

Arrivals & Departures

CONTENTS

WELCOME

NONFICTION & PERSONAL STORIES

1: Karl Kauffman - *I Made the Kid a Sandwich*

4: Jonny Wilson - *The Story of the Whistleblower*

6: MariaJose Alcazar - *Rest in Peace*

7: Mike Riddell - *A Writer's Vocation*

8: Steve Daugherty - *Trespass*

10: Marc Mullinax - *Lost, Found, and Lost*

11: Jacob Ratliff - *Uber in Amman*

12: Samantha González-Block - *Unexpected Blessing*

FICTION

3: Jasmin Pittman Morrell - *Abuelita*

REVIEWS & REFLECTIONS ON BETTER STORIES

2: Greg Jarrell - *'Trane*

9: Gareth Higgins - *They Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To: And That's a Good Thing*

INTERVIEW

5: Cathleen Falsani - *A Conversation with John Mahoney*

WELCOME

My friend the architect Colin Fraser Wishart says that the purpose of his craft is to help people live better. There's beautiful simplicity, but also enormous gravity in that statement. **Just imagine if every public building, city park, urban transportation hub, and home were constructed with the flourishing of humanity in mind.**

Sometimes this is already the case, and we know it when we see it.

Our minds and hearts feel more free, we breathe more easily, and we're inspired to create things, whether they be new thoughts of something hopeful or friendships with strangers or projects that will bring the energy of transformation yet still into the lives of others.

If architecture, manifested at its highest purpose, helps us live better, then it is also easy to spot architecture that is divorced from this purpose. In our internal impressions of a building or other space made to function purely within the boundaries of current economic mythology (especially buildings made to house the so-called "making" of money) the color of hope only rarely reveals itself. Instead we are touched by melancholy, weighed down by drudgery, even compelled by the urge to get away.

But we can also find spaces shaped by stewards who have considered kindness more important than the free market, who value poetry and breathing over bank balances and competition. A concert hall designed for the purest reflection of sound. A playground where the toys blend in with the trees. A train station where the transition from one place and way of being to another has been honored as a spiritual act. In these spaces, we know that it is possible to always be coming home.

So what will you build today?

Kurt Vonnegut once said: “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

Interested in being part of the cure?

Read on, and join us at www.theporchmagazine.com. We’d love to chat with you there.

In friendship,

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink that reads "Gareth". The letters are fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.

Gareth Higgins
Editor, *The Porch*

I Made the Kid a Sandwich - Karl Kauffman

On the way to work that night I thought I had hit rock bottom. It was the 11th month of the worst year of my life. *Nothing more could happen*, I thought. *Surely it can only get better from here.*

I mean come on...

I had taken the bar exam in February.

Found out my Dad had cancer in April.

Found out I failed the bar exam in May.

Took the bar exam again in July.

Buried my Dad in August.

Then found out I failed the bar exam again in October.

It was November. I was delivering flowers by day, and on this particular cold Monday, I'd start my Subway job that night. I was coming on at 9pm and closing at 1am. This was 1999; no smartphones, I didn't bring anything to read, and I decided the stack of *Penny Savers* at the door could wait until I was really desperate.

By 10:30pm I'd had two customers, swept and mopped the floor, cleaned the bathroom, and stocked everything I could think of.

My 3rd customer of the evening tripped the door chime at around 11:15pm. He was a black male not more than 15 or 16 years old, about 5' 7", weighed maybe 120 pounds and wore dark jeans and a dark hoodie. Oh, and he had a gun. I know nothing about guns other than maybe I can tell the difference between a handgun and a rifle. His was small. And black.

So he walked in and without breaking stride or making eye contact proceeded through the door clearly marked *Employees Only* and joined me behind the counter. He was a man of few words, not that I expected a chatty armed robber, I'm just saying that from start to finish he maybe uttered a dozen words. On the other hand, I was trying not to blabber like an idiot—because as my wife Karma can tell you, when I'm nervous I can't shut up.

I believe I told him it was my first night on the job, but with the gun still in hand, he motioned toward the cash register; he didn't need to say anything. We both knew why he was there and what he wanted. I opened the cash register and emptied the contents into one of those plastic zippered bank bags that I found under the counter: around \$10 in coins, less than \$25 in ones and maybe 3 or 4 fives. That was it - his take for the night. Then he asked me to open the safe. I knew where the safe was of course; I was standing right on it. I knelt down to pop the plastic cover off and showed him that the only access I had was the slot through which I could drop folded bills.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw his arm rise. Now, the gun was pointed at my head. He told me I had to the count of ten to open it. If I was just kind of afraid before, in that moment I was really scared. I repeated everything I'd just told him about it being my first night, and I could only drop money.

“Why would they give me the combination—it's my first night!” I was talking really fast and probably an octave higher than normal.

He was still counting, but when he got to five he stopped. He believed me. I must have stood up then after he stopped counting. He had the money but made no move to leave. I stared at him, and he stared at the floor.

So I did what anybody in this position would do:

I MADE THE KID A SANDWICH.

I asked him if he wanted me to make him a sandwich, to go of course. He seemed a bit confused by my question, and I remember having to repeat it again. In his defense, when planning an armed robbery it's not likely that you figure the guy behind the counter is going to do something nice for you, right?

Now, that entire time—maybe less than a minute—I had my back to the kid. No idea what he was doing. I wondered what was going through his head, but I really couldn't say. *I was thinking a footlong meatball on white would be fine.* He didn't say either way. I put the sandwich in a bag and pushed it down the counter towards him. He took it.

"Okay, so now we're done right?" I asked.

I'd given him everything he wanted and added a nice hot meal. I wish I had asked him if he wanted chips and drink with it because it would make a better story, but no.

That's when he asked me to walk out of the store with him.

The level of fear jumped up from the eight or nine of kneeling with a gun at my head to an eleven; and the sound of the blood pulsing through my head was loud enough for the kid to hear. Fear, yes. But also anger.

NOT FAIR, I thought. I gave you all the money. And, did I or did I not, MAKE YOU A SANDWICH?

Why? Why would we need to go outside? Is this to buy you more time to get away? Fine, I promise to wait ten minutes before I call the cops.

I said none of this.

When a guy with a gun tells you to drop everything and take a walk with him, you do it.

We walked out together—the streets were empty. It was quiet, peaceful, and pitch dark. The area off the main road turned immediately into residential houses set thirty feet off the sidewalk and there were lots of mature trees. The houses were dark. We walked. One house, two... He told me to turn around, give him my keys, and stand still. I do. I stood there for several minutes while he made his escape. I didn't look back. I didn't want to know where he went or how far away he was.

It was over.

Upon my return, my first call was to Karma because without my keys I couldn't drive home. Then I called my manager who made the call to the cops. The cops came and told us that the kid fit the description of the kid who hit the 7-Eleven a half mile away just an hour before.

I think about him from time-to-time. I wonder, does he think of me, ever? Did our encounter have any lasting impact on him? It surely did on me. But here's the thing, did I make the kid a sandwich to buy myself some more time for someone to come in and see what was happening? Or to make the kid feel bad? Nah.

I think I did it because it looked like he could use it.



The Story of the Whistleblower - Jonny Wilson

There's this ancient story told about a rich master going away on a journey, leaving three of his servants to manage his money. He gets the servants together, dishes out five bags of gold to the first one, two to the second and one to the third, based on his impressions of their capacity to do the right thing. Whilst the master is away the first servant doubles his handout, as does the second. The third one takes a different tack, however, by burying the gold and keeping it out of sight.

The rich master eventually returns after quite a time away. Of course he wants to see how much gold his three servants have earned, so he addresses them publicly one by one, starting with the servant to whom he gave five bags. The servant who had two bags of gold follows, and upon learning of his seven bags of gold having doubled in value the master addresses both men with the now famous words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

This leaves the third servant who rather than doubling his gold returns the single bag with this remarkable phrase, "Master, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

At this point it's worth remembering the initial total of eight bags of gold given out have returned as fifteen bags without the master having lifted a finger himself. Not only that but the third servant had been given the least to begin with, seemingly based on the master's mistrust or ignorance.

But the master isn't really thinking about that. He explodes with rage. He starts by calling him a wicked and lazy servant, then insults his capabilities by telling him what he should have done—at least deposited it in the bank to earn interest! Then he takes the gold away and gives it to the first servant who had the most. He finishes off the whole humiliating punishment by calling him worthless and publicly sacking him, presumably in the hope of some final economic scapegoating and shame.

It's hard for me to write this, but in the faith tradition in which I grew up, the rich master was always interpreted as an analogy for God. The story sits alongside others about always being prepared for an otherwise distant cosmic master who might reappear at the drop of a hat, ready to judge our decisions and mistakes. We were supposed to use our abilities for that same far removed God. The theory continues that the first two servants are good by obeying and getting on with the task of making money for the master whilst the master is absent.

I want to suggest an alternative interpretation.

It's worth recognizing a few things about the master at this point. At the time this story emerged a couple of thousand years ago, journeys of the scale of the rich master's were undertaken only by those with the financial means and status to do so. The everyday person didn't disappear from the daily grind of work and family life for months or years at a time. The everyday person didn't oversee a staff team from within which they had the luxury of picking their favorite three to whom they could hand over excess wealth. The everyday person would never see money of this quantity in their lifetime, never mind as loose change from one man's pocket. The everyday person wouldn't have the land needed to sustain so many servants, nor the power to maneuver so many other everyday people off their land to gather more acres for themselves.

That's why as I continue to scratch the surface of the force of Love that I believe somehow holds together this dysfunctional world we share, I cannot see this rich master as good. I've come to see that the example to follow in this story isn't the rich master or the first two servants but rather the third servant who becomes a whistle-blower. He recognizes the master for what he is—an exploitative abuser who does nothing but take the fruit of other people's labor. The way he then describes the master to the master's face is reasonably accurate but actually understated given the brutally disproportionate response from the master. Overall, the whistle-blower's general reading of the master and the entire situation cuts through the injustice and goes straight for the truth of the matter.

