

# ***FIXING THE CHRISTIANS***

by Michael Craig

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Dedication

*For my father*

*Paul Finley*

*1921-2006*

*with gratitude and affection*

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## **1. Living Next Door to Lazarus**

In the fall of 1995 my family packed up all its belongings into a truck and moved them from the 2000 block of Dayton Avenue in the leafy neighborhood of Merriam Park in Saint Paul, to the 1800 block – a move of about six blocks.

Our two children, Aretha, 12, and Gus, 8, were getting older, and we wanted them both to have rooms. Gus had a room in the old house, but it was more of a nursery wrapped around a chimney than a room for a growing boy.

The move was a mistake, from a financial standpoint. I am a freelance writer, and I had enjoyed some good years down the street, writing copy for various businesses and magazines, and even a couple of business books. So we assumed that the good times would continue, and we could afford the larger house.

We were wrong, but it was an American mistake, begotten of optimism. We thought things would stay the same, or get better. But my business began going bad almost the minute we took on the new obligations.

We are a funny group. When we packed the truck up, it included about forty boxes of books I had acquired over the years. Many of these books were by philosophers and mystics, like Alan Watts, P.D. Ouspensky, and the great poet Jalaluddin Rumi. I was very proud of my library, but I hadn't actually read most of the books. Because of them, friends thought I was very spiritual, and I did little to discourage this idea. My library was like my wardrobe: it was how I wanted to be seen.

I am a clever, jittery fellow. I never say just *yup* or *nope*. I always have to twist things a bit. Sometimes to be funny, sometimes just to be weird. Sometimes to up the ante on what everyone else has said -- to put my stamp on it. My friends see this behavior and accept that my intentions are good. ("Mike has a good heart.") Others, I can tell from the way they look at me sometimes, have pegged me as a difficult person, a bit of a flake.

My wife Lily, a nurse practitioner at a poor people's clinic, is a schemer. She lies awake at nights thinking of ways we can live well without having much income. She clips all the zero percent credit card offers that come into the house, and she spins our faltering finances like acrobat's plates on long sticks. She finds ways to send us on great vacations on a dime, to New Orleans, New York, or Hawaii. Every day she amazes me.

Lily is a singer, sitting every night at the piano and picking out jazz standards. A part of her has always burned to be on stage, giving everything she has to a song of Ella's or Billie's or Peggy Lee's. It's why I married her way back in 1981. I saw a fire of desire when I looked into her eyes, a supernova of desire that fanned out across her freckled face. Not desire for me, but for marvelous things to happen in her life.

I once wrote a poem comparing the two of us to lions. I was the indolent male sprawled out on the veldt, batting away flies with his tail. She was the virtuous panting female actually chasing down game and bringing it home still twitching and bloodied for me to sink my appetite into.

My mother, before she died, laid the ultimate compliment/curse on Lily: "God knows you are very proficient," she said. That was mean. Lily is unbelievably loving – it's just that her way of loving you is to solve all your problems, including ones you didn't know you had.

And our kids. Aretha, rosy-cheeked and verbal, but estranged from the other kids at school. She was vocally unhappy about the move to the new house, convinced she was losing out. (Gus got a bigger room. Aretha's was a few cubic centimeters smaller.) "It'll never be like the yellow house," she complained in the back seat, clutching her stuffed blue caterpillar with the pipe-cleaner eyebrows. "Nothing will."

And Gus, our youngest, with a face so serious, so dour, you'd think he had been child-witness to some shocking crime, like young Bruce Wayne. As a toddler Gus could be lively, helicoptering a plastic saber over his head or swinging like a gibbon from a branch of a tree. The rest of the time, he had some vaguely autistic certain traits of mild autism. He seldom smiled. He had trouble with pronunciation. He was bad at transitions – going from one activity to the next.

And he was lost in his own little head. though he was never actually diagnosed. Many things you said to Gus, you had to say twice – because he took that long to realize he was being addressed. Enclosed in his rude cocoon, he seemed was insulated from reality. He mostly lived in his room, playing stalking games on his PC.

We were one family, but we lived on four separate planets. And now we were following the moving truck in our old Volvo to our new home six blocks up Dayton Avenue.

When the moving truck pulled up at the curb, we met our new neighbors the Garrins for the first time. Alex Garrin, a smallish man about my age - mid 40s -- was throwing a raggedy foam football on his front lawn with his two sons. Gus and I joined them, and within sixty seconds he was friends with Ian and Dwight.

Shaking hands with Alex, I made an oafish remark about the house I had just bought: "The price tag on this place is going to put me in the fucking grave."

"So," I asked Alex. "What kind of work do you do?"

"Oh, I'm pastor of a small church here in Merriam Park," he said. I looked into his eyes.

There was glint of humor there, but also something serenely stubborn. I thought these words: "Beware the man who knows who he is."

"Sorry about the F-word thing."

Alex laughed. "Not a problem, Mike. We have a mortgage, too."

I realized that apologizing was probably worse than saying the word in the first place. It implied he was not up to it, he was a bluenose, etc. Oh, I was getting off to a super start! Why do I say things like that? I wondered. What's the matter with me? I guess I just get anxious. I'm an edgy sort of guy, and I like to break rules in hopes it comes across as rakish and engaging. Alex was cool about it. But I noted how I managed to put my foot in my mouth multiple times within ten minutes of our arrival at the new house.

Life in the new neighborhood was great. We liked our big Victorian house. I got my own office space up in the unfinished third floor attic area, typing among the rafters and swatting bats with a tennis racquet.

Our family and the Garrins quickly became “best neighbors.” Alex was a better dad than me. I had tried for years to teach both my kids how to ride bikes. My approach, passed on to me by my equally useless dad, was to push them into a parked car and watch as they scraped the hell out of themselves. It was a lousy method. Aretha was phobic after the sixth or seventh major scraping – her knees looked like a NO HUNTING sign that’d been blasted by a shotgun -- and Gus just didn’t see the point of transportation, since there was no place he really wanted to go anyway.

One day when I wasn’t looking, Alex stuck a sawed-off broomstick down the back of Gus’s bike, giving him a handle on the bike. Then he ran alongside until the magic of gyroscopic action became apparent to Gus, who raced through the neighborhood exhilarated with his new capability.

When Aretha saw that Gus had leapfrogged him on a childhood developmental milestone, Alex had to do the same with her, and she rode for the first time, at age 13. It was a delirious day for our children and for us. But just another day on the block for Alex Garrin.

Alex' wife Beth never hesitated to send one of their six kids over to our place to borrow a couple of eggs or a cup of brown sugar. Lily and I were charmed to have such down-to-earth and decent friends. I mean, what could be better than borrowing an egg or listening to a ballgame in the backyard ? It was so neighborly! It was how life should be - people turning casually and comfortably to one another when they're out of eggs. "Can we borrow that egg back?" always felt just a little bit like "We are loving the daylights out of you guys!"

It didn’t matter that they were strict evangelicals, and we were whatever the hell we were. Spiritual but cool. Able to sort through all the theological ingredients and cook up a cafeteria-style religion that was high in poetic sensibility but low in fatty acids.

If you want a quick label to paste on Lily and me, we will stand still for “hippies in hiding.” I lived in a commune in California ages ago, and for a while ran a natural foods root beer company, before the government shut me down. Lily was an early devotee of the eclectic Whole Earth ethic of growing your own food and securing your own health. We didn’t actually raise our own food. We ordered out a lot. But there was a sense in which we were always accumulating our own variety of wealth and wisdom. In the cafeteria of meaning, we were loading our trays a la carte.

We were both lifelong Democrats. We worshiped Martin Luther King back in the day, and Gene McCarthy and Shirley Chisholm. We were anti-war and pro-choice. We didn’t hate all Republicans – but we despised the bullying Christian wing of the party, Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson and those folks. But also the crooks and neoconservatives who led our nation into ruinous wars, drained our surpluses and seized unprecedented power for themselves under the guise of wartime: Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Karl Rove, George Bush, Tom DeLay, Condoleeza Rice, John Bolton, John Ashcroft, Jack Abramoff, Grover Norquist, all the players who played this country for fools while currying favor with the religious right.

As for religion, Lily remembered the “Baruch Atah Adonai” calls from her visits to synagogue as a child, but that was about all the Jewishness she could summon. In recent years she had studied Buddhist thought and Hatha Yoga and meditation. But did she have a conventional religion? No. Her religion was the First Church of Lily -- solving life's problems with knowledge and pluck.

The Church of Lily had its drawbacks. Once she read an article about surviving airplane crashes, which said that people wearing polyester often suffered terrible burns after crashing because their clothing was so flammable. For years we boarded planes wearing all-cotton clothes, glancing smugly around at the poor goners wearing nylon and Polarfleece. Wouldn't they be sad when the plane went into a dive. And wouldn't we be high-fiving all the way down.

When the kids were little, we had good intentions about spirituality, but we never did much about it. Oddly, it was Aretha who expressed an appetite for religion in her life. When she was 10 she got us to take her to Mount Zion Synagogue, where she had a really good Sunday School teacher. But the next year she didn't like the teacher so much, and she dropped out. The year after that, she started going to her best friend Betsy's church, just down the street. It was a cavernous old building with a congregation of about thirty people. The girls practically had the place all to themselves. By the time she was fourteen, Aretha dropped out of this place, too – I never learned why.

At fourteen she was a high schooler and her crowd was getting rougher. Lily and I talked about doing thoughtful readings before evening meals – from the Bible, Koran, Rumi, Kabir – anything to kindle an awareness of the spiritual dimension. We even tried it a few times. But we were too self-conscious about it. Aretha and Gus have always had terrific artifice detectors, and they were beeping and flashing away. After a while we dropped the poetry and ate supper in unceremoniously.

I was less a stranger to churches and religion than Lily. I was raised Catholic, but sloughed it off as highschoolers do as the province of tiny minds. Later on, as an adult living out in the country, I reconsidered enough to attend a Presbyterian church. Returned in the city, we attended Mount Sinai Temple on Summit Avenue for a few months, auditioning Reform Judaism. They had a husband and wife rabbinical team who taught Torah using marionettes. Services careened wildly from the inscrutable (Baruch Atah Adonai) to the ineffable (their version of Jerry Mahoney and Mortimer Snerd). We passed.

Religiously, I always had good feelings about God and Jesus. I considered myself insightful about them, in a noncommittal sort of way. Just as I was a freelance writer, so was I a freelance believer. I wanted a God who reflected my own cool values.

“God wants us to find out what he wants,” I told them. His favorite people had to be artists, sensitive and open-minded, because wasn't Jesus like a kind of poet? My theology amounted to a blank check to do whatever I wanted, then blame the outcome on God.

I remembered a mystical throwaway line from a Neil Young live album: "It's all one song," Neil said. I made that line my banner in life. Everything was connected. God sent Jesus, and Buddha, and Muhammad, and everyone else. We are saved ten ways to Sunday. Every day, every bluebird, every random event in our lives is messianic.

It was a theology as wide as all outdoors.

Here's a memory I had almost forgotten. At age 19, I was consuming a lot of Boone's Farm apple wine, smoking some bodacious weed and hiding a single copy of Penthouse under my futon on the floor of my efficiency apartment. I had a temporary job at an auto parts warehouse conducting inventory counts. I was paired with a divinity student named Jim – a Baptist, maybe. Over a week's time he and I totaled up all the spark plugs and carburetor kits on the shelves. I liked Jim. He did not try to baptize me when I wasn't looking, and just generally was not as full of bull as I expected a person with his background to be full of.

I specifically remember him turning to me on his stepladder one day, in the fan belt section, and remarking, as if the idea had just come to him magically: "You know, Mike, I just had a funny feeling, a kind of vision, that one day you will be a wonderful leader."

I blushed with inner pleasure. Me, a wonderful leader! What it meant, I had no idea. It's funny how much you forget in life. But flattering remarks get little candle-lit shrines erected to them in the memory.

Not that I was likely to become a Baptist, or a Catholic again, or anything. I had zero confidence in organized religion as an answer to life's questions. It was nice, and the people were doubtless nice, and the topics of conversation at these places probably could not have been nicer.

But I supposed that God was a lot simpler than what most Christians maintained. He/she/it had to be the same intelligence underlying all faiths, making them all equally legitimate – making everyone who thought his religion was the "right" one an ass -- and making a flexible flyer like myself clearly preferable (to this God figure) ahead of those narrow-minded fanatics who understood only that part of the elephant on which they had personally laid a hand.

I saw myself as drawn to a deeper realm of meaning than what the man in the street sees, but turned off by the clichéd routes people take to it. I was alienated by churches and by the whole idea of community and worshiping and being normal. But inside, I was the guy who was touched by Jim's little prophecy. I was dying to have a real conversation with another human soul, and if I got really lucky, a similar conversation with God.

I was almost an atheist. The God I gave the nod to -- I will not say "believed in" -- was not so much a personality as an indistinct ordering power, the source of all "generativity" in the universe: goodness, thoughtfulness, kindness, heroism, love. This generativity generally did not intervene directly in our affairs, preventing toddlers from falling down wells. Rather, this God wanted us to figure out things by ourselves, so we were pretty much on our own.

As for toddlers falling down the wells, foreign wars and famines, it was regrettable in the extreme. But what could one do but accept it and move on?

I was not dogmatic about my vision. I did not try to convert people to it. But I figured I was more likely to be right about such a thing than people who were weighted down by centuries of flame-eyed gobbledygook.

I liked having access to Alex. It gave me the opportunity to test out my own nascent theological theories. Alex was fiercely anti-abortion, and he was once talking about a protest that he took part in at the local Planned Parenthood clinic. I opined that many Jewish commentators thought that life started not at conception but with the "quickenings," the moment the mother first feels the baby move inside.

I figured, what's he going to say, that the Jews were all wet? That wouldn't be very ecumenical, would it? I was ready with my Gotcha.

"Well," he said of two plus thousand years of Jewish midrash, "they're wrong."

I was pleased that Alex several times told me that it was a blessing to him to have friends like Lily and me. "The air in the evangelical box sometimes gets a little stale," he said. "We get so used to hearing ourselves, we forget what other people are thinking. So it's really valuable to me to have friends like you - just to see what other people are thinking."

What a joke – like Lily and I represented standard non-evangelical thinking! Nevertheless, from that moment on, I felt deputized to provide my opinion on ecclesiastic matters, and I had a great many.

I once shared the opinion that neither the Christians nor the Jews had got CHRIST right. "Yes, he was the Messiah, but no, he was not the Son of God. Wouldn't that be the height of irony?" I asked him. "Think about it. God makes this huge sacrifice, only to have neither of his 'chosen peoples' get it right?"

I loved this kind of thinking. It was basic elitism -- only a select few like myself were able to see the poignant misunderstood truth of the great religions. And poor Jesus died on the cross, his great gift misconstrued by the ages. Maybe I was only a smalltime writer but I had the world's two leading faith groups on the ropes.

Alex pursed his lips at the thought, the value of my input visibly receding.

One time, at a barbecue at his place, with my boy Gus and his boy Dwight playing one-on-one basketball on the garage apron beside us, I issued this challenge:

"If the Hebrews had no written language until they were dragged off to Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, how did God write commandments in stone for them in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC?"<sup>[1]</sup>

Another time, sitting next to Alex at a Twins game, I bugged him about the Trinity, a concept no thinking person wants to defend with a tied score. I didn't understand it as a child, growing up Catholic, and even now I still stare at my shoes when I see it coming.

"If the Holy Spirit is coequal with the Father and the Son, why does he get short shrift within the Trinity? He doesn't even have a proper name, for Pete's sake. For years we called him the Holy Ghost, then it dawned on us that that maybe wasn't the most respectful name for a deity. But Christians still use the old name in songs when they need something to rhyme with *most* or *boast*."

Alex ignored me, intent on the action on the field. This was likely what Jesus would have done, had Satan annoyed him at a ball game. And I just would not shut up. I was too loud, I laughed too much, I slapped Alex and the other Christians like we were pals in the Coast Guard. I did not know when to stop.

"According to the Bible," I taunted him, "Jesus is gone from the world, although he will come again some day. The Holy Spirit, supposedly co-equal with the other two persons, is on patrol among us night and day. Yet when we pray, we always pray to the guy who is gone, not the guy who is still here with us, exhorting and encouraging?"

I arched my eyebrows, standup style, as if to pointedly ask, What was with *that*?

Now, the Gospel of Mark assures damnation to those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. I did not intend to do that with my remarks, and I do not think I did, technically.<sup>[2]</sup> I was just trying to get Alex's goat because Christianity had so many odd rules and seeming contradictions. What did I want from him? I wanted Alex to concede that there were aspects of his religion that were ridiculous, and a truly fair-minded person like myself would laugh them off and start over again with a clean sheet of paper.

But Alex smiled thinly at my impudence, loving his enemies as commanded.

One night I accidentally met the congregation of CHRIST Community. It was a kind of snowy epiphany. I was out one December night walking my dog off-leash – which is not strictly legal – in a city park a dozen blocks from home. In the center of this park was a small community center, which was sometimes rented out to groups. My dog, his body sprinkled with new-fallen snow, dashed ahead of me, and perhaps smelling food, nosed open the door of the community center and began working his way through a party the congregation was having.

By the time I got to the doorway, apology already on my lips, I saw about fifty people gathered around my dog, laughing and patting him. Maybe they were the church's Rapture Response Team, and my dog had burst in on them just as they were to ink their final

preparedness plans. But he was a funny, friendly-hearted, ivory-toothed creature, and everyone was grinning at his impudence. I remember thinking to myself: They don't seem *so* bad.

Now comes the conflict. Five years after moving next door to Alex, five years after becoming neighbors and friends, bad things began to happen. In our late 40s both Alex and I had major health challenges. One night, sitting at my desk in the attic of my house, I suffered a stroke. Blinding pain, very scary. To make matters worse, when I went to the doctor, and they looked inside my head, they found a tumor impinging on the language center of my brain. It was in a scary place to operate – one flick of the scalpel and I might lose my ability to think and speak.

Even though the tumor proved to be of a slow-growing type, I was still shaken at the idea of something unfriendly being in there. I had had relatives die of brain tumors, including a beloved stepfather, and they were gruesome deaths, irradiated to the point their heads were dried out like cornhusks, unable to salivate or even tear up.

At about this time, something strange began to happen in my left ear, the one near the tumor. I began to hear really weird noises. All day long, every day, I heard a kind of tinnitus. Only it wasn't a high-pitched ringing like most people report. My noise was an angry, clanging, chugging sound, a mechanical roar like you might hear in the engine room of an ocean-going vessel.

It was no louder than hearing someone speaking right into my left ear all the time. But it made talking on the telephone with that ear impossible. Watching a video, I was constantly rewinding to hear lost dialogue. And it made ordinary conversation difficult. I was always saying "What?" to everyone. It made me feel stupid.

Was the noise caused by the tumor? I don't know. I visited an ear man, who told me that ear problems are notoriously hard to diagnose on the exam room. The ear is a sealed system – doctors can only peer and poke. His advice was to wait and see, and maybe the noise would go away, or I would get used to it.

He omitted a third option, freaking out. My life was about to end, and this awful gurgling was the soundtrack I would get for my last act. It was the sound of me going down the pooper. I became theologically hysterical. If there was a God, I conceived that my pain, like all the pain and distress in the world, was something he found amusing or at the very least tolerable. If there wasn't, what difference did it make.

I suddenly needed everything at once – to get my affairs in order, to make a million bucks for my family, to write a masterpiece so my name would be preserved so long as people walked on hind legs. I decided to write one last book before my brain shut down completely, so I spent the next year writing a grisly memoir of my imminent demise.

The resulting (unpublishable) book was sickening, streaked with shafts of fear. I enjoyed taking readers into the recesses of my skull and letting them feel the weird and awful things going on in there. Like, for the first month after my stroke, I heard *bubbles* rising through my head. Like in an aquarium. When people read that, they invariably let out little moans. My attitude was, if I could horrify other people with what was happening to me, maybe it would rub off on them, and I could get rid of the damn thing that way. The book I wrote was self-pitying, confused, and neurotic. And since I didn't die – the tumor just seemed to stop growing one day -- it was unpublishable as well. Who's going to feel sorry for an author living off the royalties from a book about his own death? I was screwed.

I even passed it on to my kids, who were now 16 and 12. I gathered them about me and read them the riot act. They were solemn and unblinking, like the kids in the Addams Family.

"Listen," I say, "there's stuff I got to tell you."

"Are you gonna be OK?" Gus asked. "Dwight said you were gonna die. I slugged him in the arm."

"Gus, don't slug Dwight. No, I'm not going to die. Well, I am, but not from this. My tumor's not like Grandpa Dick's. We caught mine earlier. It's smaller. It's slow-growing. It's almost a friendly tumor."

Aretha just stared at me. She wasn't buying it.

"I'm not kidding," I told her. "Really."

Aretha nibbled her lip, like she does when she's holding something back. More body language: she folded her arms across her chest, trying to look tough.

"What?" I asked her.

"Is this something that's going to happen again? Because I don't want to do this ever again."

"Not if we're lucky, honey," I said, and held her close to me. "Not if we're very, very lucky."

One day I knocked on the Garrins' door, returning a lemon squeezer we had borrowed for a party. Beth was home and invited me in. Alexc was on the couch behind her. He looked all in.

"How is your head, Mike?" she asked, with a note of concern.

"Actually," I said, "I just got a good report. The last MRI shows that it's 'calcified.' That means the tumor seems to be coated with calcium. Which suggests that it's growing slowly, if it's growing at all."

"Oh, praise God," Beth said, more sincerely than I thought those words could be said.

"So the doctors are encouraging," I said vacantly, a bit put off by Beth's intensity.

"We have all been praying for you, Mike. To take this thing away from you. To shrink the tumor."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to reassure her that there were probably better things to pray for, because I was doing fine.

And then it hit me, like a barrow of bricks. Beth believed her prayers were what caused the tumor growth to slow. It was a stunningly different way of thinking about things. I was so touched by her earnestness. But I thought it was wrongheaded. But then I thought – what did I think exactly?

I sought to be polite.

"Beth, thank you for praying for me, and thank all the other people at the church too. I'm blown away that you have been thinking about me like this."

"And may we continue?" Beth wanted my permission to pray for me!

"Yes," I nodded, and realizing that by giving my assent I was endorsing the approach.

"Please."

Over the weeks that followed, Alex was noticeably weaker. He complained of a feeling a numbness in his hands, which gradually spread to his whole body. He saw the doctor, who conducted a battery of tests and eventually informed Alex that he had a rare form of neuropathy that eventually would shut down his entire body.

Lily, who had assured me at the time of my stroke that I would be fine, only shook her head at Alex's prospects.

“The myelin sheath that conducts electricity from one neuron to another is being destroyed by his immune system,” she explained. “It’s a death sentence, because his body has just decided, for no good reason, to destroy itself.”

Alex had no health insurance, and only a tiny congregation of a hundred people to turn to for financial support. And they were mostly people of very modest means.

In the thick of my own health hysteria, it hurt me to see what was happening to Alex. His Christian faith, far from seeming to be a resource to him in his hour of desperation, seemed to me to be a millstone. He put all his hopes in God. And I knew he was in for the same kind of disappointment everyone else feels who prays for healing, and doesn’t get any.

Lily supplied my theology on this. “Every day I see people in my practice with some dreadful disease or condition. Sometimes I see something I can’t explain, a miracle perhaps. But mostly, I just see people suffer. I don’t see angels airlifting people out of their misery. That’s just magical thinking.”

“Christians say God never gives us a problem bigger than we can handle.”

Lily just snorted. “They don’t see what I see,” was all she could say.

What a shame, I thought, that Alex must suffer the disappointment of God letting him down, with the eyes of his parish fixed on the failure. Everyone prayed that God would pull him up out of his hospital bed, dust him off, and put him back to work. But God was failing Alex, and Alex would eventually fail everyone.

Do you see why I was so sad? While I considered myself spiritual, I had a profoundly pessimistic attitude about the chances of God or Whatever intervening in people’s lives. “God has his eye on the sparrow?”<sup>[3]</sup> Right, was my feeling -- he watches the little fucker die. A God who permitted wholesale holocausts would have no problem putting the screws to a sick minister with six kids.

One autumn night, Lily and I were out walking, and we met up with Beth and Alex. Alex was unsteady because he couldn’t feel his feet at that stage. Nevertheless, the women walked behind us as we men talked about what being sick had taught us. No small task – we headed straight to the Department of Ultimate Things.

"I'm surprised that I'm not that afraid of dying," I said to him. "I just don't want it to screw up my kids." Both Gus and Aretha wore perpetual looks of being weary and weirded out since I got sick. They were going bad. I wanted to get them back to what passed for normal in our family.

Alex, despite his shuffling gait, was surprisingly chipper. He fixated not on his disease but on the amazing systems of health that fend off so much disease.

"I've never learned so much in my life, about the way the body works," he said. "I'm learning things about the immune system that they don't teach in Bible college. It amazes me how our physical nature, all by itself and without any obvious help from God, supplies us with weapons on a daily basis.

“It’s an incredibly rugged system,” he said. “Layer after layer of defense, redundancy piled on redundancy. It’s proof to me that we are designed to survive in this world.”

Whatever sauce Alex was on, I wanted some. How could he be so upbeat? Whence shone that bright and happy light? By comparison, I was a whiner. I tried handing my tumor to everyone I spoke to, then ran away, leaving them to deal with it. It was tumor tag. Whereas Alex was actually welcoming what happened to him as a lesson handed to him by his creator. Instead of destroying the relationship it deepened it. His neuropathy, far from being an acid balloon dropped on him by fate, was an exception to the rule that God fortified us against attack.

I got better, but Alex got worse. I tried to stay up to date with him. But I had no vocabulary with which to discuss the predicament he was in. I was just a wise-guy, completely useless in these straits. I visited him a couple times. I loaned him an extra VCR, also copies of the Ken Burns baseball documentary, and also some '87 and '91 Twins World Series footage. I figured, This will bring him some comfort. And isn't that about all a human being can do for another in this godforsaken world?

Each time I saw Alex he looked thinner and weaker. The end stage for this neuropathy, Lily told me, was that the lungs lack the musculature to draw breath – you struggle to breathe, then you stop.

It was a bleak and unheroic way to die, and after he had been hospitalized for several weeks, just before the holidays, I began to back off from him and his family. It was too much for me. On Christmas Eve, 1999, I looked out our frosted front window and saw his family wheeling Alex up to his front stoop, too wasted and weak to stand. This was one poignant Christmas pageant -- a man of God coming home to die, the lights on the tree blinking merrily despite imminent death, the family putting the best possible face on it.

Then, in the twelve days of Christmas, while I was averting my eyes from the nearing tragedy, Alex started to get better. Not just a little better, but a lot. Every day a little more. It was some combination of steroids and chelation therapy, Beth joyfully told me. And it cost plenty, about \$30,000 per treatment. But that wasn't important now.

It was the most stunning thing to see, Alex standing out on his porch again, arms folded, a funny smile playing on his face as he watched his sons and my son throw the football around. Even more stunning, week after week, to see him walking around the block on Beth's arm, then by himself, then breaking into a slow trot, solo. By April, he was jogging through the hood just the way he used to, working up a holy sweat, dragging his dog Isaac on a rope. "They say the serum could stop working at any time, and I'll be right back where I was," Alex told me.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Mike, whatever God dishes up for me, I'm going to accept."

I had nothing to say to all this. I was happy for Alex, but I could not form an opinion about it, except for a giant "Huh!" that welled up deep inside me. It was all beyond anything I had any confidence in or personal knowledge about.

In the springtime of his recovery, Alex invited me to another Twins game. Our team was down by two runs in the late innings, and we could not seem to catch a break. In my heart, I gave up on the Twins, and even started to hate them a little, especially third-basemen Corey Koskie, whose two errors let in four unearned runs.

In my heart, I switched sides - to protect myself from the team's woeful humanness. It's what I do. But not Alex. I looked over at him, and he seemed perfectly content, watching the play. "Just wait," his attitude seemed to say.

I thought I understood where he was at. He had just cheated death. Now he was enjoying a ballgame. Who cared if the home team won or lost?

But there was more to it than that. With two outs in the ninth inning and the Twins trailing, an extremely peculiar series of plays happened. A batter was hit by a pitch and took first base. Then the next batter launched a soft liner into right center field, causing the two Kansas City outfielders to run toward it simultaneously, collide, and both fall down, with the ball rolling to the fence.

The second baseman ran all the way to the fence, picked up the ball, whirled, and fired it home. The catcher grabbed it and turned to tag the first runner, who barreled into him so hard that he dropped the ball, allowing both runners to score. Twins win, 6-5.

It was more of a train wreck than a baseball play. When the dust settled, three Royals were lying still on their backs, and even the Twins trainer ran onto the field to help with the wounded.

Oh, you should have heard the cacophony in that stadium. Tens of thousands of people were certain they had seen a baseball miracle. I high-fived the stranger sitting next to me. But when I turned to Alex, he seemed not joyous but serene, like he had glimpsed heaven on the field, and he could confirm that yep, that was what it is like, all right.

Come-from-behind victories had become humdrum for him. Impossible upsets were just the way things were. Another day, another miracle!

Not that God wanted the Twins to win, or the three Royals to be go on the 15-day disabled list. But anything can happen in this life, and if you are patient enough, it is almost certain to. Like Alex' money problem. He had run up hospital bills of almost two million dollars, and no insurance. So he attended an insurance committee hearing and he casually threw himself at the panel's mercy.

He told them, "You're going to have to pay this bill for me, because I can't. For some reason I'm alive, and we're all just going to have to live with that."

Despite some actuarial eyebrow-arching, the panel eventually agreed and in one stroke wiped all the red ink away.

