

My “Coming To Jesus Moments:” The Unvarnished Truth, By Mitchell Milch

Prior to answering The Lord’s call to serve Him, my “former self” was a sometime battlefield of amoral and immoral inner forces vying to usurp exercises of my mindful free will in their dogged pursuit of self-centered gratification. I was a “child of postmodern enlightenment,” my tongue and cheek label for pantheist. After spending enough money in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and later psychoanalytic training, to finance the summer homes of several shrinks, I grew over the course of 35 years to be a semi-autonomous, sometimes self-regulating, and sometimes self-organizing, adequate parent to the many sides of myself. Little did I realize for 65 plus years not unlike the fictional character Sancho Panza, that I was a foolhardy warrior, no match boxing the windmills of my mind without God in my corner as trainer and cut man.

I grew up in a provincial enclave of Jews, Italians and Irish in The Flatbush section of Brooklyn. God was not a subject of discussion inside or outside my family’s cramped apartment. Had I prayed, which I did not, it would have been for my parents to stop overwhelming my immature and constitutionally anxious brain. Love in my household was a set of implicit, unilateral and instrumental transactions with lots of fine print written in invisible ink. Had I been able to say “no thank you” I would have.

My parents’ hearts swung in unpredictable and dramatic arcs between self-sacrificial, infantilizing indulgence of my needs, and self-centered indifference and contempt for my needs. “Love” was always at someone’s expense. To remain alive and not go insane required me to cling to an illusion of God-like omnipotence organized around an old adage: “Better to be a devil raised by angels than an angel raised by devils.” I never took any reference to the devil literally. My illusory hope to end my suffering rested with the belief that if I could be a “better child,” one who pandered flawlessly to my parents, asked for nothing I was not offered and mirrored them as “fault-less” no matter how poorly they behaved. One day the pendulum of their regard for me would mercifully settle somewhere at the bottom of its arc. What’s so poignant and ironic is that implicit in my childhood superstitious ritual of tapping was an implicit understanding that the devilish contents of my corporeal container my parents doused with emotional lighter fluid was equally, if not more than my behaviors, the bane of my existence.

My insecure attachment style forged in the crucible of a traumatizing childhood morphed into island-like avoidance of needing anyone when I was old enough to fend for myself. The temple of my soul became an incubator for addictions. I was infatuated with the anxiety, mood, and self-regard regulating properties of intense marathon training and fasting. What in truth constituted self-abuse eventually rendered me helpless to run (no pun intended), or hide from depression and anxiety. So, at 28 I traded my negative addictions for the positive addiction of psychotherapy.

As much as my life improved in the arenas of work, love, and play, I remained the same. In no small measure was I mightily challenged to love myself and others, all of us damaged and grossly imperfect beings. As I matured, I was less hard on others if not so much on myself. What drove me to distraction was that so many folks whom I regarded as pockmarked with imperfections, likening their humanity to a bad case of psoriasis, were loving and forgiving of themselves in ways I could not fathom. Looking back now, the engine of my meaningless suffering was this crusade of mine to master the art of loving the entirety of myself in spite of my hawk-like attention on those aspects of myself that stained my self-regard. Had I been a shirt I would have thrown myself out. My life was an unfolding tragedy due to my arrogant confidence in a misdiagnosis. Childhood trauma had derailed my life for decades. I was nearly maniacal in my fervor to get my life back on a high-speed rail line. Before God called me and resolved my amnesia for my true identity, "His wayward creation," I was clueless as to the etiology of my damnation, the denial of my inherent depravity.

You could easily say that I blurred the boundaries between being made in God's image and having pretensions to ascend to God's throne. Obviously, The Devil was not written into my secular narrative. But a case could be made I was his plaything. It was pure insanity on my part to long to be loved for "being me" and then compulsively without end to "keep doing to be better," thus making my unworthiness to be a lovable being a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nobody was breaking this sprinter's stride. By the sheer exercise of my free and disciplined will and faith in the transformative potential of my brain's plasticity, only death would interfere with my efforts to master my habits of self-sabotage that had taken on lives of their own. Yours truly, a self-described, warrior-growth junkie was doggedly determined to develop the requisite mental

muscles to mediate, arbitrate, integrate, and coordinate the many sides of myself to pull for “team me.” I would either ultimately prevail or kill myself learning to accept and love myself as a fallible human despite harboring hate for aspects of myself.