Having seen what happens to this third servant though, it's not an easy or immediately attractive path to follow.

Yet I'm reminded of another story that directly links to this one. It talks of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting the prisoner—any number of these consequences with which the whistle-blower would have been familiar. According to this follow-up story what is truly stunning about these things that any one of us can do is that these apparently mundane activities are direct experiences of who or what this force behind the universe is. Remarkable. Suddenly, disobedience, subversion, and speaking truth against lies becomes where and how we experience our fullest life.

My own experience tells me that it is in remaining present to the painful stories of refugees who fled all they knew because of cruel regimes that this promised beauty begins to blossom. It is in the supposedly economically worthless lives of people with learning disabilities that I have been led in to laughter in a way that no one else can facilitate. The truth is that our reputation, job prospects, and relationships can suffer as we align ourselves with those not towing the party

line or refusing to play the common economic games. Yet once the real hardships and tears are shared, understood and confronted together, it is with these exact people that hope germinates, grows, and fights back in a way that we can only begin to imagine.



John Mahoney in Conversation with Cathleen Falsani

As this issue of The Porch was being prepared, the wonderful actor John Mahoney, best known for portraying the crotchety but loving father on Frasier, died at age 77. We were delighted when our dear friend Cathleen Falsani gave us permission to republish her 2005 interview with this lovely man, of whom John Cusack wrote “any time you saw him you left feeling better.” Now that’s a life.

“God is the personification of love and forgiveness. He constantly forgives you and constantly loves you.” - John Mahoney

She was squishing my heirloom tomatoes, and I wanted to slap her. The sullen, vaguely menacing clerk at the greengrocer was roughly bagging my purchases, including the two perfectly ripe beauties I had carefully picked for dinner. When I handed over my credit card, I even had asked, nicely, if she wouldn't mind, please, putting the two tomatoes on top. She ignored me. When I reached into the bag to move the pretty yellow-and-red-striped one, she grunted and shoved the bag at me. It was hot, she was inexcusably rude, and I was about to lose my cool. But a single thought suddenly stopped me: What would John Mahoney do?

So instead of being ugly back at her, I smiled, picked up my bag of slightly molested groceries, said thank you, and held the door for another customer on my way out.

I'd like to think it's what John would have done. He is truly the kindest man I know. We've been acquaintances for a number of years—he lives a few blocks from me in Oak Park, Illinois, an artsy, historic suburb (birthplace of Ernest Hemingway, we like to brag) just west of the Chicago city limits—and his unfailing magnanimity is well known in our community. But it wasn't until we had a discussion about his spirituality over lunch at a local Italian joint a few

days before the tomato incident that I came to realize that being charitable is, for John, an act of faith. And it should be for me, too.

Most people know John as the dad—Martin Crane—on the television show *Frasier*, a role he played for eleven years, until the sitcom ended in 2004, and for which he won an Emmy. But he is also a Tony-award-winning stage actor, a member of Chicago's renowned Steppenwolf Theatre Company since 1979, who was leaving for London not long after we spoke to begin rehearsals for a six-month run in David Mamet's latest play, *Romance*. John also has appeared in a dozen films, including *Moonstruck* (he was the guy who had the drink thrown in his face by an angry date) and *Say Anything ...*, in which he played lone Skye's controlling father, the nemesis of John Cusack's iconic Lloyd Dobler.

Of course, those are just characters, and most aren't anything like the real John Mahoney. "I'm more spiritual than anything else, and Christianity is probably the most important facet of my life," he tells me, after returning from the salad bar with a small plate of vegetables and cottage cheese. "I try to live my life in a way that is definitely spiritually based. I pray a lot. It's the first thing I do when I get up in the morning, and it's the last thing I do before I go to bed. I have a little mantra that I say probably twenty or thirty times throughout the day: 'Dear God, please help me to treat everybody—including myself—with love, respect, and dignity.' That's why it's important for me to be liked.

"If people like me, it means I'm treating them well and it's sort of proof that I'm doing the right thing," he says, interrupting himself momentarily to thank the waitress when she brings his cup of chicken soup to the table and to ask her gently when my artichoke ravioli might be arriving. "I try to be charitable. I think that's the greatest virtue. I was always taught that it is the greatest virtue, and I feel that. I try to be very loving to people, and I try to be very patient with people, which is my biggest failing. I'm a very impatient person. I work constantly on that.

“I’m not sure who to pray to for that. I don’t know who the patron saint of patience is,” he says, laughing.

Later I did a little checking around and, surprisingly, there doesn’t appear to be a patron saint of patience. But there are two patron saints of actors: Genesius and Vito. Both were martyred in 303—Genesius was beheaded and Vito boiled in oil. I suppose you could argue that both knew a little something about patience and long-suffering.

When John talks about the importance of being kind, his mind drifts back to a time well before he was an actor, a vocation he chose to pursue full-time at the age of thirty-seven. Born in Manchester, England, the sixth of eight children, John emigrated to the United States when he was nineteen, joining the Army for three years before becoming a citizen and enrolling in Quincy College, a Franciscan school in downstate Illinois. He worked his way through college as an orderly in a local hospital.

“I must have given a thousand enemas and catheterized a thousand people. I just think that somehow being around all that sickness and illness, yet seeing people’s resilience and faith, I noticed that the people to emulate were the people who loved, and loved God, and loved their fellow man, and weren’t selfish,” he says.

“Charity is more important than telling the truth. I think sometimes the virtue is making sure you don’t hurt anybody’s feelings, as opposed to patting yourself on the back saying, ‘Oh, well, I had to tell them the truth,’” he says, as he begins to tell the story of a patient who was in the last days of her battle with cancer.

“She was in excruciating pain. She had gray hair but had always wanted to have red hair, so one day the nurses said, ‘Would you like us to dye your hair for you?’ When they finished, it looked kind of carrot, but she was thrilled that before she died she was going to have red hair. She just loved it.”

But then, her daughter showed up at the hospital for a visit and threw a fit, telling her mother that her hair looked ridiculous and raising holy hell with the nurses for making her mother look like a clown. “One of the nurses said, ‘Your mother’s dying. That’s what she wanted. Why are you so cruel? Why are you saying that to her?’ And the daughter said, ‘Well, I can’t lie to her, can I?’ Yes. She could have. It would have been much more charitable to say, ‘Oh, how pretty!’ even if you hated it. If I go to see a play and somebody’s not very good in it, or it’s not their best work, I would never tell them that. I mean, why? All you’re doing is being proud. You’re congratulating yourself for always being truthful.” John’s raspy voice sounds genuinely pained. “When they asked Jesus what the greatest virtue was, he said it was to love God with all your heart and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes to love your neighbor, you have to tell a lie. And I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

John’s focus on kind living evolved over time. “I was very, very self-centered when I was young,” he says. “I thought the world revolved around me. It even affected my work when I became an actor. I used to think about how great I had to be and how wonderful I had to be on that stage instead of honoring the playwright or honoring the screenwriter and becoming a part of something that was wonderful.”

While he can’t put an exact date on it, John believes his mind began to change when his heart did, around the time he had what he describes as an “epiphany” in a Roman Catholic church in downtown Chicago around 1975. “I was in the Loop, and I went into St. Peter’s and went to Mass, and it was just about the most emotional thing that ever happened to me. I don’t know where it came from, I just had a little breakdown of some sort, and after that, made a conscious effort to be a better person, to be a part of the world, and to try to revolve around everyone else in the world instead of expecting them to revolve around me.

“I think maybe it was the intercession of the Holy Ghost,” he continues. “I’ve always prayed to the Holy Ghost for wisdom and for understanding and knowledge. I think he answered my prayers when I stopped in the church that day. My life was totally different from that day on. I saw myself as I was, and I saw into the future and saw what I wanted to be. And I sort of rededicated myself to God and begged him to make me a better person. It wasn’t fear of hell or anything like that. I just somehow knew that to be like this, like what I was, wasn’t the reason I was created. I had to be better. I had to be a better person. And I think I am now. I like myself,” he says, breaking into one of his patented head-back-eyes-closed-mouth-open laughs.

“I’m pretty much in a spiritual state most of the time. Even when I’m out drinking with my friends, and even when I drink too much, God’s never far from my thoughts. I’m not a freak, asking ‘What would Jesus do?’ and stuff like that. I don’t think things like that. I don’t pride myself on being able to do what he did anyway. We don’t really know. I just try to live a good life.”

Before John goes onstage each night, he says a prayer. “Most glorious Blessed Spirit, I thank you for all the gifts and talents that you’ve given me. Please help me to use all these gifts and talents to their fullest. And please accept this performance as a prayer of praise and thanks to you.’ I always say that,” he says, adding that occasionally it leads to special spiritual inspiration. “It’s only happened to me about three times, where I was totally struck by divine intervention, where it was the most rewarding thing I had ever experienced, where I felt totally at one with the actors, with the playwright, and I couldn’t do anything in that part that was not right. The way I crossed my legs, the way I folded my arms, whatever. I was just totally engulfed by the character. It was one of the most glorious feelings I’ve ever had, but I’ve only had it about three times.”

The first time, he was playing a flamboyantly gay character in the play *Loose Ends*, directed by Austin Pendleton. John says he was doing it over the top, and Pendleton told him just to play it straight. "I started doing it the other way, and BOOM! That was it! There was an actual feeling that fused through me, where I just knew I was inspired. Truly inspired." Another occasion John was in what he might call the Holy Spirit Zone was when John Malkovich directed him in Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*. (It was Malkovich who invited John to become a member of Steppenwolf in 1979, not long after Mahoney started acting professionally.)