And throughout these days of miracles and wonder, I groped for something to say to Alex.

The closest I came one day was to yell at him in his front yard, "It must be like returning from the dead to be able to mow your lawn again."

Alex looked up from his Lawn-Boy and grinned at me. "Mike," he shouted, "you don't know the half of it!"

## **2. The Holy Rollers**

At the same time Alex and I were descending into our respective illness, my kids were sinking into problems of their own.

My Aretha was a poised and intelligent little girl, brilliant verbally, and artistic with her hands. But as she grew older, a vein of hyperdramatic emotion came into view. Inside, she was boiling. She was jealous of other girls' relationships. She thought they were out to get her. Rejection was like death. Sometimes she would curl into a ball and hide from classmates. She was beset by deep, painful phobias – of dogs jumping up on her, of doctors, of germs on a countertop, of performing in front of others, of wearing a swimsuit, of sitting in plain view of others.

None of these fears were unusual in themselves. But all together, they placed her in a category by herself, as someone who was almost always being afflicted by something. Her life was too much for her.

Gradually she drifted from the company of "normal" boys and girls, and began hanging out with the Punks and Goths at her school, and even with some who had dropped out. Among these walking wounded she felt more sure-footed. Their culture of piercing and darkness matched her feeling of victimization. Everyone else was too straight, too competitive, too plastic.

I can't describe how it hurt me to watch her slide into this funk. I used to try to coach her, when she was still in grade school, on how to overcome these feelings, which I thought I understood.

"Never give your friends the satisfaction of knowing they hurt you," I would tell her. "Don't give them that power over you, or they will use it every time."

I suggested that, when she was feeling down, she put her hands on her hips and tip her chin up just a bit, Errol Flynn style. "Portrait photographers call it an 'ideo,'" I said. "You would be surprised how differently you feel just by changing your stance."

I proposed that she become popular by giving people things. We had masses of kids her age over to the house. None ever invited her over to theirs. I sent her to school every day with two candy bars. The candy disappeared, followed by her new friends.

Now, at 16, she flaunted her hatred for the conventional, competitive straight world. Her movie collection included One day she sat me down to see a video of pornographic rock exhibitionist Gigi G.G. Allen pushing a hot dog up a fan's buttocks onstage. She showed it to me hoping to make space for include me in her small circle of hip, dark friends. But I failed her – I hated G.G. Allen, who I found out later was dead.

it just alarmed me.

By this time I never saw her normal hair color any more. It was usually fuchsia, with occasional forays into platinum. She wore heavy leathers, clanking rings and spikes, and boots with sixty eyelets. Around 15 she started to drink and to smoke. By 16 she was addicted to both.

It wasn't the punk aspect that bothered us, it was the misery that followed after her like a little black cloud, the anger and self-hatred that she seemed to feel almost all the time. One day when she was a senior in high school, I pulled the car over to the curb and asked her a question point-blank: "Honey, what's it like where you are?"

She turned to me with a look of unalterable sorrow. "Always drowning," was all she said. She spent all her time either out with friends, who became scuzzier every year, or in her room, watching TV or sleeping. One of her friends, [a gentle young man who had been sexually abused by his dad](#), had his whole face tattooed with flowers while drunk. It was suicide by tattoo, obliteration of all his chances to make it in the world. Who would hire a young man who had turned his face into a beautiful garden of flowers and butterflies? I grieved for him, and I grieved at Aretha for finding that compelling.

Lily and I knew Aretha was suffering from some deep, uncontrollable anxiety, and it was carrying her away from us. But we didn't know what it was about. Some people found her off-putting and unsympathetic – she came off to them as nasty. She would have a great friendship for a while, full of willful joy. Then something would happen, and Aretha would feel betrayed, and that would be that.

We sent her to a series of child psychologists. Diagnoses ranged from depression to high anxiety to adolescent moodiness. She formed a close relationship with one counselor, who thought we were brilliant parents coping super-creatively with a problem that Aretha would likely grow out of. She was a mysterious girl, full of vivacity but with a dark streak of fearfulness as well.

As a little boy, Gus could not have been more swashbuckling. He loved to play by himself or with another boy, and the games were unrelievedly heroic. Wearing any of a boxful of hats – cowboy, fireman, knight, Robin Hood – Gus leaped into imaginary play, righting wrongs and doing in the bad guy.

As he got older and began going to school, his heroism hit a wall. The other kids weren't interested in his visions. They weren't interested in him, period. Other boys made Gus sad, almost from the start. He wore a look of visible disappointment – that his cohort of school friends had no interest in joining his campaign against evil, that they were not especially keen on allowing him to opt for glory on his own.

Gus looked around him and saw he lived in a matrix of unheroic conformity, and he began to slide. At 7 he was a swash-buckler. By 10 he had restricted his derring-do to endless violent videogames, in which he stalked the labyrinthine corridors of some fictional fort or palace or squalid city – shooting and killing everyone he encountered. He affected a slit-eyed “I don't care attitude” about everyone and everything. He didn't sleep well. He had nightmares.

One night, after Lily had read to him, he confided to her: “I think about things no kid should think about.”

Lily was alarmed. “What, Gussie? What things do you think?” But Gus wouldn't say.

One time, on a car trip east, we stayed with a family with twin boys a few months younger than Gus. Their mother was a professor of American lit with her own theories about child-rearing, and she had done a good job raising her 13-year-olds. They were bright of spirit and kind of heart. But when Gus showed up with his dire stories of mutilation and suffering, the two boys were unnerved by him. The professor mother asked us not to leave Gus with them while Lily and I went on a day trip. She didn't want his dark shadow alighting on her boys.

The psychologist whom Aretha liked, before she moved out of the area, assured us that Aretha was just a creative kid adapting in a creative way to the circumstances of her life. “Give her space,” the psychologist advised us. “Aretha's going to surprise you with her strength.”

We took this advice to the point of doing the stupidest thing any parents ever did. One night when she was 16 she came home – cause for joy in itself – with a request.

“My friend Lou got kicked out and needs a place to stay the night. Can Lou he crash here?”

Aretha was very personable and reassuring about this request. I nodded, happy to see her looking out for a friend, and assuming the friend would be staying in the empty fourth bedroom. It wasn't until morning that I realized this friend – a 19-year-old alcoholic young man – had spent the night in my underage daughter's bed.

“But we're not sexual!” my daughter insisted after Lou had left the house for work. I looked at Lily. This didn't seem very likely.

“It's just for a few days,” Aretha promised. We were over a barrel. If we booted Lou out, Aretha would likely follow, crashing on a series of friends' couches. We worried about her in that world. Aretha was young and vulnerable. If she were raped or otherwise harmed, we worried it would undo her forever. So we relented, and let this alcoholic young man stay another night, and another night, and another night with us for the better part of a yearan entire year.

Half the time we were convinced we had done something parentally brilliant – providing a “laboratory of love” for our daughter to learn about men. Men could still hurt her but I would be on hand with a baseball bat to make immediate amends. The other half, we knew it was It was idiotic. , bBut once we committed to it we had to let it play out. Lou lived with us for nine harrowing months before the two broke up, nine months in which he was usually too paranoid to come downstairs and share a meal with us -- but that didn't keep him from sleeping in the same bed with with our daughter every night.

When she was 17, in 2003, she moved out of the house and into an apartment in Minneapolis. She ran into Lou and took up with him again. They rented a nice apartment together, she working as a barrista at a coffeeshop, he working nights in a bank check clearinghouse. When I visited their apartment, I could see things were starting to slide. The two were constitutionally unable to clean up after themselves. Pizza boxes, cat boxes, unpacked boxes of belongings jammed against one another like tectonic plates. They lived in microbial chaos, flies buzzing everywhere, storm windows still sealed from winter, without a breeze to freshen the place on a hot summer day.

I knew Aretha was using fake ID to get into bars. Lou was the alcoholic son of alcoholic and drug-addicted parents, and although he was a gentle soul by day, Aretha told me about his frequent alcoholic blackouts, often in public places. Sometimes he picked fights with her when they were out. He flirted with other women to make her jealous. A couple of times, he struck her. They were in a like Sid- and- Nancy, in a death spiral.

When the two broke up, I was initially glad. At least he would not be putting a hand on her again. Maybe he would get help from his job, go into treatment, start a new life. But instead of a fresh start, both kept twirling downward descending.

Lou lost his job at the check clearinghouse, their sole claim to the middle class. Aretha began to miss work. When she did work she became ensnared in ugly vendettas with her supervisors. The way companies do it now, people aren't fired – too litigatable. Instead, companies reduce people's hours until they are forced to quit. At her nadir, Aretha raided the college money her grandparents had set aside for her, to pay for groceries, kitty litter and rent.

The brilliant creative experiment was a flopover.

Having seen what anything-goes parenting had done to Aretha's life, Lily and I went to war for Gus.

Lily bought Gus a cheap electric guitar, not really expecting him to show much interest. But he surprised us by spending time with it every day, picking out songs that he had heard. Within a very short time he became a serious player. We wound up buying him a new guitar, a wine-colored Schecter. He loved the muddy sound it made when he turned the distortion all the way up.

Lily also came up with the idea of him affiliating in some way with a church youth group. She figured the kids at a church would be nicer than the kids at middle school. The adult leaders would give him a little TLC, and Gus could take part in fun activities like picnics and trips to Valleyfair, a regional suburban amusement park. And maybe, just maybe, the result of all this fun and attention would be that Gus would cheer up and resume loving himself, and we'd have dodged a bullet the size of an Audi.

We even considered going to church as a family deal. Lily and I probably wouldn't actually join the church in question. We were too educated for that, and much too busy. Lily was too agnostic to put in too many hours before the cross. And I was too deaf in my bad ear to listen to anyone besides myself for very long. But the two of us conversed about "doing our part" to make religion work in Gus's life.

"We can read before dinner," Lily said. "You know, like a parable or a psalm, or something -- if there's an interesting contemporary translation."

"Or a poem by Rumi," I said. I was still trying to feed Rumi into the stream.

Lily read books by "boys" expert" Michael Gurion, who holds that the nuclear family is not enough, and that in order to develop into decent men boys need an extended family of uncles

and grandpas and cousins, and beyond that churches and scouting and an assortment of "walkabout" activities to put boys to the test and provide them with a bridge to adulthood. So we were keen on the concept of church as spiritual rite of passage, but iffy about God himself. We thought it was a good idea, psychologically, to have a moral order, a sense that something, somewhere, somehow, was bigger than oneself. Even if there was no such thing, *really*.

Needless to say, it had to be a place we respected – open-minded, ecumenical, pacifistic in the face of the growing cultural war -- which barred Alex's evangelical group from consideration.

We checked out and rejected several places within two miles of our home:

At Hope Unitarian church was , which was a busy hive of thoughtful and contradictory subcaucuses, including such as Buddhists, pantheists, Lesbians, even atheists. The sermon that day was about the Divine Feminine. It was interesting but a little weak, determined not to be pinned down to much of anything, or to offend anyone – at least, not anyone already under the roof. We came out thinking we needed a church with at least trace amounts of

testosterone.

with more testosterone.

We found such a church in a multiracial inner-city Catholic parish called St. Peter Claver. It had a terrific reputation for uniting people of different backgrounds. We liked standing shoulder to shoulder with black and Latino and Vietnamese people. At the same time yet it was a profoundly conservative Catholic church. The sacraments and the Vatican and abortion were important there. We expected a greater emphasis on It seemed too much about God and authority and not enough about social justice and protests and such. We wanted something with more political oomph.

We found such a place at St. Ben's in Minneapolis, a parish frequently in trouble with its Archdiocese for showing too much solidarity with gays, and letting women manhandle the Eucharist. This place was social justice personified, the kind of people who bang on nuclear warheads with sledgehammers to make a point. And yet – the church was the hottest place I ever spent an hour, about a hundred degrees inside, with people passing out from the heat right and left. Well, mostly left.

Eventually we chose a classy Episcopal church in the posh Crocus Hill section of Saint Paul. The place had a thoughtful and kind minister and a decent, well-heeled congregation.

Everyone we met seemed to be on somebody else's board of directors. The woodwork in the church was out of this world, and the full-time paid music choir director put on a heck of a show every week, with sonorous string quartets, trilling sopranos, massive pipe organs, and a polished brass ensemble. It sounds like graffiti, but Garrison Keillor worshipped there from time to time. <sup>[4]</sup>

The place had a crackerjack youth group – lots of outings, ice cream socials, movies, sleepovers, and round-the-fire talks about understanding oneself and being tolerant of every kind of diversity. The leaders discouraged drugs, encouraged empathic behavior, and talked about spirituality as a way of positively centering oneself in an often negative universe.

This was what a youth group was supposed to be. We especially liked the two youth leaders, who came across to us as loving and devout. The whole thing sounded terrific, a group therapy clinic with a cross – and no genuflecting required. But over the next three months Gus continued to stagnate. The kids at the Episcopal church weren't really any nicer than the ones at his middle school, and some were behavioral problems, "dumped" there by their parents to buy a stress-free Sunday morning away from them.

One day, driving Gus home from an outing, he made a request. "Dad, I want to quit the group."

"Why? It's a good opportunity. You get to go to all those movies, and Valley Fair. And you love Cosetta's pizza."

"Dad, there are some creepy things going on. Two of the guys pretend they're raping the other guys when the leader isn't looking."

Evidently they targeted a boy, ran him down, and pretended to hump him from behind.

"That's awful, Gus. Have they done this to you?" In my mind I was already dialing the youth leader to protest – maybe even the priest.

"No. But I don't want them to do it with me." He had had to take down his banner of heroism too many times for other kids. He did not want to submit to this.

I sighed. Our kids had a pattern of dropping out of activities, and Lily and I were tired of bailing out of difficult situations. On the other hand, ritual rapings sounded really awful.

We wound up doing something a little different for us. It was Lily's idea. Why couldn't Gus get involved with the youth group at Alex' church?<sup>[5]</sup> We knew little about it, but we knew it was quite conservative. "Not our sort of place at all," as they say. But we liked the Garrins.

Gus had hung around with Ian and Dwight, for much of his young most of his life. We knew Ian and Dwight would be kind to Gus and not tear him down.

The main downside was that the church might fill him with religious nonsense. I would have to go through his belief system after every sleepover and pick out the nits. "Yes to God's love. No to slavery. Yes to the Beatitudes. No to genocide. Yes to forgiving your enemies. No to woman kowtowing to man."

That sounded like more work than a modern parent ought to do. We would actually have to pay attention to what our son was doing. But Gus was at risk. In our view, he was on the brink of getting imprinted with the notion that he was a loser, a failure, a maladapt. We envisioned great harm coming to him unless we did something creative to intervene.

Maybe, further on down the road, we would have to have him deprogrammed by some camouflaged cult escapee. Or maybe we could do it ourselves, subtly deprogramming a little bit every day, painting over the church's binary black-and-white truths with our more secular, subtle shadings.

Either way, it was worth the risk.

Lily and I debated the wisdom of sending Gus to Christ Community.

"I feel good about it," I said. "Chances are he'll play basketball, be the rebel in the group, tell shady jokes and be wildly popular. It's a win-win situation."

Lily wasn't so sure. "What if he becomes a holy roller like the rest of them?"

"Geez, that seems unlikely," I said. "He's such a stubborn little cuss. And anyway, how do we know they're holy rollers?"

Lily's question sent a ripple of dread through me. My mom hated those people and warned me many times against people who overcame reason with emotion.

"Maybe they're not, but what if they are?" Lily said. "What if they're racists, or have it in for gays or women?"

"But the Garrins are great. And that's a fact!"

"Sure they are, to us. And now they've got Gus." Tense? It feels like you're still just discussing it, not that they "have" him yet?

I let the thought swirl around in me, conjuring up all these fears of know-nothingism, of insane sweaty preachers, of unquestioning authoritarianism, pie-eyed people who answer every question with the word *Jesus*.

You know, stretching the word out and adding strange syllables that other people don't say. *Jeee-eee-y-zussss-ah!* It's a wonder they have enough breath to get it out.

"Lily, either we're about to do something brilliant or unforgivable."

"Knowing us, it's probably the latter," Lily replied. "Like letting Aretha bring that boy home."

"But what can we do?" I asked. "Gus is in trouble. He likes Ian and Dwight. They're great kids. But he's not interested in religion. He just wants to hatchet people to death online. Surely he's not going to become one of the undead."

Lily grimaced. "Let's make a mental note to remember this conversation later."

That was her way of saying *I told you so* in advance.

So we began dropping Gus off at Christ Community on Saturday afternoons and Sunday nights for youth activities. The kids, a gang of about 20 between the ages of 14 and 18, did service work like washing cars and hauling rubbish out of parishioner's basements. They seemed genuinely wholesome and kind to one another – an unheard-of situation for us. The older kids were not shitty to the younger ones as a matter of *droit du seigneur*. No one raped anyone else. It was nice.

Our depressed, beat-down hero began to stir to life again. Gus seemed to look forward to each get-together. Lily and I saw something we had not seen in months. Gus smiled, ever so slightly. To smile at someone in school was tantamount to wearing a banner saying *I am gay*. But Gus was loosening up.

For weeks Lily and I beamed at each other over our fair-trade Colombian French roast.

Placing Gus with these simple, good-hearted people was a feat of behavioral genius, bigger than Konrad Lorenz and Ivan Pavlov sewn together at the hip. God we were good.

After each outing I asked Gus what the group did. His monosyllabic answers rocketed me to the stars. For the most part.

"Hoops."

"Pizza."

"Sang."

"Put up sheetrock."

"Prayed."

I nodded, and kept my mouth shut till the next day.

"So Gus, tell me about that praying business."

Gus shrugged. "It's OK."

"Isn't it kind of strange, though, praying when you're not in the same religion as everybody else?"

Gus regarded me like I was soaked in creosote.

"What?"

"I mean, they're devout Christians, and we're something else?"

"I just do what they do," Gus said. "No big deal."

"Smart adaptation," I said with upraised thumb.

Short pause.

"But I like when we lay hands on one another."

"When what?"

"We prayed for each other. It was nice."

That sounded odd, and intense. I did not tell Lily about my concerns, trusting in Gus's naturally withdrawn personality to keep him from being assimilated into the Borg.

One day over lunch, Gus looked up at Lily, and spoke. This in itself was unusual. What he said was worse. "Mom, aren't you afraid of going to hell?"

Lily glared at me, as if to say, "They should have covered this in the vows." Suddenly the Christian thing was all my idea.

"Do the other kids say I'm going to hell?" she demanded.

"No," Gus said, blinking languidly. "Mr. Harper did. You have to love Christ to be saved. If you don't love Christ, you're out of luck."

Lily didn't say anything, on account of her mouth hanging wide open. I tried to assure them both.

"Gus," I said, "Don't you think God takes into account if you're a good person, and you've lived a kind and loving life?"

The look on Gus' face indicated that he didn't think that we were covered by that description in the first place. And in the second place, the answer was no. Jesus was a hard-ass on this point. "One way" or the highway.

So we had a problem. Our earnest young son was gobbling up evangelical notions about salvation and applying them to his own family. This was important to him. He loved his mom and didn't want her to go to hell. How did we rebut that without overruling the suddenly inerrant source it sprang from, the Bible? Was it even in the Bible, or was it something the Evangelicals had extrapolated from it?

And how did we resolve this problem without jeopardizing the sweet rehab we'd found for Gus?

We didn't really give a shit about the Bible, so we didn't tiptoe around that. "Gus, it's a mistake to read everything you see literally. That stuff was written thousands of years ago, in a book bursting with great things, confusing things, and a few flat-out wrong-headed things. Every religion makes these dogmatic statements. If you don't do that, you're not a religion. Our job is to decide which things to take to heart and which to set aside."

Gus looked at us suspiciously. "Dad, it's the word of God. How can it be wrong?"

Lily's expression sank. From her own brief Jesus-freak period in college, she knew there was a potential for getting very passionate and rigid about religion. She wasn't mad about it. But she was disappointed.

And Gus, what a position he was in. He was 15, and so saw right through me. He saw how self-serving my explanation was. It was a gas for him to bring these new laws into our house. It was fun to slap us with these doctrinal assertions just to see the ashen looks on our faces. Or maybe not "fun," but empowering to the youngest in the family to strike back at the rest of us with righteousness.

The chickens were coming home to roost. The free-wheeling atmosphere Lily and I had tried to create was backfiring. Aretha took advantage of it, and now Gus, who had to be disgusted by what he had seen, was throwing off our too-loose yoke, and embracing a repressive faith.

I considered calling Alex Garrin on the phone and giving him a heads-up.

"Alex, Gus asked Lily at dinner tonight if she was going to hell. It was sort of disturbing to us. I imagine it was something he picked up in youth group."

"Oh, dear, that's regrettable," Alex would say, because he had to respect the primacy of our family values, right? I mean, he knew he had no right to *indoctrinate* our son against us, didn't he?

Of course, when I thought about it, indoctrination is pretty much what religion does.

"In future, Alex, I would appreciate it if you would lighten up a bit on the hell stuff, because Gus has been through a whole lot lately, and he is an impressionable kid, and I really can't

see the wisdom of stirring him up with a lot of hell hokum. So maybe if you backed off on the inerrancy stuff just a tad ..."

And what did I expect Alex to do with such a request? [Maybe make some brief mention here of the ways he'd responded to you in the past?]

"Mike, you're absolutely right. I'll put out an APB to our youth leaders right away!"

"Thanks, Alex, I really appreciate your violating the terms of your understanding of God for our sake. You're some great neighbor!"

At the Episcopal church, my fantasy conversation would in fact have gone just like that. They would have said or unsaid anything I asked. They really didn't want to presume, or offend -- or anything. They wanted to get along. What a terrific religion they were.

But these were the Holy Rollers. There would be no theological accommodations made for us. The *fatwah* against Lily remained in place.

I envisioned myself trudging next door and having a painful discussion with Alex and Beth, in which we would doubtless say something that would throw into question the basis for our friendship as neighbors -- and all because of God and hell.

I didn't want to make that trip.

I didn't have to, because Alex came to my door and knocked.

### 3. God for the Hard of Hearing

I went to the door and there Alex was.

“Mike, you’re going to have to do something about the nails on your sidewalk.”

“Nails?”

“I’ve been patching my kids’ bike tires all morning, then I looked over here. Sure enough, a box of 8-penny nails lay strewn across the walkway. I had no explanation. I don’t think I even owned nails.

“But that’s not the reason I’m here,” Alex said.

“Good,” I said, “because there’s something I’ve been meaning to discuss with you.”

“I want to invite you to something.”

“I like invitations,” I said. And I did.

“OK, Here’s the deal. Every year Christ Community holds a men’s retreat at a lake up near St. Cloud. It’s a big deal for the men in our church, and for their sons if they have sons. It gives us all a chance to get to know each other better, and to say what’s on our minds. We play some golf, jump in the pool, and eat hamburgers. We also sing and pray, but you wouldn’t have to join if you didn’t want to. Since Gus is in the youth group, he’s invited. And since you’re his father, so are you, if you’re are up for it.”

I opened my mouth, wanting to address the problem of Lily going to hell. But Alex was so peaceful and non-Calvinist in his demeanor, I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Maybe Gus wasn’t repeating what he had heard, but piecing together some loose ends of theology in his head? In which case, it had nothing to do with Alex?

I exhaled. “Thanks, Alex. Can I talk to Lily and get back to you tomorrow?”

Lily and I decided that a good father would accompany his son to a church retreat, even if he was not a member of the church. And he would be a good sport about it. He would attend the prayer sessions and sing along with the songs, even if he didn’t agree with everything he was singing. Fatherhood sometimes means faking it.

“Just one thing,” Lily said to me as we were finishing up.

“What’s that?”

“Don’t get carried away, Mike.”

She said it nicely, but it hurt. As if I had a habit of rolling on the ground and frothing at religious retreats. Like I was some sort of weak-minded rube.

“You can count on me,” I promised.

Up in his room, sitting at his game console, Gus was less than delighted that I would be going along. “That’s great, Dad. Great.”

“Do you want me to come?”

“I do. Really. Just – try not to talk too much.”

“Roger. Will do,” I said, giving him the thumbs up and then morphing it into the OK sign.

“One or the other, Dad. Not both.”

I heard. Going to the retreat meant I had to actually be a good sport, not just pretend to be one. No eye rolling. No exasperated lip-smacking. No amused disapproval. No manipulative side conversations with Gus about how silly this all was. But neither should I suddenly start beating a tambourine. I needed to find a middle ground.

We tossed our duffles into the trunk, along with his guitar and amp and my laptop, plus a few bags of sweet and salty snacks in case camp food sucked. The ride to Camp Courage was only an hour but that seemed like a long time to ride with Gus.

I sat with my good ear facing him – a prescription for communication. Most fifteen year old boys would rather stare like corpses than converse with their dads. So I brought along some music to get us in a spiritual mood.

It was a CD called *Footsteps* by Jai Uttal, an American who went to India in the 1980s and fell in love with the street music of the Bauls. His songs were so rich, so emotional, and so soaring, I figured they would get our third eyes focused on the emerald beyond, and get a jump on the other guys. I rolled down the windows, turned up the volume on the sitars, tables, and horns (Don Cherry no less), and sped past the unplowed beanfields, scattering raga notes in our wake.

“Can you imagine what the Christian guys would say if they heard this stuff!” I said.

Gus narrowed his eyes. “Maybe they’d like it.”

“I have this fantasy of coming into the camp, and people hear the music, and they start dancing to it, like in the movie *Fame*, dancing on cars, and it gives them a whole new idea about godhead.”

“What’s that?”

“Fame?”

“No, godhead.”

“It’s like godness. The qualities of God?”

Long silence.

“See, the reason I brought it up,” I said, “is, I figure you guys sing songs like ‘Jesus loves me, this I know.’?”

“That song’s for little children,” Gus sneered, clearly insulted.

“What do you sing then? Anything I’d like?”

“Well, there’s ‘I’m Trading My Sorrows,’ that’s got a strong chorus. ‘Amazing Love’ is a good song.”

“I’ll have to give them a second listen,” I said. Them heading into deeper water, “What do you make of all the Jesus? Where are you at with it?”

Gus regarded me balefully.

I told him I was embarrassed to even be saying the word Jesus. “I mean, it’s a Greek word. The man’s name was Aramaic, Jeshua or Joshua. You’d think we could call him by his real name.”

I couldn’t be sure, since I had to look at the road ahead of us, but it seemed like it had been years since Gus blinked. I sighed. I kept telling him and his sister all this great stuff, like the truth about Jeshua. But I can’t think of instance where they said, “Wow, this gives us the cognitive leverage to move the world! You’re the greatest, Dad!”

Instead, Gus returned his headphones to their intended place, and gazed out the side window. Here was my fantasy for the weekend. I would show up at Camp Courage with my Jai Uttal, my Ram Dass,<sup>[6]</sup> my kundalini meditation, but also my deep respect for certain aspects of their faith. The yoga of Christianity, if you will.

"Christ," I would explain to them, "was a shaman and a magus. His *kingdom of heaven* was what the Buddha called *enlightenment*. It's all one song, my brothers – can you glimpse how it all fits together?"

I figured to make a very positive impression. “Instruct us, Mike,” the men would say, crowding about me as I expanded their minds light years beyond the narrow confines of Christian fundamentalism.

To me everything had a surprising, poetic, spiritual component -- Coltrane, walking in the woods, breakfast with friends, a Styrofoam cup of mediocre red wine on a moonlit October

night, the dog scratching his ear with his foot. It was all God. It was all good. It was all one song.

Admit it -- I've got you going, a little bit -- haven't I? The root thought underlying all this is that *I'm not nobody*. I've studied these truths, and thought my own thoughts, and I've been waiting all my life to find a group of people I could lay this stuff on. And now I had one. I saw myself as a heavy-hitter, a spiritual adventurer who had read a lot and committed himself to the broadest possible interpretation of how the world worked. Was there a God? Damn betcha there was. No doubt about it, no sir!

But come on. God had to be so much more than the old beard of Judeo-Christianity. God, the fellow who spoke to Abraham and Moses in a loud voice? What a notion! It was the only way the scribes could write it, because it was the only modality they could think in. Patriarchal thunder!

A better question was, what really happened out there in the desert? What herbs did Abraham and Moses eat? What tricks did the desert sun and wind play on their imaginations? And how did the real God, the spirit of the universe, manifest him/her/itself to these kinds of men? He or she or whoever was more than a fellow hiding behind a tree saying *Psst!* This God was bigger, broader, and more spectacular than the bare patch of anthropomorphism these fundamentalists were tending.

Driving north with Gus beside me listening to his Walkman, I convinced myself that in some way I was coming to Camp Courage not just to praise Jesus and eat flapjacks, but to meet my destiny and reveal to the people there how wonderfully their own destinies could expand, with my wisdom acting as the yeast.

When we arrived at camp we unpacked and began to socialize. My roomie was a younger man named Dave, about 30. Dave was lying on his back on the plastic-coated bunk-bed mattress. He greeted me but he did not get out of his bunk. He just lay there, smiling at me through his bushy beard, wiggling his feet like a kid who had to go to the bathroom but didn't quite realize it yet.

"What do you do, Dave?"

"Sell cars."

I liked that. It was down to earth. It required a bit of showmanship, a little body English to seal a sale. Some pizzazz. It gave me hope for the weekend.

"And you, Mike?"

"Oh, I'm a freelance scribe," I told him. "I write down what people tell me to say."

"Are you going to write about this?"

"Nope. Just here to be with my boy. He's in the youth group."

"Which one?"

"Gus."

Dave knew him. "Oh, Gus. I like Gus," he said. "Deep. Asked me what the purpose of life was."

"What did you tell him?"

