



## **ROLLING ON THE RIVER**

As you may have noticed, I have been struggling since Daniele's death over a year ago, often quite bitterly, at the inadequacy, or perhaps I should say the overadequacy, of the religious tradition I was part of the past decade.

It was a source of acute pain to me that I belonged to a group that taught that God would rescue us from every danger – it's all in Psalm 91 – and that all things, no matter how seemingly foul, turned to good in the mind of God.

Because: how could that be? How could Daniele's life and death be interpreted as a blessing? Where was the blessing to her? To her family? Was the mind of God so convoluted that we were doing good for others, but taking it in the ass ourselves? And if

so, what good was that?

So I have railed against the childishness of the rescuer mode. The recurring example is that mankind is Lois Lane, always falling from the upper stories of the Daily Planet Building, but always rescued by Superman before she arrived at the intersection below.

No matter what part of the world Superman was in, or what point in time he had dashed off to, he showed up.

The overadequacy of that God is that Lois need never to learn the lessons life has to teach us about staying away from ledges. She continues with her triumphal notion of the divinity, which has distressing reverbs – a God that excellent is worth invading other countries for, worth limiting the civil rights of gay citizens for, etc.

He's so good, such a perfect package, that bad becomes good.

Two weeks ago, I was at a party -- the Algonquin Hotdish, a local social for freelancers like myself -- and I met a woman author. We had had some of the same publishers -- no miracle there. But she told me she was involved in forgiveness counseling.

Both red and green lights began flashing in me simultaneously. I respected the idea of forgiveness but I was leery of the idea of new age counseling. Candles, harp music, cosmic diction.

But I told her -- Mary Hayes Grieco was her name -- that I might have a deep need to forgive God. I laid out my story for her, and stressed that I knew my bitterness was not a good attitude to sustain indefinitely.

"Then let's try to fire God," she said, prettily. Meaning, the Superman God idea. "Clear him out of your head. Come up with a notion that makes more sense to you."

So I signed up to do that very thing, and last night I did it.

For two weeks I fretted, because it did not seem like a good idea, when you squinted at it, to "fire" the All In All. My old pastor had railed at "cafeteria religion" in which the practitioner picks and chooses what attributes he likes, an ala carte faith. I like Luke, but I hate Paul. Like Mother Teresa, not so big on the Inquisition.

And I was doing that here,

But I went forward anyway, to see what was there. Last night I met with another counselor, not Mary, but a colleague named Theresa. We chatted for an hour about the nature of my problem, and the particulars of my life. Then she led me through a hypnotic lesson.

It is the basic forgiveness lesson that they teach at this "company." In it, the plaintiff ticks off a list of grievances against the person to be forgiven, with the culprit imaginarily occupying a chair. It is like a debate in which one of the opponents has not shown up. Only, since God is likely invisible, he may have been sitting in the docket.

My job was not necessarily to make perfect logical or legal sense, but to list my complaints, Declaration of Independence style. I did, focusing on Daniele's life, how painful it was for her to live her entire life plagued with acute anxiety problems, OCD, panic attacks, deep depression, deep hostility to her own growth and development, deep antagonism to anyone unlucky enough to try to lead her, a messed up personality, and, according to her at least, attention issues (I never observed them). She was alcoholic, a punk, and ultimately a suicide.

I laid all this at Superman's feet. And told him how he had contradicted his own advertised features. How this was supposed to work for the good, how Daniele was loved, how prayers were answered, how nothing happens to us so bad that that we cannot handle it. All these suppositions were patently wrong. So I was forced to let him go – let that concept of God the rescuer dry up

and blow away.

I did this, with an element of fear in my heart. I was firing the Great and Mighty Oz, This could be catastrophic karma.

Then I was directed to face another chair set up in the room. This was the mystery guest chair, where the new God was sitting. He was not fleshed in with features. He was a cipher – possibly not there at all if I did not want him to be.

My job was to commence a relationship with this “new” being, to talk with him and tell him what I needed in a god.

I told him (I didn't really mean “him,” it's just an old habit) I did not want to be lied to. I wanted to be told the truth, or nothing at all. I wanted some basic sense of a relationship – an entity I could go to when meditating or praying, that could pick me out of a crowd, that I did not have to fill in every time we spoke. I told him I wanted a connection not just to one religion or one tradition but to the religious spirit of all people. I told him I wanted companionship as I journeyed through loss toward death, not abandonment. I told him I wanted community in the broadest possible sense – with all humanity, with nature, with myself – and not in the narrowest sense, a church of sixty-odd friendly souls.

I told him a bunch of things. I did not bring a list in with me, and I was creating a God-homunculus so I felt somewhat insecure. But I proceeded, and just said what was in my heart.

Then, after perhaps fifteen minutes of this, I was directed to rise from my chair, and go sit where “God” had been sitting, and to sit with that spirit, and become one with him. And from that wooden chair look back at where I had been sitting, as if I were merged with the new god, and regard my own figure, sitting on the couch.

It was the eeriest feeling I could possibly describe to you. It was a god's eye view of myself. I saw how unhappy I have been, how restless and irritable. I saw how good my intentions were, no

matter how screwed up the outcome sometimes was. I saw my own effort to live a good life, to be a good husband and father and witness to others, and I found sympathy welling up in my for myself.

And then I spoke to myself, and I astonished myself by using the words of Jesus. They were sentences that I had copied into a novel I had written back in the 1970s. They came out of me as if they were being blown out of an old grave. I have much to tell you. But you cannot bear it all yet ... Fear not ... Behold, I have overcome the world...

They were chestnuts, but they were poems, too. I was reminded of the role language had always played for me, how I loved the music in the old Episcopalian church I attended in New Haven,

But then things became even weirder. I was channeling Jesus, but I had the unmistakable feeling that this Jesus was an innocent compared to the Jesus of history. That he was full of ignorance, unletteredness, skepticism, and humor. My Jesus had morphed into a character I carry very close to my heart – Huckleberry Finn! My Jesus was a companion not to end the Civil War, but accompany me on a raft journey, down the mighty river of life.

It was so odd, I knew I would have trouble describing it credibly to Theresa. And when the spell passed, and it was time to talk, I blabbed everything to her. She was fine with it. Whatever I experienced was my vision, and mine alone.

I think the nexus of it was that it was OK to be me. And I was probably stick with a strange personal amalgam of Jesus and Huckleberry Finn – just as I had written to myself in 1979, and never published.

[Here's that story](#), if anyone is still reading.

Theresa and I hugged and I went out into the night.

I felt a tingle along both my arms, and my face was warm to the touch, More importantly, I could feel every wrinkle of my face every tired crease, had relaxed. I started my car. Springsteen on the radio.

I was still an old man, I found, as I checked the car mirror. But I was relaxed, at peace. And I had not felt that way in years.

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