"Once again I was too fussy and doing too much. And he told me, 'I want you to double through this, forget the pauses that are written. Just go—vroom!—right through it.' And I said, Okay, and I did. And about three-quarters of the way through, BOOM! I was suffused with inspiration, and it became a joy to do because everything was right."

We're finishing up lunch, and our conversation about faith is winding down. John hurries out for a couple of minutes to feed the meter where his car is parked a block away. When he returns, he's got something else he wants to tell me.

"I was just thinking how wrong it is to second-guess God. Everything I've ever wanted in my life, I got. Everything—except a wife and family," he says, with a hint of sadness in his eyes I'm not used to seeing. "But had I had a wife and children I probably would be dead by now."

He's not exaggerating. In the late 1980s, John was diagnosed with cancer. He says if he hadn't been so happy with his life as a full-time actor, he probably would not have had the will to fight the disease. He'd made the leap of faith several years before the diagnosis, when he left a job he hated as an editor in Chicago. "I was finally doing the one thing that I wanted to do. I was gloriously happy and joyful for the first time I can remember. I was just walking down the street,

licking my feet in the air, thinking, I'm a working actor in Chicago. I get paid for this and I love it!

"And then I got struck with cancer. I was determined, because my life was finally so great, that I didn't care. I was going to go ahead. I had a colon resection, and I'll tell you something that very few people outside my life know: I had a colostomy. I've had it for almost twenty years now. The doctors at the hospital said they were amazed at how fast I recovered. I was out of the hospital in a week, and the following week I was in Paris wrestling Harrison Ford under a table shooting a movie. I was so thankful for the life I had, and I've had almost twenty glorious years since that," he says. "I see that when the one thing came along that would finally fulfill me as a human being—acting—I was able to do it because I wasn't married with children. There would have been mortgages and tuitions and things like that, and I never would have been able to just throw away my job to get seventy-five dollars a week at Steppenwolf. I had to sell almost every piece of furniture I had. I was sleeping on the floor. Sold all my records, all my books. But I was so happy. I finally understood why God withheld a wife and children from me.

"I've achieved remarkable success, and I think it all goes back to my faith, especially after I became an actor and realized that was God's plan for me and surrendered myself to it joyfully," he says. "It enabled me to shrug off the disappointments because I figure the only reason I didn't get a part was that something better is awaiting me. Unless there was a plan for me, God would not have let me quit my job at thirty-seven to become an actor where at any given time 95 percent of the union members are out of work. So I might be disappointed I didn't get a part, but I'd think, Forget it. There must be something better up ahead. And there always was."

John Mahoney's God is a kind God. But that's not the God he knew as a child.

"My original idea of God was an extremely vengeful, powerful God. Love never

entered the equation,” he says. “If I had children, what I would mostly want them to understand is exactly the opposite of what I was taught when I was a kid. I’d want them to know that they will always be forgiven, that they will always be loved, that they will always get a second chance, a third chance, a fourth chance, and a fifth chance and however many chances it takes. I would want them to know that, unless they are really, really vicious and mean and totally horrible, that they are going to heaven. They don’t have to worry about a thing. God will always love them and forgive them. That’s what I’d really want them to know,” he says, smiling so warmly it brings tears to my eyes. I want to jump up and hug him.

“Yes, you make mistakes. And yes, you do things that you shouldn’t do, but you will be forgiven, and you will be loved, and you won’t be loved less. You will be loved just as much as you were before you made the mistakes.”

Even if you squish the tomatoes. On purpose.

Extracted with permission From *The God Factor: Inside the Spiritual Lives of Public People* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006)



'Trane - Greg Jarrell

You almost always hear a train before you see it. The whistle pierces the air to warn anyone nearby that a thousand tons of cargo are hustling through. You might see the train soon after hearing it, exhaust billowing from the engines as it chugs down the track. But even if you could not see or hear a nearby train, you know when it passes because you feel it. The ground rumbles for several blocks in every direction. Thousands of tons of steel reverberate bass tones up through the foundations of buildings and down toward the bedrock of a place. Things shake and rattle while the train rolls. Stuff falls off shelves. Vibrations slide up through your feet. The sound gets in your body.

Seventy-five minutes east of Charlotte, NC, train tracks bisect a little town called Hamlet. Nowadays, passersby mostly do not notice Hamlet, except for the signs on the superhighway just south of town. But before the bypass sliced up the countryside, Hamlet was a stopping point for travelers on the way to and from the coast. US Highway 74 went right down the main street of town, which for many harried vacationers meant a stop to wait for the train to pass. The trains cut through, dividing neighborhoods by race and class, using geography to reinforce ideas of difference, ideas that would be used to justify violence and oppression.

The trains still bisect Hamlet today, but the bypass took the highway, and the traffic, and the commerce, out a couple miles from town. The automobiles do not back up at the railroad crossing anymore, while oil tanks, coal cars, and cargo carriers roll down the track. The mills have shuttered and emptied out the little town of its cars and the people that belong to them. But at the corner of Hamlet Avenue—that's the main street—and Bridges Street, a small granite plaque sits enshrined in a brick wall. It reads:

John Coltrane
“A Jazz Messiah”
Was born here 9-23-26
Died 7-17-67

“Messiah” is an uncommon description, but then, Coltrane was an exceptional man. And in that little, nearly unnoticeable spot, he lived his earliest days.

“Trane,” as he would later be called, born by the tracks.

For most of the 1960’s, the United States was shaking at its foundations. In an act of terrorism, white supremacists killed four young Black girls at church in September 1963. Only two months later, President Kennedy was assassinated. The Civil Rights movement won milestone victories with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, but those legislative victories failed to undo the systemic nature of poverty and oppression in Black and Native American communities. By the end of the decade, the country was in an uproar over Vietnam.

Coltrane did not generally take a direct approach to activism in his music. His quest was driven by the union of music and spirituality. Interviews make clear that he did not see music and spirituality as divorced from the political situation of the 1960’s, the decade that his career blossomed and his mastery as an improviser was on full display. The connections to his musical and spiritual quest and the context of social upheaval were there, but without lyrics, the connections were not always overt.

One exception to this, perhaps the only exception, is “Alabama,” recorded in November 1963, just a few weeks after the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The track appears on the album *Live at Birdland*, a record where half the tracks were recorded at that legendary New York jazz club.

By 1963, Coltrane's playing, which was already dense, was growing increasingly complex. He used long improvised solos with unrelenting passages moving as fast as humanly possible.

Against that backdrop, "Alabama" makes an immediate contrast. It moves slowly, without the motor of a walking bass or the driving and crashing of drums. The melody is a chant or meditation—simple, speech-like. And its source is clear. This music is the music of the elders, a song heard in the hush-harbor, or the rhythmic prayer of a chain gang.

The sounds themselves tell the story. No name would be needed to draw the connection between the cruel bombing in September and this recording in November of the same year. But the name of the piece thickens the meaning of the music. Though the timing hints at the story behind the song, the name deepens and expands its meaning. Coltrane's lament is for four little girls, but it is also for generations, over centuries, who lived with brutality and terror and learned to sing songs of despair and hope in the midst of it all. And surely there were some nights when singing a song was the only thing to be done.

The ground rumbled on the morning of September 15, 1963 in Birmingham. So it had always been in Alabama. But Coltrane's first songs, while still nurtured in his mother's womb, were heard above a rumble. While the trains shook her side of the tracks, she sang to baby John, sending through the vibrations of her body songs of woe, songs of courage, songs of hope—"There's a freedom train a'coming, get on board!" John learned his first music over that rumble, heard his grandfather's sermons over it. When it continued—when the ground of the whole world shook—he knew a song to sing, a new song, but one still connected back to a time far before he could remember.

Folks speed down the highway now, bypassing the rumbling ground in Hamlet, but vibrations are moving through the bedrock all around this land still divided by race and class and neighborhood. There are more songs to sing, songs of lament, of hope, of courage, of determined resistance and resilience. There may be moments ahead when singing is about all anyone has left. But sing we must, for who knows what child may be born to sing new songs into our rumbling world?



Illustration by Daniel Wernäck

Abuelita - Jasmin Pittman Morrell

While Aimee had time away from work for recovery, she'd made a ritual out of waiting for the children to come home from school in the afternoons. She sat on the couch curled into herself, with her knees drawn into her chest, sipping black coffee to keep a headache at bay. She kept the windows facing the street open; the crisp breeze occasionally brought the light blue curtains to life. Like ants scurrying from their hill, the children spilled out of the bright orange bus, burdened by book bags and coats. Their mothers waited for them, some calling out in Spanish, some in English, their words forming thin white wisps in the air. Aimee pulled a blanket from the couch over her body, buried her toes deeper into the cushion, and waited as well.

Her husband Ted would be home soon too. He taught high school English, and since it was Friday, he probably wouldn't stay late after school. When he walked through the door he would come to her, plant a kiss on her forehead, and ask what she did during the day. He might look hopefully toward the kitchen and wonder aloud about dinner, his words flatlining around her. *Did he really expect her to cook?* She hadn't felt hungry for days.

It was cold for early fall, and Aimee wondered if Isabelle, the one she watched for, was warm enough. Isabelle. That's what she'd named her, even though the little girl's name could've been anything—it could've been Anne, or Jessica, or Kate for all she knew. She wondered if it was somehow wrong to assume that this dark-haired, brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking girl with endless dark eyes was named something like Isabelle.

Even if it was too early in her pregnancy to tell, Aimee knew she would've had a daughter. She'd already named her Cecily. Perhaps her

grandmother's name was too old-fashioned, but Aimee had been determined to hold onto this baby, and her grandmother was tough, the perfect namesake. Her grandmother had taught her how important it was to "go it alone." Despite her grandmother's pearl-tinged complexion and ash blond hair that bespoke fragility, Aimee knew she'd been strong enough to raise her father almost entirely on her own.