"Same thing I tell everyone," Dave said, still wagging his feet. "We wake up every morning with a choice -- we can feed ourselves, or we can glorify God."

I drifted through the bunkhouse. First thing I noticed: Everyone had a Bible. Everyone but me. I know I had one somewhere at home, because I once borrowed one from the Episcopal Church library. Second thing I noticed: People were sitting around reading them.

I have read extended chunks of the book – Genesis, Exodus, skip to Joshua. Ruth is great. Some of the Psalms are, too. Job is great, skip, skip, skip, the four gospels, a bit of Acts, and that's about it. No Paul, except the bits about the sounding brass and how "the greatest of these is Love." That was the Bible I knew.

My attitude went something like, "The Bible is surely great mythopoeic literature, the cornerstone of the literary canon, etc. etc. But it is limited by the obsessive references to animal husbandry and by the general inapplicability of first century mores to the 21st." I counted about 40 guys at the retreat. The only ones I knew were Alex and a couple of others that also lived in the neighborhood. So I steeled myself to having to be friendly with people I didn't know, and maybe didn't want to know.

There was a physician, a couple of teachers, a multimedia producer, several small business owners, a couple of shopkeepers, some IT people, a cop, an electrician, a carpenter, and some fellows in business-to-business sales. I was the only guy who sat around all the time in his everyday life drumming his fingers and thinking.

Word got out that I was a new guy, not a Christian, and not to be looked to for orthodox expression. People seemed polite and friendly, sparing me a lot of "Praise the Lords" -- although I did overhear a few saying that to others.

At one point, I remember we were sitting in deck chairs down by the water. Guys had introduced themselves to me, and we were getting on. I said something about the Beatles -- perhaps I was harping on my old sense that love songs were just a syllable away from being songs to God. "I Want to Hold Your Hand" could be a song to Jesus, if you squinted and turned your head flat on its side. "All My Loving" was practically a psalm.

One of the guys, a sour-faced, tiny-eyed fellow named Ed, would have none of it. "I remember when those guys said they were better than the Lord," he said. "I threw all my Beatle records into a big bonfire in the church parking lot. Lots of stinky black smoke that day, brother."

I was stricken. "Really? You did that?"

"Nobody's bigger than God," Ed said.

"Yeah, but, jumping Jehosaphat! The Beatles sang about love, and joy. Good things. Surely the boys were on God's side!"

"I suppose," Ed said, "if God's side means smoking pot and having sex with a sea of groupies and corrupting tens of millions of young people around the world."

I bit my lip. I came into this determined not to discuss war, politics, or abortion. I needed to expand that list to include anything that happened after the twelfth century.

"See," I told Ed, "I knew we could find common ground."

Camp Courage is usually used by severely handicapped people, so the facilities are a little different. The boat dock is wheelchair friendly. All the buildings are built on a slope, so they can be easily entered at either the first or second floor. Bathrooms had pull-ropes, not knobs. I was reading a kitchen bulletin board post about how to look at severely burned people, for whom just being seen has the potential for deeper trauma:

Say HELLO! Be yourself.

Smile and let the person know that you are a friend.

Understand that a person who has been burned will have scars and may look different. That difference is on the outside only. On the inside that person is the same as before the burn injury.

Speak kindly and politely to the person if you have questions about the burn or scars.

Ask the person who has been burned to join your activities or games.

Remember to see the person with burn scars as a PERSON.

Behind me I heard a man's voice.

"Never saw you before. I'm Hal Buchanan."

By all accounts Hal should have been a very scary individual. He was a big, strong, blue-collar guy with a growly, Jesse Ventura-like voice and a shaved head that was bright red from sun exposure. And his eyes were fierce and devoid of irony. He looked like he could pick me up and do a flying mare on me with his arms and legs tied behind his back. His knees and ankles, I learned later, were shot from years of laying down floors. And he had a faint tremor in both hands, which gave him the effect of being simultaneously tough as nails and shaky as a leaf.

It did not seem like a formula for a great conversation. And yet we had one.

"Alex says you're a writer. What's that about?"

"Oh, whatever anyone pays me to write. I ghostwrite other people's books for them. And I write some stuff of my own."

Hal shook his head like now he'd heard everything. "I take my hat off to ya, Mike. To be able to put words together and say something. I mean, that's pretty amazing when you think about it."

He was right. It is kind of amazing. When you think about it.

"I gotta tell ya, Mike" Hal began, and you got the feeling this was how a lot of his conversations began. "If you want to see the power of the Lord, you don't have to look much further than my life. I spent twenty-five years as a drinker and a dooper. A clown is what I was. A stupid, selfish clown. On a Harley-Davidson. Everything I did was about me. I did what I liked. I really didn't care what you or anybody else thought. If I didn't like you, you stood a pretty good chance of getting hurt."

"But that's all history now, right, Hal?"

"Mike, the idea that the Lord would look down and pick a stupid clown like me out of a crowd of guys to save, a lot of who are dead now, well, all I can say is, 'Hallelujah,' you know?"

Hal pointed out his 19-year-old son Zeke to me, playing down by the lake with some other boys. "I'm really glad Zeke could come with me this year.

"Zeke is what they called 'developmentally disabled.' He's slower than other boys, and autistic. He gets mainstreamed in public schools, but he stills needs a lot of attention. A month ago, him and me went to Disneyland, and this was typical of him, when the crowd pressed around, he still took his old man's hand. He gets scared."

I liked Hal immediately. He just put everything out there, with none of the customary holding-back. "I grew up hard. My dad was a drinker, and a very abusive person. He used to whale on me and my brothers and made us feel useless and small.

"I grew up strong, but I was angry, too. I still wanted my father's love, but I knew I was never gonna get it, I drifted into biking and drugs and alcohol and treating other people the way my dad treated us boys."

The miracle in his life, he said, was finding Christ and discovering he didn't need to feel hateful or self-annihilating any more. Christ was the "higher power" that leveraged him to sanity. Once he figured out it was Jesus who saved him, he never attended another AA meeting.

"I'm trying to be a decent Christian man. My current thing is I'm reading the entire Bible, cover to cover. I've gotten through all the histories and I'm just starting the book of Job, which let me tell you is very powerful stuff."

"Job," I nodded. I knew that one.

Hal talked about his brother. "Remember those L.A. cops who screwed up the O.J. Simpson investigation? My brother Dean was one of those guys. He and I can barely stand to see each other. Since I found the Lordm Dean can't put up with me any more. But a few weeks ago I felt the call to go visit him, and me and Zeb flew out to Southern California and spent a week with him.

"We drove around the city and he showed me his hangouts, and introduced me to other guys on the force. He gave Zeke a ride on his motorcycle, and Zeke really enjoyed it.

"But how can I tell ya, Mike, that Dean gave off the vibe of being a really bad cop. I know in my heart he's cracked heads wide open and planted evidence on people and been involved in shady deals. He's stolen, and he's told lies that put people away. It wouldn't surprise me to learn he's killed people. That's how rough he is.

"Dean spends his after-hours time at the cop hangout getting drunk. The other cops all tippy-toe around him. I don't use the word hell lightly, but my brother lives in a kind of horrible hell of hating himself and everybody. He says it's the city of Los Angeles that's bad, but I look at him and see he's his own biggest problem. He sees me as, you know, kind of muttonheaded and religious. We definitely do not see eye to eye on that!

"And yet, I found myself praying for Dean in L.A. and feeling this visit was for some sort of purpose. I wanted to say something, to draw him in a bit. In the end, as we were packing up to fly back to Minnesota, all I was brave enough to do was leave a little booklet on the nightstand. But as I was closing the door behind me, that flyer seemed so inadequate I wanted to snatch it back.

"But here's the thing, Mike. When we got back to Minnesota Dean was on the phone a lot. He wanted to talk to Zeke. It was all about Zeke. The two of them talked about getting together again, and maybe flying out to L.A. on his own, which would be a really big thing for Zeke." Hal leaned over the folding table and whispered the conclusion to his story, as if it would be bad if anyone else at the retreat were to overhear:

"And I got to thinking, what a wonderful way God has with us, that the road to this dangerous man went through my boy who is so gentle and loving. That's just like God, too. I was a coward leaving that pamphlet next to the guest bed. But there was Zeke doing the Lord's work just by being a loving kid. I tell ya, Mike, it humbles me. Everything humbles me these days."

Hal was like a force of nature to me. Nothing was going to keep him from connecting with the God that made him. If Dean was a rough cop, Hal was a rough angel. Any God worth his salt would love this man.

The other thing bothering Hal was the recent death of a friend.

"I'm in a bad spot now," Hal said, "because a few weeks back a dear friend of mine took his life. This man was like my brother, you know. I woulda done anything for Greg. And I thought I was making headway with him, pitching the love of God to him.

"I'll say this about Greg, he never said, 'Hal, shut up.' But then this last bout of depression stole over him, and it was pure hell on him. Greg walked into the woods, and sat on a log and put that shotgun barrel in his mouth. It was me that found him that way, with his head all blasted away. He didn't have no head at all. First thing, it made me sick to my stomach. Second thing, it squashed my heart flat as a pancake. It really did.

"Now Greg's gone and, I have to assume, in the fires of eternal torment. And that just eats at me."

I sat up at the assertion. "How do you know he's in hell, Hal?"

"Well, it's obvious. You take your life, you're throwing God's gift back at him. It's like one day just up and quitting the only job you'll ever get. It's so ungrateful, naturally God has no use for you. It makes me sick to say it, but that's the way it is."

Hal's remark triggered in me a series of rapid suppositions. While he went on about his friend Greg, this is what was happening in my head:

Does God really hate suicide? Bible must say so. But Oh, how can I argue this point with Hal if I don't know what the Bible says?

Is despair a mortal sin, irredeemable? If so, what sort of God punishes people whose hearts are already broken?

And how do we know that a person who takes his life dies in a state of faithlessness?

This last question led me down an interesting logic branch. I wanted to tell Hal something valuable, after all he'd told me about himself. So I looked him in the eye over the mess hall table we were sitting at and told him this:

"Hal, aren't you assuming that God's time is the same as our time? If I pull the trigger and blow a bullet into my brain, there appears to be zero time left for repentance, so I obviously go directly to hell. But that's our notion of time.

"What if there is all the time in the world between *bang* and death? How do we know there's no time for repentance? Maybe there's eons between the click of the trigger and the bullet coming to a halt deep inside the skull.

"I know, that sounds fanciful, Hal. But we have no reason to be confident about how things work in God's mind. What did the Apostle Paul say – all we can do is see through a glass darkly?"

Hal nodded.

"So aren't we putting a ceiling on God's grace to suggest that his forgiveness is slower than a speeding bullet?"

"I hadn't thought of it like that," he said.

"Here's how I think about it," I continued. "We don't really know how God's time works. We live our lives forward, like along straight march from birth to death, so to us the last deed done trumps everything that went before. What if God, being outside time, sees it differently -- working from the broader picture of how you lived, who you loved, and what your best impulses in this life were?"

Hal was still nodding.

"Finally, when we say we know someone's in hell, for sure – aren't we taking upon ourselves a judgment that is only God's to make? And isn't that more an example of 'playing God' than the poor depressed soul who, being beside himself with sadness, puts a gun in his mouth?"

Hal, God love him, looked at me like I had shot him off a horse. I worried I had said too much. It wasn't my job to come to Hal's retreat and spew my sci-fi notions of God's relativism and make him question his black-and-white beliefs.

I didn't expect that this tough, Bible-reading guy would take seriously anything that tumbled from my shape-shifting lips. But he did. He didn't say it right on the spot. But he wore a stricken expression, as if he had transgressed, and needed to make immediate amends.

The next morning at breakfast, Hal sought me out. He approached me with what I thought was a glower on his face, and I thought, "Uh oh. Hal's prayed and God told him to pound the snot out of me for my theological impudence."

But Hal was anything but avenging. "Mike, I just wanted to tell you thanks for the things you said to me yesterday, about Greg maybe not being in hell. It's something that has weighed on me so heavily, and what you said just about knocked me down. It's not my job to say who's in hell and who isn't. God's mercy is more than I will ever be able to understand.

"You lifted a giant weight off my chest, and I'm able to breathe again. I don't ever want to judge anyone's life like that ever again. So I just want to say, thanks, brother."

And Hal gave me the biggest hug I think have I ever got, right there among the folding chairs of Camp Courage.

The first night of the retreat I kept to the outskirts of things, avoiding the knots of men reading or praying, but also the ones playing basketball or swimming. I peered through a window at one point and watched Gus play basketball with his mates. Back home Gus had been driven out of basketball.

I remembered one league game when he was twelve. He drove up to the basket, only to have the ball stripped away by a kid two heads taller than him. The game was in its final seconds, and the takeaway meant Gus's team would lose. A blonde kid on Gus' own team said to him, as they walked off the court, "You suck, man."

And now I was watching Gus and he was not sucking at all. He was hanging in there, he was driving, he was putting up points. OK, so it was with church kids. Still I adored watching Gus do well. I adored the look I saw on his face.

And then I snuck away. I didn't like noisy gym scenes because I couldn't hear what people were saying in the confusion, because of my ear noises, and I hated always saying *What, What?*

I wandered down to the main meeting room about a half hour before the evening assembly was to begin. There I found Brian MacMillan, whom I had met at lunch, taking down tables and setting up chairs. I offered to help, and we worked side by side in silence for a few minutes.

Brian was tall and affable, but unlike many other Scots he was unable to be quiet for long. And he was a compulsive punster.

I saw it at the lunch table, when Alex had sat down across from Brian.

"Good morning, Brian. What are you up to today?"

"No good, for starters."

"Oh, Brian!"

"But I'm also *up* to my ears – with work!"

"That's a good one."

"Fortunately I'm *up* to my usual tricks."

"Another good one."

"Of course, if it was *up* to me ..."

"Stop, Brian, please!"

"*Up* to and including this one."

And so it went. It was a cross between a gift and an affliction. I know there is a psycholinguistic diagnosis called paronomasia, the compulsion to use words as toys. I think it might be what Brian had. It was an utterly harmless riff, but I had the feeling at breakfast that Brian couldn't stop doing it even at a funeral. He always seemed to be puzzling for the next odd thing to say. But now, stacking tables with him, he was different.

While straightening things up with Brian, I came across a Bible atop the upright piano. The cover featured an airbrushed illustration of the earth floating dramatically in space, and the hand of God, coming out of a sleeve the size of North America, poking our sweet planet with fatherly love.

What made the picture interesting was that it was super-realistic, photographic, while depicting something pretty unrealistic, God as a bearded old man the size of Neptune. It was Christian Wagnerian kitsch.

I nudged Brian and showed him the book cover. "You know, if we could get this photo into wider distribution, we could probably cancel a lot of mission work."

Well, I thought it was funny. Like, it was not only proof of God, but that he was very large and scary.

"I am always amazed at how people find their way to God," Brian said.

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

He folded a table leg in and looked at me. "Well, you, silly."

I demurred. "Brian, I'm just here because my son is in the youth group. I'm not a convert."

"Oh, Mike," Brian said, drawing a deep breath, "do you know what business I'm in?"

"No."

"Here, he said, fishing in his wallet for a business card. It said: *BRIAN MacMILLAN, Concrete Thinker.*

"Everyone knows something," he said. "I have the ability to tell, just by looking at architectural plans, whether a new concrete structure like a bridge will stand up or fall down. It's the darnedest thing to know!"

"I saw a bridge fall once," I said. I had. "Well, I heard it more than saw it. Fresh-poured concrete developed a crack. It fell into the Mississippi below like the sound of two train engines colliding. Gus and I were just a couple hundred yards away, playing in the grass."

"Too much water," Brian said. "Puts the ache in H<sub>2</sub>O."

But Brian caught himself in time to be serious.

"I was like that bridge," he said. "Believe it or not, I was a gangbanger," he said. "I got into all kinds of fights. I just wanted to hurt people. One time I hurt a guy really bad, nearly killed him. I was in jail -- the works."

That was strange. I mean, sure, Brian was a big guy. He looked strong, but in a Merlin Olson, "Say it with flowers" sort of way. A paranomasiac putting people in the hospital? But to hear his story, he was more like a Jet out of West Side Story.

I remembered something Alex, the pastor, mentioned about Brian. "Oh, we have all kinds in our group," he was saying. "We've got people as far to the left as Ben, with the long hair and the geodesic dome, and people as Republican as Brian MacMillan."

Now, I had met the other guy just an hour or so before, and got to know him a little, and it was true Ben was leftish on environmental issues. He was a sunny, good-hearted fellow who would have fit in well at the commune I once belonged to. Ben's goal was to teach soil remediation techniques in parts of the world where the soil was too tired to grow crops.

That was what constituted liberalism at Christ Community. Forget feminism, civil rights, electoral reform and the redistribution of wealth. Soil remediation was as far out as it got.

That was Ben.

But here, on the other end of the scale, was Brian, the most reactionary guy in a reactionary church. I didn't want to like a reactionary. Brian was the sort of guy whose bumper sticker said, "I'd rather be hunting with Dick Cheney than riding around with Ted Kennedy."

But I liked him. He had a whimsical humanity about him, a boyish sweetness that wanted to explain itself to others. His puns were like origami peace offerings he couldn't help making to people. It was a little *Help me* and a little *I love you*. You wanted to buy him an All-Day Sucker just to see him frown at it for the afternoon.

That is what I was thinking, as we set chairs in a semicircle around the speaking area. And then, before I knew it, Brian was weeping. As he stood on the retreat center floor with four folding chairs dangling from his hands, tears came splashing down his cheeks. He closed his eyes and let out this testimony:

“If I could communicate one thing to you, Mike,” he said, “it would be that I was so lost before. And now, what I have now, is so precious to me.

“I don’t think most people understand the concept of treasure,” he continued. “But I do, because I have treasure. It’s the greatest thing in my life. Greater than my marriage or my kids. And doggone it, I love the heck out of my wife and boys!”

“Knowing Jesus, you mean.”

Brian paused to snooft away the tears. He nodded an emphatic *Yes*.

For a moment I just looked at him. I really didn’t know what to say. I admired his courage in blurting such a thing out. I had no doubts about his sincerity, but I did not have clue one what he was talking about. I did not get how the figure of Jesus became treasure to a grown man. This was one of the communication abyssees that open up between believers and nonbelievers. In one swell foop, the believer reaches the end of his rope, in terms of words being able to express things. “Jesus saved me!” And after that, he really doesn’t try. You either get it, or you don’t. It’s a rhetorical cul-de-sac.

Maybe Brian was just being modest. If a fellow liked the sound of himself talking and had the ability to carve out terrific metaphors for the upheaval he experienced in his life -- like some people -- he might find great words and speak them with the depth of an Olivier.

But instead Brian just gave up. “Jesus saved me.” I needed more data. Why? I wanted to know. For what reason? How is it different? What happened exactly? It was frustrating for a fellow like me, who believed in words more than in any god. I wanted to push Brian to say more – the way you kick and shake a candy machine that won’t release your Million Dollar Bar.

But I looked at him, snuffling and smearing the saline solution from his whiskered Scottish face, and thought better of it. Here was this tough guy, who had broken people’s bones, crying in front of me, a stranger. Why were all these grown men around me weeping?

As the three-day retreat progressed, I expected there would be group work in which the men would talk about their lives. I expected most would testify about what a difference Christ had made in their lives, how everything was now hunky-dory as a result. Then we would eat a big meal and maybe play some bad softball.

That’s what the Episcopalians would have done.

But there was surprisingly little of that. What I quickly picked up is that conservative Christians live in a state of submission to God’s will. Every moment of every day, they seek to do the right thing, as revealed to them through scripture, exhortation and prayer. The Christ Community group wasn’t into “give and take.” They only wanted “take” -- the grace that God offers, the teaching and wisdom that the preaching and reading offers, the prayer that the other men pray on your behalf. Compared to God’s will, their personal opinions didn’t amount to much.

A concept I had never dealt with before was God’s *sovereignty*. This meant that there was nothing that was not subject to God’s will. He can do absolutely anything. He does not have to hide behind a curtain if he does not feel like it. He steps out and works miracles all the time, and these guys felt they were breathing proof of that. Cures like Alex’s. Life overhauls like Hal’s and Brian’s. It struck me as an irrational world, like something out of a fairy tale. I was struck by the centrality of Jesus to everything that happened. Jesus was front and center in all the songs we sang. They were not sentimental but ecstatic and worshipful. It was a pep rally – not for the men themselves, but for Jesus. I found it weird.

In my Catholic upbringing Jesus was a distant, perfect, solemn, iconic figure who was the center of a series of scenes. It was like a Viewmaster disk from the 1950s with a dozen 3-D images:

Jesus born in a manger

Jesus resisting Satan

Jesus walking on the water

Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus hosting the Last Supper

Jesus dying on the cross

Jesus rising from the grave

It was all sealed over, though, and hard to get at, like a paperweight you shake to see the falling snow. It was mysterious, and above all it was long ago and somewhere else.

I am not saying Catholics loved Jesus any less than these evangelical men. But these men were involved with Jesus at a much more galvanic level. Catholic men would have sung only a little, it being considered uncouth to sing unless one had the voice of a castrati. At Camp Courage the guys lashed into the songs. These songs were like catechisms, hammering home the central themes, about Jesus being worthy, washing away our sins, saving us from woe. These ideas, these memes come down to us already embedded in amber. They are hinted at in the Psalms and Isaiah, and then they spring to life in the Gospels – and then are frozen again. Jesus saved us. It sounds so long ago, its meaning lost in the layers of dust that have settled over it. How was a modern mind to make all this old dust relevant?

I'm like, OK, I get it. Jesus is indisputably a pivotal figure. But aren't we overdoing it a bit? Surely Jesus, wherever he was, doesn't require all this praise. He must know who he is, and what he has done. Mightn't we be annoying him with these simple songs? Mightn't we be putting him on such a pedestal of enthusiasm, we are in danger of lacquering him over just like the Catholics did, and losing the qualities that made him appealing?

This Jesus was a little like Superman, hard to sympathize with because he was just so great. This sentence doesn't work for me, I think because people *do* sympathize with Superman, don't they?

And there was something else. The way the group submitted to leadership. The way in which they sang with one voice, squelching individual voices like mine. The way the songs pounded away on themes of glory, righteousness, holiness, kingdom, and almighty. These words were so powerful they were like bombs going off. But while they were packed with explosive power, they still seemed vague and undefined to me. Worse, they had a triumphal, Nuremberg-rally flavor about them, like we had to pump ourselves up to 10,000 psi of pressure to feel anything.

How different I was from all the rest of these guys. Where my mind generated questions, theirs seemed to generate acceptance and joy. They were without shame or self-consciousness about being God-smacked. They sang lustily and from their diaphragms, the way they were meant to. Often they held a hand up to God, or two hands with outstretched palms. They clapped. They shouted. They rocked on their heels.

I looked over at Gus, standing hands in pockets with the other younger guys, who were mostly trying to look cool in the midst of all this fervor. I was glad he was keeping his mouth shut and casting sidelong glances at his pals, who did likewise. A little circumspection is not always a bad thing.

I sang, but without conviction. I kept thinking about the Jai Uttal disc in my car, and the cultural gulf between that sacred music and this sacred music. I wondered if I could translate

the Hindi words into Christian English, and keep the sitars and tablas, what the Christian fellows would think.

The preaching was a bipolar arrangement, in the sense that Alex had invited over from Poland a pair of evangelical preachers named Szymon and Tadeusz. In the small southwestern Polish city of Gryfow, these two were creating a vibrant Christian enclave in an otherwise depressed part of the country, giving special attention to the needs of alcoholics and drug addicts. Their churches were like sister churches of Alex's church in Saint Paul. Alex and others made frequent visits, raised money for them, and provided the folks in Gryfow with labor in the form of our youth group -- my boy Gus told me he wanted to spend a few weeks of the coming summer doing the kind of demolition work that goes with remodeling -- hauling rubble out of buildings.

Szymon was a rough man who had done hard time in prison as a thief and gangster. He was an alcoholic. He spoke barely any English at Camp Courage. He needed a compatriot to translate for him, and in Tadeusz he had a passionate frontman. Szymon provided the grit, and Tadeusz the emotion.

The two presented a slideshow featuring an audio recording of the town drunk, a fellow named Jerzy. On the slide Jerzy looked 80, but in fact he was only 53. You could actually hear the man testifying in Polish, about how his life had been turned around. He told how he spent 40 years drinking any household chemical compound he could get his hands on, to suck the ethanol from it. Astonishingly, to hear the tale, Jerzy died within an hour of recording this quavering narrative. But you could not hear death in his remarks, only surprise on his part that he was considered worth saving at all.

Szymon was all business as he dictated his thoughts to Tadeusz. His voice was flat, his face unsmiling. His English, barely functional.

"I spent four years in prison for stealing. God came into my life and lifted me up. Now I am on my knees all the days thanking him."

But Szymon found a way to make all the g's in his participles hard -- that last phrase came out as "every day thanking k'him."

Whereas his partner Tadeusz spoke a kind of child's English; he had a tender, heartfelt approach to preaching that felt like he could string sentences together all night long out of joy and submission. He talked almost solely about loving Jesus and Jesus loving you back.

"Trust in Jesus!" He cried, bringing his hands forcibly together. "It is the answer to every sorrow in your heart." His imploring tone made his clumsy English sound profound. I strained to hear the two of them above the rumblings of my bad ear, which sounded today like a lawnmower sinking in a tar pit.

"If you trust in Jesus ... if you put your heart at his feet ... you will find rest with him ... for Jesus knows everthings you know ... and his love is somethings that nobody can make into a question ... he died for you one time ... if it was up to him he would die a thousand other times, just for you. That much is how he loves you!"

It was a gospel of almost motherly love, and it was beneficent for me to hear the guileless Szymon and Tadeusz my first time out, and not some polyester-clad siding salesman from Chattanooga. These two men connected to the part of me that lay in bed awake at night, wondering what would become of me. Would I ever find success as a writer? Would I ever become the man I was born to be?

They appealed to my sense of myself as an orphaned child a long way from home.

Listening to them, I felt an odd love for myself, of the type perhaps that God also might feel for me. That every man is brave just to live honestly in the world, ostensibly alone, but

guided by this concealed spirit. So corrupted, and yet still, even in our shabby condition, to be more lovable than angels. Or so they say.

I thought those thoughts without intending to. When I caught myself thinking them, I stopped.

As the meeting was breaking up, around 9:30, they invited people to step forward “for prayer.” I didn’t know what this was, but I was in the spell of Szymon and Tadeusz's simplicity. I wanted to put myself out, to be a good guest, to show reciprocity to these people. If I could stand in line for this prayer as a sign of my good faith, I would feel better about being a stranger in their midst.

Also, the thought of slinking back to the bunkhouse without interacting with anyone in any way seemed totally chicken-shit.

I figured, if prayer was something I didn't feel comfortable doing, I could revert to my role of journalist-anthropologist. “I am just here to observe.”

Now, about prayer. It was more than just reading words off a sheet of paper. The way it was done at the retreat, it is a kind of physical, personal humbling, in which a person presents himself to a small group of others, and requests that they pray for a special problem or intention. The others gather around the petitioner, lay hands on his hands, shoulders and head, and talk out-loud to God on his behalf.

So I craned forward, keen to hear what the men were saying in their invocations. First, the praying was not stock prayers like I remembered as a Catholic boy, the Hail Mary, Our Father, etc. The men were making their prayers up as they went. Men took turns praying, in very churchy language (“Heavenly father, we just want to say to you how glad we are ...”). Part of me wanted to blue-pencil next to his words: *Just* is a waste-word, it adds nothing. And *heavenly* raises more questions than it answers.”

It wasn't poetry -- but in a way that quality made it even better, because you didn't have to strain for great-sounding words. The readily available ones, clichés and all, were right there, and they were acceptable. It was like the old tuna fish commercial: Starkist didn't want tuna with good taste. They wanted tuna that tastes good. Sincere tuna.

I could not have said what they were saying in 10,000 years – spoken so nakedly, without a sense of my own authorship. Not only were they not embarrassed; they seemed to call down power with their own humility. Talking directly to God, they were linking up with everyone in the Bible who had ever done that – Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jesus. This praying was the same as *that*.

I witnessed grown men hanging their heads and telling their brothers they were having problems with anger, or lust, or paying their mortgage, or dealing with stress or arguing with the wife.

The humility was astonishing. And the physicality of men touching and meaning the very best possible thing for one another, without worrying about seeming unmanly or gay. It was beautiful. Especially to my sort of person, who puts so much effort into “coming across” in a good, controlled, always superior way.

This moment of observing the beauty of men humbly praying for one another wound up being a pivotal moment in my life. Not a "conversion moment," but something that jarred me out of one way of thinking and into another.

My willingness to judge what I see allows me to be confident as a writer, but it has the opposite effect deeper down, of making me feel insecure, like an imposter, that I must always come up with something "good enough" if I am to even open my mouth. Otherwise my whole shtick in life -- which is to be impressive -- will collapse like a house of cards.

What I would give to be able to speak in clichés and not feel I was letting people down!

Suddenly I found myself at the front of the line. I felt like I had climbed into a foreign taxicab and suddenly had no idea where I was going, or what to say. Tadeusz was the prayer leader for my group, and he inquired in the kindest voice: “How may we pray for you, friend?” I looked around, nervous but determined to keep moving forward. “My children,” I stammered. (No, this couldn’t be about *me!*) “My son suffers from depression. He’s here tonight. My daughter suffers, too. I’m not a member of this group, but I ask you to pray for them.”

Then Tadeusz and the other men began putting their hands on me. I felt them on my shoulders, on my head, on my upper arms. One man took my hand in his. I was touched, literally, with the decency and affection that was radiating from these men. Whoever the hell I was, whatever my reservations about their God were, I deserved God’s mercy in their eyes, and they gave me every bit as much as they gave one another.

