

BECOMING WHO I AM

A Religio-Spiritual Autobiography in Seven Acts

WILLIAM HART

Act One

"It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of - namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography. . ."

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

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"The only difference between me and a madman is that I'm not mad."

Salvador Dali²

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"The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense."

Tom Clancy³

The rapture of loud, raucous demonstration versus the rapture of quiet meditation, and "inward deepening"—if demonstration and meditation are polar religious affections, moods, and dispositions, then I tend toward the latter. Contemplative by nature, there is not a Pentecostal or charismatic bone in my body. This makes me unusual in the Black Church context (and equally odd in a dance club) where a neo-Pentecostalism is dominant, making the volume of one's praise and celebration and the ostentation of one's gestures an index of authentic Christianity. In that context, I am an oddball, a misfit; a coldwater fish in a hot tub. I stick out like a sore thumb, like a "hard on," like an inflamed pimple on someone's ass. And yet, like shoes that are too big or, more to the point, like a monk at a bacchanal this misfit is who I am.

"If you're been saved, you oughta feel somethin', you oughta shout sometime!" The preacher regards me with the same anxiety as a comedian "hung out to dry" by a tough audience: they are not laughing, Bill is not shouting. Something is obviously wrong. I should be "filled with the spirit" and "getting happy," but I am not. The preacher is observant. He knows when a "dog won't hunt" and when a sermonic tactic "won't preach" so he tries another tactic: he makes fun of my "ejumacation." This is a time-honored tactic in the Black Church, in a church of working class background where a college education is not the statistical norm and certainly not the ideological norm. Former Vice President Spiro Agnew has nothing on the Black Church when it comes to suspicion of intellectuals. Indeed, the *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) that Richard Hofstadler wrote about is alive and well in the Black Church. "Egg heads" and "pointy headed" intellectuals are suspect in a religious context that posits an inverse relationship between knowledge and faith. After all, doesn't scripture say that God uses the base things of the world to confound the wise? The preacher circles me intently like a great bird of prey, reconnoitering, poking, prodding; looking for an opening, a way to attack. Soon he tires of the hunt, of this religious war game, and concludes that Bill is a tough case that he is "special" in the condescending way that we describe others as special. As in the nature

videos that one sees on PBS or on the Discovery Channel, he loses interest in this potential object of prey and moves on.

I live on the border of the Black Church, on the threshold of sacred space and profane space, in the twilight zone. My status is liminal. I live in that ritual, uncertain space of the initiate and the slave, between social death and social rebirth. “Here I stand! I can do nothing else.” There is much in the church that makes me nauseous. My stomach can tolerate the church only in small homeopathic doses. Too much church is poison. But in small doses, it is medicine for my soul. Better than psychotherapy, drugs, or sex, it is certainly better than anybody’s chicken soup! The church is both poison and cure. I am bound to the church by a many-strand cable of ambivalence: in the church but not of it, of the church but spending as little time there as possible. On the other hand, I have not found it possible *not* to be there, at least some of the time. To riff on Lerone Bennett, Jr.’s description of Black peoples’ attitude toward America, I love the church with a love that is full of hate and hate the church with a hate that is full of love.⁴ Love and hate: for me, it doesn’t get any better or worse.

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“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Proverbs 1:7

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The fearless and relentless critique of religion is the premise of all critical thinking.

Karl Marx (paraphrased)

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Yo Creo!

A Confession of Fidelity

Propositional beliefs are overrated in our culture. Beliefs are important only as far as they produce habitual forms of behavior. Thus my religious commitments are more a matter of deeds than creeds. For example, I do not pray but am deeply moved by the act of prayer, by prayer as a form of spiritual discipline. I am moved in particular by the blue notes, the plaintive cries. To paraphrase Emerson, sometimes a cry, shout, or moan is better than a thesis, sermon, or explication of sacred doctrine.⁵ The efforts of fellow mortal beings to make sense of their lives, to find relief from their pain, comfort in the midst of their suffering, and courage in the face of their fears can move me to tears. When others pray, my reaction is one of the following: either I enter deeply into myself through intense concentration and contemplation, during which I survey, inspect, and make judgments about my character; or my ego diminishes as my empathy with others is expanded, as my compassion is deepened, as their cries and pain become mine and mine become theirs. I may not pray but I do meditate, fast, and offer libations to the spirits. And I try very hard, with modest success, to live with compassion for others.

Religion overlaps and transacts with various domains of spirit. By “spirit,” I refer to those experiences such as art, drugs, sports, and violence that grab, lift, and transport us beyond the ordinariness of our everyday lives, beyond grey zones and temperate climates. Sex is a huge part of the spiritual terrain. Sexuality is both a rich source of religious metaphors and an object of religious anxiety, regulation, and taboo. Sex and violence are two forms of spirituality that religious traditions try desperately to repress, co-opt, or otherwise master. In that light, I suggest that the extensive moralization of sex that is epitomized by the notion of “lusting in one’s heart” (as opposed to the

ethical-political regulation of sex) is absurd. My sexual ethic is minimalist, containing only two moral “oughts”: (1) there ought to be mutuality (2) there ought to be an appropriate, minimal age of consent. From these all other principles are derived.⁶

However much we may disagree about its contours and details, religion is a set of activities where we find people at their very best and at their very worst. Ethically and politically speaking, religious commitments are profoundly important. Students are curious about the commitments of their professors. This is especially true in religion studies. Students assume and with good reason that our commitments are relevant to what we teach and how we teach it. When asked about the specifics of my beliefs, I try to explain what we pragmatists mean by belief, which is *a disposition to act in particular ways*. Or to put it differently, beliefs that are disconnected from observable behaviors are empty. Insofar as I can describe my religious commitments in creedal terms, I offer the following: In my dominant mood (my beliefs are mood-specific), I identify myself as a Unitarian rather than a Trinitarian Christian. I belong to the repressed, underside of Christianity, to the side or sides (for there are many Christianities) that lost Arius and his descendants whom the dominant church calls “heretics” are my friends.⁷ But there are other moods as well where God whispers in my ear. How crazy is that? Like Montanus, again a “heretic,” I hear the Holy Spirit speaking directly to me, qualifying, resignifying, and even superceding anything written in a sacred text or anything that my church or tradition might hold as true. On my arrogant-Emersonian view, God speaks to me now the way he spoke to Abraham then. How crazy is that? And sometimes I hear the voices of three hundred and sixty Gods, one—depending on the calendar—for every day of the year. After all, didn’t Emerson say that the days are Gods? How crazy is that?

To put a finer point on things, I believe in God and in Nature. And I believe that God and Nature are the same. I believe in the Devil and all his demonic minions. And I believe that they, God, and Nature are the same. I believe in Allah, the Cosmic Buddha, the Christian God, Damballah, Eshu-Elegbara, the Great Rainbow Serpent, Olorun, Vishnu and all his avatars; I believe in the Hebrew God identified by the tetragrammaton YHWH and in any other God or Goddess in whom anyone at anytime has ever believed. And I believe that they are the same, *that is*, they (all of them) are our collective “will and idea,” objective manifestations of our highest subjectivity, our idealized father image projected writ large onto the cosmos as “Big Daddy” or the primordial, pre-linguistic “memory” of mother, our first object-relation and love-object. Indeed, as some describe it, God is an artifact of a family romance among “mommy, daddy, and me.”⁸ As wonderful characters in a tragicomedy that we write, Gods are our nationalism, ethnic, racial, gender, and other group identities and loyalties *deified*. Gods are the phenomenology of our deepest hopes and greatest fears, our darkest resentment and most heartfelt gratitude.⁹ They are the way that we appear to ourselves and the way our natural environs, earth and sky, appear to us. They, all of them (for God is legion) are US. We create Gods just as surely as birds sing and bees make honey. Above all, therefore, and with more passion and less embarrassment, I believe in Earth, the Great Cannibal-Mother Goddess who gives us life and takes it away.

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THOUGHT of the Infinite—the All!
Be thou my God.

Lover Divine, and Perfect Comrade!
Waiting, content, invisible yet, but certain,
Be thou my God.

Thou—thou, the Ideal Man!
Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,
Complete in Body, and dilate in Spirit,
Be thou my God.

O Death—(for Life has served its turn;)
Opener and usher to the heavenly mansion!
Be thou my God.

Aught, aught, of mightiest, best, I see, conceive, or know,
(To break the stagnant tie—thee, thee to free, O Soul,)
Be thou my God.

Or thee, Old Cause, when'er advancing;
All great Ideas, the races' aspirations,
All that exalts, releases thee, my Soul!
All heroisms, deeds of rapt enthusiasts,
Be ye my Gods!

Or Time and Space!
Or shape of Earth, divine and wondrous!
Or shape in I myself—or some fair shape, I, viewing, worship,
Or lustrous orb of Sun, or star by night:
Be ye my Gods.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892), *Leaves of Grass*, 1900.