Finally, she saw Isabelle walking toward their apartment building from the bus stop alone, singing a song to herself. Isabelle wore a red sweater and a blue plaid skirt, and the harness-like backpack was almost the same size as she was. Isabelle had no coat; if she were her child, Aimee would have made her wear a coat today. Isabelle disappeared into the building and Aimee listened to her soft footsteps climb the stairs. Before she realized what she was doing, she got up off the couch, opened her door, and stepped out into the hallway, her door falling shut behind her. Isabelle had just made it to the top of the stairs and looked up at Aimee curiously. "Hi," Aimee said softly.

The girl only stared in response and edged past Aimee to her family's apartment door. She rang the doorbell and the door swung open.

"Mia! Come in child, where is your coat? Hungry?" Aimee caught a glimpse of a white-haired woman in a wheelchair, hands fluttering around the girl like butterflies as she ushered her into the apartment. More words followed that Aimee didn't understand, but she felt the affection in the old woman's tone.

There were others inside: Aimee could hear someone playing the guitar and singing earnestly and slightly off-key. The aroma of cooking onions,

garlic, and cumin was in the rush of air that swept into the hallway before her neighbors' door closed, and it made Aimee's stomach growl.

As if she were waking up from a dream, Aimee turned to go back inside, wondering exactly why she was in the hallway in the first place. She leaned into her door to push it open but was met with resistance. She tried again, even though she remembered with frustration that their doorknob was almost always set to lock automatically, a habit both she and Ted had developed that she usually appreciated. Last year, when her parents helped them move into the city, her father had glanced around and said, "Make sure you keep your doors locked," and frowned disapprovingly at Ted, who'd taken the teaching position in a school where Aimee would not have wanted to send their children if they had them.

There was no spare key, and her cell phone sat inside on the coffee table. Aimee glanced down at her pajama pants and bare feet, crossed her arms over her chest, and briefly considered walking a block away to the apartment's office building to see if they would open the door for her. *Ted will be home soon*, she consoled herself, though suddenly aware of the fact that she hadn't showered since yesterday. With her back to the door, Aimee slid down onto the floor and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. With no way to tell what time it was, the minutes passed slowly, and she was surprised by how disarmed she felt without her phone in hand, even if scrolling through all the photos of her friends' burgeoning families was torture.

When her neighbor's door swung open again, she didn't know whether to be relieved or embarrassed. This time, a teenage boy emerged, the one she'd always assumed was the older brother. She'd never really even said hello to him before, and certainly didn't know his name either. He noticed

her sitting and paused, shrugged almost imperceptibly, and bounded down the stairs. Aimee heard a key jingling in the lock of a mailbox on the ground floor. In a moment he was back with several envelopes in hand, and Aimee avoided meeting his eyes.

“Abuelita!” he shouted into the apartment as he went inside, “Tita?” he called again, the door slamming shut behind him.

She knew it was ridiculous, but Aimee found her eyes filling with tears as the door closed yet again. But just as quickly, the door reopened and this time Aimee jumped up, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand.

The white-haired woman sat in her wheelchair in the doorway, squinting up at Aimee. She cocked her head, a little smile playing at the edges of her lips. “You live next door, right?”

“Yes.” Unsure of how to explain, Aimee found herself saying, “I can’t get back in,” she motioned to her door. “I can’t go home.”

“Oh my dear, what do you need? Are you hungry? Do you need the phone?”

Aimee noticed how cold her feet were, and something inside of her crumbled. She nodded. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

“No bother, no apologies now. I’m Camila, but everybody just calls me Tita. Come in, come in!” her hands fluttered again, beckoning Aimee to cross the threshold. “And next time, just knock, okay?”

A Writer's Vocation - Mike Riddell

My current screenwriting project began ten years ago. It's progressed, like most independent films, slowly. It now sits on the precipice of being green-lit, but has only two months left of viability to attract the remaining rats and mice of pre-sales or it will fold. Should the worst happen, the movie will sink into the swamp of oblivion, and I will kiss goodbye a decade of work.

If someone would have told me in my youth that I would expend ten years of creative exploration at the risk of achieving nothing, I may never have started. In those open-skied days, I assumed that all that was needed was to open the floodgates of my imagination, and the world would receive me. It was one of the many naiveties of youth. I actually believed my ideas and insights only awaited distribution to guarantee acclaim.

These days, as a gnarled old writer, I recognize my early ambitions as a form of idolatry. I sought after and worshipped success. And more deeply, I was driven by ego and the desire to *be* somebody. Writing, then, was a means to an end. The goal was fame; the method was stringing words together. This view was given fuel by the stories of people who had suddenly been *recognized*, and subsequently been showered with praise and money.

I may have been vaguely aware that less than one in a thousand manuscripts were accepted, but disregarded such odds with reckless passion. And my hubris was made all the worse by achieving a minuscule amount of success. My first attempt at writing a book was accepted for publication. I argued over the details of the contract as if I was an established writer who needed to be respected in case I went elsewhere. Looking back, I know my publisher must have smiled.

I then started a novel, which was immediately accepted by HarperCollins, and published under their literary fiction imprint. I developed a relationship with a small publisher in the United Kingdom, and wrote several books for them. My work was translated into several languages. I travelled on the back of my work, and spoke to audiences. This, I thought, was as good as it gets. Soon I would be a household name and be able to make a living from my writing.

The truth was sobering. While receiving decent critical appraisal, my books were consistently remaindered. I earned enough to have a celebratory meal each time a work was published, but I hardly ever earned enough in sales to repay the advance. So began a slide into depression. At the root of this was the belief that I had failed completely. I wanted to be *recognized*, and I wasn't. Nobody knew who I was.

A long and difficult period of despair and grief work ensued, resulting in self-doubt and shame. This was a necessary letting go—the death of my idolatrous dreams. The impulse to write was legitimate, but the attempt to make my craft a means to acceptance and reward was misguided. The world is full of “failed” artists who live out of resentment and jealousy. I had been one of them, I now realized. I was expending my emotional energy on something beyond my control.

While it was a death, it was also a birth. What emerged from my petulant crisis was a sense of the vocation of a writer. In essence, this is as simple as the aphorism *A writer writes*. My calling, I now saw, was to set words in order, in the attempt to create some form of beauty. This, apparently, is sufficient in itself. Year after year, a rose bush will grow and produce resplendent blooms with heavenly scent. Whether anyone pauses to inhale that perfume is beyond the control or responsibility of the rose.

Now I was free to write what I wanted to write, in the conviction that this was my role in the world. I am capable of many things—what I'm called to do is write. I suspect the notion of vocation is a key to all pursuits of work, whether they are regarded as creative or not. A table waiter who has a passion and gift for their role will bring great joy and satisfaction to their lives and those of others. The essence of vocation is faithfulness to the call.

It is helpful if one's self-worth is not dependent on others. It frees us to appreciate the work of those around us, without feeling diminished by them. I have found it invaluable in meetings with film executives and their provision of critical "notes." In early days I was completely distraught at the process. My carefully crafted work was being picked apart by ignorant birds of prey. Eventually I relaxed into it, and discovered the odd suggestion was actually helpful.

A person's work is a form of spirituality, or at least should be. Success in a faithful life comes not through recognition, but by endurance and consistency. Thus Oscar Wilde's well-known thought: "I have spent most of the day putting in a comma and the rest of the day taking it out." Such labor comes at the cost of the ego, with the understanding that we may only be valued by that handful of people who know us and love us. And that this is sufficient.

Working away on my imperiled film project has enriched my life greatly. I have delved into the life of a largely forgotten man and learned his story—the essence of his life. I am the better for it, whether this tale makes it to the silver screen or not. We have to do something with our time. How wonderfully luxurious to be able to spend it fulfilling whatever it is within us to give.

Rest in Peace - Cocó Maria José Alcázar

Note to Readers: We are proud to publish this heartfelt essay, which contains imagery that seeks to honor deep pain, and therefore some may find harrowing and challenging to read.

In the end she said: "He must be pointing his finger at me."

And actually he was.

John Doe was from a small town-big city; the type of man that walked with no intention other than to flatter his own feet and admire his passing reflection on the windows. He was slick, tall, and ugly. His hands were pale white, and they had been to every corner filled with dust and darkness. His nails tasted like bitter tears and dirty deeds. The back of his neck felt to the touch like the skin of a child who grew up too soon, but too late. He was alone. And the calamity he excavated to invent himself a duty created a whirlwind that got underneath your eyes, piercing slowly at the brain and the lungs; it was blindness.

He was lonely. And he was indeed alone.

And he.

Well, he loved her.

But if I may say so, he did not love her.

Now her: Well, she had pulled all the riddles from the ground like ripe fruit and put them in her mouth. She tasted them, sucked on them, emptied them of their milk till her mouth was overflowing with tangled universes. As if she had swallowed hair, the strings of confabulated landscapes hung from her tongue, taunting anyone who shook her hand or smiled at her, with dripping watercolors from sunsets she had undone inside her teeth. If you said a few more words to

her or came close to embrace her, she would defiantly flash you with vistas she had given birth to inwardly. Very messy! Messy stars, smeared milky ways, tapestries of salt and turquoise, chapped satin lips and doorways that held her body open like an offering to the unknown.

And she. She was almost broken. And she was kind of crazy about him.

Exactly ten hours and 25,000 days later, his eyes—

Well, actually, I want to tell you a little bit more about his eyes, for they were all the eyes that had touched her, **but had not seen her**. They were the last and saddest eyes I have known. They lingered in an ongoing state of broken overindulged innocence. He was invertebrate and ashamed, but would clasp and break her backbone with the speed and impact of a train, leaving a corpse behind just for fun. He was lost. You could see it from time to time in the way his gaze landed on the world or her breasts, you could see the broken bones, the needles, the sweat. His flesh was scarred underneath the veins. There were bruises and cavities all over.