For my part I tried to do it well. I kept my eyes closed. I listened to the prayers and tried to be “receptive” to what was being said. (“Heavenly father, watch over Michael and his son and daughter. Strengthen him to do the work he needs to do every day. Give him courage and clarity to be a good man, a good husband, a good father. Let him never doubt your love. Let your love for him be a firm foundation on which to build a life. Keep him healthy, and confident, and *blah blah blah* ...)

But I did not myself pray. I would have liked for something magical to happen. But I felt magic-proof. These men with their humble heartfelt prayers were on a charming trip that I hoped would continue to work for them. But how would it ever get past my defenses? I despaired of myself ever attaining that simplicity.

Then the audible praying was over, and I felt uncomfortable again and felt I needed to do something. I began reaching for everyone’s hands, thanking them. “Thank you. Thanks so much. Thank you. Thank you.”

To me the handshake was a point of etiquette. These guys had “put out” for me, and I appreciated it on my end. But they seemed perplexed, like I was trying to tip them. What they had done for me was so much more intimate than a handshake. It was like, someone gives you an emergency tracheotomy and you give them a five dollar bill. The debt could not be paid!

Indeed, on some level it was not even personal. If I had said, “Pray for me to stop masturbating twelve times a day,” I don’t think that would have jarred them, or caused them to form a judgment about me. Don’t we all do much worse that masturbate twelve times a day, twelve times twelve times twelve times? We are all bound up addictively in ourselves, and somehow -- this thought was just dawning on me, in a way I did not yet understand -- Christ is the smelling salt that wakes us from that needy torpor.

Suddenly, I wanted to be out of the spiritual spotlight. I worried that Gus had been watching from behind a pillar, and would now expect me to be different somehow. Somehow I would no longer be his old dad. I felt ashamed, like I was unworthy of being with these guys, that I was a tourist in a house of prayer. I wanted to show respect so I felt myself backing away. As I did so, Brian, the paranomasitic Scot, asked The Question That Puts the Spiritually Shaky to Flight:

“Mike, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?”

It was so barenaked, so ugly, so frightening. I mumbled something, which today I reconstruct as “Probably not to your satisfaction.”

Now I was bolting out of the room. I walked in long strides up the hill to the bunkhouse where my stuff was. At the door, I stopped in my tracks. The sun was setting over the lake by the retreat center, and a few loons could be heard paddling in the nearby reeds.

*Could be heard?* I actually did hear loons. How could I hear loons paddling, or anything that subtle, with my bum ear? I stood and whirled around, and heard the movement inside my ear. I put my hand to my ear and tugged on it. I took turns listening from each ear.

And this was the deal. I could hear. I really could. I was not bullshitting myself. I could hear as well as I ever could.

I ran into the bunkhouse and there in the commons area was the last person I wanted to see. Ed. The guy who had set his Beatle records ablaze. How my heart sagged when I heard him say that! If God ever sent avatars into this world, he had sent John and Paul and Ringo and George. And to then let petty religious fervor cause you to melt their music on a holy bonfire? Say it didn't happen, Ed!

Now I was standing in the bunkhouse commons, cupping my ear, and Ed was poring over his Bible, and I needed to tell someone about it. Isn't it weird how these things play out?

"Ed, it's the darnedest thing. Tadeusz and the men prayed over me, and my hearing just came back."

To me it was the most mind-blowing coincidence – prayer, then healing. I mean, it was Jungian and synchronistic and all that, but really *corny* Jungian, and really *hack* synchronistic.

"It's the most incredible coincidence I have ever experienced," I said, staring at myself in the mirror.

Ed, God bless him – I could see him in the mirror, behind my shoulder, looking up from his study Bible. This is what he said, without missing a beat:

"It's a proven fact that coincidences increase when you pray."

#### 4. Moron Logic

Gus and I rode home from the retreat together, me with a head full of thoughts and him with his headphones on. Gus had had a great time the night before, playing death metal on his guitar until lights out, the mutilated notes rising like dirty incense above the retreat.

"So how did you like it?" I asked loudly.

"What do you like?" he shouted.

"No, you. The retreat," I yelled at him.

"OK," he yelled back at me, like, what was my problem?

"What about it did you like?"

"What?"

"What ... did ... you ... *like*?"

Gus frowned. The question seemed answerable. "B-ball?"

I prevailed upon him to turn off his Walkman.

"I can hear," I said, tapping my formerly bad ear.

"I'm sorry. I turned the music off."

"No, I mean, I can hear with my bad ear now. Tadeusz and the other guys prayed over me and my hearing came back."

"That's weird."

"Tell me about it."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," I said. "The people are so right-wing."

"What's that?"

"Conservative," I translated. Gus didn't know from politics. "I doubt there's a decent Democrat in the whole group. You know, when all you care about is Jesus, people take advantage of you. I'm sure this church is pro-life."

"Pro-life doesn't sound bad."

"It may sound good," I said, frustrated. "But there's more to it than that. Not letting women choose keeps them down. Trust me. I'll bet they're totally freaked out about gays, too."

Gus looked down. Among his friends there was nothing worse than being gay.

"Gus, the problem with many Christians is, they are so sure about God and the Bible that they stake out positions that can be very un-Christian, unloving and intolerant. And they aren't good at looking at themselves and saying, 'We were wrong about this.' Christians didn't do near enough to stop the Holocaust. Jesus becomes so important in the scheme of things, that nothing else matters. Since nothing else matters, they ignore or consent to all sorts of unjust positions."

Gus gave me a look that I wanted to be respectful admiration, but probably was something else.

He attempted a futile objection. "Why don't you just ignore things you don't like, and maybe it will become clear to you later?" he said nonsensically.

To demonstrate, he turned up his Walkman and ignored me.

We drove the rest of the way in silence. I had no idea what to do about my ear getting better. It wasn't something I had asked for. But having benefited from it, it wanted some kind of response from me. I felt obligated. It was like driving in the city, and a bum washes your windshield with a filthy sleeve, and now you're supposed to give him a dollar. Only the bum was God – maybe – and it was unclear exactly what he wanted in return.

A dollar might not cover it.

Lily met us at the door. “How were the Christians?” she asked slyly.

“Pretty remarkable, actually.”

“What happened?”

“It was the darnedest thing,” I began.

“Don’t tell me,” she gasped. “You didn’t! Oh, Mike!” Lily had suffered many stupid slings and arrows over her lifetime from anti-Semitic Christians. She believes she didn’t make her high school cheerleading squad because she was Jewish. It was OK to be friendly with right-wing Christians, but why would you want to join them and give aid and comfort to their wrong-headed ways?

If I became a “born-again Christian” (coming from Lily, the phrase carried the same warmth as “blithering idiot”), it might open up a rift neither she nor I knew how to close.

To put it another way, she did not marry a Christian, yet I had promised to be faithful to her as I was. Having made that promise, where did I get off making such a radical change?

So I sought to reassure her. “Whoa, hey, wait, slow down. I was good. I was like a tourist, honey. You’d have been proud. I got a little involved, but I kept my distance. In fact, I would say it went great, right up until the end.”

“What happened at the end?”

“Well, these Polish guys prayed over me and a minute later I could hear again out of my bad ear.”

“Over your tinnitus?” Lily pronounced it TIN-a-tiss – clinically preferred to my tin-EYE-tiss.

“The TIN-a-tiss went away,” I said limply, looking to her to save me from this saving.

Lily stared at me with open mouth. “Hysteria,” she said.

“Maybe a little,” I said miserably. “But what should I want? That I lose my hearing again?”

She brightened. “Mike, listen to me,” she said. “It was a door prize. You won. You are under no obligation.”

Lily was right. Even if this was something God Almighty Himself had done, I didn’t owe anybody at the retreat anything. Those people were merely the instrument of my brain tumor releasing its grip on my auditory nerve. That did not make me their chattel. My soul was not a raccoon tail for them to tie to their car antennas.

And yet I did feel obligated. The Jesus business made no sense, really. The people were light years from me culturally. I could spend a lifetime trying to fit in with them and still not make the grade. There was no possibility of success.

But I kept coming back to my damn ear. Something made it hear again. I needed to respond to that. That’s just good manners.

The following Sunday morning at ten o’clock I drove Gus to Christ Community Church. I told Lily the same thing when I went to the retreat: that I was going on Gus’ behalf, to be a good dad. Thumb up, wink wink, not to worry.

She looked at me as if I had made a pass at another woman at a party, and turned away.

Perched on a tiny terrace on Princeton Avenue in an older in-town neighborhood, with two giant pine trees standing sentry, Christ Community is far from a mega-church. It is small. The sign, most days, does not even say the church’s name, because they rent the building from the Seventh Day Adventists, who by definition don’t need a place on Sundays. Early every Sunday morning someone wraps a vinyl banner with Christ Community Church on it. Right

after the service, the sign comes off again. Not exactly a mighty fortress, signwise. On the other hand, the rent is low, about \$1200 a month, and for that amount Alex' group gets unlimited use of the community rooms.

Since the building is shared by two congregations, it is relatively free of the posters, banners and Jesus portraits you see at many churches – because the two tenants take pains not to annoy one another. I don't know what doctrinal differences exist between Adventists and evangelical outfits like Christ Community. But it's a rare pair of Christian congregations that don't get on each other's nerves.

The interior was simple and quiet, with lots of dark wood. Not Episcopalian by a long shot, but not bad, either. People spoke, but not loudly. Way in the front was a pulpit, some stairs, and behind that, some kind of water tank. In the back of the main room I saw people from the retreat. Brian was greeting people and handing them bulletins. Hal and his family were getting settled in a back row. I saw Ed, the guy who hated the Beatles. But the men were different here. Instead of embracing one another boldly as they did at the retreat, they were calmly shaking hands and chatting. They were with their wives, which seemed to impose a ceiling on the manly gusto.

Up front, praying intently with two other men in the front row of pews, was Alex. They were praying just like we had at the retreat, hands on shoulders, eyes closed, speaking out loud to God. I keened my now-good ear to hear what they were saying.

“You know what is in our hearts, Jesus. Give us the strength to be better men. Teach us to live the way that you lived among us ...”

During the announcements portion of the service, I glanced at a flyer I had picked up from a small wooden table at the back of the church, proclaiming the key values at Christ Community. According to this sheet of paper, the church was:

*Christ-centered.* (At this place, Jesus was the Alpha, the Omega, and everything in between.)

*Gospel-spreading.* (This tiny church of fewer than a hundred people somehow maintained a human presence in Poland, Brazil, China, Japan, Ghana, Thailand, and Zambia. More locally, being a Christian means giving a joyful example -- in that sense they see every congregant as a missionary.)

*Bible-oriented.* “The Old and New Testaments are inspired, truthful, and without error.”

*Community-based.* “No one comes to God by himself.” Spirituality begins with one another. You can't pray or meditate or read your way into heaven.

It was like the list of ingredients on a can of soup, telling you what was contained inside. Full disclosure. No one could go into that church and not have an idea what they were getting themselves into.

The service began with a half hour of singing. We led off with one or two up-tempo anthems with a lot of doctrine in them, about Christ dying for our sins, then segued into a song that was slower and more emotional, that was just about how much Jesus loves us, and us him. The congregation repeated key verses, sometimes three or four times. Between songs people in the pews might shout out a line of scripture or a burst of praise.

I heard someone speaking in tongues my first day. To me it sounded like someone was shouting out a line of Polish or Farsi. Something with more consonants than vowels. It sizzled in our midst like a sudden bolt of some mystery language, that had the effect of electrifying people. As I understand it, a person who speaks a tongue has no more understanding of it than the person standing next to him. Its effect is to create awe.

Afterward, Alex made an attempt to explain the tongue:

"What I'm hearing is that God is here with us if we allow him to be. That God is boundless and sovereign in our lives. And that this is the source of our greatest joy."

After the singing came then five minutes of church business -- luncheons, bake sales, prayer meetings and the like -- then a really long sermon, 45 minutes or more. Followed by communion. Followed by donuts.

I liked a few things, like the solemnity and God talk. But I disliked some things too.

There was a distinct "factory model" to the way things worked. I suppose they would call it a shepherd/flock model. It was very centralized and top-down, with one person, the minister, coaxing conformance out of seventy. It was undemocratic. I wanted to stand and ask, When do the sheep get to bleat? I thought of the theory of multiple learning styles, how some people learn from listening, others from demonstration, and still others by talking things over among themselves. That was loose (whatever works!) whereas this poured-into-the-ear apostolic approach was tight. But it had one key advantage -- people were exposed only to the "right" way of thinking.

Right away I picked up on how a church like Christ Community Church creates a mini-world to live in, and shuts the larger world out. As a "man of the world," a "thinking man," a "trivia king," this did not play to my strong suit at all. I lost a lot in such a configuration. I was very clear in this: whatever happened with this church, I wanted to keep living in the real world of problems and anxieties. I liked modernity. I liked America. I liked knowing who the bad guys were, and voting against them. I got my "edge" there, and my power. I wanted to keep reading newspapers and voting and watching Saturday Night Live. I wanted to feel like I was at liberty to challenge every assertion that bugged me, and engage with it.

Whereas, Christ Community Church was a happy world unto itself, sealed off from the real world. It did not engage with the modern world on its terms. They might as well have been passing a wicker basket piled high with Valium. We're happy because Jesus loves us, end of story.

I wanted to say, "OK, I get it. Jesus loves the bejeezus out of you. He really, really does. But how does him loving you like that actually change anything? You still have rent to pay, you still have cells metastasizing, you still have injustice in the world. What are we so happy about?"

Did being a Christian mean sacrificing your edge?

Alex' sermons had tons of edge. At one point he even put in a good word for Communism, saying that catacombs-era Christians, the folks St. Paul wrote his epistles to, typified the ideals that came to be associated with socialist thought -- "giving to one another according to their need." More than one thin pair of lips in the congregation pursed at the thought that Karl Marx and Jesus were in cahoots.

I liked that about Alex. He liked dropping little bombs to challenge people's sense of what was allowed. He liked Neil Young and the Who. He was once a pothead motorcyclist. (He once, perhaps recalling our meeting, used the F-word in conversation. But it was with a ten-foot pole: "I don't think anyone has gone to hell for saying the word *fuck*.")

But Alex always came back to Jesus. His sermons were never exercises in his own wit and erudition. They were always about Jesus, and why loving him -- and really, living in him -- is the only recourse of a sensible person. He reminded people that without God they were alone, with their own flawed judgment in charge of things. With God, they had a higher standard to follow.

What was salvation? Jesus saved people in a dozen ways: by taking away their shame and self-hatred, by teaching them a new way to live, by simplifying life to a pair of rememberable laws, by breaking the silence that had existed for so long between creator and created.

Alex in his first sermons didn't set off the alarms that I expected. He didn't flat-out tell people to get involved politically, and go to holy war against the gentiles, the liberals, the secularists, the humanists. Oh, he made gentle fun of them at times -- and this riled me -- but not in a hateful way. He didn't rail against nonbelievers. He didn't play to easy prejudices. Neither did he preach sweetness and light -- pabulum. His talks were intelligent but also emotionally intelligent -- they made spiritual sense.

He didn't scare people with hell and damnation. Church was not about terrorizing people, but loving them.

He could be all over the place, quoting multiple testaments, juggling jokes and asides, improvising, digressing when he felt like it, and then apologizing several times, toward the end, for its beard-growing length.

He was a friendly man, but he could be icy at times, as when challenged on a point of theology. He was not there to compromise his covenant with God to make someone feel good or included. Gus brought home stories of his fearsome parenting style -- very patriarchal and brow-furrowing compared to the Mister Rogers approach I had mastered.

But publicly Alex spoke with a sly, sweet smile. He enjoyed making everyone in a group feel momentarily uncomfortable -- just a moment of devilish provocation -- then hugging them with God's love. He was funny and human and smart.

Best of all, he used himself as a negative example. He told a revealing story of how he got into a fight while jogging when his dog pooped on the path, and a nonbeliever had the temerity to ask him to pick it up.

"I was as big a jerk as you could imagine. I was rude to the guy, and trotted off thinking how much better I was than him, and all the good I do in the world. Why, I'm a minister of the Lord, for Pete's sake!

"And then, as I was bounding along around the lake, it hit me what a self-absorbed, defensive jackass I was being. I was so *me*. I was so Alex Garrin! And I said 'Thank you, Jesus,' and went back and found the guy I had snapped at and apologized to him. And yes, I picked up Laddie's poop. But I took no pleasure in it."

It wasn't a made-up story. I could easily imagine Alex being insensitive about picking up after his dog, decades after every other Twin Citian -- we are the most environmentally civilized people in North America -- had made that adjustment.

A nine-word summary of his talks: "Trust Jesus, he knows way better than you do."

A longer synopsis might go like this:

Throughout the world, throughout history, people have been broken -- by bad luck, by pain, but also by their own self-obsession. We are all of us egomaniacs by nature, anxious and fearful, which justifies our taking from others. This selfishness is what sin is. Sin is the dominant feature of human life. It is nothing more than a degraded obsession with self.

God stepped physically into this dismal situation, and gave people an unimaginable gift -- the sacrificial slaughtering of his own self in human form. The God who gave us life took his own, out of love for us. It was an unignorable lesson of love that has confused billions ever since. Because of this selfless action, we have a chance to advance beyond brokenness to a condition of wholeness or healedness -- the thing Christians call salvation. The essence of this salvation is surrender to God's will and the forsaking of our own ego-obsessed selves.

That's the theology of Christ Community Church straight up. Of course, it makes no sense unless you have "crossed over" into their way of thinking. The idea of a God who kills himself for love of his creatures -- it's a quantum leap that most minds do not want to make.

Paul acknowledged as much when he said, "The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men." The Greek word for foolishness was *morologia*, literally, "moron logic."

This, I thought, was the constant disadvantage of being a Christian, and the thing that bugged me the most: many people will think you are an idiot. The idea of Jesus doesn't connect with them. It's a myth. Or it's lost in the dubiousness of history. Or it's such an amalgam of counter-intuitive notions (love your enemy, smash your own ego, become a slave to a god who allowed himself to be publicly executed) that it's hopeless.

Unless you are on the other side of this idea, unless you have experienced some kind of internal transformation and swallowed the potent Kool-Aid of Christ – a transformation that can only be understood by those who have experienced it -- it makes no sense.

Add to this incomprehensibility the tendency of most Christians to speak in fatuous clichés about being saved and glory be, and Christianity looms as a language that outsiders can never quite parse, but easily despise.

I argued in my head with other things Alex said:

“I want you to promise to pray for me every day. It's hard having to make good decisions that affect others. I need you to do what I say. But I also need to say what God wants. It's hard, and I see leaders everywhere failing and suffering. Promise me you'll pray. For me. For our elders. For our civil leaders. For everyone who is in charge of others.”

That didn't sit well with me. I felt that our “elected” leaders were gangsters who had stolen power and were breaking every law to amass even greater power. To pray for such as them was like praying for Mu'ammar Qaddafi or Kim Il-Jong. It was an insult to God's intelligence, not just ours.

How can we oppose bad leaders – the way the Declaration of Independence says we must -- while bending our hearts in sympathetic prayer for them? I was beginning to understand why the really revolutionary figures like Thomas Jefferson and Samuel Adams were never conservative Christians. Praying for one's leaders unavoidably bound one to the establishment. It was *droit du seigneur*, the king as God's pawn, embedded in a prayer.

I saw how the TV evangelists and Moral Majority types transformed ordinary Christian piety into raw political clout. Republicans counted on this lick-spittle piety. It made worshippers into political props. Get out the vote, load up the bus. It was how the GOP won recent elections.

Alex may have been asking for prayer to be a better preacher – but the idea appeared to underwrite tyranny. Which I was against.

Over the next few weeks Alex made other observations I found disturbing.

He used the word *fundamentalist*. “We believe in absolute truth,” he said. “We believe the Bible is without error, and reliable. This does not make us literalists. Poetry is poetry. And it's not always easy to know what is being said, in this giant library of writings.

“And it's wrong and dishonest to take a statement out of its scriptural context. But we stand by this book. It was written by God, through man. In this sense we are staunchly fundamentalist.”

I was mentally headed for the exits after that remark. To me, fundamentalists were like the radical imams of Iran, or the people who strap dynamite to themselves and walk into a crowded ice cream parlor. I wished he had not used that word.

One day Alex moseyed over to our place and I had a rare post-retreat chat with him. I brought up this business of leadership.

“You know, Alex, it's hard to pray for leaders when they're not leading from principles of justice and truth. I grew up on LBJ and Richard Nixon. They were stone liars who played the citizenry for fools. After them, and with the current group in power, it's hard to give leaders a free pass again.”

“I know, Mike. I know. But you have to come around and trust again. It’s like post traumatic stress. You have to get back on the horse that threw you. Without trust, leaders can’t lead.”  
“Yeah, but not *this* horse.” Meaning the administration currently holding power. “We have an especially terrible horse right now. Couldn’t I start by trusting someone who is trustworthy?”  
I brought up the subject of Jimmy Carter, to me an eminently trustworthy yet evangelical president. “Carter taught Sunday School and confessed publicly to his sinful impulses. But conservative Christians wouldn’t take their foot off his throat, on every issue from the Panama Canal to human rights in China, which they opposed -- the same people who advocate the use of torture today. Did you criticize those guys then? Or did you help them gang up on Carter, because he was a liberal?”

I suggested to him that there are really only two politics – bully and anti-bully. The fascist wants a strong leader, and the anti-fascist wants a fair one. “It’s not left versus right, it’s David versus Goliath,” I said. “And rightwing Christians almost always take the side of Goliath. Guys like James Dobson are bullies.

"Conservative Christians have a real problem with this love of power. Check out Franco’s tomb, carved out of a mountain in Salamanca. To most of the world he's a Hitler, but to conservative Spaniards he’s a saint.”

Alex sighed. "Evangelicals have always tended to be politically conservative. It's just the way it is."

In the year ahead, I never asked Alex what his politics were. I knew he was anti-abortion. But on topics as huge as the war, taxes, immigration, Social Security, he never let on. (But if I had to guess, I'd say he voted Republican.)

In the sermon Alex talked about Adam and Eve as if they were really real. It was a wonderful story, the way he told it, containing tons of psychological truth about human vanity and shame. But the literalness of his interpretation surprised me. There was an actual garden, actual man and woman, actual serpent, actual God.

“Imagine the moment when God asked Adam why he was hiding – all that hung suspended in that awful moment!”

If it was a folk tale, as I had always assumed, Adam and Eve had tremendous value as wisdom literature. It explains how evil and self-delusion came into our world. But if it was historically true – well, we had a heap of fossils to explain.

Again, I saw political dimensions to this belief – why Christians are so hostile to evolution, which is plainly and obviously true. But because Darwinism doesn’t jibe with an historical Adam and Eve, Christians feel they must fight the idea. Ugh. I began to formulate in my mind a way in which both evolution and Adam and Eve might be true. If God “dictated” the Torah to scribes, why could he not dictate this exquisite story *as a story*? And who would charge God with writing misleading nonfiction? If God is truly all-powerful, why can’t he be non-literal? If a thing is fiction, is it therefore a lie?

But this thought led me to an even scarier possibility – what if Adam and Eve really *did* happen? Then every other story of God appearing and talking to people would be much easier to believe. If a person could believe in Adam and Eve, a person could believe anything.

Alex used phrases like the “supreme majesty of Christ,” the “gleaming throne of God,” and the “power of his almighty holiness.” All these images were so grandiose, and so stupefyingly psychedelic, that I began to identify an appetite for glory and grandeur and great-bigness as part of the evangelical vision.

Compare. Lefties like William Blake see God in a grain of sand. Righties see vast Maxfield Parrish cloudscapes of golden, blissful, eternity everlasting. It’s Nuremburg all the way

down. Everything was big, big, big, like the furling of a giant flag. I judged it to be sentimental and not real (no “edge”), all aimed at a kind of final solution, a last judgment on the plain of Armageddon.

It was creepy.

Periodically Alex made a statement that was so theocratic that I wondered what his take was on the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, the liberties we enjoy as Americans and extend to one another out of hospitality.

It was a paradox. Conservative Christians proclaim their patriotism. They virtually own the American flag. And yet they sidestep the most basic things about our country -- our rights and laws.

Many in the church lamented the abolition of public prayer in schools – regardless of how a Hindu child, for instance, might feel being forced to worship our monotheistic God. This rudeness didn’t bother them, because God required it. When God required something – that “every knee should bow to Jesus” -- good manners went by the boards.

Likewise, depriving gay people of the right to equal protection under the law – hospital visitation rights, insurance equality, parental rights – seems inhospitable to me, regardless of what God may or may not say about these public policies. It isn’t very Jesusy.

The notion of freedom is ambiguous at Christ Community. On the one hand, we send our sons to Iraq, perhaps to die, for the cause of freedom. But theologically, conservative Christians are against freedom. People should not be free to wear slutty clothes, read subversive books, enjoy lighthearted songs sung by subversives like the Beatles, or be homosexual. In conservative Christianity, the ideal is to be God’s slave, to surrender all our freedoms to him. “Thy will, not my will, be done.”

This is the entire brief against liberal theology – that liberals crave the very freedom that God wants them to give up. Our freedom, our individualism, our sense that we matter, that we are special, is what damns us.

On one occasion Alex made an offhand remark about demons. “Why is it so hard to be with Jesus? Why do we slip away from his love, even as we cast our eyes up to him? Demonic activity is one explanation. And demonic activity is real. There are external forces around us seeking our downfall.”

So there it was. Alex, my next door neighbor, the guy I loaned all those eggs to, believed in devils.

Now, I know what devils and demons are. I often like the idea of them. It suits my pessimistic nature to imagine that the reason we make so little progress in this earthly vale is because there are rejects from a Hieronymus Bosch triptych poking us with tridents.

At the same time, I’ve tried to live by Occam’s razor – when there is a logical and simple explanation for why we fail, you don’t need to blame it on a third invisible party like devils. If we are brought down by our pride and our greed, what need is there for devils? Sometimes it is just Murphy’s Law. Sometimes stuff happens.

The next week, Alex talked about sex and gender. “It’s part of our belief that men and women are different from one another,” he said, “and accordingly have different missions.” I realized with a start that I had attended a *men’s* retreat back when this all started. That all the lessons taught at it were about what it means to be a *man* in the eyes of God. Here in the church proper, women were used in other capacities – as wives and mothers, as helpers, as nursery workers, as kitchen cleanup, as musicians, even as prayer leaders. But never as

preachers. Paul explicitly excludes women from this kind of leadership; he excludes them from even speaking. <sup>[7]</sup>

I thought, it's a good thing Lily isn't here to hear this. She's an ardent feminist, and I guess I have always been one too, as part of my anti-bully politics. We both felt that the history of men and women was basically one of men abusing women. Women as often needed protection from men, as they needed men to be kinder and gentler.

Here is another example of divine right – God placing some folks in charge of others. Again, it disenfranchises the rebel. It seems un-American.

The other part is, ordained women do a fantastic job at Episcopal churches. Women are half the world's intelligence -- how could they not? There was no doubt in my mind that they were as “of God” as their betestied counterparts.

The word patriarchal to Lily and me was proof of error. To evangelicals it was the way things ought to be. It was the will of God. Their God.

We then had communion, which, not knowing better, I participated in.

Part of me wanted to go forward and get that prayer. I was feeling agitated, and angry – and I wanted to get closer to the peace I felt at the retreat. I wanted answers to my questions. I wanted to feel less restless and resentful. But I couldn't bring myself to walk to the front of the church and ask. I was shy. I didn't know enough. I was embarrassed to have the people around me – many of whom I had never met, including all the women – see me going up in some sort of psychic distress.

So I didn't. I hung back, and I listened, and I judged.

## **5. An Exorcism in Poland**

The retreat had taken place before Easter. My visits to Christ Community took me through Pentecost, the event after Jesus' departure from the world in which the Holy Spirit ignites the souls of the disciples.

By the onset of summer, I had a "dotted line" relationship to the church -- a hanger-on, someone who was not officially part of things, but could often be spotted in the back rows, biting his lip and muttering to himself through the service.

That's OK. I don't mind that. That's pretty cool. That's complete bullshit.

I was irritable and alienated but no one seemed to mind. I was judging them every second -- their politics, their morality, their philosophical contradictions, their ignorance of other traditions, their intellectual capacity. They didn't care. They were always happy to see me. Their kids played with my kid, so how bad could I be?

Around dusk of a late June evening, I found myself standing in the Garrins' back yard waiting with other church parents. The mosquitoes hatched early that year, and it was refreshing to watch the Christians slapping one another like crazy. We were all waiting for the Christ Community van to return from the airport, bearing our offspring fresh from a mission trip to Poland.

I was upbeat about Gus since he had joined the youth group. He had taken part in work teams, working weekends to sweep out elderly parishioners' basements and garages, haul trash to the curb, even helping to rehab a fraternity space near the University in Minneapolis for a Christian coffeehouse.

Despite all this activity, Gus retained a gray demeanor that seemed to say, “I have seen suffering you cannot even guess at.” That was OK. I could live with a gray demeanor. The boy inside was doing better, and that helped me enormously.

Two years earlier, Gus had had surgery to remove a tumor in his right shoulder that had kept him from writing, lifting, dressing himself. Sports, which he was dying to be good at, were impossible for him. He couldn’t even throw a ball.

The tumor could have been diagnosed one of two ways: as an osteochondroma or an osteosarcoma. Both strike teenagers, primarily. The former is benign and requires bone-grading to remove the “horn” growing on the growth plate. The latter, which is malignant, would have required sawing his shoulder off and repackaging his rib cage. Thank God, it was the former, not the latter.