I was incapable for 65 plus years of entertaining an unbearable and cataclysmic truth: That is, only God through the mediation of The Holy Spirit could give birth to what I was chasing in futility. Little did I realize that I was a fugitive from existential dread and despair over dying and God remanding me to Hell after judging me an inveterate sinner. Preserving the fiction that I was inherently a “good person” required expertise playing the “blame game,” and ride my unconscious whitewater currents of masochism. I maintained quite an impressive database of suspects to finger when the windmills of my mind had me feeling the way Muhammad Ali looked at the end of fights, when age and a traumatized brain rendered him helpless to defend himself. There was a large pool of folks parading in and out of my police line ups. Curiously I was the one common denominator in every lineup.

In 2020, a patient of mine spoke of “the blessings of Lyme disease.” In retrospect this Non-believer sounded like a Christian praising God for sewing her disability with a silver lining of love. Now as a justified Christian, I echo her refrain and embrace a similar notion that God in His unwavering love for me used the Covid epidemic to save me and facilitate my adoption into the Cornerstone Family.

The sun was soon to set on my life as a Christian infidel once God beckoned me through His chosen intermediary, my baptized cousin Bob, to wipe 12 years of dust off the Bible he had gifted me. Bob’s characterization of this world as “broken” and “fallen” puzzled and intrigued me. Little did I know that all the dominoes were fated to fall and erase forever my arrogant, self-aggrandizing belief that breaking free of artificial limitations on achievement would cleanse me of the “blood on hands” and exonerate me for crimes of the heart. Infection by Covid, once nothing more than he repressed remnants of an apocalypse-themed dream was fast becoming a living nightmare.

Here I was, shortly to take a victory lap on a successful career as a psychotherapist in private practice. A psychodynamic psychotherapist is a fancy term for one who serves patients in three simultaneous capacities, as psychological archaeologist, life trail guide, and perhaps most

importantly, developmental editor for their revisionist narratives. My patients were for the most part growing and developing, and in my estimation ready to consolidate their therapeutic gains, mourn the loss of our relationship and terminate. My life by all concrete measures was better than I could have ever imagined given where I came from. Yet, I was spiritually very sick, and it took nothing short of me recognizing Covid as a modern-day biblical plague for this house of cards of an identity to collapse and be washed away by a torrent of despair, near panic, and dread. God was shortly to make certain that I'd have no choice but to evacuate my wishful and magical island of false hopes and beg for His mercy.

In my twisted neurotic mind, if Covid claimed my life quickly then I would not have failed to dignify my life. I would have chalked up my failure to something akin to a terminal muscle pull that did not permit me to complete my quest. The only Hell I dreaded was my conscription into the unenviable club of "long haulers." This was my nightmare of gargantuan proportions. You see the weight bearing beams supporting my identity as a useful and worthwhile human being were 1) my artistic meaning making voice, 2) my youthful and athletically vigorous self, and 3) my chimerical dreams of triumph that banked on the capacities of my high priced, re-engineered self. My Grim Reaper was a double-headed monster of mental fog and chronic fatigue. These long-haul symptoms of Covid would raze my valued identity the way a demolition expert does to a building that has outlived its usefulness. To run out of hopes of mastering the dastardly aspects of myself only to suffer meaninglessly while in a permanent state of decline was a formula for me to beg any physician who would listen to euthanize me.

To become a 'long hauler' was the cruelest cut imaginable because it brought me so close to home in mimicking trauma's signature emotional flashbacks. These flashbacks were akin to me feeling like I had received an irreversible frontal lobotomy even if losing touch with the executive capacities of my frontal cortex were extremely time limited. If you like instructive metaphors, then you might liken traumatic sequelae to the experience of some nano-sized Chinese or Russian hacker who has planted a worm in your brain that throws your coordinated and integrated mental functioning completely out of whack. The one nightmarish difference between an emotional flashback and long-haul symptoms is that we are not in possession of the longitudinal data to rule out "long haul" symptoms as time-limited by anything except death.

A little knowledge is very dangerous. Once my reading of some of the finest Christian scientific minds convinced me that Christ was The Messiah and that The Bible was God's loving words to His wise, the words "fallen" and "broken" now begged a fateful question to myself: What if this pandemic was God's loving and righteous way of calling me to recognize that the Covid epidemic foreshadowed the prophecies written in The Book of Revelations. The personal implications and ramifications of this rhetorical question were too much for me to contemplate for more than a moment.

