

Determinism on a summer morning in the Midwest

by [Jeff Gundy](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue

*Ibn 'Ata' (d. 922) declared that [rida] is "the heart's regard for what God chose for the servant at the beginning of time, and it is abandoning displeasure."*

—Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim, "What Is Rida?"

1.

There's no such thing as free will and that's bad, or so says Stephen Cave in *The Atlantic*. I guess that explains my decision

to read his whole grim article this morning, when I had plans to walk around town, mail a package, buy a retirement card

for Susan, have a cup of coffee uptown as I always think I should but rarely do. The problem, says Cave, isn't that

we don't have free will but that we need to think we do.

"It seems that when people stop believing they are free agents, they stop seeing themselves as blameworthy for their actions."

2.

Dostoyevsky said, *If God is dead, everything is permitted*, but the claim has not been proven to my satisfaction.

There are tulips and a daffodil on the table, in a glass mostly full of water. There's a child's orange coat hanging

by the door. Who can say when the gates will open, or what they'll reveal? Lisa's five or six tables away,

but her voice is the only one I can hear. Not the words, just the tone. She passed along what sounds like bad news,

though not a catastrophe. What am I doing here? Anywhere? It feels like I'm free, but only because

I have no idea what to do next. OK, I have several ideas, just none that seem halfway interesting.

Out on the sidewalk a woman with a child's hand clutched in hers passed one way, then back the other.

3.

*Blonde on Blonde* is fifty years old. Dylan is still touring. There are songs that mean more to me than most

of the Bible. I have fair-sized chunks of the Bible and dozens of Dylan songs "by heart," which means

"lodged in my brain, to emerge at unpredictable moments." Should I leave them by your gate? Should I wait?

4.

I have to go pee or just go home. There's nobody at home, nobody in my office, I'd be safe either place, it would

seem like I could do anything I wanted. Maybe not disappear, or fly, or grow hair on the top of my head.

I could get in the car and drive straight north to the lake, or cross the bridge to Canada, or take the small roads

across the open prairies till they dwindle into traces.

5.

MS Word fixes some of my typos, but not all of them.

People I know keep wandering along the sidewalk.

The woman I thought was Susie isn't. The sky is gray but no rain yet. The spring has been miserable.

I pay young folks to mow, spread mulch, things I could do but just don't want to. I get on the bike and tear around

the country roads instead, come home sweaty and pleased with myself. The tomatoes are still in their little plastic pots.

The broccoli is leggy and sulking. Who wants to believe it's all my fault? Who wants to believe it isn't?

6.

"Wherever you go, you take yourself with you," says Neil Gaiman, also "You can't make me love you."

I'm pretty sure that when he said you he didn't mean me.

7.

For years I've loved the notion of being lost, thanks to Rebecca Solnit's *Field Guide to Getting Lost*,

not to mention Jesus and Thoreau. I've lived for decades in the same house on the same street in the same town

but I've never quite gotten my head around being saved.

In an old poem I wrote something like "He decided to save

his soul, the way some people save / handkerchief boxes . . ."

8.

"Sleep," says Picard-as-Locutus. "He's exhausted," says Dr. Crusher. But he's telling them how to destroy

the Borg vessel before they assimilate everybody.

There are many ways to awaken. Some are fatal.

Others will save you, if you can be saved, whatever it means to be saved. On *Star Trek Data* figures it out quickly

and the cube ship explodes, leaving the Federation safe and the members of the Borg collective

in a spectacularly less structured condition.

9.

I still don't know how to be myself and belong to something at the same time, much less rest easy

where I am, however pleasant, however graced.

These days all I want to do is sleep, and eat,

and ride my bike for hours on the sweaty blacktops,  
drain my water in the first ten miles, fog my glasses,

not bother to glance at the corn to this side,  
the soybeans to the other, slow as little as I dare

at the blind corners where a pickup may be  
blazing my way with its oblivious tons of doom.