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“[E]very god has a devil for a father.”
Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁰

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Plus a woman and a man for grandparents!
Yours Truly

Act Two

Untold millions are still untold. / Untold millions are outside the fold. / Who will
tell them of Jesus' love, / And the heavenly mansions awaiting above?

Jesus died on Calvary to save each one from sin. / Now he lives for you and me, so
go and bring them in for many, / Untold millions are still untold. / Untold millions

are outside the fold. / Who will tell them of Jesus' love, / And the heavenly mansions awaiting above?

Bill Hart knocked on the door and waited nervously. He thought about the love of God, the end of the world, and a lake of fire. He thought of untold millions of lost souls, of people separated from the mercy of God and excluded from his glorious presence. The door opened and the face of a lost soul silenced a song that played silently on Bill's lips. "Good afternoon ma'am. We are from Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. Can we speak to you for a moment? Do you know Jesus?" Memory fades. Perhaps his words were different. But that is how he remembers them now. Perhaps someone else spoke and through the "dream work" of memory, he now remembers their words as his. Are the facts of who actually spoke more important than the truth that he bore witness to the word of God? Only now does Bill recall that he was not alone. He was one of three or four witnesses. They always went in groups, not because this was a housing project, the closest that Phoenix got to a Watts-style ghetto, but because faithful witness was hard, sometimes one faltered. It was good as the preacher would say to have someone to "build you up where you were torn down" and to "support you on every leaning side." There was spiritual strength in numbers. This mutual support was especially important when Bill encountered the amused contempt of his jeering peers, "Hey, Jesus boy!" Fear, it is important to add, was not the issue. Bill lived in these projects, went to school with its children, and knew some of their mothers. There were very few fathers to know. Sure there were drugs and drug related crime. But this was the late nineteen sixties and early seventies. Heroin was king, marijuana was queen, and the mood was mellow, even if "OD" was part of everyone's vocabulary, and everyone knew someone who had died of a heroin overdose. This was the time before the emergence of PCP, "angel dust," or "sherm," and long before the murderous frenzy of the "rock" cocaine (in the Eastern United States they called it "crack") epidemic.

. . . The door slammed rudely in their faces. This lost soul did not want to hear what the righteous had to say. She acted as if they were Jehovah Witnesses! So much the worse for her, they thought with gleeful sadness. As they left, Bill imagined that they sang. He can't be sure but he can imagine them singing:

I am on the battlefield for my Lord. / I am on the battlefield for my Lord; / And I promise Him that I would serve Him 'till I die. / I am on the battlefield for my Lord.

or

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! / Oh what a for-taste of glory divine! / Heir of salvation, purchase of God, / Born of his Spirit, washed in His blood. / This is my story, this is my song, / Praising my savior all the day long; / This is my story, this is my song, / Praising my savior all the day long.

“Momma gave us money for Sunday school; we’d trade ours’ for candy, after church was through.” Stevie Wonder must have been a member of the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church! You too would take God’s tithe and offering and buy donuts and other sugary sweets. After all, *Our Father who art in heaven* was rich in houses (he had mansions!) and land. How could this small act of expropriation and redistribution hurt Him? Give a kid a break. As you look back on these childhood sentiments, perhaps you were making, unbeknownst to yourself, a rather sophisticated theological claim: either God is *red* or He is dead. As a young “twentysomething” adult, you read two theologians—Vine Deloria, Jr. and Gustavo Gutierrez—who claimed in radically different ways that God is “red.” You also read a philosopher and two theologians, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Altizer, and Charles Winquist, who claimed that “God is dead.” But you’re getting ahead of yourself, so back to your childhood. Back to the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, with its fire-and-brimstone sermons, and to the “good news” club, between which you had your formative childhood religious experiences.

Antioch was a black, working class Baptist church. Most of its families were like yours. They were poor, resided in housing projects, or in housing of an even lesser quality. Most of the parents at best were high school graduates. College graduates were very rare. You do not recall any professionals: no doctors, lawyers, or accountants; no professors, bankers, firefighters or police. On second thought, there may have been a nurse or two (but on third thought they may have been LPN’s). And there were a few school teachers as well. Most of the men were laborers of various sorts, many of the women were domestics. Hellfire and damnation was preached each Sunday. The dead were “funeralized” and buried on Saturdays.¹¹ And the “fervent and effectual prayers” of the righteous could be heard every Wednesday night. Mother Woods would prowl the church like the Wicked Witch of the West, surrounded by her winged monkeys, disciplining any child who misbehaved, especially if their parents failed to do so or were absent. You thought she was mean, wicked, a witch. As you grew older, you came to love Mother Woods and her stern discipline, her desire to keep you on the right path in a world where the odds were stacked against you. Mother Woods had no formal authority but exercised great influence. As the “mother” of the church, she was informally and in effect the “under pastor.”

In the Duppa Villa Housing Project where your family lived in the 1960s, you were “touched by an angel.” Her name was Josie Colleen. She was a member of the Morningside Presbyterian Church. Located only two blocks from the housing project where both of you lived, this predominantly white church, would eventually close, as it would fall victim to white middleclass flight. As part of the evangelical outreach to the local community, Josie—a *Chicana in a racially integrated housing project*—organized and conducted a “good news” club, which must be one of the most effective tools of Protestant evangelism among children ever imagined. You would meet in Josie’s apartment weekly, study the Bible, read religious dramas, hear religious stories designed for children, mingle with like-minded kids, eat cookies, drink punch, and sing. How you loved the songs that you all sang!

My heart was dark with sin, / Until the Savior came in. / His precious blood I know,
 / Has washed it white as snow. / And in God’s word I’m told, / I’ll walk the streets
 of gold. / To grow in Christ each day, / I read the Bible and pray.

and

Thou art a wonderful God. / Thou art a wonderful God. / Thou makest the mountains. / Thou makest the trees. / Thou makest the sunlight that shines over me. / Thou art a wonderful God. / Thou art a wonderful God!¹²

and

The Lord is my shepherd; I'll walk with Him always. / He leads by still waters; I'll walk with Him always. / Always, always, I'll walk with Him always. / Always, always, I'll walk with Him always.

Associated with Morningside Presbyterian Church and Josie's "good news" club was "Camp Good News." The camp was located in Arizona's high country, in the beautiful town of Prescott. But surely this Camp was misnamed; for there was something excessive about the regime at Camp Good News. This was Christian boot camp: up at the break of dawn with barely enough time to empty your bladder, before you were expected to be in chapel and ready to praise God. After a short devotion, it was off to breakfast. Then back to chapel for the morning worship service, after which you returned to your cabin and did your daily cleaning. Cleaning was followed by lunch, which was followed by two hours of free time, if you recall correctly, then—at this point things get a little hazy—you had Bible study as an appetizer before dinner. Dinner was followed by evening service. Lights were out and you and your fellow campers were in bed by ten p.m. You were young Christian Spartans! At the end of the week, the evening before you all departed for home, you had a lovely "fire and brimstone" sermon, just for old-times sakes. You and your fellow campers were assembled around a huge bond fire. Its heat was intense. One could hear the wood popping as it cracked. You imagined that wood as your bones in the fires of hell, which was no coincidence as these Christian child psychologists knew exactly what they were doing! They knew the effect these sermons and this fire would have on your young, impressionable minds as they were experts in the uses of fear. Nothing communicated more effectively to you and your fellow campers the horror of hell fire.

Act Four

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and his mouth was like a lion's. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but the mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" (Revelations 13: 1-4 NOAB)

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters,

with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers of the earth have become drunk.” And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hands a golden cup of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations. And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. (Revelations 17: 1-6 NOAB)

I sat listening to the radio, wondering when the world would end. The distant horizon appeared threatening, “Would the world end tonight?” Didn’t scripture say that he would come like a thief in the night? Perhaps this threatening sky was a “sign of the times.” God knows, there were signs everywhere. There were “wars and rumors of wars.” In what part of the night sky would Jesus appear? Ever since that first episode of trembling in my body, perhaps it was my mind-psyche-soul that was trembling, that was *shaky*—after all, Isn’t the soul a capacity of the body?—I had the irresistible sense of being *called* by God. An overly serious and studious kid, my older siblings called me Mr. Peabody and Mr. Know-It-All. Curious and inquisitive, everyone was sure that I would be a preacher one day. Perhaps it was inevitable that I would come to share that view. I never actually heard the voice of God in the way that one hears thunder rumble across the sky, but I felt it. In retrospect, I wonder if what I felt was the authoritative weight of my church community’s collective desire, a mélange of all those voices and smiling faces and expectant eyes, which I felt *but never heard* as the voice of God. Whatever the truth of such retrospection, one thing is clear: I was in the rutting stage, at the rutting age of my religious passion. I saw everything through religious lenses. The more demanding its requirements, the more attractive I found a given religious vision. It was about this time, I was 16 or 17, that I encountered Protestant evangelicalism of a millenarian and dispensational kind. I was in love, enraptured, swept up and carried away like the lovely heroine in a Harlequin romance.