After the surgery Gus was in considerable pain for three months. But as soon as he could move again without pain, he began to build himself up. I bought him a weight bench for his bedroom and a big punching bag to hang from a beam in the garage. Gus worked out for two hours every day.

In a matter of months he changed his whole body identity. He went from a skinny prepubertal kid to a muscle-hound with about 8% body fat. His arms were Popeye-like, with veins popping out all over. Even his face became muscular and strong. He joined the gymnastics team, and worked his way onto the varsity team. Lily and I were dying to come see him at the meets with other schools, but he wouldn’t let us. He didn’t want us to embarrass him by taking flash pictures of his events. For him, athletics was pure performance, without ego or fanfare. Without having to please parents.

Then, for his last meet, he relented and allowed Lily and me to attend. We understood why he didn’t want us there: parents simply didn’t come to these events. We were the only non-athletes there. We tried to sit inconspicuously but the sidelines, but it was hard, watching our formerly crippled boy wow everyone with his high bar and rings routines.

He surprised us by winning first place for the four schools involved. When it was all over, Gus managed to win first place in the rings, and to finish in the top three for the high bar. What I remember is that all the kids, from all the schools, knew Gus and what he had been through. And when his achievement was announced, they all stood and applauded for him.

Three weeks later, Gus and his Christ Community team, high school students like himself, hopped aboard a flight to Chicago, where they boarded a plane for Frankfort, then flew to Dresden where Tadeusz and another Pole picked them up and drove (“like bats out of hell,” Gus described it in a report he emailed to his youth leader) the remaining two and a half hours to Gryfow, a regional center dating back to the Middle Ages.

Gus had never been out of the U.S. before. He had never really been away from Lily and me for more than a day or two. But he liked it, even if he still felt tethered to us by email.

“At Tadeusz’ church basement,” he wrote, “we crashed hard. I slept the whole day. When I woke up, the other guys were already talking and playing cards with the Polish kids. I was surprised the Polish kids spoke English so well. I was worried we would just stare at each other for two weeks, and no one would say anything.

“After breakfast, which was like coffee and bread and lots of butter, we prayed and walked to the worksite. It was a big house on the edge of town. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the place had been a Mafia hangout for the crooks who ran the town. But now they were gone, and Tadeusz had bought the place to turn it into a detox and residency for alcoholics.”

For the next ten days Gus and the others gutted the old Mafia hotel and wheel-barrowed all the rubble out of it so that the Polish workers could sheetrock it and start afresh. “The Polish

kids didn't think the Americans would bring much to the job," he said. "You know, we're all spoiled and all we do is play video games. But they really respected how hard we worked. Because we sweated with them, we got to be friends."

But it was on the fifth day, at an after-work campfire in the hills outside the city, that Gus had the experience. "Tadeusz and his wife Marisha asked, through the interpreter, if they could pray for me. I said sure. But it was more than the usual prayer we do. Marisha told me she sensed that I was possessed by a brace of demons, who were weighing me down and oppressing my spirit. She could actually see them. So I thought about it and said OK, I don't want any demons in me.

"Marisha knelt, and Tadeusz had me kneel in front of her, and asked if I was ready to renounce Satan and all his works, and I told them Yeah, I was plenty ready.

"And then everyone gathered around and laid hands on me while she prayed for a whole string of devils to come out of me, and she named them all by their Polish name. Tadeusz held my head by the hair and called on Christ and the Holy Spirit to protect me, and demanded in the name of the most holy that the demons who had dwelt inside me must never be allowed back in.

"And I felt different then and there. Something really did leave me. It was like a long parade of things getting out of me and disappearing into air.

"When Tadeusz and Marisha were done with me, I felt light and warm. That was last Wednesday night. Ever since then I have felt like a different person. A person blessed."

Gus' letter report was the talk of the backyard, and everyone was excited to see if he would be the same kid we packed out a couple of weeks earlier. Several parents wondered out loud if their son or daughter couldn't benefit from an exorcism, too.

Then someone saw the van coming down Fairview Avenue, and all the parents clustered around. The van pulled up, the kids jumped out, and there was Gus, red-eyed from the long flight and cramped cabin, and he saw me and grinned. And I must tell you, I had never seen that grin before.

"Gus you old dog!"

"Hey Dad!" And a smile broader and deeper than any I had ever seen on this kid. He was all laughter and happiness, and we walked home together, arms around each other's shoulders, clapping each other on the back like old combat buddies, duffle banging at his side.

Gus showed me and Lily a set of snapshots taken on the trip. The first four he was the usual Gus – cement-faced and impassive. But every shot after that he was smiling, applying face-paint to children, mugging for the camera, kicking a ball, carrying a girl in a swimming pool, hugging his friends at the airport.

"Dad," he said to me, the most earnestly I have ever heard him speak, "for the first time in my life, I felt the power of God. Up until that night, I believed, but in a faraway way. But that night was like dynamite blowing up my natural negativity. Now I feel like there are no walls separating me from God. They all got knocked down. I feel God all the time, every second, right by me."

Gus had been in an honest-to-God exorcism. And the darn thing held. It took. In the months since Gus's event in the hills outside Gryfow, he was a different person – reflective, cheerful, and kind. He still had faults, like any kid. He was still careful with his speech, not given to sudden exuberance. That was Gus. But at the root, at his core, he was no longer negative. The word dour, never far from my mind with regard to my son, had to be socked away in storage. The summer of getting to know Gus was a deep blessing for us. Lily remained ambivalent about what she perceived as the ideology of Christ Community. But there was no denying the

change that had overtaken our son. He spoke to us. He did his chores and, when school started again, his homework. He actually engaged with us, and kidded, like we had always imagined our kids one day might. Sometimes his face, frozen for so long, gave up everything with a smile, or a blush like the reddest rose.

The elections in 2004 were fierce. Democrats were devoted to the idea of casting out the neoconservatives, and we sorted through a boxful of candidates for the one with the best chance of toppling the bullies. Wes Clark was an impressive candidate in theory, a general going up against the warmongers! But he didn't seem to know anything about politics. Howard Dean impressed early, then self-destructed in Iowa. The last guy in the box turned out to be John Kerry, who at least was a soldier in Vietnam. We looked at him, swallowed hard, and decided to go with him.

It was my idea that if we could persuade even the tiniest fraction of conservative Christians to go the other way this time, we would win. All we had to do was persuade 3 or 4 percent of evangelicals and fundamentalists that John Kerry was the moral one, and George Bush the immoral one, and that tiny slice of the pie would sweep us to victory.

Though it wasn't cool to do this, I sent an email to everyone at Christ Community calling their attention to the moral failures of the administration. My letter was measured. It suggested that as Christians, we were obliged to cast our votes for the candidate who best exemplified the teachings of Christ. And those teachings were laid out in the Beatitudes -- sympathy for the poor, faithfulness to those in trouble, fairness to those who labor in the vineyard, honesty in all our dealings and peace to all men of good will.

It was the most conservative, namby-pamby, mealy-mouthed thing I ever wrote.

"I believe, when you examine the record of the current administration, you will be unable to conclude that they embody the teachings of Our Lord," I wrote. "That is why I invite you to join with me and vote for Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts."

Oh, the replies I got.

"Mike this is way, way, way off-base," wrote Jack, a machine tool salesman. "You need to check your radical politics at the church entry."

"John Kerry is a traitor and he is for abortion," wrote Duane, who owns a restaurant. "Hell will freeze over before I could vote for a man so immoral."

"Does Alex know you are sending this out to the church list?" demanded Christine, a homemaker. "Because I don't like getting something like this in my email."

And then there was this, from Marie, a former music teacher. "Thank you, Mike, for taking such a daring step. It required great courage on your part, and I applaud you. You know, when I was younger I voted for Democrats all the time. Of course, I can't do that any more since *Rowe v. Wade*."

The elections came and went. James Dobson and the Christian right got out the vote in even larger numbers than aggrieved liberals. Massive numbers of evangelicals voted, many for the first time, all but a handful for Bush. John Kerry headed for the exits, and I contemplated a life with people who thought that, between Bush and Kerry, Kerry was the one with questionable character.

I sometimes tell people the happiest moment in my life was one weekday night in January of 1985. A deep snow had fallen, and our little family of three loved one another in our Milwaukee apartment. Aretha was seven months old, and while I adored her because it was a father's job to adore his baby daughter, it was across a vast separation of years and outlook.

We did not really share anything, apart from one another, and we could not really tell one another anything yet.

So, we played. One game was sliding a rolled up athletic sock back and forth in the long hallway of our Milwaukee apartment. Aretha got the game immediately, and slid it back to me, which I loved. Then, I did something odd - I pretended I was Rollie Fingers, the mustachioed relief pitcher on the Brewers, and wound up in an exaggerated "roundhouse curve" motion - and flung the ball right at her.

The moment I let go, I thought, my God, man, you just whipped a solid object in the direction of your baby daughter! But the ball hit her in the chest and fell harmlessly to the floor. And the great part was, Aretha started laughing.

Oh, you should have heard that laugh - it was sensible and silly and totally powerful. She got it! She got that it was hilarious for me to pretend to be this comical pitching person. She got that the ball was supposed to suggest great personal harm. She got that it was all a joke, and that it was very, very funny. She got that hilarious was a wonderful thing. And she loved me for making it all happen.

I stared at her and my heart almost burst with the realization that anything I would ever throw at her, Aretha was smart enough, and wise enough, to handle.

In that stupid, silly moment, I realized with a loud crash how connected we would be all our lives together. Our souls were stitched together like the heel of that old sock.

It was all beautiful, and I laughed, too, and reached for the sock to hurl it again.

I often tell people that my daughter is the most interesting person I know. She is brilliant, funny, mercurial, wise in some ways, and impressively self-destructive in others. For all her peculiarities, Aretha remained a charismatic and appealing person. People who like her like her a lot. She is a more daring, more dramatic, more intense version of me. And she is my only daughter. I call Gus my pride, and I am very proud of him. But Aretha is the joy of my life.

But she has lived in such pain. And I have been in dad-pain at every step along her way. All this time I was attending Christ Community, and praying for my daughter, praying for some crazy miracle to blow away the psychological fog that enshrouded her. Why wasn't that possible, I told myself. A God who could raise the dead, a God who infused every atom with energy could snap his fingers and bring my daughter about.

There was a bus strike that spring, and I drove over to Minneapolis every day to drive her to her coffeeshop job. We talked, but I was unable to get through to her that I was feeling optimism about my life, and about hers. She looked at me like I was the pitiable one.

"I pray, and I read the Bible. You should read Job," I told her. "It's all about the pain of the world. It's very hard, and it's very bitter, but Job is able to find a way to see through it all and be grateful for his life. I think it's the most beautiful thing I ever read."

"You know, dad," she said. "I love you very much, and I like you a lot, but maybe you should stick to just being my dad, and hold off on the spiritual wisdom. Because it really just makes me mad to hear you go on about it. It's disrespectful."

I was on the up escalator, she was on the down. All we could do was acknowledge each other as we passed.

I tried to keep my distance, while "being there" during the precise moments when she could put up with me - fetching her an air conditioner, getting her medicines for her, buying her a trunkload of groceries. But she kept slipping further and further away.

One day I listened to my messages and there was a slurred, incomplete call from her. “Hi, guys, I just wanna say ...” She sounded so gone, I couldn’t make out what she was mumbling.

I was alarmed, and went to Lily. “Aretha’s in trouble,” I told her.

The two of us sped over to Minneapolis, and had her downstairs neighbor open the back door to her apartment. Aretha was lying dazed in a dirty bed, Styrofoam carryout plates scattered across the spread, the sour smell of puppy crap filling the airless apartment. An empty pill jar sat on the cluttered end table.

“Honey, we’re going to take you down to the ER,” Lily informed her, helping her off the bed. “You promise you won’t leave me there?” she whispered.

“I promise,” I said.

“OK,” she said. “I’ll go with you.”

While Rachel went out to the car, I did a dumb thing. I put my hands on her and I began to pray. I knew she thought it was ridiculous. But I was out of ideas. All I had left to turn to was God’s mercy. I didn’t have much faith in it, either, but it was what I had at hand. I figured it was all I had. So I prayed out loud about eight words:

“God help us. We’re so frightened. Give us –“

God should have told me to duck. Because Aretha – the little girl I threw the rolled-up sock to, and made her laugh, all those years before -- hauled off and slapped me across the head, across my now-good ear as hard as she possibly could.

“You know I told you I don’t like that,” she said.

But that night, coming home from the hospital with Aretha, I was as beaten as a man could be. Though Aretha checked out physically, in fact her heart was broken. She knew Lou was no good to her, a walking dead man. But nevertheless he was everything to her, the love of her life. And she felt horribly exposed by the emergency room, and the questions, and the invasion into her paranoid, ultra-private life. To be coming home to live with her parents – so reasonable, so loving, so awful -- for a while must have been unbearable to her.

I came home that night. Coming home to live with us was a total defeat for her.

Lily and I walked down the stairs in silence. and put my keys in the dish in the kitchen. I put down my keys and stepped into the kitchen. Gus, hearing my footsteps, bounded down the stairs to see me.

“Hey, Dad, how’s Aretha?”

I looked at Gus red-eyed. Right now I just wanted to protect him from what had happened.

“She’s OK,” I said, and shook my head.

“Is she moving back home here?” he asked,

“Yeah, I think so. She’s in a lot of trouble, son. She’s having a real hard time, son, been so depressed, and so hopeless. This is hard, but it seems like the best thing for now. We thought it was best if she came home to be with us for a while.”

“Are you all right, dad? What happened?”

“Gus,” I said, groping for words, “Aretha took some pills. Then she called Poison Control to ask if it was enough to kill her. When they said yes, she lay down and went to sleep. She slept a really long time, and then this morning we woke her up. It’s all about Lou. She’s just gone to pieces without him.”

I couldn’t go on. I began sobbing under the kitchen light. I stood before my brilliant son convulsing in tears, helpless, helpless.

Gus, God bless him, wrapped his quiet arms around me and held me strong.

## 7. Jesus of the Trees

Suicide still carrying stigma, especially among conservative people, I didn't ask the people at Christ Community to pray for Aretha. I had known other Christians who were pretty harsh to kids just for looking punky or for wearing a manacle through their nose. I didn't feel I could turn to them for sympathy or support. A few people in the church were very clear on who was going to hell and who was not, and I did not want to bind my daughter spiritually over to them. And she had no wish to have anyone praying for her. I had already bound her over to the psychiatric ward. I had to keep that awful secret secret.

In any event, Aretha would have a hard enough time in the months ahead without having the neighborhood Christians peering into her eyes to locate the devils crowding back there.

I was dying to offload the worry horror onto other people. I'm no good at keeping secrets.

But what could I say? When your kid's in trouble, how do you look at other parents and their babies? A part of you wants to blab to them about the pain that may be waiting down the road. Another part wants to reassure them: What happened to us will never happen to you.

Even after the exorcism, I didn't really believe in very much. Even now, I was merely willing to believe if I could get my daughter's sentence reduced.

I tried praying for Aretha myself, and for my family, too. But I had nothing. It was like my salivary glands had been irradiated, like my lips were glued together. I couldn't form words, much less sentences. I couldn't think thoughts. So tThis was what woe was.

I couldn't stand the idea of Aretha suffering. But what could I do? My words, my love, my splendid example, the wisdom of all the books that lined the walls of our house – none of these amounted to much. I felt I needed to come up with something, before our situation got even worse. I worried about suicide. How could I look Lily in the eye after a repeat? Once gone Aretha was gone she would be gone forever.

I wanted things to be the way they used to be. I wanted that sweet little one-year-old sitting behind me in the Corolla, still clapping her hands and dazzling me with animals sounds:

"How does a snake laugh, Aretha?"

"Sss! Sss! Sss!"

I wanted to still be the glad doting dad who stayed home for 20 years to be with her and her brother. I wanted the sword of Damocles to be in some other room hanging over some other guy's head.

I felt the horror of what Aretha's life must be like every day, afraid to leave her room, afraid that people will see her, having to sit facing the door in every room. I felt the sorrow of being me, and being responsible to Lily, keeping my promises to her, and now the two of us looking at each other, knowing how lost our eldest child was, and how little there was we could do about it.

I thought of the unease this must have created for Gus, who grew up so stolid and uncomplaining. He and Aretha were never close. When he was four she got him to stop singing because it bothered her. Poor Gus. Poor Aretha. Poor us.

What would a real Christian man do with all this? In our church, he would be the Joseph, the iconic head of his family, the one who absorbs all violence to keep the family safe. He would have had them kneel with him before a wood-grain cross hooked to the living room wall, and the family would kneel there every day and pray for understanding and, if God willed it, a drop or two of merciful rain.

But I was no Joseph. Or rather, I was like the actual Joseph, the poor slob with no credibility in his own home, the one who had to suck it up and do whatever angels told his wife needed

doing, getting up in the middle of the night and saddling up for Egypt, or picking through the stalls in Jerusalem for his kid, the look on whose face always seemed to insinuate: “You’re not my real dad.”

That’s the kind of Joseph I was, and my holy family was out to lunch.

I slept badly the night we brought Aretha was locked up home, and early the next morning, a cold late-October morning, I drove down to the Minnesota River to walk the dog. Snow was falling, and the cattails and reeds poked out of the crunch with ghostly heads.

I had hoped the cold air and the exercise would jar me out of my fear. But as I staggered across the snowy ground, I felt oppressed as never before. It was like having cancer – wherever you went, you still had it.

I tried to distract myself with ways to make some money. Money was something I still had leverage over. My income was down that year, what with one thing and another, and I did need to get something going financially. So I thought about money down by the river, how to get some, who to call.

Got to do this. Call A about B. Maybe rewrite something. Get on the phone. Go down the list of dormant clients. Good thought, write that down. No, wait. What if I can’t do it? What if it won’t work?

Suddenly I had had enough and I stopped in my boots and started sobbing, leaning back against a young cottonwood. The cancer hurt. Everything was shit. I was going to this stupid church, and my wife thought I was nuts, and the people at the church also thought I pretty nutty, and if my agent and publishers could agree on one thing, it would be that I was teetering on the verge of nuts.

I felt so sorry for myself.

And I did something then that I had not quite done up to that point. Something I had not even done at the retreat, where my hearing suddenly returned. I prayed. Not to the “great God of the universe,” which was how I usually began these affairs. No, I prayed to the suffering Christ. I prayed to the beaten man.

"Oh, Jesus, if you are here, if you are anywhere, have pity on me."

And I stood there shaking from my sobbing, as I let out an entire year of anguish and frustration. It came flooding out in half-thoughts. The money problems. The fear. The humiliation. The helplessness. The shame. It shot out of me like paper snakes coiled in a can. At this moment in my life, I was able to set aside all the cultural baggage, just for a second – who had the best politics, who had the best sense of humor, who had the most respectable theology. All the things I had stood in church arguing about, in my head, for the past six months.

Now it wasn’t a matter of thinking it through any more, holding God up to just the right angle so I could see him as he was. It was just a moment of capitulation. I can’t do this any more. I can’t be this way any more. I’m so fucked up, God. Help me to not fuck up any more.

This was the closest thing I ever had to a dramatic "conversion moment." I hesitate to call it that, because I always believed in God. But I was so freaking bleak about it all. God was God, but the world still ground us to powder.

My ear, my little miracle cure, was an exception to that feeling of theological noir. And Gus, stepping out of the van and embracing me. And now, a kind of hidden miracle, in Aretha not dying, in coming home to be with us, of us all getting a second chance to love one another.

I started to think back through my life. All the car crashes that didn’t quite happen. The phone calls that offered me a job. The friends who had said a kind word to me at the exact

moment I needed one. The walks with my dog at dawn, down by the river. So many savings. And yet we deny, deny, deny.

Write this down: God can work a dozen conspicuous miracles in your life. He can make you Speaker of the House of Representatives, with a shiny blue PT Cruiser. You will marry Uma Thurman and bowl consecutive perfect games. And you will still wonder what it all means. It's the way we're built. We're idiots.

I didn't want a corny religion. I didn't want a blinking dayglo Jesus. I didn't want any of the crap and mediocrity and anthropomorphism and bad politics and bad poetry.

In that moment I just wanted the goodies that The Good had. I craved protection. I lusted for peace. I was a whore for the pity of God. I wanted it, and I couldn't hide that fact from myself any more.

If it wasn't a full-blown conversion, *something* fundamental nevertheless did happen. Because I had a frightening feeling that I had unbolted a door, and it was only a matter of moments before Someone on the other side strode in, kicked off his galoshes, and made himself at home. This Someone was monstrous like Death, the dark figure in the cloak and scythe, because it knew about death. Indeed it had spent a weekend dead, a long time back. This Someone knew everything.

I conceived of a Jesus made of wood, gnarled and green like myrtle and olive, and every whorl straining as he moved, his dried leaves rasping in the cold light and snow.

I did not actually see this. I was not hallucinating it. It was more like a poem in my mind, an indelible imagining. I imagined God in that moment, and it was a God of infinite sorrow, a God whose skin and bone became cross, and for what, for a "relationship" that most people live their entire lives oblivious to. This green, groaning carapace, a swamp-thing staggering stiff-limbed through the rushes, offering love to the point of death with quaking arms.

I looked around and everywhere I saw bare trees lining the river's soft banks – gigantic cottonwoods, locusts, shaggy willows, scarlet maples. And I beheld in a flash the beautiful symmetry of each of them, its roots forming a phantom self below the ground, its limbs raised in naked hosannas to the gray clouds above.

In my library of occult books, the sorcerer always forms alliances with certain species of animals and plants. This was my shamanic moment, and I was merging with the cold bare trees of Christ, and they would be my allies forever after, my angels, my Greek chorus, my collected consciousness.

And you know what raised the hair on the back of my neck – the knowledge that they had always been there. I had always sought to be among trees, even as a little boy. I shivered when their branches brushed up against my bedroom window as a child. I climbed, but mainly I just liked to walk among them, to feel their sheltering strength.

It was like the wonderful pantheist Saint Patrick said in his famous breastplate poem. *Christ in every chloroplast. The cross in every tree.*

And there was nothing the trees did *not* know and understand. There was nothing they did not see.

It was such an outrageous and shocking thought.

And so, among the rattling rushes and trees, I knelt down and vomited.

I threw up everything I had for breakfast – a frozen waffle, a half of a banana, a box of orange juice. I reminded myself to chew my food more completely.

I threw up because it was unacceptable to me to throw up my hands to Jesus. And because it is something I do. Months later, after the fanfare surrounding the movie *The Passion of the Christ* had subsided, I snuck down to the bargain cinema and watched it in a theater empty

except for me and a lady about eight rows back. I'm sure she heard me hurl when they were whipping Jesus in the courtyard scene, and the flesh was leaping off his bones. It was unacceptable to watch a man be torn apart for twelve minutes. I was mad at the Romans, but mainly mad at the movie. So I barfed. It looked like red wine on my pants and sleeves, And as I leaned back against the trunk of a young cottonwood, the idea formed in my head that Jesus ruled the universe. I always was drawn to him, but now for the first time, he might be the horse to bet on. That's why this was less a conversion moment than a moment of concession, in which I allowed myself to think the unthinkable.

What if? I asked. What if Jesus was exactly what people said he was – a living spirit, a “son of God,” the messiah foretold in the Old Testament, the baby born in a barn who grew up to be torn to pieces and three days later reassembled in the tomb?

Who would have thought it? Well, lots of people, for going on two millennia. Still it was a brand new thought to me. Not that there was a Jesus, but that he might be exactly as advertised. All the crazy lame stuff everyone said might be true. And the people who seemed lamest would be the most right of all.

Now that was a joke. And what a God, to plant such a joke, and then sit back and wait thousands of years for the punchline to develop. Watch all the clever fellows like me struggling their whole lives to figure out what ordinary people with ordinary brains had no difficulty whatsoever with. How much energy we would expend on subtlety, on irony, on sorrow and pity – thinking that was what a God worth his salt ought to want.

Sorry, Charlie – Starkist doesn't want tuna with good taste.

Tell me that's not funny.

God could be hiding behind a bush, and jump out and say Hi at any time. He did it to Abraham. He did it to Moses. He could do it to you. And no matter how smart you are, no matter how many initials you stack next to your name, no matter how snappy your remarks – this one will have you on your knees, puking frozen waffle on your shoes like me.

What a howling joke, that smart people rail against anthropomorphism – the tendency of the faithful to see God in human terms – when the actual nature of God is madly, ravingly, hilariously anthropomorphic.

“Booga booga!”

It's a bad movie, I tell you.

And I didn't quite believe this part, but I got it, I understood it. It was that, if God should turn out to be God, with his eyes on the sparrow and all that, that would relieve me of the God job. I could resign from the position. My work was done. I could retire. I could go back to being Mike if I could only remember what the job required.

The Tree-Christ didn't speak to me. It just stalked past me, looked me in the eye as it passed, and was gone.

But the message was clear. “Don't worry so much. This thing that seems so bad, with your daughter, it may turn out to be nothing at all.”

And then it was gone.

## 8. My Dinner with Finnegan

Christmas was not much of a Christmas in our house. Aretha was full of blame for Lily and me for bringing her home to live with us. We begged her to come downstairs and join in the festivities, but she refused.

I never again tried to pray for her. At least, not in her presence. And she was right. I was her dad, not her spiritual advisor. If she wanted to get right with God, she would do it on her own steam. Of course, I led off every day with a prayer for her, and for Gus, and for Lily, and myself. There wasn't anything else I could do.

I prayed, but I was sinking into my own depression. My daughter was suffering, I wasn't making any money, and I was spinning in this weird religious whorl.

Lily and I talked but it was weary talk. We made lists of the good things we had done for Aretha and the lousy way she was repaying us by being sad. It was mean because Lily and I had each other, to reinforce one another's prejudices, but Aretha was all by herself.

Inevitably, because we were suffering and needed to vent, we ganged up on her.

Over the months to come, Lily and I would diverge more and more. Ever the doer, Lily wanted us to have a concrete plan, wanted Aretha to commit to getting better a regimen of therapy, which I knew she had no interest in. Ever the dreamer, I hoped for a miracle cure, something like what happened to my ear, only deep in her soulpsychological. One morning the anxiety and anguish would just up and depart from her, and she would be my little girl again.

"You don't help her by moping for her," Lily said. She was right. "You can't un-depress her by out-depressing her. And why isn't your *faith* helping you get through this?"

I didn't know why it wasn't.

It got to the point where, some days, I couldn't talk to Lily without upsetting her, and vice versa.

Neither could I talk to people at Christ Community. Their basic attitude about psychology mental illness was that it was demons, demons, demons. In extreme cases, an anti-depressant like Prozac might be in order. But really otherwise, a person just had to repent.

I did speak to Alex one day about the problem. I didn't mention glimpsing the Tree-Christ down by the Minnesota River, because the image and the whole experience seemed so Wizard of Oz – I didn't want him to tell me it wasn't real.

Alex was distant at the meeting. I told him about Aretha, and how she had told me she just wanted to die all the time. I was terrified that was what would happen certain she would try it again, and now she had a good excuse – her embarrassment.

I so wanted Alex to do something or say something that would make everything better. He knew God inside and out. He was the guy God cured of that terrible auto-immune disease. If there was a trick to keeping my daughter alive, and finding a way for her to live and find happiness, Alex must know what it was.

Alex explained that orthodox Christianity didn't put a lot of stock in the idea of mental illness, so my daughter's diagnosis wasn't of particular interest to him.

"I know, I know" I said, "it's all demons. And honestly, I'd like nothing better than to get them all out of her. But I don't think she'd sit still for that."

"Well," he concluded, rubbing his hands together, "I'm a hoper. This really is in God's hands, not ours."

"Yeah, I know," I replied.

I didn't really have any Christian friends besides Alex, that I knew well enough to lay all this on. Neither did I have many non-Christian friends I could dump it on, although I did confide in a few, and I thank them for suffering through those days with me.

On about the Twelfth Day of Christmas, without intending to, I found someone to talk to. For almost fifteen years I have belonged to a monthly poker group of eight or nine guys. It was a classy group of guys – professors and journalists mainly. Every month I showed up with thirty bucks in my pocket, hoping for some great conversation.

But for the past couple of years, what with my tumor and my business going down the toilet and now my daughter being sick, poker wasn't doing much for me any more. I no longer cared whether a flush was better than a straight. I started skipping months.

Unlike my church friends, they were worldly, ironic, and hip. If they knew what had befallen me – seeing Tree-Christ's down by the river – I was sure they would eat me alive. I was as afraid of what they would think of me, as I was of what Jesus, alive and crashing through the forest, thought.

So I never told 'em.

One night, one of the guys, a China scholar named Perry Finnegan, asked me out to dinner. I accepted. One of my complaints about our group was that we never were able to just talk – too many players were fixated by the game itself, and had no taste for digressive conversation. Breaking bread together was something Finnegan and I both craved – no cards, just two guys who weren't best friends but willing to get to know each other better.

We met at a Greek restaurant in Minneapolis midway between our two homes. We ordered a bottle of Roditis rose and some lamb kebabs.

"This reminds me of a dinner I once had at the Parthenon Restaurant on Halsted in Chicago, back before I met Lily," I said. "My department at the University won an award for a film we made, and we flew down to receive it at a big reception at the Palmer House. It was a very big deal, though I played only a small role in it, writing a few lines of the script. But our department head invited us all for a celebration dinner, and we all gathered there and drank wine from bottles without labels, and scarfed down a ton of octopus.

"This was when the Mary Tyler Moore Show was on, and our group reminded me of that group, minus Ted Baxter – we all loved each other. It was the only good job I ever had." Finnegan smiled. "I'm trying to think of the Chinese Studies faculty getting together like that."

