



Shook Foil

by Mike Finley

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Tony, a friend of mine, died this week, after a long, gruesome illness. For twenty three years Tony suffered from multiple sclerosis. Toward the end it took from him almost everything he had. He could not walk or even work his hands. He ate through a tube in his stomach. He got severe respiratory infections and bed sores. He couldn't speak except in sighs and moans (which I could never quite decipher, and had to figure out a way to respond to). He was, medically speaking, demented.

Because of this he also lost his wife and children, who stopped coming by. It was just too painful. Tony understood. He grieved, but he understood.

Tony and I were seminarians as boys, back in the early '60s when the Catholic Church still sent 14 year olds to begin study for the priesthood. We didn't go to the same school – we discovered this fact about one another when we became roommates as adults.

This doesn't mean Tony and I were great friends. Former seminarians are a peculiar class of people – we carry with us a sense of washing out, but also a sense of having been close to something amazing.

Seminary was a remarkable experience. We used to rise at 5:30 in the morning, silently, and walk through the dark to chapel with our classmates. There we would kneel on hard wood, and blink up at the tabernacle. I can't say what Tony felt, but I felt like I could not be closer to God, kneeling with all those yawning boys.

We were so fair and cherry-cheeked. I contrast that with the haggard look I saw on Tony in his final years. He had lost all the muscle in his arms and legs, and his hair hung like scraggly straw. He became very eccentric, and occasionally very angry. By his own admission, he was "crazy."

Does God give us more than we can handle? I used to think yes, but Tony, from the wreckage of his existence, managed to convince me otherwise. He lived for five years with a nursing home roommate who also couldn't talk, who was also demented, who was also given to fits of screaming and weeping. Yet when that roommate died, Tony was inconsolable -- he loved that broken man so much.

Tony loved Jesus more than you think it would be possible, in a joyous, weeping, delirious way. He

could barely put his hands together, but he embraced his Bible sometimes every moment of the day.

He loved getting phone messages. Although he couldn't talk on the phone, he used to play and replay them until he sucked the marrow from every morpheme.

And here's something you wouldn't expect. He read. Lots. He read a book practically every day. And he played cribbage. In the last year of his life he was a cribbage monster, defeating everyone in the nursing home, including the orderlies. Whenever competition was afoot, Tony rallied his resources. He made sure he won, one way or another. Cheating was not totally beyond him.

I myself had gone many years without seeing Tony, when his brother Clete suggested I give him a call. So I dialed the nursing home number, figuring a nurse would answer, or Tony's answering machine.

Now, I must tell you, I was afraid. Tony could be really weird and I figured he would be antagonized by the voice of a fellow seminarian stopping by to be "charitable." So I had to summon courage just to dial the phone.

The plan was to leave a voice message. Read an inspiring-sounding thought into the tape, then cut and run. But it didn't work out that way.

Instead, after a full minute of fumbling and voices in the background ("Here, let me help you") I know I have a line to Jim.

Since Tony couldn't talk, I had to do all the talking, so did.

"Hello, Tony, this is an old friend. I know you can't guess who I am, so I won't try and make you. This is Mike Finley. Remember, from the house on Superior Street?"

No answer, just loud breathing.

"Well, I saw Clete and his little girl the other day at the dentist's, and we talked about you, and I thought I'd give you a call."

Only breathing as response, but it had an interested quality about it, as in the phrase "bated breath."

I caught him up a bit with my life, my kids, and work. But I didn't go into a lot of detail – family being a sore point for him. "You know, we're all doing pretty good, busy with school and work."

I had run out of things to say, and now, in addition to hearing Tony's breathing, I could hear my own in my ear. I sounded frightened. I said a little prayer, asking for calm, and the right thing to say. And I reached for a book I kept in a desk drawer.

"Tony, I'm going to read something to you, and I'm betting you'll recognize it from seminary. It's the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the poem is called "God's Grandeur," and the poem has always amazed me by finding words and images to suggest something we have such a hard time expressing. I want to read it just for you, Tony, because I know you love God."

And before I started to read, my fear melted away. And I found myself pausing to explain what the poem was about.

"Now, this is what English professors mean by a difficult poem, Tony. You remember what that means. It means you have to think about the words. And sometimes, read them over again, and that's what I am going to do."

And that's what I did, stopping to translating some of the phrases and underscoring the really meaningful ones.

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.*

“Isn’t that amazing, Tony? The world is *charged*. I picture a cable of high voltage held up to our lives, and God sizzling through the wire.”

*Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell:*

“Do you hear that, ‘trod and trod’ – can’t you hear how hard it is for all of us to go forward. Seared, bleared, smeared – what words to describe this imperfect life!”

And all through the chat I could hear Jim's gasping and sighing. He wanted me to know when a phrase or moment worked for him, and I got the drift.

*the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. And for all this,
nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;*

“Tony, I get shivers thinking how nature is never spent, how this freshness courses underneath us every instant, always there for us to tap into.”

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs--

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

When I finished, Tony and I just hung on the line for a few minutes. I could hear the breath in his airways. And while he could not speak to me, I felt this call was very interesting to him. He was thanking me, even though he knew it was a “pity call.”

But I was the thankful one. Somehow that book peeked out at me from deep in my drawer. I remembered liking it, but hadn’t read it in years.

But what a glorious thing it was, the idea of God’s grace lighting up the world like shook foil, even in the midst of awfulness.

I always have thought I was a pretty clever fellow. But our conversation was like a shipwreck, and then this poem appeared in my hands. Tony turned out to be the one with imagination. He led me through it. He was the man. Somehow, strapped to his bed, the picture of

misery, unable to even dial a phone, he looked onto me,
and made me feel God's true grandeur.

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