My memory is not precise but it was sometime in the early-seventies that I first read *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). And a good yarn it was! At the time, I thought that it was more than a good yarn. This was the word of God or at least, to spin it retrospectively, a Christian version of the Talmud or better of the Kabbalah. In reading this book—I also read Lindsey’s sequel, *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972)—I thought that I was reading about future events. It was as if I were reading tomorrow’s newspapers today. It was, to paraphrase President Wilson’s comments on the movie “Birth of a Nation,” future history written with lightning.¹³ Consequently, I thought that I had a better sense of the geopolitical situation than Henry Kissinger, since I relied on Lindsey, and he certainly seemed to know. He spoke of Gog and the land of Magog from the book of Revelations, whom he identified with the Soviet Union. He spoke of the beast with “ten horns,” that is, the European Common Market! And he spoke of the special role of Israel in the culmination of world history. He spoke about Armageddon, about Jesus with a sword, about the blood of God’s enemies that was flowing deep enough to swim in. Yes. At last! All those who had denied God and scoffed at our belief and made fun of us would get theirs! I must have felt as Tertullian felt when he described the great pleasure that we Christians, from our vantage point in heaven, will experience watching the damned writhing in excruciating pain in a hell fire whose flames could not be quenched, where it was utterly dark, where there was a gnashing of teeth, and

where the maggots that crawl through the bodies of the dead will not die.¹⁴ Oh, the joy! That is how *I* must have felt.

It took some time for me to realize just how perverse this rapture genre of Christianity was. The enemies of God—Arab nations, African nations, Asian nations, especially the “yellow/red” Chinese, and the godless Soviet Union—appeared to be the enemies of the emerging America *imperium* and of a restored, “Third Temple” State of Israel. (The new temple would be built on the ruins of the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem, which right-wing Jews had destroyed with the encouragement of right-wing Christians, thus fulfilling one of the prophetic preconditions for the second advent of Jesus!) On this paranoid prophetic scenario, Russia will lead a northern confederacy of hostile nations against Third Temple Israel and a southern confederacy of African and Arab nations led by Egypt will attack from the South. Meanwhile the Chinese will wipe out one third of the earth’s population. All of this presaged the emergence of the new Roman Empire (one-world government), which is none other than the beast with ten horns, the European Common Market countries, a new “mystery Babylon”—that is, a whorish, horrific, one-world religion—and sitting atop both a new dictator, a new Fuehrer--the Antichrist. As if this carnage were not enough, every Jew on the face of the earth would be killed or converted to Christianity, as the rightwing Christian imagination had to find some way of dealing with those troublesome Jews. Mass murder or mass conversion was their final solution. These blood-soaked events are predicted, of course, in the book of Revelations.¹⁵ How neatly this bizarre, paranoid fantasy fit the requirements of American (White) nationalism, *Herrenvolke* democracy, and Cold War politics. To be taken in by all of this, what a sorry sucker *I* was!

Was there no end to my stupidity? *I* soon fell under the influence of the World Wide Church of God and the religious ideology of British (also called Anglo) Israelism. *I* was not aware of it at the time but this ideology is deeply rooted in the Puritan traditions of America; the tradition of configuring American history and destiny according to the biblical model of Exodus, Promised Land, and Conquest. Just as Puritans regarded themselves as new world Israelites, who had braved a mighty Exodus from England (read: Egypt), across the Red Sea of the Atlantic Ocean to the new Canaan Land of America, where their religious duty was to kill the new world Canaanites (read: Indians) and possess their land, so the ideology of British Israelism held that the Anglo-Saxon people are the descendants of the “ten lost tribes” of Israel, that is, the Northern Kingdom of Israel that was destroyed by the Assyrians in 721 BCE.¹⁶ British Israelism, *I* discovered, is deeply enmeshed with the most virulent forms of white supremacist Christianity, the “Christianity Identity” movement, which in turn is a more fanatical version of the “Reconstructionist Theology” of the radical—let’s shoot a doctor and bomb a clinic—anti-abortion movement, which is at extreme of the “Dominion Theology” movement of such right-wing luminaries as the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.¹⁷

As the motto of the United Negro College Fund puts it, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” And now, as *I* look back on those days, *I* can’t help but agree with that great philosopher Frank Zappa: “There is more stupidity than hydrogen in the universe and it has a longer shelf life.”¹⁸

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While other kids were getting high and getting laid, or lying about it, *I* surveyed the night sky,
waiting for the Apocalypse.

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Now I understand the famous saying by George Bernard Shaw:

“Youth is wasted on the young.”¹⁹

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Smile.

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Jesus and Other Revolutionaries

As a kid, I was powerfully affected by the story of Jesus raising hell in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers. It appealed to my adolescent desire, as George Bush senior put it, to kick some ass. I had a lurid imagination, which made the Jesus of the Book of Revelations—bronzed skinned, wooly haired, sword-toting avenger of the apocalypse—more attractive than the meek and holy lamb of the Gospels. I was equally affected by the imagery of “Negroes with Guns.” And in 1973 I became a Black Panther, a black kitten of that regal black cat, a follower of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale; a fan of Eldridge Cleaver’s electrifying, *Soul on Ice*, a devotee of black berets and black jackets and of black fists thrust in the air. Power to the people! Off the pigs! Huey, Bobby, and Eldridge did not know me but I knew them through the many books and articles I had read and the occasional story about them on the evening news. This occurred in the context of a story, I now think is apocryphal, that my brother, nine years my senior, had flirted with the idea of joining the Panther’s when he wasn’t struggling with the unhappy choice of either dogging bullets in Vietnam or dodging the draft and fleeing to Canada. My membership in the party was strictly a textual, phantasmagoric, and virtual affair. Blending like a collage with the imagery of the Panthers was the gap-tooth grin of Angela Davis, America’s most infamous black communist, who had recently been on the run from the FBI. She was the Panther that I loved the most. While still in high school, I read her early critique of the prison industrial complex, entitled *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971). And I fell as deeply in love with George Jackson, a prisoner about whom she wrote eloquently, as she obviously was. If I did not see her on the news, I could always see her at the local post office on the FBI’s Ten Most-Wanted List or on posters demanding her freedom. (Like Huey, Angela had been arrested and became a “cause celebre.” She was released from prison in 1972 and entered my adolescent fantasies. I was a freshman in high school, full of “vim and vigor.” And I loved her. My love of her beauty and defiance—I’m not sure which I loved more, the beauty or the defiance—was as great as my admiration of Huey Newton’s psychotic masculinity. The way he confronted the police, a gun in one hand and a copy of the California State Constitution in the other: now that was a man. Power to the people! Off the pigs! Unbeknownst to me, my timing was warped. Time had played a cruel trick on me. The Panthers, who seemed so alive to me, were nearly dead. They were in the final stages of being destroyed by the FBI’s counter-intelligence program, “COINTELPRO,” its leadership scattered by the cold winds of a Cold War-driven reaction. Cleaver was on the verge of becoming a turncoat-William F. Buckley, Jr.-celebrated-neo-conservative. Bobby was preparing to become a petit bourgeois black entrepreneur, selling barbeque. And Huey, poor Huey had began a descent into his own drug-induced version of Dante’s Inferno.

Of course, I didn’t know any of this then. In 1973 I was only sixteen, living belatedly and vicariously through what I read. I was a black revolutionary nationalist, one of the “angry children of Malcolm X.” I knew that Brother Malcolm had been assassinated. What I didn’t realize was that the Revolution was dead. My revolutionary fervor dissipated. I became a frat boy.

Act Five

All you men of A-Fag-A who like to give the booty away!

I say all you men of black and gold, I don't want none of your booty hole!
Dog, dog, dog—a nasty Que dog!

In 1978 I entered the brotherhood of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. Officially and ideally, I had become an Omega man. Unofficially and in reality, I had become a “Que dog.” And we dogs did what dogs do best: strive to be top dog, while dogging as many bitches as possible. I wasn't very successful as a dog. Perhaps I had too much bitch or feline in me, or maybe I was a model of what it meant to be an Omega man? One thing is clear; I was a “party pooper.” This would be confirmed a few years later when my “frat” gave me a bachelors' party and I left before the strippers came and the “real” fun began. My decision to pledge Omega came after a semester-long courtship and in the face of much hesitation and many reservations, some of which never completely disappeared. I was a socially-awkward late adolescent. The social life of a large university was a foreign land whose language I could not speak and whose rituals however crude I could not decode. Socially, I had two left feet, wore high-water pants, and had the *savior fare* of Jethro from the Beverly Hillbillies. I was out of place. And my timing was wrong. I wasn't coolly behind the beat like a jazz musician but simple off beat, oblivious, clueless about the rhythms that governed college social life. Pledging Omega was a way of overcoming my alienation, my sense of strangeness. In time, I came to engage in the homophobic chants that often characterize inter-fraternal rivalry--“All you men of A-Fag-A (Alpha Phi Alpha) who like to give the booty away! I say all you men of black and gold, I don't want none of your booty hole!” The lessons of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, about shall I shall speak shortly, were conveniently forgotten, as I learned that the art of living courageously is a life-long pursuit, requiring mindfulness and perseverance. And like so many personal skills, it is developmental. The crisis time of adolescence is the time when one is least likely to demonstrate courage. But even here I want to avoid any simple-minded or one-sided account as there were high-minded reasons for pledging Omega as well. I still admire the cardinal principals of Omega Psi Phi, even if they are relics in some respects of a time when men were men and women were women and “queers” were in the closet. These principles are Manhood, Scholarship, Perseverance, and Uplift. A fifth, unwritten principal is Respect for Womanhood. I still subscribe to these principles and imagine that I always will.