"They don't like Greek?"

"They'd like the skewers. Academic groups can be very bitchy."

I sipped my sweet wine. "Too bad."

"We should pry the cards from our group's fingers sometime and take them out like this," I said.

Finnegan brightened. "We could bring our wives." Finnegan loves his wife,

"Maybe a picnic on Pike Island."

"We could bring our kids." Finnegan loves his two daughters, too.

I didn't mention my daughter. I wouldn't have known where to begin.

"Perry," I said to him, "do you remember what you said about my boy Gus about five years ago? We were at my place, and he wandered into the dining room where we were playing, rubbing his eyes. He was about ten."

"I said he was beautiful!"

"I had to leave the room after you said that," I said. "No one ever says that about your kids after they graduate from the stroller. Especially, no one said it about sour little Gus."

Finnegan lifted his glass. “To all our beauties,” he said.

I remembered another story. “We were playing at Bob Hammardinck’s. “I said something and you responded, ‘You always have to be loved by everyone, don’t you?’”

“I didn’t say that!” Finnegan insisted.

“You did. I remember, because it was like getting harpooned in the lungs.”

“Well, I’m profoundly sorry if I said such a thing.”

“Yer a strange man, Finnegan. And I don’t buy your act. You want people to think you’re a sensitive sweet guy. But that night you looked me in the eye and said that horrible, true thing.”

“Yes.”

“It bothered the hell out of me. Where did you get off calling me emotionally needy? No wonder I couldn’t win at cards – I wanted you guys to still love me when the game was over.” Finnegan blushed. Or was it the roditis. Either way I lifted my glass.

“To being loved by every man, woman, and child.”

“Alive or dead.”

“Real or imagined.”

We slurped.

“So tell me, Mike – why’d you miss the last few games? We missed you.”

“You mean you missed my thirty dollars.”

Finnegan feigned sensitivity. “We missed you all.”

“My son started attending a church,” I began. It was a shitty beginning, already denying my own part in what had happened. “He started going there, and it’s a church my son started attending, and then I began attending it, too.”

That wasn’t too bad.

“What kind of church?”

“Um – fundamentalist evangelical?”

Give Finnegan credit – he did not do a Roditis spit-take across the white tablecloth.

“Really.”

“Uh huh.” I began talking pretty fast. “It’s been a weird experience. The place is very conservative. But other parts I like a lot.”

“The Jesus scene, eh? You believe in Jesus now?”

The directness of the question stung me. Finnegan was being mean again. “Yes, I do.”

“He’s like, God?”

“I’m not sure exactly what that means. But, yes.”

“I could never get that, growing up. Everyone where I grew up went to church, but my family were atheists. All that just seemed ridiculous to us.”

“It is ridiculous a lot of the time,” I agreed.

“So do you pray?”

“Uh huh.”

“Have you had any interesting experiences?”

“Oh. Yes. Lots.”

“Like what.”

“Well, I saw Jesus the other day.”

“Get out!”

“Well, not actually really Jesus. But I was down by the river, and I imagined I saw him.”

“What did you imagine he looked like?”

“He was kind of like a monster. Half man, half tree. He was staggering through the swamp. And he looked at me. It was eerie, and druggy, but not at all negative. I really liked him.”

“You didn’t actually see this.”

“No, it was more like in my head, like an idea. But I felt it very keenly.”

“What do you think it means?”

“For a while I thought it was Jesus saying hello to me. But lately, I’m thinking it was just me coming up with my own dismal version of something. I don’t believe Jesus is half tree. It was a way of seeing my own misery.”

Finnegan tore off a triangle of pita. “How are you, Mike?”

I laughed. “I’m stressed out, Perry. My daughter Aretha is not doing well.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I honestly don’t know. But I’m really worried.”

Finnegan poked at his salad. I think he was thinking about his daughters. Finally he looked up.

“What’s it like, going to an evangelical church? Their politics must be off the page.”

“About what you’d expect. Very Republican. Pro-war. Indifferent about social justice.

Anti-gay marriage. Pro-life. Women stay home and raise the kids.

“Life for them is kind of like a fairy tale. What happens here, in this world, doesn’t matter.

They are operating on another plane, a heavenly plane where good deeds are stored up in heaven and miracles happen routinely. In one case I saw a terminal illness cured. What holds it all together is prayer. They believe they can make contact with the mind of the universe, and that the mind of the universe follows their every move, subtly intervening in their lives.”

“What do they believe?”

“They know who and what God is,” I said. “He is the guy in the Bible. I was sitting down to a meal one evening with some church people. I sat next to Dorothy Thompson, who had done mission work for 40 years in Asia. Somehow, I informed her that I was wrestling with the question of what sort of entity God was, like what a mass spectrometer would say if you stuck God in one end. The problem was, I didn’t know what a spirit was. So I asked if there was a way to learn more about spirits.

“Dorothy looked at me like she had just peeked in the door of Jeffrey Dahmer’s refrigerator. It was an honest inquiry from my perspective, but to her it was obviously a jarring thing to say.

“They believe in demons. Demons are always around us, seeking our downfall, our separation from God. Illness, insanity, bad luck, bad habits are all the doing of these demons.

“It’s hard to draw the line and say when believing in demons becomes ‘superstitious.’ Our preacher Alex warns against becoming demon-centric – in attributing everything to them. He calls that ‘woo-woo’ religion. The trick is to acknowledge that evil has an external reality, without going crazy about it.

“They believe in Satan. The devil is a spirit-creature who went bad. Satan is in charge of demons. He is heavily invested in us messing up our lives and short-circuiting our spiritual growth. He’s a lot like an arch-villain in a comic book – it’s hard to see what his motivation is.

“They believe Adam and Eve were real people, that what the Bible says happened to them, really happened.

“They believe in Jesus, of course. That he is the son of God. I don’t understand what they mean by this. But I wrestle with almost everything.

“They believe the world will end, and we will be given new bodies, like the one Jesus had after his resurrection. And we will live not in some faraway heaven, but here. The afterlife for us will be right here in Minnesota. And Lily and I won’t be married any more. I haven’t told her that yet.”

Finnegan shivered at this recitation. "You're going crazy, aren't you?"

"Sometimes a little," I said. "Sometimes I sit in church and I'm muttering in my head the whole time" I said. "But I'm in a bad position because of my ear."

Finnegan spoke very slowly: "Mike, I don't understand what you're saying."

"It's a long, confusing story," I said, and sipped my wine.

Perry was interested, the way people are interested in flaming train wrecks. "What do you do at this place?"

"We sing and pray. We pray a lot. The thing is, I can hear again. That happened at a retreat. Suddenly, the engine noise in my bad ear went away."

"What are you saying, it was like –"

"A faith healing, right."

"Mike," he held his palms upright and grimaced. "Coincidence!"

"That's what I said. A guy at the retreat said it was funny how coincidences happen when people pray for you. And then there was my brain tumor. All the women in the church were praying for me. I thought I was just lucky. But then I got to thinking, maybe their prayers are why I didn't die. The tumor's still there, and I'm still here."

Finnegan looked at me with tenderness. I was clearly mad.

"The mind is its own place," he said, daubing his chin with a napkin.

"Tell me about it."

I told him about going down to the river and having my vision, or whatever it was, of Jesus striding through the marshes, his body morphed with the leaves and green wood. I told him about the suffering I saw in his eyes. I told him about the idea that God was really God, and he can see us every second, and no unworthy thought escapes his notice.

"What if it's all real?" I asked him. "What good does our cleverness and our degrees do us then? Maybe clever people are like the rich young man. Jesus told him, 'Chuck your money and follow me.' Maybe we have to chuck our minds. Whatever we treasure more than God, that's what we have to chuck. Our beautiful children, even."

Finnegan smacked his lips in exasperation. "I don't doubt it's real," he said. "I'm sure there was a Jesus. But the mythology that sprang up around him is myth, like Hercules or Ichabod Crane. An amazing story. But experience teaches us that in real life, once people are dead, that's it."

"But I can hear."

"Nor can God alter the laws of nature and go around fixing people's ears willy-nilly," he said emphatically. "It makes a hash out of everything. If he could do that, you wouldn't like it."

"You're right," I said. "I didn't, much."

Finnegan frowned. "What do you want, Mike? Do you want to convince me? To convert me? I liked you better when you needed everyone to love you."

"No!" I said. And then caught myself. Actually, it was nice to have someone to talk to on the other side of things. Sometimes it got lonely. Lily had just about given up on me.

I took a deep breath. "Let me describe how I think the universe works," I said. "This is the physics of God."

"We think of nature as having one mode, of things running down, of energy getting spent, of fruit going bad and everyone eventually croaking. Eventually, the universe will collapse on itself, the big bang in reverse, and that will be that."

"Agreed," Finnegan said.

"OK," I said, tracing a circle on my wine glass, "That's the scientific view. Now imagine that the universe has two modes instead of the one I just described. Think of it having a switch

that goes from ON to OFF. Every atom in the universe is likewise switchable, from ON to OFF."

"Certainly ..."

"What we call nature is really nature in the OFF position. Entropy rules. Give it time, and every mountain crumbles. Every ocean goes dry. Every star blinks and goes out.

"The universe is a predatory place where things survive by stealing energy from one another. Animals eat plants or other animals. Every creature must reproduce in record numbers to keep pace with the death rate. People compete against other people, steal from them, oppress them, bomb the crap put of them.

"OK. When the switch is in the OFF position, you are right. The dead stay dead. In fact, they keep getting more and more dead.

"But then there's the ON Position. In our lives, it's only ON every so often. When we go to baseball games or fall in love or stand under waterfalls or dig in the garden or bet on an inside straight and win.

"Some people so enjoy these things that they think the world is always ON. Most of us, experiencing these sweet moments, just hunger for more. And when they are gone, we grieve."

Finnegan interrupted. "So OFF constitutes all of life's destructive processes?"

"Um -- yes."

"Like digestion?"

"No. Not digestion. Well, maybe."

"How about chemical processes? Do they change when the world is in the ON position? What do flesh-eating bacteria eat instead of flesh?"

I sighed. "I haven't thought every part of this through yet."

I started over. "The reason literalist Christians are so loyal to the story of Adam and Eve is that it connects us to a world in the ON position. It's the way things are supposed to be.

"And because, without Adam, Jesus makes less sense, because he's the anti-Adam. Because of Adam, the world got switched into the OFF position. Jesus comes, preaching a philosophy that goes against what we think nature is all about. He says, 'Bless those who harm you. Turn the other cheek. Surrender your will, your very self, your very life, to the spirit that put you here in the first place.'"

Finnegan paraphrased for me. "So Jesus is an incredibly powerful magician who can heal leprosy, make food and wine pop into existence, and just generally turn the forces of nature in the OFF position on their heads."

"That's right," I said guardedly.

"So storms die down when he tells them to," Finnegan said. "Infections disappear. Insane people light up inside with understanding.

"But, this incredible magician allows his enemies to torture him. He essentially commits suicide to show us how we can win by losing.

"And after they are done with him, and they have brutalized him beyond imagining, he still has one more trick up his sleeve. In the grave the switch is flicked once more, and the deader-than-dead springs back to life. The corpse gets up and walks, and fries up some fish for his friends."

Finnegan knew more about this stuff than he let on.

"That's what it's about," I agreed. "OFF and ON. He fixed my ear. He fixed my head. He's fixing my life, and Gus's life, and our pastor Alex' life. I hope he may be fixing my daughter Aretha. And I'm thinking, How much of a jerk would I have to be, to look the other way?"

Finnegan looked at me with open mouth. "Wow," he finally said.

“Wow is right. Do you see what I’m up against here? I’m not up against the Republicans, I’m up against God. He’s sitting with us right now, forkful of spanakopita in his mitt. And he means business.”

Finnegan: “So what would you say the difference is, really, between OFF and ON?”

Me: “When you are OFF, you are thinking only about your own stuff, you and maybe your family. When you are ON, you see the way we really are, connected, humble, not in charge.”

Him: “So what do we need Jesus for? Doesn’t the wisdom of the other religions say the same thing, that the ego has to be gotten around?”

Me: “Yeah, but we don’t seem to be very good at doing this by ourselves. I meditate, but most of the time I kick myself afterward for being distracted, or thinking about baseball. By themselves, operating out of their ego, people don’t do a good job of quashing the ego. That’s why an intercessory figure, a savior, is so useful.”

“So being ON is same thing as being saved?”

“Yes.”

Finnegan looked at the table setting opposite us, and looked away.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t believe a word of it. But it’s fascinating.”

As we bundled up to step out into the Minneapolis cold, Finnegan had one last question for me.

“Coming to Friday’s game?”

“I want to,” I told him. “I miss the guys. But you know, after all that’s happened to me, I’m still a really lousy player.”

I got home pretty late and slipped into bed beside Lily.

“How was your dinner with Perry?” she asked. “What did you talk about?”

“It was good.”

“How are his daughters? And Francine?”

“Good, I guess. We really didn’t talk much about that.”

“What did you talk about?”

I wanted to tell Lily about how much fun it was to drink wine and talk about God. I felt I was using my brain the way it was supposed to be used. I wanted to talk about Aretha and Gus, and how I just wanted to stop fretting about them.

But it was past twelve. And in the dark, with just the two of us there, I didn’t have confidence I could persuade her.

## 9. Ash Wednesday

One of my original conceptions about Christ Community was that everyone in it was one kind of person (The Good), and those who would not stomach it (The Clever) stayed away. Just statistically, this was not true. The church had professional and working men. We had women with careers and women who stayed at home. We had married people, divorced people, and single people. We had a few who were well to do, and lot in the low to middle income groups. We had native-borns and foreigners. We had White people, Black people, Asian people, and people In Between.

We even had Jews. Daniel and Emily Levine were Messianists – Brooklyn-bred Reformed Jews who had a Christian conversion experience back in the 1960s and went over to the other side. They were Jews for Jesus, something I remember finding very weird when I first heard of this, also in the ‘60s.

Neither worked for a living, living instead off a small inheritance from an aunt. Daniel was an elder at Christ Community, meaning he provides lots of service to the group -- counseling, teaching, and occasional preaching. Emily was involved, too. The two have lived in kibbutz-like Christian communities in Minnesota and elsewhere.

Daniel was about 60, wry, very Jewish, and very mental. He often disappeared into a mensch persona, shrugging, bulging out his lower lip, arching his eyebrows, adlibbing in Yiddish, alluding to the original baseball Dodgers, of the Borough of Brooklyn, to whom he was attached as a boy, and from whom he was untimely ripped when they flew away to California.

He followed them, in a way, driving a cab and studying philosophy at Berkeley. A depressive’s depressive, he characterized himself in those days as the ultimate devotee of Albert Camus, riveted by the notions of death and will, and the bleak Sisyphean choices facing human beings in this life. He was dark and he was deep.

One day on campus he stopped to watch the daily spectacle of a roving campus preacher named Humphrey engaged in debate with a crowd of taunting students. They threw every clever thing they had at him. What kind of God would murder his own son. Wearing the cross is like dangling an electric chair around your neck.

As Daniel listened to the preacher give better than he got, it occurred to him that no one would do this – take on bright sixties Berkeley students in a daily battle of wit and nerve – unless they were pretty sincere about what they were saying. The Jesus idea was so ridiculous, he told himself, that it might actually be rooted in historic and cosmic truth. For dark, dismalbrooding, dysphoric, crowd-loathing Daniel, that was it. He wanted for himself the rock-solid foundation that he saw Humphrey standing on. He wanted to go up against hipsters and stoned semi-intellectuals the way he saw Humphrey doing.

Within weeks he joined the burgeoning Berkeley Campus Christian movement. He got a doctor of divinity degree. He and his wife Emily lived for a time in a planned Catacombs-style Christian community in Arizona – which broke his heart when it went bust. Somehow he met up with Alex, and became one of Alex’s elders. This particular Sunday, he was preaching on the fate of the Jews:

“The Bible teaches us in no uncertain terms that sin is not just individual, but collective,” he said. Throughout the Old Testament we hear of judgments being levied onto families for seven generations. The sin of Adam himself has devolved on every person born since. The flood swept away untold generations of every family on earth save one.

“While it seems unjust to modern people, who want to be known and judged solely on their own performance, God evidently thinks otherwise.

“And so we see edicts against whole peoples. The Amalekites in the book of Samuel were personally condemned by God to be exterminated – men, women, and children -- along with all their livestock.<sup>[8]</sup> Not even their donkeys were allowed to live. And what was their collective sin? Having hassled the Hebrews escaping from Pharaoh 300 years earlier!

“This is a hard lesson. Hard to believe God would wish such a thing – although, seeing the mess in Israel today, and imagining that same mess in the time of the new nation of the Jews, we wonder if they would have survived to see the kingdom of David.

“Harder still to think about what we would say if God whispered in our ear, as he did in Saul’s:

“I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”

“This is genocide. We’re against it. But God, if we are to believe the Bible, has sometimes been in favor if it.

“And we fall down in a sweat at the suggestion that God could be so heartless. And in that moment of disapproval we stand in judgment of God. Which is not a good thing.

“Abraham was commanded by God to take his son Isaac, promised to him by God to be the father of a great nation, to the summit Mount Moriah and sacrifice him as an offering to him. The reason we remember Abraham is that he did it. He took the knife to his beloved son’s throat. He did not fall on the ground and complain that God was being unjust. It may horrify us, but it is the key to Abraham’s greatness. And of course, God spared Abraham and Isaac, by making an eleventh-hour alternative available.

“Which brings us to the Praetorian Gate and the judgment of Pontius Pilate. Pilate is a weasel, and has been battling the members of the Sanhedrin for an entire day, resisting their demands that he have Jesus killed. He offers many options to crucifixion – scourging, a mock coronation, remanding him to Herod, giving the crowd a choice between Jesus and the prisoner Barabbas. But the crowd would have none of it. When Pilate washes his hands of the matter, he says to the assembled Jews, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.’ And the Jews at the gate roared back at him, ‘His blood be on us and on our children.’

“What no one wants to think,” Daniel struggled to say, “is that God heard this self-curse that the crowd made, and held them to it for the rest of history. That this handful of agitators gathered outside the Roman magisterium – many of them paid for their trouble – could affect the fortunes of Jews not just seven generations hence, but seventy times seven generations.

“And to be sure, much of the suffering of the Jews has been because wrong-headed Christians took angry pleasure in blaming all Jews for the actions of a few at the Praetorian Gate. We know history. We know about diasporas, pogroms, and holocausts. We know that the generations to follow would be God-loving, and God-fearing, and innocent of the blood of Jesus.

“But in the end it comes down to Abraham, to whom the most wonderful promise was made, that of his offspring a mighty nation would spring, the chosen ones of God. Abraham assumed what we all assume, that this was to be a great and glorious thing.

“But Abraham quickly found that being chosen by God is not a ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card. Far from assuring peace and security, the blessing of being chosen was itself a curse. This

people would forever be in the crucible, held over the flame. And for every Hebrew child who survived the fiery furnace, thousands would be incinerated.

“As Christians, we like to elide the promise of God, to steal the mantle of chosen-ness from the Hebrews and declare ourselves their heirs-apparent. They were Version 1.0 of the God's covenant. We're 2.0. They blew their chosen-ness, but we're holding steady!

“My friends, I am a Jew, a child of Abraham. And I am also a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, who like me was a Jew. I too fall down in agony at the suggestion that God ordered or sought the suffering of innocents as part of some ancient curse. If I were to design the God I would want to have, that would not be a design feature I would include.

“But we who believe live with an excruciating truth, that God is God and we are not. If we could understand everything, we could change places with God. Without divine understanding, and relying only on what wisdom we have accumulated, the judgment of God seems foolish and cruel.

“But I say to you as a Jew, that though I do not understand, I accept. And I believe that this suffering continues to burn and purify, as fire does, and that this purification will last till the last unconverted Jew cries out the name of Jesus.”

Throughout this oration, I, standing in a back row of the church, was in my own fiery furnace.

Daniel's sermon was clearly something ripped from his own heart. As a Jew who had rejected his own family's faith to take on the creed of the ostensible enemy, his thoughts on curses and blessings carried great personal weight. Good for him, I thought. Hurray for him.

But setting aside his personal story, the talk contained the very guts of anti-Semitism: the conviction that the Jews were to blame for Jesus' execution, and are therefore free game throughout history for those of us who claim to love Christ, and seek revenge for his brutal murder.

My wife, a Jew who knows all about this so-called blood libel, was therefore complicit in it. As were my children, because they are her children.

I was boiling. I hated Daniel for telling this story, and I hated the theory that a bunch of paid-off jerks in Pilate's courtyard could rile God to the point of harming innocents millennia later.

Hadn't Jesus himself, near death on the cross, said, “Father forgive them, they don't understand what they do”? Wasn't this forgiveness, this impossible love, the heart and soul of what Christianity was supposed to be about?

So I did something really rude. I stood up, made eye contact with Daniel in mid-sentence, and strode out of the church. I could hear the crinks in people's lumbar regions as they turned to watch me disappear out the double doors.

Outside it was raining in sheets, and I stood in the wet, happy I had put that awful place and its awful, twisted hatred, behind me.

But Annie, a woman from our church who was going through a painful divorce, had followed me out.

"Come back in, Mike," she pleaded, holding the door open for me.

"I'm OK," I told her. "Don't worry about me. I just can't hear what he was saying. It's an insult to the God I know. It's an insult to my family. We're Jews! I need to get away and think."

"Come back in," she repeated, "please" -- as if being on the other side of that oaken door would solve all problems.

Annie played another card. "Mike, I'm been suffering lately, too. I got prayer a few days ago over at Gethsemane Fellowship. It helped me. Maybe you should go there, too."  
I told her I was unable to even consider it at the moment. I was so angry and bewildered.  
I closed the door of my old Mercury and sped away from Christ Community in the driving rain.

## 10. The Loosing of the Mind

Annie had suggested I visit the prayer committee at Gethsemene Christian Fellowship. Gethsemene is like a sister church to Christ Community, though it is Pentecostal – a bit more physical than the personality of Christ Community.

Gethsemene had set up guerrilla prayer teams, in which the supplicant is prayed for by four people of the same gender. The idea intrigued me. I liked the praying and the laying on of hands, and I hoped the change of scene and players would free me from the tangle I was in, about Daniel, and anti-Semitism, and the politics of the church.

My plan was to go in there, meet with the prayer team, lay out my various sorrows -- money woes, writers block, brain tumor, misunderstandings with Lily, tension with Gus, terror about Aretha -- and get the men on my side. Once I had them on my side, they would pray a mighty prayer, and it would be refreshing and positive and send me off on a note of renewed energy and grace, and my sorrows would melt away. I was sincere, as far as that goes. But I also knew what I wanted, and I intended to get it.

That's not exactly how it turned out.

The woman in charge of the program met me at the door and ushered me into a Sunday School classroom. All the desks were third-grade size, but there were also a few stacked adult chairs in one corner. She left me alone for about ten minutes. I walked around the room, read whatever was left on the blackboard, muttered some hasty prayers ("May this do me some good"), and waited for the committee to arrive.

After a while they filed in. It was a surprisingly multiracial team -- an older white guy named Jon, a middle-aged white guy named Dan, a younger Asian guy named Michael, and a silvery-bearded African-American guy named Louis.

I knew Louis as a visitor to the previous year's men's retreat. He emitted major serious spiritual vibes. I winced as I recalled being "kind" to him at the retreat, like the good liberal, making sure he felt welcome. And now he was in charge, and my soul was in his hands! I nodded to him, and he nodded noncommittally back at me. I intuited that past pleasantries had no weight in this room. If someone was your friend in everyday life, you parked that at the door. Here we spoke only the truth.

The leader of the group was Dan, a big-bellied man with straw-colored hair and a sorrowful face. Dan went over the rules with me. We would pray for a successful session. I would make a statement about why I was there. The men would take turns "interviewing" me and offer prayers and relevant scriptures. Then we would pray again, and it would be over. Sounded good to me. I felt I was moving out of my original anthropological, observational mode -- like Carlos Castaneda scribbling in his pocket. I really wanted whatever these guys had to offer.

"First off, we're not any better than you," Dan said. "We all struggle with sin. I'm diabetic, and I can't stop eating. Sin is in us all. But we have found, through Christ, that we are not ourselves sin. God does not condemn you, and neither do any of us."

So we prayed for a minute or two, and I was invited to make a statement. "I'm here because my life no longer works," I said.

"I have a daughter, 19, who is mentally ill, who drinks too much and hangs around with people as sick as her. She has trouble holding down jobs and is running up big debts. I live in fear that she will do something bad, cost us tons of money, cause our household to split apart,

take pills again and blow a crater in our family too big for us to survive. I don't know why God made her this way, but I feel at times he is punishing me, and I don't know why."

"I have a son, 16, who has such a hard time following through on things and attending to people. He's a good kid, but he's off in his own dreamy world most of the time. I worry about him being safe, and finding a life that he can live.

"I have a wife whom I love very much but who is not a believer and confused and repelled by the fact that I am attending a conservative Christian church."

"What church is that?"

"Christ Community, down the street."

"We are brothers with Alex, and work on many things together."

"Yeah," I say, "he's great." I didn't tell them about the 826 emails I had left Alex over the previous year, challenging him on this and that doctrinal points. Or the conflict I was having with Daniel, the elder, that triggered this visit.

I explained that I was raised Catholic and then spent most of my adult life away from churches of any kind -- that it was not easy for me even to say the word *Jesus* and that I felt really weird living with these conservative Christians -- no offense, guys -- but they have a different style and different degree of religious intensity than I was used to, and it threw me. Plus, the politics sometimes made me mad.

I explained that I was a writer, that I spent much of my time home alone writing, that I had a good head, but in recent years I was unable to make even a quarter of what I made in the 1990s. I was losing confidence in myself, and worried about losing the house and breaking my wife's heart.

And yet, when it came time to sit down and work, my head was often a complete blank. I tied myself in knots trying to get started with projects, but they just seemed to languish there.

I told them I went to church and was really interested in God and Jesus but half the time I sat there debating everything that was said or sung or assumed or implied, and that I was tired of the stress of having to weigh everything like a butcher, and tired of having to manage all this bumper-to-bumper stop intellectual traffic.

Oh, and I have a brain tumor in my head that's inoperable -- they say it won't kill me but the truth is it makes me nervous as hell, and sometimes I wonder why God put it there, and why he made my son the way he was, and my daughter, and why he was doing all this to my family, because most days it seemed like more than a person could bear.

Dan stole a look at the other guys, then spoke to me.

"Mike, do you believe in our lord Jesus Christ?"

I slumped, trying to imagine anyone walking into this lion's den unless they were pretty fixed on the Jesus end of things. "Yes, sir. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe he died for my sins. I believe he was of God. I pray to him every day. I believe I am saved in him."

Dan arched his eyebrows. "Well, that's good," he said.

He looked at me very steadily. "Mike, what would you like to have happen right now?"

I gulped. "I'd like my son and daughter to be OK. I'd like my wife to understand better what I'm doing, and not be so estranged from it. I'd like to feel like I fit in better at this church. I'd like to have a breakthrough in my work, so I can function again and take care of my family.

I'd like to stop feeling like I was going to explode at any moment."

"And if you could have just one of those things?"

"I'd like my daughter to be OK." Really.

Then Dan threw me for a loop. "Well, we can't guarantee any of those things," he said.

Great, I thought. I wished I had known that before getting my hopes up.

"Because we're not in a place to guarantee them. God's will is not our will. We can't ever be certain of his purposes."

"Yeah, I got that."

"Mike, do you think you have a lot of problems, more than your fair share?"

"To be honest," I said, "Yes, I believe I do."

And then Dan asked me a question that was to change my life. "Mike, what do you think of your mind?"

I was taken aback. What was my opinion of my mind? "I guess ... I guess ... I guess I think a lot of it."

It was true. I was a person without power in the world. I had no financial strength, no impressive genetic legacy, no killer skills that I could fall back on. But I always had my mind. This will sound obnoxious, but it is the only thing halfway special about me -- my humor, my rhetoric, my argumentativeness, my sense of a steady, discerning self that exercises in instantaneous judgment over everything that comes its way. It is my glory. I saw it immediately, and blushed from the shame of understanding something for the first time, in plain sight of other people. I was a mental egomaniac. My mind was my god. I was addicted to my own thoughts.

That was the problem of my life, right there. That was what prevented me from getting closer to God. My stupid brilliant mind. And moment after moment after moment after moment -- I *chose* to be this way. Thinking, the way I did it, was a sin.

One by one the four men read scriptural passages to me. How they were able to locate these four prescient statements from such an enormous book, with so little warning, seemed like a miracle to me. All four were killer true, but this is the one that touched me most deeply, from Psalm 131:

I am not conceited, lord,  
And I don't waste my time  
On impossible schemes.  
But I have learned to feel safe  
And satisfied  
Just like a young child  
On its mother's lap.  
People of Israel,  
You must trust the Lord  
Forever.

This was not what I expected -- analysis of my soul. I expected laying on of hands and sincere words. I expected them to take my side, not to examine it. I expected a warm glow. But this was downright troubling. And then it got worse.

"Mike, I need to ask, and you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Do you have problems with sin and addiction?"

I blinked. "Yes. Of course I do. What you just said, I'm addicted to myself."

"Do you drink alcohol?"

"I used to drink a lot. Too much, sneaking drinks, staying up after everyone else went to bed so I could drink. But I hardly drink any more."

"Hardly?"

"Well, sometimes."

"Drugs?"

"I smoked pot when I was younger. In my teens and twenties."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"What about sex, Mike. Have you been a faithful husband?"

"Yes --" technically.

"Have you engaged in homosexual conduct?"

"No!"

"Have you indulged in pornography?"