God's final knock on my door that resolved my amnesia for having come into this world not as an innocent but a sinful, wayward lamb, was something resembling the sound of a warrant officer pounding on the door of a fugitive who had been on the lam for ages.

I was shaving in front of my mirror reflecting on my good fortune. Unlike years and decades past, my patient caseload was light. I had ceased taking on new cases and through attrition was working what a few short years ago I'd have described as half time. My long-standing patients were faring well. I was soon to announce to them with minimal dis-ease my plans to retire. My career had all the earmarks of a successful one. Time once a commodity in very short supply as a single parent working two jobs was now ample enough for me to work, exercise, and engage in artistic projects. In spite of having a very disordered relationship to money in prior decades, I had saved enough money on my own and in conjunction with my second wife Laura to retire with her blessings.

What happened next left me torn between unrestrained laughter and wanting in rageful despair to pull the 3-4 hairs remaining atop my head. With the speed of light, I went from taking a victory lap in a mental simulation of a retirement parade to incomprehensibly recapitulating and re-scripting a regrettably shameful ending to an old friendship that dissolved a decade earlier. I was lost in this fugue stated for no more than perhaps 2-4 minutes. When I returned to my shaving cream covered visage in the mirror, I realized that I had put an angry, vengeful match to my good feelings about my vocational legacy and my day's light work schedule. What dawned on me was that 1) I had just upset myself over someone who was an unhealthy presence in my life, with whom I had chosen to sever ties, and 2) I was letting some memory reconstruction rent space in my head. Here I was sinking my vindictive teeth into the architect of an old wound.

Even a dog whose jaws maintain a vise-like grip on a prized bone will eventually suffer muscle fatigue and drop the bone, but not me. Anyone except me who was privy to my mental machinations would have found ludicrous my obsessive thinking about someone who in all likelihood by now had forgotten I ever existed. Then I asked myself a fateful question: Was I really to take seriously that the nature of my upset this morning was over my handling of this episode when I had not given any thought to this person in years?

In that moment, God let the scales fall from eyes and lifted the amnesic fog from my brain for me to recall my true birthright I had turned my back on. Just like the late, great songwriter Johnny Nash who gleefully sang "I Can See Clearly Now" all the way to #1 on Billboard's hit songs in 1972, I could see clearly through and expose my specious efforts to dignify a moon crater's volume of hostile, vindictive, hateful and destructive energies. In truth, I was an extension of God's righteous and wrathful loving arm. I had turned my back on Him for 65 plus years so what could I expect but to play the role of spoiler, doling out another portion of His just desserts on myself for being a crucible of sinfulness. Christ's crucifixion paved the way for my justification. The Devil had rightly played me for a fool. It was time to wave the white flag, get on my knees, confess my sinful nature, repent and beg God for His mercy. Short of being baptized with The Holy Spirit I had amply demonstrated that left to my own devices I could do no better preserving love for any sinner while hating their sins for more time than a cup of coffee. Most often maintaining positive regard for anyone was a temporary job of virtually dissecting out what I hated about them or photo shopping the warts out of my image of them. God answered my prayer that day and lifted from my shoulders the dual burden of reprising the roles of Sisyphus and Sancho Panza in my life's variation on the theme of the movie, Ground Hog Day.

One enduring truth in my life that has crossed the bridge with me from Non-Believer to Believer has been the adage: I cannot love anyone's "being" more than I experience love for my "being". 55 years ago the fanciful answer to my prayers was to be adopted by June and Ward Cleaver, of Leave It To Beaver Fame. In truth, the answer to my prayers has been over the past 12-15 months the experience of adoption into The Cornerstone Church family. This is the experience of family I so desperately longed for and had refused to give up once it disappeared around the time Oedipal rivalries surfaced with both parents at age 4 or 5. No one earns justification and

inclusion into the family of Believers. Yet if I don't daily discipline myself and reinforce my spiritual habits I am at risk of passive inertia to re-shaping a timeless experience of abject aloneness and faith-lessness.

The Holy Spirit has gifted me the sublime honor and privilege to join my Brothers and Sisters as Kingdom Builders. The Holy Spirit's powers of transformation are anchored in and strengthened by my disciplined, and grateful acts of loving Faith. I feel blessed to be part of a holy organizational fabric that accords me synergistic opportunities on all levels of social organization to grow as a transmitter and receiver of personal communications with God. It is nothing short of a miracle that as part of the Body of Christ, I am gifted the experience of family, once nothing more than the hopeless reverie of a young boy taking refuge from parents who knew not what they were doing to crush his soul.