She said: I sampled the cigarette ashes off of his flesh. I blurred myself in those stained mirrors. I met his orphaned and dismembered bravery. I held it. Like a delicate bird I held his vulnerability in my mouth, kissing it, making my saliva into a womb, gulping the blood from his old wounds till my insides wilted. I almost lost my sense of touch from being numb to my own nausea. But that was from another time, a time when my hips were concealed and an empty mountain.

Had I known the capacity for winter in my hipbones, the seasons alongside my tights—had I known that the rivers I crossed were my own and the death I recoiled from, my own light. Had I known the ominous hands that I feared were

my own! Had I known they were kind, whole, wise. But not yet. I did not and could not know this yet.

However, what I did slowly begin to know was that the saddest part of his eyes was how they said *I am not here* while his mouth and teeth said *I love you*. His eyes, holding an encapsulated stand-still, hollowed little boy, looked straight into her eyes. *I love you (I am not here)*. And with a nonchalant, almost sweet smile as his hands took ongoing knives in and out of ribs and foreheads, cutting feet into dirt, doing his business of excavating, desecrating, doing his business of loss: *I love you*.

And his eyes did just that. Ten hours and 25,000 days later.

As he pointed his finger at her, she trembled, waiting for the wind and gravity.

As she finally broke.

She felt her heart finally drop, dead,

culminated injury.

She finally broke!

His finger: pointing. Her fingers: grasping. His eyes, two caverns of rage taking a child hostage. Her eyes, Niagara Falls. His fists, clenched, right above her cheekbones at a distance between your knuckles and the tip of your fingers. Her hands looking for him. His words cutting deep into her own throat. Her voice begging to be held. All of this the night before the day she was born. And with a fury, by the madness of the man she loved, **she was finally fully fractured now**. Thousands of millennia walking without legs, pulling cartilage out of thin air, out of the tear inside her breasts. **At last rest in peace.**

And while he whispered in her ears what was coming, and while all she wanted was to feel protected by him instead of from him, she pressed the accelerator. The

map and the north, the redemption and the pain, her now raw and empty feet, grappling for space, moving forward. **Never again.** Forth from him. From every he who claimed his name on her bust, who buried a stake declaring her mouth his newfound continent; from every he who provoked the beast in her for the entertainment; from every he that pointed his finger at her belly button expecting water to break between her legs. Forth from him. Away from the ones that could not and would not forsake the book of their own entitled mutilation.

At last rest in peace.

And she took every mile into the ticking clock, the perfect clock of her gut.

At last rest in peace.

In the beginning she said:

“Ladies and gentleman

I am her.

And ladies and gentleman

I am not him.”

And you see this is forgiveness

As I fall down to my knees, this is forgiveness

As I fall down to my knees praying, glorying,

“I am her

And I am not him”

Glorying, finally free, to know.

In the beginning she said:

I undressed my calluses at the feet of my savior, and I drank his ointment; my own knees and newfound cadence washed from the dismembered agony.

The beloved opened fire to rescue me from the chasms of my own lineage, the chasms of my own denial.

*And each mile I took further from harm, there was a planet that awoke within me; beyond Mars and Venus, beyond the moon, a hidden solar system uncoiled from my skin and I traveled the galaxy in 93 days, in 1,503.7 miles. I discovered new planets; **I deepened the roots to the one who chose me.***

And love—O Love!

*He held me across the ocean; he held me in silence; **he saw me.** Unabashed he kissed the mythical creature of my soul and he pulled my hair. With bold tenderness he perpetually baptizes the wild and feline shape of my astronomy, my anatomy; he cradles my neck as if it was a newborn grace. Inside the lullaby of the beard of the man who has given my bones back their name, I walk in dignity. **At last rest in peace.***

At last,
let the silent movie of real love trace its glimmer upon your vocabulary.
At last,
let the solid blood of your own choices
safeguard the good and immaculate residence of your life.
At last,
breathe the thick and the thin of your skin without blasphemy.
At last,
dwell in the reconciliation,
in the devotion of his eyes' vigil over your gentle and blazing body.
At last, rest in peace,
in your own collarbone, which now knows how to rest on the chest of the one
who will not hesitate to love you.
And you see this is forgiveness.

Trespass - Steve Daugherty

We nabbed good seats. Kristi and I have had years to learn
where the good ones are, accounting both for sound and
an unobstructed view of our daughters.

End-of-day exhaustion made all us parents fall into our seats.
Worn out humans thrown into theater chairs like coats.
One last responsibility to wrap the day.
The lights dimmed, a tease to heavy eyelids.

Our younger daughter wasn't performing in the first band.
She and her fellow freshmen
would close the evening in the second.
Her big sister, our eldest, opted out of band this year.
Otherwise she might have performed in the first.
No. She stayed home this night, wishing her little sister luck
on her way out the door.

The conductor explained to us parents that the first major piece was
David Maslanka's
Give Us This Day,
the title lifted from a line in Jesus' instructional prayer, wherein
a sentence later He also taught his students to
petition forgiveness
for the Hell we cause one another.
Maslanka'd written well over a hundred pieces in his lifetime
and then died this last August in his seventies of colon cancer.
Hell trespasses on even the best people
no matter how much music and forgiveness they offer.

The song, as thin and fragile as an old man's body, began,
feeble but inspired.

Soon the song outsized the room,
outsized the young lives playing it.

My skin coarse gooseflesh
a darkened theater made bright by sound,
eyelids thrown open,
sound uniting isolated souls
who'd arrived moments before
avoiding eye contact.

These were

children

playing these notes, a thought that compounded the magic,
music pouring from them as though they had already really lived,
the notes were burdened and beautiful,
gravity requiring decades of being, not semesters.

I was feeling

pangs without labels.

A catch in my throat like a tap on my shoulder, requesting acknowledgement.

I swallowed hard, and finally

I recognized grief.

Maslanka

had died only months ago,

the beauty of what he'd made outlasting that which unmade him.

The man had done all this work, and I had never heard a note of it,

of his passions or his pains,
until after it was too late to thank him.

How can something so beautiful not protect its creator from death?

The song swelled and abated, gentle then bellicose, juvenile,
then grandly climbing.

Some part of me

felt resuscitated

If only for the duration of a dead man's song.

Give us this day,

Give us more of this day.

I forgot whatever it was that had made me tired,

I believe we all forgot.

Weary souls somehow given rest without sleep.

Shadows in our insides who ever insist the light is losing,

silenced for the night.

A full fourteen minutes after it began, the song came to a crashing halt,

followed instantly by the roar of our clapping,

the sound of our hands beating out

a meager attempt at a third movement

for Maslanka's masterpiece.

It was the least we could do for what those kids had done.

Young people and less-young people, in a room on a planet spinning ever toward
and away from the light

blessing one another's ears with the sounds we know how to make.

Give us this day.

The conductor stepped aside to bow as we applauded, gesturing his hand over to the students who smiled like the kids we'd forgotten they were.

The conductor's second gesture meant they were invited to stand, section by section, to receive more precisely the praise we were clapping at them.

Horns stood.

Then flutes.

Then clarinets.

Parents leaned toward each others' ears, commenting and nodding as we clapped on and on.

Another section stood.

And with a final gesture, the last section stood.

And in this last section of smiling, bashful teenage stewards of beauty, stood a boy who last year wounded my eldest daughter so deeply she avoids any place where she thinks he might be.

See more here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zuSl1dP-YU>

*They Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To
(And That's a Good Thing)*

Gareth Higgins



Wonderstruck - by Todd Haynes & Brian Selznick

Last year was one of the richest years in cinema history. My own Top Ten list has thirty films on it, and a handful of those - *Endless Poetry*, *Dunkirk*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing*, *Missouri*, *mother!*, and *Downsizing* among them—are likely to become recognized as ageless masterpieces. Yet the old chestnut persists that movies were, on the whole, better in the past. A recent internet discussion focused on an essay claiming the movies made since the turn of the millennium are worse than those made before the millennium, and gave twenty-seven reasons why. It was a fun read, and clearly some genuine thought had gone into it, but I wasn't convinced. **(You can read it here.)**

So in one of those moments where I almost certainly had something better to do but convinced myself I definitely didn't, I decided to take a deeper look.

Researching the list of every movie released since 1967 took a while, but it was worth it. I compiled a database of the films that meet the *Movies & Meaning* definition of "a great film"— what results when humane wisdom and grace, and technical and aesthetic craft operating at their highest frequencies **kiss each other**. (Whether or not you agree with my judgement of which films deserve this definition is up to you.)

What I found, as they say, might amaze you.

In 1967, six movies were released that, by my sights, are works of substantial craft and humanity—in other words, they are well-made from a technical and aesthetic perspective, and help us live better by inviting empathy with the good or marginalized, or reveal the consequences of bad choices in human affairs: *Bonnie & Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *The Jungle Book*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *In the Heat of the Night*, and *Point Blank*.

In 1977, it was seven: *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, *Sorcerer*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Duellists*, *Annie Hall*, and *New York, New York*.

Flash forward only ten years, to 1987, and by my count, **twenty-seven** movies appeared that embody genuine craft and humanity, and yes, Nicolas Cage is in two of them. (They're getting too long to list entirely, but that's what appendices are for.... Examples include *The Last Emperor*, *Raising Arizona*, *Matewan*, *Maurice*, and *Swimming to Cambodia*.)

In 1997, twenty-three (*The Butcher Boy*, *The Ice Storm*, *The Sweet Hereafter*...) In 2007, seventeen (*Zodiac*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *Superbad*...)

And in 2017, I can think of **fifty-two** movies that seemed to me to approach the definition of great: where imaginative craft and humane wisdom meet.