Omega Psi Phi, with its rites of initiation, sacred persons, places, and times, with its creeds and iconic colors of royal purple and old gold, mimicked the rites and pageantry of popular religious practice. And when I got married at Gideon Baptist Church in Tucson, Arizona, my brothers, those who shared a common initiation stood with me, despite my reputation as a party pooper, despite my lack of “dog skills,” and despite my failure to be branded on my arm or chest with the Greek letter Ω as a way of graphically symbolizing my undying love for Omega. My refusal of this brand, of having Omega's ownership burned into my flesh was tantamount, on some level, to refusing the rite of baptism in the Christian Church. I found this practice offensive and was unwilling to acknowledge anyone's ownership of me including the ownership claims of an artificial, corporate person such as Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc. On my view, we (black people) had fought too long against the prison of white supremacy to willingly incarcerate ourselves in black prisons. I told my brothers that I was not chattel, a cow to be branded, a piece of property. And while I promised to love my wife “till death do us part,” I would make no such promise to Omega. But my brothers in Omega loved me and honored me despite my disavowal. And for that I shall always love and honor them. Que Psi Phi. Omega 'till I die!

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“When I get that feeling I want sexual healing.”

Marvin Gaye

*

How to reconcile sexual desire and religious commitment, the lure of bodies whose heat you could feel, whose scent you could smell, which spoke to you, whispering, come to me? And in the background of the mind's ear, one could hear the Bar-Kays sing—"She talks to me with her body. . ." and "Your love is like the Holy Ghost." And then I hear the competing, dissonant voice of Augustine addressing God: "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."²⁰ Salvation from sexual desire or sexual desire as a modality of salvation: Augustine or Marvin Gaye? Although I did not think of matters in these terms at the time, they seem in retrospect to be an appropriate way of understanding my spiritual life during college. It was an unending battle between the spirituality of Christian abstinence and the spirituality of sexual desire. Among late adolescents, in particular, there is a kind of soteriology of sex; a doctrine of salvation through sex; a kind of fantasy, of magical thinking, which some of people never outgrow. On this view, sex is a way of saving oneself, of being saved from ridicule—"You're still a virgin! Are you queer or what?" Sex is a way of pushing gender insecurities underground, a way of managing anxieties about one's sexual orientation, the sense that you are strange and weird in a sea of normality. If everyone is doing "it," then why aren't you?

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Its mid-seventies and there is a buzz in the air at Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. It was rumored that our pianist and choir director were "carrying on" as the old folks would say, that is, having a sexual affair. What made this affair more significant than most is that the pianist and choir director were men. And one of them was married with children. There have always been gays and lesbians in the Black church and I imagine there always will be. It is widely assumed within many Black churches that a disproportionate number of those involved in the music ministry are gay. Long before the American military adopted its "don't ask, don't tell" policy such a policy was firmly in place in the Black church. If homosexual male musicians can tolerate the homophobic missiles launched on a regular basis from the high ground of the pulpit, then they have an honored place in the church. Lesbianism, in contrast, seems to exist below the radar, seems not to offend sensibilities as much, and does not provoke the same sentiments of disgust and abomination as male homosexuality. This appears to follow "Biblical precedent" and conforms to what appears to be a dominant sensibility among heterosexual men who regard male homosexuality with disgust while finding lesbian sex arousing. In any event, to pick up the thread of my story, I was asked to lunch by one of these musicians and accepted. I went because he was a fellow church member with whom I had enjoyed numerous conversations, and I saw no reason pass up the opportunity for a free meal. We had Chinese food as I recall. He did not proposition me. Nor was that my desire. Had he propositioned me I imagine that my reaction would have been civil. I would not have engaged in the kind of exaggerated, hysterical display that is so typical of heterosexual men in these situations, as they try to assure everyone especially themselves that they are not gay. I would like to think that this is how I would have reacted that my behavior would be no different than it is when (it hasn't happened often) I am propositioned by women. I tell them that I am flattered, quickly fantasize about what it might be like and then, recalling my wedding vows, I say "No thanks." But then I recall that I am the same person who chanted: "All you men of A-Fag-A. My confidence about how I would have reacted dissipates. And I wonder who I am?"

My acceptance of the invitation to lunch caused a stir. The anxious reactions of my mother, sister, and members of my church—where a few eye brows were raised—have marked me indelibly. They

taught me an important lesson about the power of homophobia and the fundamental injustice of heteronormativity. For here I encountered the antinomy and antagonism of sexual desire and the desire for salvation in its most powerful form. Two men, two musicians who, if they were gay, had been forced into a life “down low,” a secret life, a life of lying because the church could not recognize their desire as a modality of salvation, a haven, a form of embodied bliss, but instead could only see this paradise of two bodies that were anatomically the same as something from which these men needed to be saved. They were subject to whispers, rumors, and innuendo, as were those who associated with them. Thoreau was right. During times of witch-hunting, “red scares,” and “queer panics,” the place of the just person is on the side of the vilified. Maybe that is why I have an affinity for witches, communists, and queers. *Narrator: By now it should be clear that the “I” that speaks here and now is not the “I” who spoke, if he would have spoken at all, then and there.*

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Jesus is coming back for a church / Without a spot or wrinkle. / If you're not right
you better get right/ For he is coming like a thief in the night. / Will you be caught
up to meet Him in the rapture? / Will you be caught up to meet Him in the rapture?
/ Will you be caught up to meet Him in the rapture? / When Jesus comes again.

It was about a year after “the dinner invitation” that Campus Crusade for Christ established a beachhead in our church. A handful of black students from Arizona State University who were affiliated with the Crusade joined Antioch and became active members. With them, they brought an evangelical culture that was different from the culture of most Black churches. One of those differences is evident in the “Rapture” theme, which is hard to find in the sermons, imagery, and popular imagination of the Black church. The Rapture is not part of the spiritual itinerary, the “end-of-days” scenario when Black Christians sing: “In that great getting’ up morning/ Fare thee well, fare thee well” or “Swing low sweet chariot” / Coming for to carry me home” or “I’m going away / To a place prepared just for me. / A special place, I’ll live eternally / I’m going away.”²¹ The idea of the Rapture did not translated very well among the members of Antioch, who were more likely to be impressed by the earnestness and enthusiasm of these young people than by their strange theology. On the other hand, I was quite familiar with the idea of the Rapture, both the rapture of the church and what I imagined would be the rapture of sex. As we sang about the church being raptured, that is, swept up and carried to heaven by God, I dreamed of another kind of heaven and a different kind of God. I saw God in the shape of a woman, as the real presence and the real substance of intercourse, as the transubstantiation and the consubstantiation of the sexual act. And what cultural genre captures this marriage of the sacred and the profane, effacing the dualities of mind and body and of spirit and matter, better than Rhythm & Blues, the soul of popular music? And what group does it better than the O’ Jays:

Here we go, / Claiming the stairway to heaven` / Here we go, / Walking the road of
ecstasy` / Taking the load / Of this old world, off our shoulder. / The door is wide
open, for you, the door is open, for me, yea. / Here we go, / Stealing a moment of
pleasure` / You and I, / We're gonna find the pirate treasure` / Here we go, / Ah
baby, / Here we go, / Claiming the stairway to heaven` / Claiming the stairway to
heaven / And we're going / Step, by step together / Step, by step, / . . . Stairway to
heaven / Climbing, claiming, stairway to heaven` . . .

In our own little corner of the world, in our own little spot / It'll be me and you,
 come on` / Don't you wanna go? Don't you wanna go? Don't you wanna go? / I say
 baby it's gonna be just . . . / Heaven! / Sweet like, / Heaven! / Nice like, / Heaven!
 / ooh, ooh, / Heaven! . . .

talking bout heaven right here on earth . . .

Act Six

"For centuries, theologians have been explaining the unknowable
 in terms of the-not-worth-knowing."
 Henry Louis Mencken²²

I should have been dead. But the shock of cold water was stronger than the shock of bumping my head. Rather than knocking me unconscious and putting me into a watery sleep, the head-knocking woke me up, setting off a fire alarm in my blood as adrenalin engaged in pitch battle with alcohol. I was in trouble. My life was in jeopardy. In a drunken stupor, I had driven my 1974 Dodge Dart Swinger into the "river bottom." We called it the "river bottom" because the bed of the Salt River that cuts through Phoenix like an ugly scar was usually empty. Dry as a bone on a hot summer day. The only time there was water in the normally dry "river bottom" was after extremely heavy rainfall filled the reservoirs to capacity requiring that water be released. Or it might be filled after an especially heavy snow in the northern mountains began to melt rapidly, choking water ways with more volume than they could handle before dumping it into the Salt River basin. On December 18, 1982, the "river bottom" was especially full.