"Yes, I have," I said, and began to sob. This was an embarrassing truth, but the men were so direct and unjudging, and hiding from them made no sense. "A lot when I was younger. But I still do it, sometimes. I tell myself it's not hurting anyone."

"Why do you do it?"

That was a good question. "I'm not sure. I think, in some way, it might be a response to my father abandoning us when I was a kid. He kept books and magazines in his closet, and I found them."

"But why do you do it?"

"Well, it's like a nervous feeling that comes over me. Then I get a defiant feeling, like -- like I'm giving God the finger."

I suddenly saw the habit for what it was. It was a cry of grief, of helplessness, of anger. I said it coldly. "I do it to have my own way. I do it because I can do it."

I scanned their solemn faces. I was about to admit something I have never, ever admitted to anyone. The night I had my stroke, brought on by the brain tumor -- that's what I was doing at that moment.

"I was online, looking at pictures. Suddenly, my head exploded, and I fell down. I did this to myself!"

It was a terrible secret, and I had to unburden myself of it. How could I do such a stupid thing? Why was I so selfish? And me with a beautiful wife down the stairs. And me with children living under the same roof. It had something to do, so many years ago, with my dad. Then it was like God -- my other dad -- struck me down for my defiance. And where did he strike me down? In my head!

I was weeping now. I fell to my knees on the green linoleum floor -- and my knees aren't the best any more -- with my hands clasped in front of me, tears pouring down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry for my sins," I cried. "I'm sorry for all the wrong things I have done. I want to live for God from now on."

And how true these men were, identifying, with my own clues, the addiction I had to my own mind, which had no difficulty justifying these moments of disobedience I had scattered through my life. How like my mind to create a skein of behavior that I justified as freedom, which bound me over to the worst kind of slavery -- pointless, prideful rebellion.

"And do you believe Christ can take these sins away from you, this very instant?" Dan's hands grasped my shoulders. Louis and Jon and Michael likewise leaned over me, all four chanting and praying different things simultaneously. Time seemed to bend, and I kept muttering things like "Christ have mercy," "I believe," and "I trust in you."

And Dan cried out, "Mike, I want you to feel God's grace filling you right now. I want you to feel it physically, as heat entering your body, and entering every cell, every tissue of your being. I want you to physically feel this healing power. And I want you to remember this healing moment for as long as you shall live."

And then it was over. We prayed more calmly that the session would have a permanent effect on my life, that I would change my ways from this moment on.

Louis looked me in the eye. "It's OK to be an artist," he said. "But first be a child of God, humble and grateful. And second, a friend to everyone you meet. Then be an artist -- you will be a different kind entirely. You will know exactly who and what you are."

"Get closer to the men at Christ Community," Jon said. If you aren't friends with them, become friends. Let them teach you what it means to walk in the way of the Lord."

"Remember to come back," Louis said to me. "Wait a few months, let things settle out. You'll have questions, and issues that you still need to work through. Schedule another session, to make the most of this one."

I sat in my car in the melting slush outside Gethsemane Fellowship, with the wipers slapping away the spring drizzle. I marveled at the work these men were doing. Each team worked for one or two nights per week. Every session like mine lasts two hours. And these men have to be there -- so modest, humble, patient, accepting -- for all the people that show up at their door. I wondered if I could ever set my ego -- my mind -- aside sufficiently that I could help others in the way that these men were doing.

And I was trembling. From the intensity of the experience. From the power of telling my own broken story. From the opportunity that now lay before me -- to go deeper into this weird world God had led me to.

And just so you know. The things I promised to quit doing, I have continued to struggle with. But not so much, and without the terrible feelings I used to have of defiance and hatred. Sin is in me, but I am not sin, and I try to do better. I *do* do better.

But I am dead to that old cycle of guilt and shame, I am dead to all that. And I can feel the sickness of my life departing from me bit by bit, day by day, by the loving power of God.

## 11. Our Fathers

After the Gethsemane prayer session, I made a lunch date with Daniel to hash over his holocaust sermon. We agreed to meet at a breakfast place near where I live. It was Wednesday of Holy Week -- the day before everything started to happen.

What I wanted was peace between the two of us, and peace in my own mind. It was adolescent of me to get up and walk out during his talk. I didn't want bad or confused feelings between us. But I also sensed that the anti-Semitism angle was a red herring, a distraction to me, a magician's maguffin, and I wanted to move beyond it.

The breakfast was friendly. It did me good just to go over my notes with him, making sure I understood what he had said. It's funny how, in the heat of disputation, we forget specifics. For instance, at no time did Daniel say, "The Jews should be made to convert to Christianity at gun-point," or "The Jews deserved the Holocaust because they killed Christ." But in the furnace of the moment, with all my loyalties roaring around me, I reassembled his constructions in the most negative possible way.

I told him about a conversation I had had with Lily the night before.

"Jews for Jesus are self-hating Jews," Lily said. "You really can't be a true Jew and believe in Jesus. It's unthinkable. It's a contradiction. That, plus all the bad blood that's occurred over the centuries. You can ask any Jew about this. God does not have a son, or it would be in the Torah. Why would he leave something like that out? Just to screw the Jews later?"

I argued the point with her. "Doesn't the Old Testament call for a messiah, and didn't Jesus satisfy many of the scriptural descriptions in Isaiah and elsewhere?"

"How would I know?" Lily was pretty proud of her biblical illiteracy. "I'm just telling you, Michael, a lot of stuff has gone down, and Jews are not looking for a diamond-studded bridge to traipse across and become Christians. We don't like polyester."

I didn't tell Daniel what else she said.

"I have to ask you where all this is going, Mike. I don't want to be married to a holocaust denier. I'm happy if this whole thing you're doing helps you to be happier and to be a better man. But some of this is just weird. And there are days when I don't think I want to be any part of it."

I didn't want to be doing this, either. I didn't like the corner I felt I was painting myself into. There were so many things that I didn't care for. And yet, at the heart, I saw something beautiful, and I wasn't able to say no to it. Yet I was also too afraid or too stupid to tell Lily what this beautiful thing was exactly.

I laid out my situation for Daniel till he got the picture, and made the kind of Jewish face that says, "The pain of this moment is too gruesome to do justice to."

"My own family was none too excited about me and Emily coming over," he said. "We still get together for family events and such, but they look at us like we pull the heads off baby ducks."

"But by the same token, it's also very weird to live alongside white-bread Christians, which we do. I don't like the style of right-wing Christianity. It's like a bedrock of the faith, because it always seems to be there, even though it has no place being there. Jesus was not an angry, vindictive guy. Nor was he presumptuous, or smug, or sentimental. There are cultural things about Evangelical Christianity that make me want to gnaw through the straps."

“I won’t even get started about what people -- I’m talking Christians here -- say about me being Jewish. Suffice to say, it is timber-shivering.

“Mike, I’m not the best example you could come to. I’m physically unable, during worship, to lift my hand in praise like the other guys. I can’t bring myself to sing more than a croak. There are days when the whole enterprise just makes me crazy. But I’m stuck.”

I stopped him. “Why are you stuck?”

Daniel thumped his heart with his knuckles. I got it. He was stuck because this was what God wanted from him – he felt he had no alternative had called him to.

“Mike,” he said, “the whole thing comes down to obedience. Either we obey the word of God, who made us, or we don’t. Either Christ is Lord -- something of a higher order than we are accustomed to -- or he is not. I totally understand why people run screaming from that. But I am unable to. You can look for all kinds of clever ways to say that X is Not-X. But look who are you being clever with! The day is coming when you will have to stand before God. And he will ask, Did you do what I asked you to do, or do you have a really good excuse? And if you ever knew in your heart that God really was God, there is no excuse for you.

“Every notion of our justice, our right and wrong, our politics, our professions of love for the poor and dispossessed, is a lie if we do it without acknowledging that it comes from the God who breathed life, and justice, and mercy, into us. What are our politics next to that?”

Daniel started to illustrate this again with the story of the Amalekites, but I was tired of hearing about the Amalekites. Which in a way is ironic, because like the Naragansett Indians, this extinct people, about whom we know precious little, live vividly on in our consciences, four thousand years later after God drew his finger across his throat.

“God asks us to walk a knife’s edge between extremism and excess,” Daniel said.

“Extremism is where we want to be, willing to go all out for God. The extremes push us to our limits.

“On the other hand, we aren’t allowed to cross over into positions that are forbidden. Zeal doesn’t entitle us to exceed the bounds of what is permitted.”

“But Daniel,” I said, exasperated, “aren’t extremism and excess the same thing, really? How can you live on the very edge of insanity or wrong-headedness and never flip over?”

“I think they seem closer than they are,” he responded. “I might be talking about extreme love, or extreme forgiveness. Where excess is when the thing becomes its own rationale.”

Daniel’s talk hit a funny nerve with me because I had never spent much time worrying about “standing before God.” In truth, I never seriously considered the concept of obedience – which sent something of a shiver through me.. That was a misunderstanding.

I wanted a spirituality less binding than Daniel was talking about, a faith based on simple ideas like happiness and good intentions, having a “good heart,” a theology in which no one was checking up on me to see if I was in compliance.

If my theology were true, then pretty much anything was all right, so what was there to obey, really? Kosher or non-Kosher, it’s all one song.

Yet obedience was the theme of both my prayer session with the men from Gethsemane – *Stop sinning, dumbass!* – and now of this conversation with Daniel. So maybe “It’s all one song” was more of a shrug than a theology. Maybe -- here is a revolutionary thought -- maybe everything mattered terribly.

Obedience was what I disliked most about conservative Christians – the idea that things have to be done God’s way, or they are wrong, and guess who gets to decide which way God’s way goes. Behind that simple thought lay oceans of misgivings and misunderstanding.

And how did it apply to a free spirit like myself, so obviously placed on earth to pipe my pan-flute and dance my satyr's dance, not to live like a hermit saint in a hole in the ground? A better question is, when we speak of God's will – *thine, not mine* – what are we talking about? You can fashion an idol out of obedience. This is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing, of making the law into a fetish, and overlooking the spirit of love running through and informing the law.

But if obedience were really something quite simple, it would not be idolatrous. Like loving God with all your heart. And loving other people as unstintingly as you love yourself. That's an obedience we hear less about. Yet it is the prime directive from the top man.

Begin positively – like loving and respecting yourself and others as a sign of your connection to God. Do that right and the other stuff – what headgear to wear in church, who to vote for, and whom to arm to the teeth in the name of peace – might take care of itself.

And even if it doesn't, don't get drawn into your characteristic mental habits. Don't look for trouble. Don't be quick to judge. Don't cry Intolerance! at every strong stance you encounter. Breathe slowly. Count to ten. Keep your eyes on the prize.

Daniel invited me to join a “small group” that met at his house. Small groups are the basic organizational unit at Christ Community and many other churches. Where the full congregation must sit passively and glean what the preacher is saying above the hubbub of crying babies, small groups allow people to meet more intimately in their homes. They are loosely structured, but may include scripture reading, a study lesson, prayer, or just ordinary conversation.

I think of them as group therapy for Christians – life-sized and natural in ways that the full-dress Sunday service can't be. I have been a member of several small groups through Christ Community Church and each has been good in a different way.

One was a neighborhood group, and it included Alex and Beth. We would all meet at Annie's house two blocks away, drink tea, eat cookies, and talk about whatever was bugging people. It was my favorite group.

Then there was a structured Alpha study group, where we ate takeout and watched a DVD primer on the appeal of Christianity, featuring a non-threatening Anglican priest named Nicky Gumbel. Gumbel's accent was adorable, light years from Billy Graham. Afterwards we talked about what Gumbel had said, and we prayed.

And there was a peculiar coincidence: every single member of that group – all Christ Community members – had been raised Catholic. Including me. We had a merry time, as lifelong ex-Catholics do, reminiscing with very specific memories of the priests and nuns, the morning masses, altar boys, etc. Everyone remembered their Catholic upbringing positively. Church was like family. But all felt that, from a spiritual standpoint, the liturgy was deadlier than a doornail. They benefited hugely from the more engaged and engaging ministry of someone like Alex Garrin.

Hearing them banter about growing up Catholic was the first time I ever felt I *belonged* in a Christ Community group. Mike, how can this be? It seems like you keep having these huge breakthroughs but then your experiences within the church are, well, nearly trivial.

The third small group was Daniel's, where we studied a program called Gospel Transformations, a title that made me shudder. I remember joking to the group on the first day: “Are we sure the Gospel is something that needs to be transformed after all these years? I hate to be the group reactionary, but ...”

They got that one.

Actually, the program taught what it meant to believe in God, that it is more than saying “I believe.” It’s a change of heart. It means putting trust, one’s hopes, not in oneself but in something outside oneself. The Alpha program describes life without God as inevitably self-obsessed, and tending toward a fitful self-involvement that makes us miserable. The sign of not believing is reliance on the self. So Christianity really is psychotherapy against egomania.

Hal, the biker guy I met at the retreat, was in Daniel's group, and I looked forward to getting to know him again. When I met him he was just starting to read the Bible cover to cover. Now, a year later, he was rounding the last bend, and looking forward to starting all over again at the beginning.

“I’m no scholar, Mike,” he said to me, “but this is the biggest adventure I’ve ever been on, from a standpoint of thinking. You can’t believe how wise this book is, how much it knows, and how it begins to fit together as a whole, despite being written by a hundred different guys over a thousand years time.”

And I was thinking, How different it must be to read from a position of obedience than looking for contradictions and loopholes.

It was about this time that I began to lead in prayer myself. I had always been very awkward because I figured, being a writer, I had to be exquisitely articulate, and map the whole thing out in advance. A couple of times I made an awesome poetic start – *Great God of all that is, known and unknown, uh* -- and then forgot where I was going. And everyone was waiting for me to tie it all together. Ugh.

But as I got more and more used to the practice, I began to take myself out of it so I was not performing any more. What a relief that was. Suddenly, I was free to be about as dumb as I naturally was. Not astonishingly, that had the effect of opening me up, so I was able to do what the other folks did – ramble on in a well-intentioned way, not really caring what the next phrase or paragraph would be about, or whether it was needlepoint-worthy or not -- and devil take the hindmost.

I prayed for a young couple in our group that was struggling with financial and marital problems. I prayed for Daniel and Emily’s daughter, who had problems roughly analogous to my own daughter’s. I prayed for everyone who needed a job, or a break, a sense of direction, or peace in a pivotal relationship.

What can I say, I did great. So, in only a space of about ten months, I learned that prayer is not words.

And yet -- Hal came up to me after one meeting and thumped me in the chest. “Mike, I really love you, man. When you pray I feel like we are this close to God.” He held up a thumb and forefinger almost forming a circle. Oh, *that* close. I took inordinate pleasure from his remark.

One night at small group, a young soil scientist from the University who was relatively new to our church, a man named Terry, described a problem he was having inside his head.

“I am a scientist, a rational being, but I also believe in God, and in the Bible. It creates problems in my mind sometimes. For instance I have a great deal of difficulty believing God created the world in seven 24-hour days. How do you all deal with this?”

Someone in the back of the room muttered, “Six, actually.”

I surprised myself by answering Terry. “It’s just poetry, you know. There were no witnesses with wristwatches at creation. The day idea is just an image to help us think what the world was like when it was new.”

“But people say that the Bible is literally true.”

“Right, but what does ‘literally’ mean when there are no words, not even a place for an observer to stand? Our whole idea of ‘literalness’ is a modern idea. It states that a statement can only have a face value, and nothing more. A dog is a dog, an ashtray is an ashtray. But language doesn’t work that way. It’s full of ambiguities and poetry. It’s closer to life than a mathematical formula. Which is what literalness asks us to be

"Jesus spoke to us in parables, which aren't literally true. There was no actual sower of seed, no actual good Samaritan event plucked from the headlines of the day. They are only true in the sense of the moral poetry embedded in the stories."

I was amazed when everyone around the table agreed with me.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Eva, a housewife, said.

“It’s God explaining things to us in terms we can understand,” said Tom, an electrical engineer.

“Hey, all we can do is see through a glass darkly,” said Rich, a securities broker. “This gives us a glimpse into his mystery. It’s the best we can do.”

Terry was relieved by all these backsliding remarks, but no more than I was. I thought:

*People can be very reasonable if you stand back and let them.*

It was at Daniel’s that I learned the Father prayer. Daniel was saying what a negative impact it had had on him as a boy to witness his father cutting corners in his floor-sanding business.

“He was my father, and I loved him, and he was mostly a good man – hard-working, not mean, not trying to be distant. But I saw with my own eyes how he would occasionally cheat in his business – usually charging too much – and it was a disillusioning thing for a boy to see his own father ripping customers off.

“When I became a Christian, my father’s imperfectness became an obstacle for me in knowing God as a father. If God was our father, and I had seen how fathers cheat and lie, and turn a cold shoulder to us, then what good was the image of ‘father’? Something that was supposed to ensure greater closeness and understanding – the image of a loving father – became instead an obstacle itself.

“In order to worship God in the way that God has said he wants to be worshipped, we have to get beyond the ‘bad father’ problem.”

"You know," Daniel said, "it struck me that it has always been this way. It's not just modern sons that are estranged from their fathers. Even when Jesus first said Abba, I'm guessing few men thought of their fathers as benevolent, loving, all-embracing. Life was always hard. Fathers always had to push their sons. And no one ever had an easy time saying 'I love you.'"

"So God gave not just us modern guys an order to solve this father riddle, but all men, across time, to go back and rebuild the way they thought about this important figure in their lives. It is the very essence of the second great commandment -- to learn to love one another again, even when the relationship has been a rough one."

That meant, in my case, that I had to get past the truth of my own earthly father. My dad is dying as I write this, living with my brother in California. We get along fine. I know he loves me and admires me and approves of me -- though he wishes I were tougher. But it was not always thus.

When I was 11 years old, right after my sister died at age 15, Dad left our family to start a new life in California. He was heartbroken by my sister’s death, and by our mother’s subsequent coldness to him. I imagine he felt he was losing his mind. Our family, freighted down with despair, and so unloving to him, meant death to him. So, for his own sake, he had to get away. But I will never forget the feeling of vulnerability that came over me as he met with me outside our old rented house in Ohio to shake my hand and say goodbye.

I later learned from my mother this healing, if uncomfortable, bit of news: My dad had to leave Ohio because he was considered damaged goods at General Motors, due to some expense account irregularities. He had played fast and loose with company money -- rather like Daniel's father -- and was not welcome any more in Ohio. This fact is doubtless embarrassing to him, but it is salvific to me -- because it means he left us because he *had* to, not because he wanted to ditch us kids.

I was a bright kid. I knew I was losing one of greatest things a boy can have -- a dad to learn from and perform for. At the same time, I knew he was not the greatest dad when he was around. He favored my brother Pat over me, and nearly every night, to deal with the demons of his life, he headed for the bars, where he held court, singing, dancing, telling jokes and impressing people. When he was doing this, I could go weeks without seeing him. It was the way he was, the way we all are -- busted.

Summoning the darkest images from those days, that was what a *father* was to me. A man who fell down drunk, naked, in front of his sons. A man who struck his wife when she was trying to protect their children. A father who left everyone to save himself.

So if anyone said the word *father* to me, theologically or otherwise, I first had to run the word through my own associations. *That's* what fathers do. *That's* what fathers are.

I resented the boys who had regular dads. I thought they were stupid, or naïve, or sentimental. That's not how a real dad is, taking you camping, or rafting a river. Or taking you to church. A real dad is nobody's fool. A real dad is wily like a fox. A real dad gives everyone the slip. And that was how I became the way I am. I began to glorify, in my own mind, the traits of a runner. A smart dad got while the getting was good. A smart dad looked out for number one. He knew how to get what he needed from people. He was crafty and clever and sometimes a little smug.

I'm not saying my dad was a bad man. I know he had a tender side, I know he had a sentimental heart. He loved his mom. He really loved his little girl, who was born sick and never got better. He was the most human of men. He wanted to be good. He wanted to be there for you. But in the end, on his own, he could not.

He was not very good at loving people, or telling the truth to himself. That would surprise him to hear, as he was always very confident of his version of things -- as we all are. He was terrible at admitting he had caused other people pain. I think he let himself off too easy at times. And the worst thing, from my standpoint, was that he infected me with the same glib talent.

How could he not? He was my father, and there is a scary part of every family in which the father, no matter how hurtful or immature, remains the father -- the shining tower of what a man can be -- and therefore, because he is yours, more wonderful than any other man. He is the template. All others come up short. Necessarily.

So I began to see what a hardship it was to think of God as father when the idea of father is tainted by one's own life experience. In my heart, God drove GM cars because that's what my dad drove. Caddies and Chevys. God had a scratchy face, even minutes after shaving, so you were scared to kiss him -- but that was OK, because he never wanted to kiss you. God doubtless sang like Nat King Cole while tooling down the parkways, and smoked Kool 100s and drank Gilbey's vodka from the clear plastic jug, with zero calorie Fresca as a mix, on account of he's watching his weight.

And if God was any different than that, wasn't he like other dads -- mawkish, conservative, a little unreal? And how was a fellow to pray to a Normal Rockwell representation like that? A goody-goody God.

“I know a prayer,” Daniel told me. “It’s practically a mantra. You can say it anywhere, at any time. All it requires is that you say a simple word over and over – ‘father.’ And think about what a loving father is truly like.

“This is a prayer that helped me make a major breakthrough to God, and to my own needs. It is a prayer for God to re-educate you about what a father really is.

Sometimes, he said, you can add words of your own to the prayer, as they come to you:

Loving father ... faithful father ... father that never cuts corners ... father that never leaves me ...

What you are trying to do is re-imprint yourself on the possible meaning of what a father is. This is a father who acts like a father. This is a father who is intoxicated by you, who thinks you are greater than great. Who knows more about you than you ever will. Who made you from his own substance. Who dotes on you and finds you perfect in his own eye. Who throws you in the air to hear your laughter, and loves you, and you love him right back.

Say this simple prayer not once, but every day for five minutes, when you are out driving or pushing a cart through the isles, or lying down for a nap on the couch. It is nothing less than a recommitment ceremony. Invite its power into you. Be wet cement to it. Let it impress you with its love and faithfulness. Invite God to teach you what kind of father he is. Invite him to soften your heart to this inner principle of love. Make it your prayer of choice for months at a time. It may be the only prayer you will ever need.

My father.

I said it and almost immediately I sensed a change in me. I felt it reprogramming me to think of fathers in a more innocent way. My cynicism began to melt, and replacing it was an awesome sense of the possibility of real love.

And you know what the payoff was? I began to think about myself as a father. And I saw that, despite my cynicism, despite my determination to find dark humor in everything, I was never dark or cynical about my own children. I always loved them. I stayed home with them for twenty-one years. I fed them, I changed them, I read to them. When they were young we practically lived at the zoo. I just wanted them to see things, and I wanted them to see me seeing them. I was a good father. I was better than I had any reason to be.

I remember, halfway through the first term of George W. Bush, a reporter asked him how important his father’s (former President George Herbert Walker Bush’s) counsel was. Bush, in one of his odder remarks, said that he valued his father’s input, but he valued his other father’s input more – meaning God’s.

The press saw this as a put-down of the president’s biological father, who was less conservative, and was said to not always agree with his son’s reckless actions internationally. In that scenario, W was using God to make his own dad look weak. “My dad doesn’t want me to invade Iraq, but God does.”

And I disagree with almost everything that particular president ever did. He pretended to be the least political president, but in fact he was the most political, leveraging one election loss and a paper-thin victory to create a mandate for radical conservative change. Oh, he was a piece of work, as my grandmother used to say.

But it occurs to me that this odd remark was sincere. Maybe W’s was an imperfect, distant, unreliable father. And maybe, in his heart, W had learned to count on God where his own father was insufficient. Well, God and Karl Rove.

Fathers and politics matter. I suddenly saw how my political negativity was fired by my feelings that the world was one big freaking screw job, and the authorities were all cheats and

liars. Nixon and Johnson played a part in this disillusionment, but it began even earlier, seeing the look in my father's eyes as he turned and walked away from me, under the Chinese elm tree, in 1962. The day I said, in an accepting but lost sort of way, So that's what fathers do.

It was why I chose political fathers who were themselves bulletproofed by their humor and disposition against the cravenness of the system. I loved Eugene McCarthy. I loved Moe Udall. I loved Pat Moynihan. I loved Barney Frank. I even loved George McGovern, who told a Nixon supporter during the disastrous Watergate-driven campaign of 1972 to "kiss my ass."

They were tellers of truth in a vile world. They were my surrogate fathers. My politics arose as an antidote to my sorrow. What did that mean now, now that I knew better? Who was I now? What did I believe? How should I cast my votes? Whose signs would I plant on my lawns?

I had a conversation at about this time with Mark, a liberal friend, who was going on about George Bush's offenses against all that was decent. I interrupted him.

"I know why evangelicals love George Bush," I said.

"Because he's their damn dog," Mark said.

"Actually, it's because they sense he has suffered for them. He turned against his own father, changed religions, switched his politics well to the right of his dad. His dad was someone the conservatives never trusted. But they trust W. They see him as a fierce brother. They know he is with them, because he invokes the name of God, their true father. They have all graduated beyond their life father to their eternal Father, and Bush is one of them. His faith is like theirs. Even if he screws up -- and Lord knows he has -- he's still golden for them because he subscribes to the idea of the Father."

"But he's evil."

"I like to think so," I agreed. "But really it's a different set of allegiances. On our side we have very few allegiances except to the idea of justice for the poor, and to the idea that the bad guys are always bad. We don't really care that much about policy, am I right? We are rebels at heart. What are we rebelling against? Like Brando said, 'What have you got?'"

Mark conceded the point.

"Whereas, these people are really believers. They see themselves as authentic servants of God. God tells them to obey their earthly masters. So they become worshipful of the armed forces, of the blunt, harsh fathers that God has set in charge of things. They revere the flag, not out of idolatry as it seems to us, but because it symbolizes surrender to them. There is character and redemption in this surrender. No ego, only service. To them, there is virtue in being sheep. Liberals don't get that, because we are in headlong flight from sheepishness. But it's true."

What Mark didn't see is that conservative Christians see themselves in a war with evil, and God is watching to see what they do. They have made a deal with blood, in the pits of their souls. They have given up on earthly wit and wisdom. So someone like Eugene McCarthy is just a distracting narcissist to them -- "I'm a smartypants!" Instead, they find the dumbest guy on the field and follow him, because dumb signifies virtuous to them, and that is how God works. God is the father that really matters, and if he says we are going to war, then you pack your duffle, bud.

Though I thought I had rejected my father early on in life, he still managed to pass on to me certain proclivities. I inherited his aloneness. My father was an intelligent man who never

succeeded the way he felt he deserved. As a child he was the target of small town bullies, and had to switch schools to get away from them. I'll bet he had a wild mouth, just like I do, and those boys punished him for that.

He spent his last years in the high desert of the Mojave, managing his properties and living next to a sun-baked golf course. But he never had good friends. His aloneness made it painful for him to be with people, except on the most casual terms. He was a wounded guy who needed to be shored up, which my mom was incapable of doing, but which his second wife was very good at. He loved his wife, and he adored his sons and daughters. But other people were scarier. They existed to be humored, impressed, or, in his later years, helped. He intervened with his tenant families with gifts of money, debt forgiveness, bus tickets away from abusive husbands. He tried hard to be a good man.

But he hated to knuckle under, to anyone. My dad hated to be played for a sucker. And he passed that gene on to me. That was my real religion as well – protection of self. It was like my dad gave me a dangerous gift, a gun. It put distance between me and everything.

That was why, at the Christian retreat, I wanted to shake the hands of the men who prayed for me. They had abolished with their touch the awful distance that I had built my life around. I shook their hands like I could buy them off with a tip, a hearty slap on the back. It was why I made everything a joke during my first months at Christ Community. I wanted people to know I wasn't a dope, that I was running rings around them intellectually. You can't catch me I'm the pattycake man,

One of the themes of Alex' ministry is that we are all "broken," heart-broken, soul-broken, life-broken, that we all come to God exhausted and damaged by our efforts to solve the problems of our own existence. While we have individual strengths, they never seem to be enough to establish peace in our hearts or in our homes.

Indeed, it is so often our strengths that drag us on to perdition. We are like the tightrope walker in the wind, who can't bring himself to let go of the balancing pole that keeps him upright in fair weather, but is not his friend on a windy day. We cling to our illusions of self-sufficiency, then the wind pulls us from the wire and we tumble to earth.

With my dad, and with me, it was the idea that we could create a safe place for ourselves with our intelligence alone. My dad was someone to whom love did not come easily. I know it was in his heart, but he could not quite give himself to it. He was a little like Charlie Kane in the movie – he could not set aside his wealth (his big brain) to simply love. He needed desperately to "humble up." But it was not in him to do it.

Sometimes I wonder if I have what it takes to really love. Because I know the fear of other people is strong in me. I'm always afraid people will hurt me. So by myself, I would say no. But with God in my heart, I believe anything is possible.

Again, my children are my teachers. Before we had children, I didn't want any. I remember saying to Lily, "I don't like other people's kids. Why would I like my own?" I wanted to be an artist, and write wonderful books under a tree. By myself.

Of course, when I looked into Aretha's and Gus's eyes, I was horn-swoggled, smitten, stabbed and trashed by them. I loved them with all my bubbling guts, and I never looked back, I have never stopped loving them. That's how good God is.

And now, uttering the prayer "My father," I am reversing decades of bad juju. This is a new model based not on ego or fear or superiority or need, but one rooted in obedience. Because we obey our true fathers. It is what we do. It is what they deserve.

After learning the father prayer, things began to change for me.

