of Temporal Life,” he suggests, “It is far from obvious that the experience of temporal passage is so melancholy an affair for an omniscient God as it is for us. Indeed, there is some evidence that consciousness of time’s flow can actually be an enriching experience.”

Repeat: It's "obvious" that the very flow of time is "melancholy" "for us," except perhaps for "some evidence" that may "actually" exist to the contrary.

The search for the infinite and the eternal, and dissatisfaction with anything less, is a constant theme in Craig's scholarship and his rhetoric. Either something is eternally meaningful, or valuable, or it is nothing. Contrary to the legions of non-religious philosophers (and others) who seem to find benefit in reflecting on ethics and morality, in a debate with philosopher Louise Antony, he described thinking of morality in the context of atheism as being "like shuffling chairs on the deck of the Titanic." What we do with our worldly lives isn't worth squat to him unless it's noticed by an infinite and eternal God.

Love is a possible exception. In class he would sometimes talk (as a philosophical example, of course) about the moments when you're with the person you love, and you're enjoying it so much that in the moment it seems to last forever. Even then, though, the value of such passing moments comes only from their resemblance to eternity.

Some of the students disagreed. They tried to argue that love is only possible within time. What would love be without memory, or aging, or the possibility of loss? In a discussion about the love felt among the persons of the Trinity before the creation of the universe, the students contended that the Trinity must have existed in time in order for its members to love one another. But Craig's God, on the contrary, is very much at home in timelessness.

7. Love God and Authority

Bill and Jan Craig moved to Cobb County, Georgia, through a process of deduction; it best suited each of the various criteria they sought to satisfy. Now Bill can't imagine a better choice. He loves Cobb County, which is a northern suburb of Atlanta. He also loves the United States of America in general, a love he sometimes expresses by wearing his necktie with a soaring bald eagle, just as in high school he longed to bring honor to his high school through the warfare of debate. His patriotism extends to every level of life, and his philosophy duly upholds the rightly-ordered authorities he recognizes: God, family, country, church, school.

Reason, as he wields it, buttresses each of these and is thereby also buttressed by them. By defending the God of historical Christianity he is in turn backed by two millennia of Christian truth in all its accumulated power and majesty. By loving his family he wins the material provisions and typing prowess of Jan. By loving his country's might he can hold his head high in Cobb County, one of the capitals of the military-industrial complex, where the largest employer is the Lockheed Martin plant that builds the disastrous F-22 fighter. (Even my cab driver there, a recent African immigrant, accused me of being a communist for questioning its utility.) By loving his church, Johnson Ferry Baptist, he has a large and well-organized congregation from which to populate a weekly, semi-liturgical apologetics class; worshiping under the sanctuary's elevated, shimmering baptistry behind retractable doors, the community reinforces his lonesome scholarly activities. By loving the institution where he works—Biola University—his ideas become the ammunition for strategic efforts to prepare large numbers of smart students for academic and cultural conquest.

Each of these powers stand behind Craig, in perfect order, with every word he utters—instilling in him, in turn, their authority and gravity. Despite the appearance of being a mainly independent scholar, he is continually enmeshed in these noble dependencies, and they uphold him. His philosophy is not his alone, but theirs also, making it that much more formidable. As their champion, his bearing is dominant and successful, with the willingness to give you a leg up to his plateau if you'll take it—but if you'd prefer not to, your loss.

There is no one like Craig, to be sure, but all that he does is inseparable from the powers that he serves. In a conversation in class at Biola about Saul Kripke's notion of "rigid designators," the retired housewife asked, as an example, "What makes Bill Craig Bill Craig?"

Craig—like a lot of philosophers, I've found—has a way of saying revealing things in technical utterances, unconscious turns of phrase with their own meanings when taken by themselves, out of context, and interpreted literally. All of philosophy, I sometimes think, might be considered one great Freudian slip.

To the student he replied, "I'm not sure how to answer a question like that."

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Nathan Schneider is an editor of *Killing the Buddha* and writes about religion, reason, and violence for a variety of publications. He is also a founding editor of *Waging Nonviolence*. His first two books, published by University of California Press in 2013, are *God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet* and *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse*. Visit his website at [The Row Boat](#).

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