It was my twenty-fifth birthday. My fellow firefighters and I had chosen that day to celebrate the end of our one-year probationary period. We had proven ourselves, acquired tenure, so to speak, on the Phoenix Fire Department. We were full-fledged civil servants. Our jobs, barring a crime of moral turpitude or a financial crisis in municipal government, were secure. We had arrived. To celebrate we did what twentysomething people do. We had a party. And we drank a lot of alcohol. I can't be sure, but I must have drunk the most. Parties always made me anxious rather than eager. I had long wished that I could lose myself in the moment the way that accomplished "party people" seemed to do. But I couldn't dance myself into oblivion (lacking the skill or emotional stamina); strong drink rather than dancing was my spiritual ticket. Besides, this was a white-oriented party, which meant that drinking rather than dancing would be the central attraction. I drank green, peppermint Vodka and rum, no Coke and no ice. I drank fast and became drunk quickly. And if the recollections of my fellow firefighters' are correct, I became the life of the party. It's true that I have the good fortune of being a happy rather than a sad and angry drunk. As if a different Bill, my doppelganger, more jovial, uninhibited, and playful is liberated from my normal sobriety. And yet, I have doubts about these accounts, not so much the accuracy but the interpretation. Somehow I imagine myself not merely being happy but acting the buffoon. I was drunk but not so cross-eyed drunk that I couldn't tell time. It was getting late and time that buffoonery and tomfoolery come to an end. Tomorrow was "A" shift and I was scheduled to work.

I remember saying my round of good byes. There may have been a couple of “Are you alrights?” and “Be carefuls” in response. Someone may have even suggested that I crash there. But I can’t be sure. The next thing I *do* remember is crashing through the construction barricades that warned everybody except a drunken fool behind a wheel that the bridge had been washed out. I pushed the car door against the pressure of the rising water, freeing myself from the vehicle; I do not recall the period between hitting the barricades and the fifteen-foot free fall from the street to the water. Though a good swimmer, I recall flailing desperately at the cold water before gaining my bearings and swimming to the shore. After several failed attempts, I crawled out of the water and up the slippery bank like some prehistoric amphibian. Hands, elbows, and knees were scraped raw from the effort. I must have been a sight when I wandered onto the grounds of a gravel company that sat on the bank of the river. The night watchman was kind. He could have done what so many people do when I, tall, black, and male, approach them in unfamiliar circumstances. They eye me wearily, clutch their purses tightly, cross over to the other side of the street, and even reverse course completely as if upon seeing me they suddenly recalled something they had failed to do. On that night, which was also early morning, he could have called the cops. Instead he allowed me to call my younger brother who in a couple of years would join me on the Phoenix Fire Department but that night came to my rescue.

The next day, my brothers helped me retrieve my fire-fighting gear from the trunk of my partly submerged car. Some good citizen, no doubt, assumed that four black guys in the river, gemming the lock on a car must have been up to no good. When we got to the river bank, my gear wet but no worse for wear, we were met by two police officers. The white officer had already made up his mind about us. You could see the eagerness in his eyes. He knew who we were. He dealt with people like us everyday. No need to consider alternative possibilities. We were criminals, probably with records a mile long, caught in the act. The fact that he had slipped and muddied his newly laundered uniform only steeled his determination to get us. As fate would have it (that sounds so cliché) the other officer was Pete Ramos. Pete and I had graduated from Thomas Alva Edison Elementary School. He had been president of the eighth grade class. I was vice-president. We hadn’t seen each other in years. While we exchanged pleasantries his partner’s face grew red with anger. It was clear from our exchange that the white officer wasn’t going to get any satisfaction out of this encounter. We frustrated his expectations. Any visions of us on our bellies, spread-eagle in the mud, hands cuffed behind our backs, he had to let go. He’d have to find some other way of dealing with his muddy anger. No catharsis at our expense. What a shame. Surely an injustice from his point of view. I explained what had happened to Pete. (Like firefighters, police officers are habitual drunken drivers. Car crashes and wife-beating are endemic to their culture.) Pete laughed. Told me to be careful and wished me well. To this day, I believe that he was just as amused by his partner’s reaction as he was by my story.

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My eyes opened almost immediately as soon as I heard the familiar clicking sound that the lights made when they came on. This was followed shortly by the dispatcher’s voice: “Channel three, EMS assignment. Head-on crash involving a car and a dump truck.” Then the dispatcher would give us the address. Then the dispatcher would tell us who was assigned this call: Engine 22, Ladder 22, and Rescue 22. It was 3:00 a.m. in the City of Phoenix, Arizona as we crawled out of bed and got into our clothes as quickly as possible. This was ably assisted by the adrenaline, stronger than the “best” crack cocaine that was rushing through our veins. We raced to our trucks, strapped on our seat belts, and screamed out the station like a bat out of hell. The distance from the firehouse to the accident scene is short. But there is plenty of time to go over in our minds what we are likely to

encounter. Several things can be deduced from the dispatch information itself. A head on crash between a car and dump truck equals, in all probability, severe trauma or death for the occupants of the car. The fact that the dispatcher sent “everybody,” engine, ladder, and rescue suggests that we needed a lot of “manpower.” There might be the need for fire suppression, even if Hollywood exaggerates the frequency and spectacular character of fiery crashes. Fire suppression would be the engine’s responsibility. There might be the need for extrication, especially in an accident involving a large, heavy vehicle such as a dump truck and a relatively light vehicle such as a car. Among other tools of the trade, the ladder truck carried a “Hurst Tool,” popularly known as the “jaws of life.” This powerful tool could pry apart bent and twisted metal as easily as superman. Extrication would be the ladder’s responsibility. The rescue’s job was to provide advanced life support to the injured. This might include “starting a line” of intravenous fluid, that is, an “IV” to support the blood volume of a bleeding patient and thus ensure adequate circulation and profusion of vital organs. IV’s also made it easier to give the injured life-preserving drugs. The paramedics carried a veritable pharmacy aboard their trucks. They had epinephrine, morphine, nitroglycerine, Phenobarbital, and several other drugs. In addition, paramedics might have to intubate the patient (they called it “tubing”) by inserting a flexible, plastic breathing tube into the mouth or nostril of the patient and down their throat. This facilitated the delivery of high quality oxygen to the oxygen-starved patient. If the patient was in cardiac arrest or had a heart rhythm that could not sustain adequate circulation, without which the body would be deprived of oxygen, the paramedics would defibrillate, that is, shock the heart in an effort to attain a normal or at least a sustainable rhythm.

But we would not need these skills tonight: False Alarm. Such pranks are a fact of life, a minor annoyance in our line of work.

My career as a firefighter corresponded almost exactly with a period of intense theological study. I completed the Phoenix Fire Academy, if my memory is correct, and became a professional firefighter on September 21, 1981. In the fall of 1982, I enter the Master’s program in Religious Studies at Arizona State University. Just three years before, in December of 1979, I had graduated with a degree in politics and history from the University of Arizona. I entered the job market at a time when the economy was in the grips of “stagflation,” a paradoxical condition of inflation *and* recession, each in the double digits, with double digit interest rates to boot. Getting a job was difficult. As a first generation college graduate, I bore the hopes and expectations of my family. The pressure was intense. I could not find a job. The jobs that I eventually found seemed “beneath me,” not requiring a college education at all, as I worked on the docks unloading parcels for UPS and taught adult basic education classes for Pima County, Arizona. This was after short stints as a salesman with Equitable Life (what a joke!) and as a manager trainee for Dial Finance (an even bigger joke!). That I did not become homicidal is a miracle. Bill Hart as a storm trooper for Capital, now that is a nightmare scenario!

I should have seen it coming. When I was fired from my job at Dial Finance, I had a weird sensation of anger and relief. I was angry at being misled about the nature of my work (they hired me as a manager trainee on the “fast track” but all I ever did was collect delinquent loans in Black and Chicano neighborhoods). However, my relief was as great as my anger since I would not have to do this dirty work anymore. My dirtiest deed was my last. I was sent to collect on a delinquent account of a Chicana who lived on the far eastside of Tucson, Arizona. As best I can reconstruct it, this is the story: married with children, this woman had borrowed eighteen hundred dollars for a girlfriend without her husband’s knowledge, which apparently continued a past practice of secretive

financial dealings. After making payments religiously for several months, her friend defaulted, which brought me, the wolf of finance capital, to this woman's door. While making arrangements for payment, her husband comes home. He eyes me suspiciously, wants to know who I am and why I am there. I explain. He goes ballistic. His anger is not directed at me but at his wife. He tells her that she has "fucked him for the last time," grabs a few things and leaves the house in a huff. Only later did I reflect on how potentially dangerous that situation was. He could have had a bullet for her and one for me too. As far as I know that was the end of their marriage. It was certainly the end of my job. I handed my boss the money that I had collected and he handed me a "pink slip." I felt like used toilet paper. Angry and relieved, I was also worried—the rent had to be paid. My roommate and I discussed the possibility of robbing a bank but quickly dismissed that idea as loony. But desperation can make you loony.