So the notion that movies are worse than they used to be seems to me to be, quite simply, a fallacy. But the idea that they don't make 'em like they used to is true: in fact, they make 'em better.

What I think is happening might be explained by four notions:

1: It's easy to confuse the memory of how we felt about the world when we were younger with a more objective judgement of good cinema. In other words, nostalgia may create a warm feeling inside, but it's not the most valid way to assess whether or not a work of art will last. There were some beautiful movies made when I was a kid, and there are beautiful movies being made now. But we're all different now. The burdens of adulthood make it hard to shake off cynicism or worrying about the mortgage. We didn't have cynicism or mortgages when we first saw *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* in the seventies or eighties or nineties, so it may not be obvious that *Shaun the Sheep* and *Paddington*, *Your Name*, and *The Dam-Keeper* (all made in the last five years) are even better efforts at working the same kind of magic.

The good news is that the experience of watching movies, at its best, is to do with wonder, so the childlike in us can be activated any time we go. It just takes us deciding to allow it.

2: More movies are being made than ever before, of course, so it only stands to reason that there are more good ones too. The fact that movies are easier to see than ever is the most exciting development: the fact that 1937's *Make Way for Tomorrow*, or *The Emigrants* from 1972, or *The Dekalog* from 1989 or *Yi-Yi* from 2000 or so, much of what you could ever want to see are a click away can only make the world a better place.

3: What has been called the **expanding circle of empathy** doesn't just apply to relations within and between nations. It happens in, and is sometimes led by,

artists, even those immersed in the industrial production of large-scale cinema. One of the reasons why *Mudbound* is a better film than *In the Heat of the Night* is that the racial politics of *Mudbound* benefit from half a century of cultural evolution. *In the Heat of the Night* might have been the best we could realistically hope for in 1967, but the fact that *Mudbound* is not only emotionally mature and beautifully made, but also now available—and promoted—to more than 50% of US households via Netflix? Well, that's an answer to a dream.

4: And finally, the rogue variable in my dogged research into fifty years of US movie releases, done at great enjoyment and no expense, for you, dear reader: *The Place Where It Is True That Movies Made Since The Millennium Are Worse Than Those Made Before The Millennium:*

The Place? **At the box office.** Three of those same six 1967 movies cited earlier were all in the Top Ten box office for that year. I'd watch all of them again, any day of the week. In 1977 there's two I'd repeat (*Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). In 1987, two again (*The Untouchables* and *Moonstruck*); one in 1997 and 2007 (*As Good as it Gets* and *Ratatouille*); and there isn't a single film in 2017's top ten grossing films that I'd want to see another time.

Commerce trumps art, as far as the movies seen by the largest number of people in theaters. When I looked at box office receipts and asked myself which films I'd like to see again, it was obvious that the most popular movies are not as good as they used to be.

Why any of this matters may be a moot point to anyone who only has a casual interest in cinema, but I'd suggest there's deeper treasure to be found here. Just as it's not the movies that got small, but our horizons, the current political crisis-opportunity has arisen partly because of a historically unprecedented bombardment of information and propaganda, creating silos in which people fear that the world is getting more violent, when actually violence is decreasing, but no longer seems as distant for people used to feeling safe. The

world is getting better, and our minds are only now beginning to learn how to make sense of our place in it. There's lots of evidence for this—Steven Pinker's recent conversation with Bill Gates about his new book *Enlightenment Now* is a great place to start. Pinker brilliantly illuminates the paradox of how to deal with the suffering that we see amidst the progress that continues:

“You can say the same fact two ways. Extreme global poverty has been reduced from 90 percent 200 years ago to 10 percent today. That's great! Or you can say: More than 700 million people in the world live in extreme poverty today. They're the same fact, and you have to be able to describe them to yourself both ways.”

He's speaking primarily to people with the privilege of not being among those 700 million, but if the duty of privilege is the responsibility to use that privilege to serve the common good, it's also a duty to look at things as they actually are, not as ideology would demand. There are reasons for concern about the world—the conflict between tribalism and discernment probably chief among them; just as there may be reasons to complain about popular movies! But also, just as many things in the world are getting better, movies are getting better too, and if we don't know this, it's because we're not looking.

WB Yeats once invited readers to come away with him, "for the world's more full of weeping than you can understand." He was right then, a century ago. He's right now. But there's more wonder than weeping to go around.

APPENDIX 1: A Sample of Great Movies Four Decades in a Row

1987: Moonstruck, The Last Emperor, Raising Arizona, Full Metal Jacket, Matewan, The Princess Bride, Broadcast News, Empire of the Sun, Babette's Feast, House of Games, Gardens of Stone, Dirty Dancing, Cry Freedom, Planes Trains and Automobiles, Walker, *batteries not included, The Belly of an Architect, Wall Street, Hope and Glory, Radio Days, Maurice, The Glass

Menagerie , The Whales of August, The Dead, Ironweed, Au Revoir les Enfants, Pelle the Conqueror, Swimming to Cambodia, and Vincent

1997: As Good as It Gets, Taste of Cherry, Contact, The Game, L.A. Confidential, Boogie Nights, Starship Troopers, Good Will Hunting, The Apostle, The Butcher Boy, The Ice Storm, Kundun, Life is Beautiful, Lost Highway, The Sweet Hereafter, Titanic, Donnie Brasco, The Full Monty, Cop Land, Mousehunt, Wag the Dog, Affliction, Waiting for Guffman

2007: Ratatouille, Zodiac, Superbad, In the Valley of Elah, Into the Wild, The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, No Country for Old Men, I'm Not There, Sweeney Todd, There Will Be Blood, We Own the Night, Juno, Atonement, The Darjeeling Limited, 3:10 to Yuma, Blades of Glory, Michael Clayton

2017: Endless Poetry, Patti Cake\$, mother!, Downsizing, Wonderstruck, Call me by Your Name, Maudie, The Lost City of Z, Dunkirk, Beatriz at Dinner, A Ghost Story, Faces Places, Three Billboards, War for the Planet of the Apes, The Florida Project, The Shape of Water, Brigsby Bear, Okja, The Big Sick, After the Storm, Your Name, Blade Runner 2049, Lady Bird, Lucky, Spider-Man: Homecoming, Table 19, Logan Lucky, Columbus, Coco, The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected), Jane, The Work, Rumble, Marjorie Prime, The Disaster Artist, Get Out, The Hero, I am not Your Negro, The Lego Batman Movie, My Life as a Zucchini, Their Finest, Battle of the Sexes, The Red Turtle, Personal Shopper, Manifesto, Dina, The Square, Mudbound, The Breadwinner, Roman J Israel, Esq, Last Flag Flying, Wonder.

APPENDIX 2: Good Movies I'd Watch Again, from the Top Twenty Five Box Office By Decade

1960s: Thirteen: The Sound of Music, The Jungle Book, Doctor Zhivago, The Graduate, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Mary Poppins, 2001: A Space

Odyssey, Bonnie and Clyde, It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, Lawrence of Arabia, Midnight Cowboy, The Odd Couple, West Side Story.

1970s: Twenty-two: The Exorcist, Jaws, The Godfather, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Superman, Blazing Saddles, Rocky, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Kramer vs Kramer, Young Frankenstein, Apocalypse Now, Star Trek The Motion Picture, Heaven Can Wait, MASH, Fiddler on the Roof, Alien, The Rescuers, All the President's Men, Patton, The Godfather Part II, Papillon, The China Syndrome

1980s: Fifteen: ET The Extra-Terrestrial, The Empire Strikes Back, Batman, Back to the Future, Tootsie, Rain Man, Who Framed Roger Rabbit, Platoon, On Golden Pond, Terms of Endearment, Superman II, 9 to 5, Parenthood, Dead Poets Society, When Harry Met Sally...

1990s: Twelve: Forrest Gump, The Lion King, The Sixth Sense, Mrs Doubtfire, Beauty and the Beast, Saving Private Ryan, Terminator 2, Dances with Wolves, The Fugitive, There's Something About Mary, Apollo 13, As Good as It Gets

2000s: Five: Avatar, The Dark Knight, Spider-Man 2, Signs, Hancock

2010s: Five: Toy Story 3, Inside Out, Zootopia, Inception, Gravity

Lost, Found, and Lost - Marc Mullinax

Many-a-story, and a few wild goose chases, begin in earnest with a moment of clarity breaking through the chaos. So if in the beginning there is chaos, sometimes clarity happens. This story about what happened to a moment of clarity when I was twenty-three, when I took the chance to teach for two years in a mission school in Daejeon City, about 100 miles southeast of Seoul, Korea.

There, I learned History and English with 7-12 graders, math and science with third graders, coached girls' volleyball, and was the school's Athletic Director. There were about 100 students from grades one through twelve. The school is special to me; while there I changed my major from history to religion, and I met both of the women whom I would later marry (not simultaneous marriages!).

In those pre-internet days, I dutifully communicated weekly to my family in Raleigh by aerogramme, and they in turn. Two weeks in transit for these letters was considered fast. Phone calls, at \$12.00 a minute in 1979 dollars, meant no trans-oceanic chit-chat. We were a family of writers, who considered the phone call a short cut, even a dishonorable communications medium.

One of my more exciting times came the first Fall there. I had driven the men's basketball team to an overnight sports trip at the American Forces school on Yongsan base in Seoul. Late that Friday night, the base went crazy. Sirens, whistles, lock-down. The president of the country, PARK, Chung-Hee, had been assassinated about three miles away. Speculations centered about how involved North Korea was, or if it would take advantage of the situation.

Half-way through my two years in Daejeon, I urged my mom and dad to consider a two week visit to Korea during my summer vacation. So in June of 1980 I took a bus up to Seoul's Kimpo Airport to meet my parents. I quickly discovered that my mom, who a couple of years earlier had made her first overseas trip to London, and got a bad case of culture shock there, was now doing her best to appear that she enjoyed this most strange land of new sounds,

smells, and sights. But she had little resilience for Korea's olfactory challenges, sanitary conditions, and food. This was going to be a marathon trip for her, for us, in this faraway place.