In my first half-year at Christ Community, a few people said a few things that riled – remarks about homosexuality or evolution or liberals or women that caused me to sit bolt upright in indignation. They were the sorts of cartoony things that you might expect conservative Christians to say. Each time this happened, I relapsed into feeling allergic to Christianity. These people have the gift of gifts, I thought, but they indulge in the most pointless and destructive conversations.

In the months following my event at Gethsemane, the tone of everything seemed to change. When someone said something that struck me as stupid, I reminded myself that not everyone is a spokesperson for his faith. What did I expect, that everyone at every level, regardless of IQ and education, would express everything to my elliptical satisfaction? Did I always express myself that well? Of course not.

We were at an outing, and a congregant I knew began riffing to me on how "liberals were the cause of all our problems." His name was Dick Freeman and I felt something close to rage seize me. But then I became insanely calm and put my hands on his shoulders, and calmly pointed out to him that Jesus and Paul had virtually invented liberalism.

"Jesus' crime that so offended religious conservatives was that he was an egalitarian," I told him. "He treated women as human beings. He ate and drank with sinners. He worked on the Sabbath. He hewed to the spirit, not the letter of the Law."

All these are part of the liberal tradition, I told him. The part that says, "Love trumps power." I quoted Dick all the beatitudes that came to mind: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the hungry, for they shall be filled. Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be brought to laughter."

I reminded Dick that when Jesus first announced himself to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, it was to say the that spirit of the Lord had "anointed me to bring good news to the poor, and to proclaim release for those who are imprisoned, to free the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Dick Freeman just put his hands over mine, and tenderly said, "I know, brother. I know."

"Hubert Humphrey was a liberal," I squeaked, a tear close to forming in my eye. "He just wanted to help people. He wanted people to have better lives."

"I liked old Hubert," Dick Freeman said. "I could vote for him one more time." Pause. "But I can't vote for abortion."

"Fair enough, Dick" I said to him. "Fair enough."

Another propitious thing happened. Some of the more conservative people in our church were indignant because Target Stores refused to use the phrase *Merry Christmas* in its advertising, preferring the more ecumenical and less divisive *Happy Holidays*.

A churchwide email went out suggesting that congregants assemble outside the Target store on University Avenue with placards and candles, to show our displeasure over the secularization of Our Lord's birthday.

I took a deep breath, then wrote an opinion in response.

"Dear friends," I wrote. "Target has no reason to inflame Christian consumers at Christmas time. They are just trying to appeal to the broadest possible group of buyers. Let's face it, Christmas is a commercial holiday. If we hold our breath, it will just make us look like spoiled kids trying to push a corporation around."

I suggested that we look at the people who were behind this staged protest. Did the protest originate locally, or from a national organization like James Dobson's? If nationally, did we want to play the part of pawns in their political game? Should we let them mess up our own families' Christmas, which ought to be about the miracle of God's love?

“If we sincerely want to pray for Target,” I said, “we could do so in the privacy of our own homes. God will not listen less to us if we gather modestly, and not in sight of local TV cameras.”

I wrote this expecting to be rejected as pro-Target and anti-Christmas. Instead, I was actually joined by others.

"I'm with Mike on this one," wrote Hazel, a single woman in the church. "Let's keep our powder dry and try to enjoy Christmas, and remember what it's about instead of getting all ticked off about it."

I was so grateful to get that support. Later, I visited a Target store and there, across the front of the building, was a huge sign saying "Merry Christmas." The charge of de-Christmasification wasn't even true in the first place.

I remembered a talk about fathers and fathering that Alex gave at the retreat. It was very Biblical, and involved a story I had never read. In the book of Samuel I, King Saul has committed suicide on the plain of battle, and the Israelite army is put to rout. Leaderless, the men of Israel throw off their armor and insignias and disperse across the country, hiding wherever they can from the marauding Philistines. Some, including David, hid in caves. Some hid in cisterns. Some emptied graves and hid where the bones of their ancestors had lain.<sup>[9]</sup>

It reminded me of the scene in *Schindler's List* where the children, separated from their fathers, are left to their own devices as they hide from the Nazis seeking to round them up for the ovens. None of the children has illusions about what awaits them if caught. Spielberg shows a little boy of about nine wading into the stink and filth of the concentration camp latrine, hoping the soldiers searching above don't look down the hole.

This is what happens to children without fathers, scattered and reduced to hiding in the most horrible places and hoping the horror will save us. In the movie, no saving father, no David arrives on the scene to set things right. Chaos and killing rage until its energy is spent.

“Men,” Alex said that day, “we are all under-fathered, and more alone than we can bear to be. Either our fathers have died, or they are far away, or they were never able to be the kind of fathers we needed.”

We men shifted on our folding chairs, thinking about the various shortcomings we had experienced. I saw Daniel in the front row, and there was Hal, and Brian standing alongside. We were all learning together.

“The solution is dual,” Alex said. “First, we must lay claim to God in heaven as our true father, our first father, the father who doesn't fail us even when other fathers do. Look to him. Accept him. Hail him as your father. Accept that that is who he is. He wants your love so badly.

“Jesus said, ‘How often I have longed to gather you to me, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.’ That is how God longs for us to be close to him! And so we must draw ever closer to this God, this father.

“Secondly, we must be fathers to one another. Men must be fathers to other men's sons. Sons must be fathers to their own fathers. I want to be your father, and I beg you to take me as your son. Teach me, love me, correct me. Be with me throughout this lonely life. It is our only hope as men.”

When I got back to Saint Paul I was on fire. I wrote my father a long letter by hand. It was a letter of amends.

"Dad, for many years I nursed my anger at you for leaving us as kids," I wrote. "And I hated it when you told me you never worried about me, because I was the strong one, I was the resilient one who rolled with the punches, who found a way to win. Because I knew all the times I crumpled like a Styrofoam cup and I wished I had a dad to rescue me.

"But I made a shrine out of that grievance. I nursed my sense of being a victim, and you being a bad guy. I never thought about how Kathy's death broke your heart, and it was not in you any more to look out for us. We were all children, you included, and you needed our support, too, and all you got was my blame.

"And I was a good son for years afterwards. We wrote and phoned, and I sent Phyllis flowers on Mothers Day. But I never really loved you, because I never forgave you. I want you to know that I forgive you now, and I beg your forgiveness for me being such a glib wise-ass for so many years. I'm sorry I was not a better son to you. And if I have one memory I want to keep of you, it is of you carrying Kathy across the football field after the fireworks to the car. You only had two arms, and you gave them lovingly to her."

And my dad called me back a few days later, and there was a catch in his voice.

"I think this may be the most beautiful letter I ever got," Mike. "And I must tell you, that if anyone needed to apologize to anybody, I need to apologize to you."

That was it. There would never be any more. And that was OK.

And I was so grateful for this mercy, I drove down to the cathedral overlooking the city of Saint Paul. I had not been in a Catholic Church for ages. I just wanted to look at the beautiful dome, from inside, and maybe say a prayer of thanks. But I followed a handful of people down the stairs to the vault, to a little room where the Blessed Sacrament was on display, and everyone had their own prie-dieu or kneeler to kneel down on and worship the oversized host, imprisoned by the monsterness of gold.

And I did so, and I prayed a prayer of thanks. And I looked at the people kneeling all around me, who might have thought it strange for an "evangelical" to be praying in their midst. But I did not feel like I was a stranger, that I did not belong, that I was an imposter of any kind.

I was a child of God, and I needed no excuse to be right where I was.

## 12. The Sign of the Turtle

A year had passed since the original retreat at Camp Courage, when the bipolar prayer team had healed my bad ear. In the twelve months since, I had been on a journey of destruction – I was blowing up my old sense of myself, and my heartfelt attachment to anxiety and self-regard.

One day I got a call from a young couple at Christ Community, Burke and Annette. They were members of the prayer group I met with every couple of weeks, and so they were aware of my worries about Aretha.

“We feel that God is telling us to get involved,” Burke said.

I wasn’t sure what “getting involved” might mean. Aretha didn’t like the idea of Christians, and she sure was not going to like the idea that God was sending people to fix her up. A month or so earlier, a good friend offered to take Aretha out to tea, and she was incensed at the idea that she was an object of pity.

Nevertheless, I liked the idea of anyone cutting through the fog and saying hello to Aretha. She was living in a kind of workaholic tizzy, holding down two jobs, one in a teashop and the other as weekend concierge in an apartment complex for seniors.

“Why don’t you drop in at the teashop she works at?” I said. “She can’t run away from you there.”

The next day I got a call from Aretha. She was crying.

“Oh, daddy,” she sobbed. Things must not have gone well.

“What is it, darling?”

“Your friends were just here,” she said.

“Burke and Annette? Yes, they called the other day asking about you.” I braced for a tirade.

“They came in with their new baby,” she said.

“Oh, you got to see little Bea.”

“Yes, she’s adorable.”

I brightened. “So what did they say?”

“Well,” Aretha said, “they said God told them to drop in on me.”

“No kidding.”

“God also told them to give me a hundred dollars.”

“Oh, Aretha,” I said. “Those folks have about exactly four cents to rub together.”

“I was just kind of dumbstruck when they were here,” she said. “I overdrafted Wednesday, and I’ve been feeling terrible about money. Then, when they left, I just started crying. I must have cried for twenty minutes.”

“Oh honey.”

“Daddy,” she sobbed, “I never said thank you. I was like paralyzed.”

“It’s OK, darling. They understand.”

During the year Gus and I grew closer together. There was the moment he held me, and there were others as well – breakthrough moments for both of us. I watched him play lead guitar in the church band (now called Moron Logic), and he was blisteringly, spine-shiveringly good. Every day Gus seemed to grow closer to God, and every so often he would let me a little deeper into his life – not an easy or natural thing for him. It was the opposite of what living with a teenager was supposed to be like. There were times when he withdrew, or was rude to me. But these times were the exceptions now. He was compassionate. He was appreciative. He truly loved his friends, male and female. Improbably, he took up swing dancing. He loved his music, but he was determined not to let it replace God in his life.

At the first retreat we were like infants doing parallel play, him playing basketball and guitar, me jawing with the grownups, the two of us never quite interacting. A year later, a week after Easter, there was a peacefulness between us, the calm idea that, even if we split up and spent time with other people, even if he went off to college and I didn't see so much of him any more, we would still be together in our hearts.

That's not nothing.

This year Alex asked the minister at Gethsemane Pentecostal Fellowship to lead the retreat – to pick up where Tadeusz and Szymon had left off. Jim was younger than Alex, a young 40 perhaps, blue-eyed and blonde-haired, with just a touch of the shiny-suit evangelical demeanor that would once have dispatched me to the exits. He was a fearless, eyes-closed gospel singer, prone to go off on an improvisational wailing tangent at the drop of a hat, clap hands, shout Halleluia! and jump into the air, all without warning.

It was an achievement that I was able to watch Jim do all this without bubbling over with some internal argument. I never once thought: Elmer Gantry! Because he wasn't that. He was the real deal.

Jim led us through a set of considerations designed to make us feel like worldly men out in the piney woods away from our womenfolk. He referenced Jimi Hendrix (favorably). He alluded to the fact that people have sex and sexual thoughts (again, not a bad thing). He drew a chart of human aspirations in which certain lumpy objects scattered on the ground under The Tree of Knowledge represented dog poop (pretty darn salty for this group).

But as Jim warmed up he returned to the theme of Tadeusz – that God's love for us is undying, that we are the boxful of puppies he dotes on and delights in. He was intense. He clasped his hands together and rubbed them as if to start a fire. He laughed, he cried, he embraced the guys in the front row if they happened to be looking the other way. He was not going to lose us tonight. We were not going to be allowed to wander off in our minds.

Jim was an actual charismatic preacher, something I had not seen before. I watched in fascination as he laid out an historical theology. He described the arrival of Jesus in the world, his life among us, and how his death was a kind of cosmic train wreck – the collision of all that is loving and true head-first against all that is hateful and delusionary.

“And what we got from this crash was a big bang, an explosion that reverberated beyond history, that shook the timbers of the universe, our planet becoming a giant tuning fork for this cosmic correction, for this resetting in human time of a covenant that stood outside history because outside history, outside time, is where God spends his time, where time flows like endless water down an endless mountainside, and where the God who made us waits for us with welcoming arms.

“The surrender of God was a unique and paradoxical event, God taking on all of our shamefulness and shamelessness, all our vying and slogging through this dreary world, and opting to suffer right alongside us, only more than any of us will ever be asked to suffer.

Jesus opted to live with our fleas and disappointments and betrayals and crummy weather and miserable economies and soul-killing wars, and the casual cruelties we visit upon one another, and the lies every man tells himself every day, and the unimaginable grief of feeling far from God.

“His crucifixion was like a train barreling out of heaven at the speed of life, and it smacked up against all the crap we could mount against him. Our power, our arrogance, our hatred, our will.

“And we cut him up and stabbed him and cursed him and whipped him and we nailed the love of the universe to a couple of four by fours, and we stood him up and watched God die, and we laughed, looking to one another for reassurance, and then the ground shook, and the dead sloughed off their rags and climbed up out of their graves, and the curtain in the temple ripped down the middle, it just ripped, it couldn’t be whole another moment.

“And the people who lived on that day saw something nobody, nowhere, had ever seen before, and no one would ever see again – the physical death of God. The cessation of his heart and breath. The draining of his blood. A God laid so low that down was up to him.

“And his terrifying truth was that *this*, this emptying out of all he had in him, is the way life is *supposed* to be. We’re supposed to love one another so much our own lives stop mattering to us. We’re supposed to give of ourselves until our blood is all gone, and all that seeps out of us is runny water. Our hope of winning is to first lose everything. And this will sound strange and maybe even a little sick, but there is our joy, that we stop mattering to ourselves.

“Our bodies are just fuel, we are just another log to throw on the fire. Despite how highly we think of ourselves, no matter how sad our story seems, or how brave our struggles appear, all we are is crumbs on the table. All we have we owe to God, because of this thing that he gave to us, a road map to a different kind of life, a life that goes on forever, a life that is no longer about us, that frees us from the dark prison that is our anxious, arrogant will.”

Jim had worked himself up to a joyous fury. He sang. He howled. He chattered in tongues. He spoke with clamped eyes and clenched fists. The supernatural had become physical in him. All opposites were resolved. He was unselfconscious in the extreme. He was the opposite of me – at least, of the me that I used to be.

I watched in fascination. I was watching myself in a sense, noting how OK I was with Jim’s intensity. It seemed *earned* to me – earned by the insanity of Christ’s sacrifice, earned by the imploding A-bomb of his death, that sucked the last vestiges of light from the heavens, and the brilliant exploding H-bomb at dawn on Easter Day.

Then, as the evening wound down, Jim announced he had a funny trick up his sleeve. Some call it “the touch of death,” and you have probably witnessed some variation on it while flipping through the channels: A preacher puts the palm of his hand to a believer’s brow, and the believer faints away “dead” and falls to the carpet. There he lies still, or trembling, or kicking a little, for maybe ninety seconds and that’s it.

And it is a trick. If you don’t want it to happen, it won’t. When the preacher gives you the slightest push, simply stand your ground and you will not fall. The trick is that you go up knowing you are going down, that going down is what you desire, so you give yourself to it gladly, and the fall is like a cradle wafting through the treetops, a lullaby sung just for you.

The lights dimmed and a line formed in front of Jim, much like the line I stood in a year earlier. That other time I joined the line in order to be a good sport. This time I lined up because I hungered for the touch of death, I wanted to feel the whammy in my life. I wanted God to reach into me through this man’s hand. I wanted to sift through the treetops like a baby dreaming.

Where before my mind raced to stay one step ahead of the charlatans, not being made a fool of, this time I was not thinking about anything. I wanted to be made a fool of, desperately, finally.

My turn came. Jim stepped up to me and he called Jesus by name; bade him enter my body and open my heart. Then Jim touched me and I closed my eyes and fell. I fell back like I had walked backward over a deep hole, like the floor opening up under the condemned man, only I didn't wave my arms to keep from falling, and I was the exact opposite of condemned, and so I gave myself to it and tumbled, and it seemed like it took a minute or two before the people around me gently eased me to the acrylic carpet, knelt around me and began to pray out loud for me.

I heard their words, which were dumb and simple and yet seemed to know everything important about me. "Bless this man ... touch his heart ... strengthen him, Lord ... fire his faith."

You know, in our lives we want more than anything to be known, just to feel that people get us, that there is no quarrel between us, no deliberate misconstruance. Prayer in a group, unless it is utterly false, does this. Because there is no way to stand before God, and hold hands with one another, and unite in such a vulnerable and loving way, and still be an asshole. It goes away, if only for that moment, and you are still and humble in the light of your maker. And it is a time for telling only truth, and speaking only out of deepest love and fondest hope.

Then, undramatically, after maybe a minute or two, I came to. I sat up and embraced Gus, who I now saw was one of the people gathered around me to pray. Gus and I held each other for a long lovely moment.

"Your turn, son," I said, and rose to my feet and led him back into the line to be touched by Jim, like the stairway to a waterslide to God. Around us the room was like a disaster rehearsal, half the people flat on their backs, being comforted by the rest. Everyone muttering and murmuring, all at the same time. It seemed so loving to me, and so beautiful and sweet. I would have cried, but I was too full of peace.

All around the rest of the world men were shoveling coal, drinking beer, hooting at girls and cheering on the home team. But here in this oversized cabin were men comforting one another and expressing pure brotherly love. It was strange and funny. It was wonderful.

Gus stepped up to Jim and Jim prayed:

"In the name of the crucified Christ, taste his death and taste the sweet grace of his salvation!"

And he released Gus with a minimum of energy, a feather's brush, and Gus floated back, eyes closed, floated into my arms and the arms of Al and Jon. We immediately commenced to pray for him. This was what I said:

"Good God, you know this young man Gus. You know his beautiful heart. You know his love for you. You know how precious you are to him. Let this right now be a special moment in his life, a bookmark in his soul, the moment you step into him and take up residence and never leave again. Take up residence in this boy's heart that is bursting for love of you. Strum on his soul like you play on his guitar, making music so honest and pure. Abide in him and love him all the rest of his days. Help him to believe in you always and to walk with you every day as his God and as his friend. Make him mindful of other people's reality, help him to empathize with their struggles and be useful to them in any way he can be. Let him not be alone but rather a vital part of every group he enters into, a center of holy consciousness, a player in every game. Send him wonderful friends and wise counselors. Lead him not into distraction and dissipation but always toward the brighter light of clarity, self-acceptance, and

the joy of living in you. Jesus bless this dear young man, and watch over him, and bind yourself to him and to his life in every possible way. So that he never feels estranged again, let him feel your ever-present love the way the way he feels his own inhalations and exhalations, be on his every breath, be a continuing tickle in his life, refreshing and empowering and reminding him. Make this be a moment of permanent branding, and sear his heart with a cross, the symbol of your love. Burn it into him so that he will never forget how loved he is, that he is a son of the great living God. Bless this boy and keep him. Make your face to shine upon him. Be gracious to him. Turn your face toward this boy always and give him peace.”

I said all that with tears in my eyes.

Other people prayed for Gus, too. Alex knelt by him and prayed. And Timothy was there. And Dwight. Everyone prayed for God’s love to enter him and stay in him forever. It was very solemn. All the people I had shared barbecue with, all the people I had gone fishing with, or swatted golf balls with or hammered nails with. Each took his turn to pray for my son. They bowed to the Almighty and prayed for my boy and his journey in life, and I was grateful to them all.

And after that time seemed to stand still and I sat there on the acrylic rug holding my silent son “asleep” in my arms, rocking him ever so slightly, stroking his face, a kind of pieta of father and son.

And my love for my boy was so overwhelming, it flowed like a mountain stream between us, it leaped and splashed in the space around us, we were enveloped in the giddiness of it. Not in a grasping “I can never let him go” way, but almost the opposite, that by giving him to God I was bringing peace to the both of us. It was plugging a hole. It was fixing the world. All would be well, and all would be well, and God would take over my job now, I was giving my boy away to him.

That night after everyone had gone to sleep, I woke up from the snoring of the Christian men around me, good men but some of them with badly deviated septumssepta.

I got up out of bed and tiptoed barefoot down to the boat launch and stood and gazed up at the starry spring night. Across the lake I could make out the lights of a faraway farm. I felt clean and strong and good.

And while I stood there looking up at the stars, a couple of them shooting through the darkness and then dissolving, the same stars Abraham stared up at a long time before, I had my vision.

It was like a slide show of premonitions about how different my life would go now.

I thought about the months I wasted muttering to myself in church, angrily trying to make everyone else fit me. My justice was so furious. My compassion was so full of arrogance and self-pity and hate. All that time I was yapping in my head, God was there offering forgiveness. All that time I spent worrying about what people would think of me, God was waiting patiently in my heart.

I looked into the infinite night and felt all those voices step out of me. My writing, which was so important to me, I watched it walk out of my life. Not going to be a famous writer?

S’alright. My reputation as a fiendishly clever person -- gone. All the things I had piled up as if it were wealth – my books, my opinions, my neurotic humor -- were drifting away from me like smoke. My worldly wealth, my ability to sock away money for the future, was gone, too. And it didn’t really matter any more.

I saw my children, Gus and Aretha, hand in hand, turn and wave goodbye to me. I had given them away. I had signed off on them. They were no longer mine, they had been set free. They were consecrated away.

Oh, I still got to be their dad. And I would still fret about this or about that, and I might have to step in from time to time and provide fatherly assistance. And I would love them as before, and as always.

But really, they were gone. They had moved out of the furnace of my mind, to take their chances on something freer and fresher. Gus had gone blissfully and quickly into God, he dwindled to a kind of speck and disappeared. Gus was dead now, dead in the way that is the source of all living, dead like ashes that return life to the earth, dead like the sleep that recharges us for the day still to come.

And my daughter Aretha, so beautiful and so vulnerable, so tempest-tossed and red-faced, just the way her old man was, she was gone, too. Not from my house or from my heart, but she was gone from my grasping and anxious mind, and my anxious grasping hands.

Her life belonged to God whether she knew it or not. Whatever journey stretched out for her like that milky splash of stars up above me would be riddled with meaning, would be riddled with glory. She would do impossible things and amaze herself and amaze everyone with the power of her love. She would bid her own suffering farewell. She would come to her senses, and she would repent in the proper sense of the word, a reversal of course, a change of heart, with a stiff strong wind at her back steering her to safety. Absurdity was not an option. She would learn and she would live.

Was it possible she would still take her life? I suppose. People die, and their loved ones grieve. It has been happening forever. There was nothing so special about me that my family had to be spared, that no one could be sick, that heartache would not take root inside us. But if that happened it would be more mystery than tragedy. Who can see to the heart of God? Who can unravel the whirlwind? I find comfort already in the certain knowledge that it did not happen because no one loved her. It did not happen because God did not care. It would be terrible and it would be strange, but it would be finite. And then she would go to God and she would know everything. All would be known, and she would find joy.

I had no notion of anything, and that is the point. God knows what we cannot. The answer to suffering is repentance, and after that, deepest peace. Talk too much about it, and like the cobbler's elves, it will go away, and you will curse your big mouth.

And standing on the bobbing dock, with the stars heaving to and fro above me, I knew I would go to Lily the next day. I knew I would rush up the steps to our old wooden house and embrace her there. And I would hold her in my arms and tell her everything that was in my heart.

"I'm sorry I let you twist and turn while I went through my crisis, my love. It wasn't fair to you. You needed reassurance, and I didn't give you any. I was lost in my loneliness and I ignored your love. It wasn't a loving way to be. I want only to be your loving husband. I want you to be my wife, my love and my life. I never want to be away from you ever.

"It wasn't right to join a church without you. But I want you to know, the real church is a temple in our hearts and it is nondenominational and it is open twenty-four-seven and we can visit whenever we want. It is the love that God bears for us, that he led me to you, and you to me. It is the love of God that he gave us these children, these particular children, and their unique challenges. They were meant for us from the spark of time, they are the proof of us, the sign of us, the irreversible course.

“I will go anywhere you say, Lily, I will do anything you ask. I will even join the synagogue and learn to sing the Barach Atah Adonai for you, because the specifics don’t matter, God is God and always will be, and he has set out a banquet, and all of us are welcome.

"I would be a Zoroastrian for you, and thank Christ for it every day, and for you.

“And we will build a new church out of our love, a church built of joy and plastered with tears. And everything we pray for will come true in the fullness of time.”

## Afterword

I have been asked why I changed the names of the people in this book, including my family. I understand that the worry is that I made everything up. Let me explain.

I did it for four reasons. First, some of this material is embarrassing to me. While writing I was in considerable anxiety about the changes occurring in my life. Changing the names gave me a bit of distance from my anxieties and allowed me to continue. It allowed me to be more honest, and less self-serving. I don't care so much about this embarrassment any more, but I cared a lot while writing.

Second, I wanted to shield people from the pain of what happened to them. I have told some uncomfortable truths. I hope using other names diminishes the sting of disclosure. If not, I beg the forgiveness of my family and my friends. My only excuse is that I felt I *had* to write what I did. Not writing did not feel like an option.

Third, in my reconstructions of sermons and conversations, I have inevitably added thoughts and phrases that were really my own and not the speaker's. I may have misunderstood or misconstrued some things people said to me, however. I never used anonymity to juice or hype the story.

Fourth, the point of my story is that I desperately needed to set aside my selfish obsessions and surrender to God. All my life I have longed to be a successful author. I did not want my desire for renown to contaminate the project. I like that this book will not be credited to that hungry, ambitious person. It serves him right!

For all these reasons, I went the way I did. Believe me that the intention is not to deceive, only to make it safer to speak truth. I know that the book is more honest this way than if I had to let everybody in it revise their quotes.

People also want to know, what happened to you, to the church, and to your family? It is now, in 2006, two years since the last event in the book. I still attend Christ Community Church. Where I used to boil over thinking about the politics and the theology of the place, I am calmer and less self-conscious now.

Most Sundays I stand by myself and shout out Halleluiah and it's fine. I like to sing, even if I am not much of a singer. It feels good, it gets me going. I no longer feel I have to reconcile being an "intellectual" with being an evangelical Christian. It's just the way things worked out.

Plus, I adore the people there. They put up with so much from me. It was plain I was not a general issue evangelical. But I never saw an arched eyebrow. I kept insulting them, I kept zinging them, until I was right where they wanted me. They embraced me as a brother in Christ. They are so dear. I have a feeling of community and acceptance and friendliness that my old friends would kill for.

I finally packed up all those boxes of books and records and drove them over to Goodwill. It amuses me to think of some collector perusing the usual dusty Readers Digest Condensations and *None Dare Call It Treasons*, or whatever fills the used book shelves these days, and stumbling upon my mother lode of exotic literature. Forty boxes of non-interlocking trade paperback wisdom!

God bless D. T. Suzuki. God bless Timothy Leary. God bless Spiderman and Jerry Lewis. God bless the Rolling Stones.

Lily and I are together, determined to make a life of the funny circumstances we find ourselves in -- a mixed marriage of one sensible person and one religious fanatic. She never joined Christ Community, but she comes to parties and things. When she sang at a local jazz nightclub, a table loaded with Christ Community women -- not major jazz-club frequenters -- cheered her on. And drank mai-tai's, some of them.

I don't know why Lily loves me after all my theological theatrics, but she does. She thinks, from a provider's standpoint, that it's healthy for people to believe in a God, and to have a place to redirect life's miseries. But she can't crack the central premise itself, that there is a loving mind, a being, a consciousness that has her in it. Christianity continues to annoy her, and that's where we're leaving it for now.

Gus is off to college on a guitar scholarship. It is more challenging for him to practice his faith in a new place, away from his friends and support network. But it is as I witnessed in my dream, he is gone, and on his own now. Maybe removing the helpful father from the experiment will prove the most helpful thing of all. Like all of us he is a miracle in progress. Aretha came home to lived with us for several years. She remains the mystery of my life: so smart, so courageous, so brave. She surprises me with her industry. Two weeks after her breakdown, she got out of bed and did not come home until she had two part-time jobs. She still fights depressionnegative moods, but I also can see how hard she works to be cheerful and light when she is with us. When a schizophrenic friend ran into an especially bad patch, Aretha was there with her, encouraging her to go on.

Life is a challenge for her, and there is no simple resolution in sight. But I tell her that I have glimpsed a great happiness growing in her. She will know who she is, and love who she is, the way I love who she is, and the way God does, too.

I knocked on her door recently and she invited me in. She was just waking up from a night out, and though she was groggy from sleep, she smiled for me, and I swear she was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

My joke to her is, if a thing is meant to be, its chances of success are 100 percent. And when I tell her that, it's like rolling up the sock and tossing it again -- there is that smile again, like an opening rose, and all is beautiful in the world.

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[1] Evidently the Hebrews were able to read in one of the languages of the area, possibly hieroglyphics, according to one expert I spoke with.

[2] Most authorities say that Mark's "unpardonable blasphemy" had to do with someone accusing Jesus Christ, in his own time, of being empowered not by God but by the devil. It had to be done while Jesus was alive on earth, so it is unduplicatable today, no matter how sarcastic you are.

[3] Matthew 10:29

[4] The one time I saw Garrison Keillor in church was when he was recovering from heart surgery. He stayed mostly in the back, but after the service, the priest was so happy to see him that he embraced Keillor at the exits, causing him excruciating pain. Also, I don't think he likes being hugged.

[5] The phrase "Alex' church' would be annoying to Alex – it is a terrible burden to a pastor to have the community considered to be "his" -- but it is how I thought of it at the time.

[6] Psychedelic propagandist and Timothy Leary collaborator Richard Alpert took the spiritual name Baba Ram Dass. In an interview his own dad described him as Baba Rammed Ass.

[7] "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church." (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

[8] 1 Samuel 15:2-3

[9] 1 Samuel 13