Other than firefighting, my only options were to become an adult probation officer or a Marine. I could run into burning buildings, hang out with murders and rapists, or become a real life G.I. Joe. And a Marine I almost became. Of course, it wouldn't have worked. I would have been court marshaled, or profiled as a crackpot through their psychological testing, or identified as a candidate for sedition, or merely recognized for my irritating and intolerable habit of asking too many damn questions and for a congenital inability to take orders. But desperation can make you do loony things. Becoming a Marine seemed better than being unemployed or underemployed. Frustrated by my lack of job success, I vowed that I would enroll in the U.S. Marine Corps' officers training program if I didn't have a good job by June of 1981. It was two days from D-day, decision day, when I would drive to the Marine recruiting office in downtown Phoenix and take an oath that would change my life. I will always be grateful for a phone call from Capitan Robert Gomez, who supervised firefighter training, notifying me that I had been accepted as a cadet. Only a few days earlier I had received a notice of hire from the Arizona Department of Probation but gleefully rejected a career in so-called "criminal justice." As for the Marines, to hell with the Marines! From Cuba to Haiti to the Philippines to Vietnam, the Marines had done more to threaten the security of others than to protect my security. And they had done it, that is, bully others, in my name, and with an annoying, gag reflex-inducing rhetoric of moral exceptionalism. And so it was that a little bit of hope in the form of the Phoenix Fire Department saved me from the looniness of desperation. I did not become a small pain in the Marines' ass and they didn't become a big pain in mine.

I became a firefighter as much by default as by choice. In contrast, I consciously chose to become a scholar. Firefighting is an exciting occupation. It is life on adrenaline. But it offers few intellectual challenges or outlets. While this is clearly fine for most firefighters, it was not fine for me. We called lazy firefighters, those who had lost the desire to fight fire or to do anything strenuous, "drones." To say that someone was "droning out" was only slightly less offensive than calling him a "fag." (Women didn't count, did not exist in this normative universe. Indeed, "our" favorite terms for women were "slash," "gash," "cunt," and "goo," all references to the female genitalia and their secretions. An especially attractive woman was referred to as "gooey.") While calling someone a drone was insulting, droning out intellectually was "standard operating procedure" as most firefighters preferred "reading" *Playboy*, *Hustler*, *Field & Stream*, and various gun magazines. Intellectual indifference was an aspect of the firefighting life that I could not live, so I read real books and was thought to be real weird. My discovery of Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941) occurred around this time. It transformed my thinking about Christianity, about the relation between knowledge and faith, about the difference between Christian idealism and Christian realism. I became a Christian realist. We realists, unlike the liberal-idealists understood the power of sin, how every evil is the corruption of a greater good. I learned the difference between taking the

Christian story seriously and taking it literally, about the symbolic rather than the historical truth of Christianity. I learned that pacifism was a luxury that Christians could not afford. Liberal-pacifist Christians let other people do their fighting, killing, and dying for them, thus remaining pristine in a world that was anything but pristine. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right. In a world that produced Nazis, Christian maturity required a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. On some level, despite many transformations, reservations, and disavowals of Reinhold Niebuhr and his legacy, *I am still a Christian realist*, a disciple of Jesus and of Machiavelli.

As part of my theological education, I read a little Barth, a little Tillich, and a lot of H. Richard Niebuhr, but they did not grab me the way ole Reinhold did. Reinhold had stolen my heart. But I'm a demanding lover. Soon there would be other suitors to fill my dance card. And when they came, I danced away. First there was Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne and Process Theology, then Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, Mary Daly, and Liberation Theology. All of a sudden, Christian realism while compelling seemed grossly inadequate. For all his talk of power, ole Reinhold did not understand the power of race and gender, of societies whose ruling ideologies were structured by white supremacy and male dominance. In addition, he overreacted to his own Marxist past by becoming the "house theologian" of the American Cold War establishment. His theology lacked the philosophical and theoretical sophistication of process theology, which scratched my metaphysical itch and made me itch in places I didn't even know that I had. Process Theology was intellectually invigorating. Here was a way of thinking about God that did not require a sacrifice of the intellect, which did not make absurdity (*a la* Tertullian and Kierkegaard) the object and/or proof of belief. To put it crudely, one could be "smart" and a believer too. This aspect of Process Theology appealed to me greatly as my self-conception was increasingly that of a left-wing Christian intellectual.

I loved the comprehensive simplicity of Whitehead's metaphysical categories: I. The Category of the Ultimate, II. Categories of Existence, III. Categories of Explanation, IV. Categoreal Obligations. For many, this may sound like dry and arcane stuff. But for those of us who "get off" on metaphysics (desire is always particular, peculiar, and idiosyncratic) these categories are at once comprehensive in their affirmative, descriptive, and explanatory power and aesthetically pleasing. They satisfy our desire for knowledge and beauty. I loved Whitehead's distinction between the "primordial" and the "consequent" natures of God, his concept of a God who lured rather than commanded; his distinction between pan(en)theism and pantheism, that is, the notion that everything is *in* God who is subject to growth rather than the notion that everything *is* God. Whitehead's concepts of *actual occasion*, *prehension*, *concrescence*, *novelty*, and *superject* were also attractive. Actual occasions or entities refer to basic realities, whether God or a grain of sand. They are the basic units of energy, "the final real things of which the world is made up." Prehension (feeling) refers to relations (negative or positive) between actual occasions. It is the basic type of perception, perception as a form of relatedness in which an actual entity as subject feels or grasps past objects and thus becomes itself. This creative, novel togetherness is concrescence or "concrete togetherness," which is the coming together of actual objects and eternal objects into a novel actual entity. Creativity is the means by which the *many* advance into a novel, complex *one*. "Creativity is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact." It is the "Category of the Ultimate." Ultimate reality, therefore, is *becoming* rather than *being*. The really real is the really new. Creativity is the lure or goad of prehension and the final cause of concrescence. Satisfaction is the final phase of concrescence during which the experiencing subject/actual entity perishes, reaches satisfaction and becomes an object, that is, a superject. As superject, it is the self-transcending (objectively immortal)

part of the actual entity, the subject. As such, it is thrown into the future as a potential object for other prehending actual entities. And the beat goes on.

I loved Whitehead's concept of immortality as eternal presence in the mind of God, as a *perishing transcendence*, which appealed to my naturalistic sensibilities, to my Darwinian-inspired sense that personal immortality was nonsense.²³ But there was something missing, a void, a lack. Not so much an ontological lack as a political lack. Process Theology was too much a theology of comfortable white men in North Atlantic societies. It did not speak to the wretched of the earth, to those whom the liberation theologians were trying to give voice, however inadequate their efforts. A war raged in my soul between the philosophical-theological elegance and aesthetic appeal of Process and the ethical-political urgency and relevance of Liberation.

I became a liberation theologian. Well, not exactly. But I did view myself as an interlocutor and "fellow traveler." Daly appealed to me the most because she challenged my thinking the most. She was the *gold standard* among feminist theologians. In her presence, I had to think very hard to hold onto anything at all. She made me uncomfortable. She disturbed my peace. She rooted me from one foxhole after another. Her critique was relentless. Her logic seemed unassailable once I had acceded to its premises. Christianity was in the grips of a vast patriarchy, The Patriarchy. All of its symbols, doctrines, rituals, and institutions were constructed by men and for men; this fact, this corruption, this Original Sin was irremediable. No blood could wash this stain away. It was indelible. . . . *What bizarre logic would construct blood as a cleansing agent anyway? Wasn't the notion that blood could purify/pacify/satiate the oldest and darkest of all superstitions? Wasn't this divine bloodlust the Original Sin? . . .* According to Daly, Christianity could not be reformed, revolutionized, or revised. It had to be abandoned. The fact that she was Catholic and I was Protestant did nothing to mitigate the power of her critique. It cut across the Catholic-Protestant divide like a diamond through glass. Her critique was so diamond-bright that I was blinded by it and intellectually immobilized for a while.

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I put down my copy of Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973) and rushed out the door to Engine 22. We had been dispatched on another EMS call. EMS stood for emergency medical service. Most of our calls were for first aid rather than fire suppression. Every Phoenix firefighter was a certified EMT or emergency medical technician, trained in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and other life preserving skills.