After a few days of sight-seeing in Seoul, it was time to go to Daejeon. From our lodgings in Seoul, we hailed a taxi, loaded our luggage, and headed over to the inter-city bus terminal. Once there, I unloaded our bags on the sidewalk, bought tickets for the next bus to Daejeon, and we arrived home late in afternoon.

"Where is my bag?" my mom called out that night as we prepared for bed.

"Huh?"

"My bag! The one with my toiletries, nightgown, and my good dress-up dress. Souvenirs. It's not here!"

"O crap," I thought. "Where could it be?"

We did the back-tracking. Together we surmised: The bag in question made it into the taxi in Seoul. My dad remembered it sitting on the sidewalk outside the bus terminal in Seoul, but that was our last memory of it. We came to the slow, and slowly horrifying conclusion, that *I* had left my mom's bag on the chaotic sidewalk at the Seoul intercity bus terminal. It could've been anywhere.

Sleep came hard that night. However, there comes these moments of clarity in a young person's life where he believes that he can do anything. The next morning over breakfast, fully in touch with my Superpowers, I announced: "We can get your bag back. I can find it." I mostly thought that I probably could.

We packed lunches and hailed a taxi to the local bus terminal, and caught a two hour bus to Seoul. Mom was not happy. The residual kimchi smell coming through the pores of the folks on the bus overwhelmed her optimism. She looked at me with despair. I gulped. "We will get your bag back!" I said, trying to assure her, and myself.

Once in Seoul, we waded through the pandemonium of the bus terminal, and arrived at the exact spot where we had exited that taxi the day before. A few yards away was a taxi monitor, who helped keep the taxi traffic moving. I approached him, and in very broken Korean, I asked if he was there yesterday.

“네| - *yes.*”

(Here’s a likely word-for-word translation of the Korean I spoke to him): *Does understand you that how yesterday lonely baggage there was there? Here?*

To our great surprise, his eyes lit up, and he looked across the street. And he spoke to me in Korean. The best I could tell after that was that a woman he knew by sight had come by and taken the bag, and walked with it across the street into a construction zone. He thought her house was beyond that zone.

I thanked him. Now we had marching orders, and headed across the street.

At this time Korea was a developing nation, having recently discarded the “Third World country” moniker. It was a place where the foreigner’s face was ever the novelty, and living conditions were kinda modest. We passed through the construction zone, to find a small nest of houses. Dogs barked at us, children stopped flying their kites. Our American faces were now an official curiosity. Had I taken my parents on a wild goose chase of embarrassment? What would my mom say if I failed? What *could* I say in Korean that would identify the reason why these pale foreigners were invading their space?

I approach an elderly gentleman, and said in my most polite words, “*Looking for American bag.* (미국의 가방을 찾고)” . He puts down his cigarette in wide-eyed wonder, and calls a friend over. “미국의 가방을 찾고,” I repeat to his friend.

To our wonder his eyes showed recognition, and he points to the last house a few yards away. “가자. *Let’s go!*” So my unbelieving mom, my astonished dad, and this hopeful son walked over to the house.

We let this man do our talking. He knocked on the door, and called out a name. No answer. He did it again. The door opened a little. And then a little more. A middle aged woman, sitting on the floor, opened the door, and there beside her was my mom's bag, completely empty, all its contents strewn about on the floor: thoroughly opened, rifled, and examined.

The man asks the woman about the bag, and I sense that he's on our side, for the two get into an argument. I pick up that she's of the mind that finders are keepers and losers are weepers. They go back and forth for a spell.

Finally, I pull out my wallet and asked, “돈이 얼마나요? *How much money will it take?*”

The woman was an expert player of Olympic International Hardball. “오 만원 *Sixty-five dollars,*” and crossed her arms. The Korean man and the Americans scoffed. But after a marathon of haggling, during which the woman ever-justified that *she* owns the bag now, she relented and took my \$35.00. We stuffed everything into the bag, bow and thank with as much courtesy as possible, and took off with the bag.

We thanked the taxi monitor, who gave us a thumbs-up for our improbable success, boarded a bus and got home in Daejeon before nightfall. What a day!

We surrounded Mom as she opened up her lost, and found, bag. She took her possessions out one-by-one. Everything was fingered, every package opened, every souvenir examined. Every toiletry opened and squeezed or applied. Most distressing, every piece of her clothing had been worn. Each piece, from underwear to dress, was stretched, torn, or ripped. For the woman was larger than my 5' 2" 100 pound mom. Mom felt violated. It was a worthless bag. In tears, she closed it, pushed it away, never to open it again. The prodigal bag is

still lost in Korea. We have other, better memories from these two weeks. But she threw that bag and its memory away. However, I saved a fan, to remember this most-improbable story.

How does confidence begin? Was my moment of clarity a moment to cherish, or to forget? And finally what would *not* have happened had we *not* gone in search of this lost bag in the huge city of Seoul?



Uber in Amman - Jacob Ratliff

From the moment I stepped foot off of the plane at Queen Alia International Airport in Amman, my senses were overwhelmed. I took everything in: the customs officer smoking a cigarette as he muttered under his breath in Arabic and stamped my passport; the bright city lights and neon signs in a language that I didn't understand. In my first half hour there, I was keenly aware of the fact that I was an American traveler on a study abroad program in an Arabic-speaking country—and I knew not one word of Arabic.

Prior to my arrival, I had obsessively scoured travel blogs, searching for any advice one might have about being in Amman—particularly about navigating the language barrier. It seemed that on every single site I visited, the same pieces of advice surfaced. Beware of taxi drivers in Amman. Make sure they're using their mileage meter. Never pay more than 2 JD for a cab ride. Never agree to an up front price. All of this advice was pretty helpful, but how was I supposed to adhere to any of it *if I couldn't communicate with the driver in the first place?*

So I, an introverted millennial, figured that I had the perfect solution that would completely circumvent the need to even step foot in a taxi: Uber. Even though I quickly learned that most Jordanians speak at least a little English, I was committed to sticking with my plan of using Uber to avoid any unnecessary stress. Over those few weeks, I became one of Uber's most loyal customers, and my solution seemed to work with a few exceptions:

One: Part of the beauty of Uber is that you input your destination on the app, and you don't have to explain where you're going, or worse, how to get there. Except it seemed that almost every time I got into a car, the driver would still ask me for detailed instructions on how to get there.

Two: Because my name is Jacob, many drivers would assume when they saw my name on their screen that I could speak Arabic. So as soon as I climbed into the car, many drivers would launch into full-scale (one-sided) conversations in Arabic. It would usually take three or four minutes before I could open my mouth to say something. And as soon as I did, they knew I was American. Which wasn't a bad thing because I quickly learned that Jordanians *love* to talk to Americans about America.

Three: Uber is actually illegal in Jordan. It's not blatantly outlawed, but it's unregulated, placing it in some legal grey area that's apparently severe enough to warrant Uber drivers insisting upon dropping me off in certain areas where they are sure that they won't be seen by police.

On the whole, though, these seemed like fairly reasonable sacrifices to make in the interest of avoiding haggling with taxi drivers and facing the possibility of being conned out of my money.

So I stuck with it for the first two weeks, my roommate Chase and I dealing with the small inconveniences and awkward interactions. Toward the end of week two, he and I went downstairs like we always did to order the Uber and stand out in the scorching heat until the driver arrived. We ordered the car and the app said that Omar driving a red Hyundai was five minutes away. After ten minutes, we tried calling the driver—we needed to get to class, after all. No answer. At the fifteen minute mark, we decided to give up and cancel the Uber so that we could order another one. This one was obviously not going to show up anytime soon.

Chase ordered another car, and we waited for a driver to accept our ride request. A few seconds went by as usual, and finally a driver accepted our request. Lo and behold, Omar in a red Hyundai would be arriving in five minutes. It was in the middle of the day and the temperature was roughly 115 degrees and we were

standing out directly under the unrelenting sun. We had little faith in Omar, but we sat and waited while Chase fumed none too quietly about how “everything here is so complicated and why can’t something like getting to class on time be as simple as it sounds?”

Ten minutes later, and there was no Omar. Still, for some reason, we didn’t even consider flagging down a traditional taxi so that we could maybe be only marginally late to class. I could look up and see neighbors peering out of their windows, no doubt wondering who the strange white men were sitting on the curb outside. Then, a silver Prius turned the corner and slowed to a halt in front of us. The driver rolled down the window and said “Uber?”

“Omar?” Chase asked.

“No,” the driver said.

Against my better judgment, and somehow completely forgetting all of the warnings people like to make based on Uber horror stories that may or may not be true, Chase and I got in the car. Chase got in the front and slammed the car door, apparently not trying to hide his intense frustration. In response to Chase taking out his anger on the car door, the driver turned toward him and let out something that sounded like a cat’s hiss. I knew this was going to be interesting, but all I could think about was the look that would be on Dr. Rifai’s face when we slipped into class half an hour late.

And then, I noticed something that had completely flown over my head when I first got into the car—our driver was dressed in an androgynous manner and had a somewhat feminine facial structure. Here’s the thing: All taxi and Uber drivers in Jordan, *all of them* are men who are often in their mid-twenties or thirties. Women are certainly allowed to drive in Jordan, but it would be considered

culturally inappropriate for a woman to drive a taxi. What had missed my radar, though, was that the driver's gender wasn't obviously discernible. I like to think of myself as a fairly progressive American, so I didn't think much of it until I remembered that we were in a country where that's not only rare and unheard of but also flat out not a thing that is shown in public.