We arrived on the scene. A Chicano maybe 30 or 35 was in the backyard, on his knees, his head tilted to the side, his body stiff with rigor mortis, a green garden hose tied into a noose around his neck. Suicide. The elasticity of the hose and the tree limb had allowed his body to gradually sag toward the ground, proving Newton right one more grisly time. I do not wish to recall the huge number of suicides that I encountered during my eight years as a firefighter. But this suicide I cannot forget. Also unforgettable is the suicide of a battered woman, a wife or maybe a girlfriend, who we found in the corner of her bedroom closet--her hiding place, dying place and her last, desperate refuge against abuse--sitting in a crouching position, frozen in place by a drug-induced death. I can't get these images out of my mind or the image of a Vietnam veteran who lived with his parents, who could not readjust to civilian life, who could not "kick" the addictions he had acquired in "Nam," who was unemployed, a disappointment, a pain in the ass, and who shot himself in the mouth with a .45 automatic, blowing off the back of his skull.

We return to the station and tell jokes. Making fun of victims of disease, trauma, or fire is a strategy of psychological survival that is common in the medical profession, on the battlefield, or in any situation of chronic violence, suffering, and death. As firefighters, we had to distance ourselves from other peoples' pain and suffering. If we were to be helpful at all, if we were to do what we did best, then we had to keep our heads while all around us others were losing theirs. We understood that there was a division of labor. Our job was not the provision of compassion but the provision of potentially life-saving first aid. After a fire in which someone had been badly burned, we commonly referred to the burn victim as a "crispy critter." Yum, yum! Callus we were. But it was/is a necessary callousness, a sanity-preserving callousness, callousness in the service of life.

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My daughter Adrienne falls and scraps her knee. Carrol (my wife), with my son Kwame in tow, brings Adrienne to me for assistance. I engage in a quick act of triage: inspecting her wound, determining that it is not serious, and pronouncing my daughter "OK." Carrol is incensed by my callousness; I'm angered and befuddled by her overreaction. Life I am reminded once again is not easily compartmentalized. And yet compartments are necessary. I sigh (Is this instead of crying?) and think about crispy critters, a crouching woman, a .45 automatic in the mouth, and a dead man with a garden hose for a noose.

Act Seven

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps, for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be."

William Hazlitt²⁴

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Man is "a god who shits."

Ernest Becker²⁵

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"What is truth?"

Pontius Pilate²⁶

My father lost his mind. He went crazy when I was about a year old. He was quite mad, so mad that he had to be committed to the Arizona State Hospital for a year. Schizophrenia, I believe. I have long wondered whether I too would go mad. Evidence suggests that this malady is genetic. In my darker moods, I fear that this mind-stealing malady may track me down, adding me to its long list of victims. I am very intense. It's spooky. And more than a few people have been spooked. There is a nuclear fire in my chest running down to the pit of my stomach. Will my intensity drive my wife away? Frighten my children? Alienate my friends? Intensity is my treasure and wealth, my personal daemon and demon, the angel with which I wrestle lest it breaks my hip. Intensity is my friend, offering, and gift. But sometimes this gift is poison. I become unhappy when my intensity suffocates my sense of humor, when it descends on me in the shape of an enemy. Perhaps my intensity is driven by fear. Fear of what? Of losing my mind as my father lost his? Or perhaps I fear dying the way he died?

My father died on Super Bowl Sunday in 1995. It was early in the second semester of my first year at Duke University. The previous semester, I had tried my best to concentrate on the demands of my new job as assistant professor of religious studies. But it was difficult. I knew my father would die any day now. Just that previous spring semester in June of 1994, my mother and father had traveled to Princeton for my graduation. Two months earlier I had suffered a major shock when my mother called to give me the bad news. Daddy was terminally ill. The doctors had discovered a large cancerous tumor the size of an Italian sausage in the lower part of his esophagus. Damn! Esophageal cancer! This was the same deadly cancer that had killed my uncle “Dollar,” my favorite uncle and my father’s older brother. Both men were long-time smokers. And like so many black men, my father preferred the more deadly menthol brand cigarettes. I tried, knowing that I would be unsuccessful, to discourage my father from making the arduous trip from Phoenix to Princeton. But my father would have none of it. I was to receive my Ph.D. and my father wanted to see me graduate, even if it killed him. My graduation was a kind of vindication for a man who, until he acquired a GED in his forties, only had a fourth grade education, which was a legacy of the Jim Crow, agrarian-capital, share-cropping economy that characterized the work lives of most black people of his generation. I was profoundly sad and grateful at the same time: sad that he was dying, glad that he could experience, if only vicariously, the thrill that I was feeling. This would be the last rite that we, father and son, could celebrate and pass and repast together, before the last great rite passage, when he would pass into the arms of the ancestors.

I did not expect what I saw. My father—always a tall, strong, vigorous man, a titan, a mortal god, was frail and gaunt. The chemo and radiation therapies had weakened him. His diarrhea was constant. He climbed the stairs slowly and with difficulty, a feat that he performed several times a day, since the sole bathroom in our townhouse-style apartment was upstairs. . . . *I could not help but think of Ernest Becker who I had read in graduate school. He describes “man” as a god who shits.²⁷ I could think of no better metaphor for the human condition. The stench of shit, of my father’s diarrhea representing the loss of bodily control, the intimation of mortality, the putrefaction of death. . . .* His appetite was small like that of the incredibly thin, anorexic young women that you see in the movies. But his spirits—thank God!—were good. Six months later, around Christmas, I flew to Phoenix to see him for what I knew would be the last time. His decline was noticeable. He spent much of his time lying down. When he sat up, he would rock back and forth in an effort to free the trapped gas that caused him so much discomfort. The muscles in his intestines no longer undulated, moving their contents through. They were failing. All of the major organs of his body were failing. He wore a death mask for a face. As I looked at my father whose face I increasingly did not recognize, I saw a skull at the banquet of life staring back at me.²⁸

Bill was not aware of it at first. Perhaps he resisted this knowledge. But gradually, bit by bit, he became aware of his depression. His voracious appetite had grown puny. And he had lost a lot of weight. His powers of concentration—his single-mindedness, his ability to will and to think one thing²⁹—deserted him. Bill was extremely irritable. His anxieties and insecurities were out of control. He had lost his father. Who would he lose next, his wife? Bill’s mind began to play tricks on him. He began to see things that were not there. He saw ghosts. He saw ha’nts, spooks and specters. He saw—to use the language of his “sanctified” sister-in-law—demons. It wasn’t the “boogey man”—which, as a kid, he mispronounced as “booger man”—that he fear so much as the “other man.” It goes without saying that Bill should have gotten professional help. But he, that is to say, I was ashamed. My weakness and vulnerability frightened me. After all, I am a man, in many ways, a conventional man. As a “cause and effect” kind of guy, I tend to be less interested in feelings, including my own, than in reasons. Were I to wax philosophical about it, I would say that

“feelings without reasons are blind.” The prospect of doing what women learn to do, are hardwired to do from the time they are little girls, talk about their feelings, cry on each others’ shoulders, and kiss each others’ tears away was more distasteful than a street fight. I had been in street fights. A bloodied and broken nose was the kind of pain I could tolerate. Finally, I was able to gather my resources and find a way out of the black hole into which I had fallen. I found the Holy Spirit in a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. Johnnie (a strong spirit) was my comforter; my bridge over troubled water. Granted, swimming through scotch isn’t best way out of a black hole, though it seemed so at the time. A superior therapy (oh, how I hate of therapeutic culture!) was vigorous exercise, which increased my metabolism and helped to drive my lethargy away. But best of all, I did what I do best. I transformed my depression, my energy-sapping and mind-numbing sadness into an object of inquiry. After all, death is *the* muse of religion.³⁰

My father’s death rumbled through my life like an earthquake. I was thrown off balance for sometime. I had frightening thoughts that I never shared with anyone, even my wife. Do not get me wrong. I do not want to be melodramatic. I never *seriously* considered suicide, even if the theme song from the movie “MASH”—“Suicide is painless . . .”—played on stereo in my mind like a broken record. [First Editor: “*What a crock of shit. I don’t think we can trust Bill’s account at all. He is clearly lying.*” Second Editor: “*The first editor is obviously an idiot. I say that Bill misremembers. Perhaps he is trying to protect himself. As honesty is an often cruel and painful discipline, perhaps this is as honest as he can be with himself.*”] With my father’s death, my own mortality appeared to be closer than ever, as if I had become an old man overnight. However, my students helped me in ways they will never know; I owe them a debt I can never repay. What I needed then more than anything was someone with whom I could think. There are no tears as genuine as tears shed when thinking joins hands with feeling and one’s emotions are both honest and educated. Only by thinking through my sadness was I able to cry the kind of tears I had to cry. My students and I grappled with Schopenhauer’s “On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our True Nature,” Nietzsche’s wise and affirmative reflections, Zygmunt Bauman’s *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*; and, of course, Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death*.³¹ By attending to my students and my work, I was able to move from melancholy to mourning, from emotional paralysis to a new resolve. By getting a conceptual handle on the fact of death I was able to better handle the existential pain of my father’s death. The pain was exquisite. It still hurts.

“Call an ancestor’s name everyday and he shall live forever.”
(anonymous)

Sylvester Hart

February 27, 1923 to January 29, 1995

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At my father’s funeral, I gave a brief eulogy.
Despite my grief, I sent his spirit to the ancestors with a smile.
When I remember, and I take such remembrance and reverence as my duty, as my *religio*,
I pour him a libation of beer, wine, or scotch.