The ride—about a thirty minute one—went by very quietly for about fifteen minutes while Chase slowly eased up his less than savory attitude. As conversation began to occur, we all three lightened up, and the driver asked us if we'd been out clubbing at any bars, and the conversation took an unexpected turn, for given that Jordan is a predominately Muslim country, drinking is very uncommon, and speaking openly about it is even less common. Chase told them that yes, we'd gone out to a couple of bars but not a whole lot.

Then, the driver told us about Roof, a bar downtown that was a really good spot that they frequented to meet girls. Given that I wasn't exactly looking to meet the woman of my dreams anytime soon, I was less focused on the idea of going out clubbing and more focused on the gravity of what the driver had just said. By sharing that, the driver hinted at their queerness. Queer people exist everywhere, of course, but this driver was the only openly queer person I had encountered in Amman, and I was in awe to be in the presence of someone who was openly and authentically *themselves* in a society in which I thought that impossible. And suddenly, it felt as though my most important learning was taking place in that silver Prius rather than in the classroom.

Yes, I entered with a set of expectations—that everything that would be complicated because of the language barrier and that I wouldn't encounter another openly queer person (along with many other expectations)—but my time in Amman taught me to embrace my experiences and the anxiety around them

and to keep my eyes open for the possibility of meaningful, truly beautiful moments even - perhaps especially - conversations with Uber drivers.

Unexpected Blessing - Samantha Gonzalez-Block

In the beginning...there was a Presbyterian Puerto Rican woman from Brooklyn and an Ashkenazi Jewish man from Chicago. They met in 1974 at a YMCA camp in upstate New York. She was sporting bellbottom jeans and ironed-straight long hair that ran down her back. He had an afro and was wearing short-shorts. He made a bet with his friends that he could get her out on a date—which consisted of a long walk around the lake. And five years later, beside that same lake, they got married.

They became the parents of three children. I was born right in the middle.

I grew up in a lively intercultural, interfaith house. It was a mixture of sounds, spices, languages, and traditions that seemed to harmonize beautifully together: Christmas trees and Hanukkah menorahs, plantains and latkes, church on Sundays and synagogue on Fridays, Salsa music and show tunes. It was certainly a stimulating place to call home.

It was also a place where questions about faith were always welcome (and I certainly had a lot of questions). I wanted to know: *“Did Moses put guava jelly on matzah – just like us?” “Is God Jewish?” “If Jesus is the son of God, who is the daughter?”* My parents would listen intently to my many queries. Dad would say things like, *“Sama, I am so glad that you are asking all of these questions. That’s what being Jewish is all about.”* Mom would say, *“Good questions, Samantita. Why don’t you pray to God and ask God to give you the answer?”*

Speaking of prayer, my parents definitely had different ideas when it came to the subject. Mom taught us that it was important to pray nearly all of the time and for just about everything. She would always say this phrase: *“Si Dios quiere,”* which roughly translates to *“God willing.”* She felt that you needed to latch this

phrase onto the end of sentences in order to keep everything safely in God's hands: "I'm heading to the store, be back soon, *si Dios quiere*." "See you tomorrow, *si Dios quiere*."

Dad, on the other hand, treated prayer as something far more exclusive. The only times he felt especially motivated to pray was when something was deeply troubling him or on a plane just before take-off. My experience with prayer in our house was a wild blend of these two philosophies; but prayer was also alive in the joy-filled dancing in the living room, in the affection shown by hundreds of relatives (and honorary relatives) who came through our door, in the roaring laughter at the dinner table, and in the moments of quiet late at night.

Growing up in an intercultural, interfaith home had its fair share of difficult moments too. The most heartbreaking of these were people from outside of my immediate family who questioned the worth of my unconventional religious upbringing and challenged my ability to feel like I could fit in to any of my given religions. A friend told me that I wasn't *really* Jewish because my father was Jewish instead of my mother. A cousin insisted that my dad would never go to heaven because he was not a Christian. Pushback from those around me—from those I loved dearly—caused me to wonder where my family and I existed in the greater landscape of faith and culture. *Could an interfaith person ever really fully belong anywhere?*

This question was one that I carried with me from childhood into adulthood—and one that I prayed that I would one day be able to answer. At the age of thirteen, I had a Confirmation in the Presbyterian Church. When I went to college, I majored in religion with a special focus in Judaism. Both of these experiences were essential steps in helping me feel more connected to the theologies and histories of both of these traditions.

I longed to be able to better articulate my faith. Perhaps, deep down inside, I wished that by doing so, I might be recognized as “an insider” in *both* of these cherished religions. I began to wear a single thin chain around my neck with a silver cross and Star of David. I joined Hillel and church-hopped. When asked, I proclaimed, “I am half-Jewish and half-Christian.” (*To which people would respond in a variety of ways.*) I wondered if my many formidable efforts were bringing me any closer to feeling like I fully belonged in both Judaism and Christianity. *Would this ever be possible?*

After I graduated from college, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel for ten days through a program called *Taglit Birthright*. This program sends people of Jewish ancestry on a trip to Israel for free. I jumped on the chance to participate because I thought that this would be an opportunity to immerse myself in one half of my identity. Perhaps now, I would at least feel fully accepted as a Jewish woman.

About fifty twenty-somethings arrived to Tel Aviv in the early morning and we boarded our tour bus. The first thing we did was pass by the Sea of Galilee or the *Sea of Kinneret*. I remember thinking, “Wow, the Sea of Galilee! This is the powerful water that was spoken about in much of Torah.” And a second later thought, “Wow, this is where Jesus walked on water.” We got out at the old city of Jerusalem and I said, “This is the place where David looked out from his balcony at all of his people below.” And then whispered under my breath, “And this is where Jesus washed his feet with his disciples before entering the temple.” It seemed that wherever I went, every time I tried to hold up one piece of my identity, my whole self came bursting to the surface.

In Jerusalem, there is a high wall known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall (because people praying move their bodies back and forth and it looks like they are weeping). Our guides explained that it was a typical practice to write a

prayer on paper and stuff it into the crevices of this wall. With that, I quickly scribbled a long three-page prayer and included the names of everyone I knew. I figured, when am I ever again going to be at one of the holiest places on earth?

After my prayer was securely embedded in the wall, I prepared to pray to God. I noticed that the woman next to me was lost in prayer. Her eyes were closed, she was clutching her holy book, speaking softly in Hebrew, and moving her body back and forth. I wished that I could be her. I thought to myself, I am going to pray just like that—with such focus, such faithfulness, that people around will surely see me and be impressed. They will know that I belong.

So, I squeezed my eyes shut, clenched my fists at my sides and began swaying my body back and forth with such intensity that I thought I might fall over. “*Dear God....*” I wondered if anyone was watching me? Could they see? Were they moved by my outward expression of faith? I began listing names of loved ones, speaking words of adoration to God. I was sure this was my best prayer yet.

And then, out of nowhere, I felt something gently kiss the top of my head. I wondered is it you, God? Is this an angel? I paused my movements just for a moment. I wanted to feel the spot where I had received that unexpected heavenly kiss.

I slowly lifted my hand to the top of my head. And the spot felt...surprisingly moist, and kind of gunky. Oh, my—it suddenly dawned on me: what I was feeling was none other than fresh bird poop.

Well, I was completely disgusted and annoyed. I halted my prayer. My eyes shot open. And I began to desperately pull the white-black feces out from my curly locks. People were definitely watching now! I began to feel myself getting angry.

Here I was, trying to have this emotional, transformative experience and a bird had literally crapped on the moment. I felt tears building up as I removed the last bit of goo.

And then, something wholly unexpected happened. I started to laugh and laugh. Uncontrollably. And through this laughter, I could suddenly hear my parents' voices. My mom saying, "You know what *mija*, maybe this *is* a sign from God." My dad saying, "Yeah, maybe this is God telling you to cool it. Stop trying so hard and just be yourself." They were right. I had to stop working so hard to pray the way that I thought I should, and instead pray the way that I knew how.

So, I took a deep breath. Relaxed my body. And I began to pray the way that my father had taught me and the way my mother had taught me. And it was the most meaningful prayer of my life—because it was authentically me. Maybe no one saw it, and that was OK. This one was just for God and me.

After that day in Jerusalem, something changed inside. I came to realize that I had been asking the wrong question from the very beginning. It didn't matter if I belonged in the eyes of others, what mattered was learning to accept and love myself: to recognize that God had made me in all of my complexity. And it *was* good.

In the years that followed, I began to study religion just for myself, just for my own exploration, just for fun. I took more classes in Judaism and Christianity. I even had a Bat-mitzvah at the age of twenty-three. And it was through that process that I eventually came to feel that I was not half-Jewish and half-Christian, but I was wholly both. I was Spanish *Aguinaldo* Christmas carols and ancient Hebrew melodies. I was Sunday morning Communion tables and late night Passover Seder plates. I was my mother's infectious laugh and my father's curious soul. Like the blood that ran through my veins, these religious traditions

had always been a part of me from the beginning: they needed each other, they brought me closer to God and to the ancestors, and they inspired me to want to be a bridge-builder in a world so broken and divided.

My hunger for religion to be used as a means to unite instead of divide, is what eventually led me to seminary. I graduated and became a Presbyterian minister, with a special passion for working with interfaith families and helping them navigate the unmarked road ahead.

When I reflect on my journey, I realize that none of us (no matter our family backgrounds or experiences) are meant to belong in boxes. God is way bigger than that. Instead, we are meant to celebrate and embrace our full, crazy-quilt selves and to recognize our identities as holy. Furthermore, we are meant to see that holiness in one another, and then to reach across the divide and welcome each other in.

In the beginning...two people from two very different walks of life found each other. And what transpired was indeed the richest of blessings. This is true any time difference meets in loving eyes. It is also true that sometimes it takes a little bird poop from heaven to remind us.

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