I love you Daddy.
I bid you adieu.

Farewell.

Perched
 Atop my father's shoulders,
 I see new vistas and distant horizons,
 my spirit soars and my gratitude grows deeper.

Memory and Expectation, Imagination and Desire: Such is the "Nature" and "Naturalness" of Transcendence.

NOTES

¹<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/nietzsc1.htm>. Source: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche's Complete Works*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Gordon Press, 1974).

² <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/s/salvador.131482.html>. The exact occasion of this quote by Dali is unclear but it is remarkably similar to a quote attributed to Charlotte Bronte: "There is only one difference between a madman and me. I am not mad."

<http://www.brainyquote.com>, the source of this endnote and notes 3, 5, 15, 16, 18, 20, and 23, is a huge commercial database consisting, as its homepage promotional puts it, of "Over 38,000 famous quotes by 10, 000 authors from Aristotle to Zappa!" The fact that this is a ".com" site rather than an ".org" or ".edu" site may be reason for an additional measure of skepticism when assessing the reliability of the source. On the other hand, sometimes a commercial motivation for "getting things right" can be as powerful a motivation as the goal of good scholarship.

³ <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/t/tomclancy.132000.html>.

⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Challenge of Blackness* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1972).

⁵ The actual quote is the following: "Sometimes a scream is better than a thesis."

<http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/r/ralphwaldo.127133.html>.

⁶ See Robert Corrington, *Nature Religion* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Little field Publishers, Inc., 1997), 151.

⁷ Even this claim is not quite accurate since, unlike Arius and his followers, I take it that Jesus was not metaphysically unique but merely human all too human. Of course, I maybe wrong. But I doubt it.

⁸ See Gill Deleuze and Felix Guataari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1983), p. 23.

⁹ I make the same claim for any person or thing (Nirvana, the Tao, etcetera) that people regard as sacred.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Samtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* vol. 10, p. 195, selection s[1] number 68, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinai, Berlin, de Gryter (1980). Unpublished fragments dating to November 1882 to February 1883.

¹¹ I borrow this phraseology from W. E. B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folks* (Library of America, 1986), p. 140. See the chapter "Of the Faith of the Fathers."

¹² Years later, this view of the wonder of God and creation would be supplemented by the following observation, which makes clear that no matter how marvelous the creation, life is violent; it exists at the expense of life:

What are we to make of a creation in which the routine activity is for organisms to be tearing others apart with teeth of all types—biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one’s own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses the residue. Everyone reaching out to incorporate others who are edible to him. The mosquitoes bloating themselves on blood, the maggots, the killer bees attacking with a fury and a demonism, sharks continuing to tear and swallow while their own innards are being torn out—not to mention the daily dismemberment and slaughter in “natural” accidents of all types: an earthquake buries alive 70 thousand bodies in Peru, automobiles make a pyramid heap of over 50 thousand a year in the U.S. alone, a tidal wave washes over a quarter of a million in the Indian Ocean. Creation is a nightmare spectacular taking place on a planet that has been soaked for hundreds of millions of year in the blood of all its creatures. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 282-283.

¹³In his review of the movie, film critic Roger Ebert offers the following comments:

... Andrew Sarris wrote about Griffith's masterpiece: "Classic or not, 'Birth of a Nation' has long been one of the embarrassments of film scholarship. It can't be ignored...and yet it was regarded as outrageously racist even at a time when racism was hardly a household word."

Here are two more quotations about the film:

"It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."-- President Woodrow Wilson, allegedly after seeing it at a White House screening. The words are quoted onscreen at the beginning of most prints of the film.

"...the President was entirely unaware of the nature of the play before it was presented and at no time has expressed his approbation of it."--Letter from J. M. Tumulty, secretary to President Wilson, to the Boston branch of the NAACP, which protested against the film's blackface villains and heroic Ku Klux Klanners.

Nobody seems to know the source of the Wilson quote, which is cited in every discussion of the film. "It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." These words were allegedly spoken by President Woodrow Wilson after a special screening the movie at White House. Whether true are not these words are quoted onscreen at the beginning of most prints of the film.

"The President was entirely unaware of the nature of the play before it was presented and at no time has expressed his approbation of it."—Letter from J.M. Tumulty, secretary to President Wilson, to the Boston branch of the NAACP, which protested against the film's blackface villains and heroic Ku Klux Klansmen.

Nobody seems to know the source of the Wilson quote, which is cited in every discussion of the film. Not dear Lillian Gish, who’s *The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me* is a touchingly affectionate and yet clear-eyed memoir of a man she always called “Mister” and clearly loved. And not Richard Schickel, whose *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* is a great biography. Certainly the quote is suspiciously similar to Coleridge's famous comment about the acting of Edmund Kean (“like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning”).

...

My guess is that Wilson said something like it in private, and found it prudent to deny when progressive editorialists attacked the film. <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/birthofanation.html>.

¹⁴ See Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1967), 49-52. Nietzsche quotes extensively from the original Latin version of Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*. Walter Kaufman provides an English translation in footnote 2 of the First Essay.

¹⁵ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970; rpt. New York: HarperPaperbacks), 44, 56-60, 65, 70-71, 83, 92-94, 106-107.

¹⁶ It has been nearly 25 years since I read this material and listen to broadcasts. Memory fades. Thus I have reproduced from the internet (http://www.religioustolerance.-org/anglo_is.htm) the information that follows, which is a good representation of what I recall:

Church beliefs during the period when [Herbert W.] Armstrong was in control include: [1] Identification of the British and American [Anglo-Saxon] people as descendants of two sons of Jacob: Ephraim and Manasseh. [2] Belief that the term "British" is derived from the ancient Hebrew word "beriyth" (covenant). [3] Belief that the term "Saxon" originated as "Isaac's Sons." [4] As the "lost" ancient Israelite tribe of Dan spread across Europe, they named many rivers, towns etc. after themselves (e.g. Danube River, Denmark, Donegal). [5] Rejection of the traditional Christian concept of the Trinity as being of pagan origin. Armstrong accepted a modified Arian view of the nature of God -- the teaching by Arius in the late third century CE. They believed that deity consisted of a dual divinity: The Eternal (their translation of the Hebrew name of God: Yahweh) and Jesus. He taught that that the Holy Spirit is a power, not a person. He promoted the concept of the "Family of God", which consisted of Jehovah, Jesus, and human believers in the WCG who became Gods. [6] At the crucifixion, Jesus' body and spirit died for three days and three nights. He was later raised by the Father and his human body was transformed into a spirit body. [7] Belief in Jesus is a necessary and sufficient requirement for salvation. Members will be rewarded in heaven according to their works: following the commandments of God (the 10 Commandments, dietary laws, holy days etc.). [8] Identification of the WCG with the "Philadelphia church" in Revelation 3:7. [9] Rejection of the concept of Hell as being pagan in origin. People who die without meeting the dual requirements (faith and works) for salvation will be resurrected, and taught Biblical truths. If they still do not accept the teachings, they will be cast into a lake of fire and simply cease to exist.

Original WCG Practices: [1] Observing the Jewish festivals of Passover, Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles, the Great Last Day and the First Day of the Sacred Year. [2] Worshiping on Saturday; the Sabbath was believed to start at sundown on Friday night. [3] Three ordinances: baptism by immersion, Lord's Supper, foot washing.

¹⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer. 2001. *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 27-36.

¹⁸ <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/f/frankzappa127414.html>.

¹⁹ <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/g/georgebern127620.html>.

²⁰ <http://ccel.org/a/augustine/confessions/confessions-bod.html>. Source: Augustine's *Confessions*, Book Eight, Chapter VII, Verse 17.

²¹ Actually, there is a hint of rapture theology in the following: "You'll look for me but I'll be gone. / Gone up to glory, where I'll scream and shout. / There be no one there to put me out. / I'm going away." However, such allusions do not constitute a theology. On the contrary, the rapture theme remains outside the normative theological imagination of the Black church.

²² <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/h/hlmencke.128127.html>.

²³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1929; rpt. New York: The Free Press, 1979), 18-26, 31-36, 185, 342-351.

²⁴ <http://www.brainquote.com/quotes/authors/w/williamhaz132326html>.

²⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York : The Free Press, 1973), 56.

²⁶ John 18:38. *NOAB*

²⁷ Ernest Becker, 56.

²⁸ Here I find William James' reference to the skull at the banquet an irresistible metaphor for human mortality.

²⁹ I borrow this phraseology from Soren Kierkegaard.

³⁰ In comparison to death, natality, birth and giving birth, appears as a relatively minor theme in the history of religion, religions, and the religious. Only in Buddhism does birth appear to have the significance that death does in other religions.

³¹ As morbid as this may sound, I was inspired by the dreadful, irresistible, and irremediable power of death, by its *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is, by a holy ambivalence, by fear and fascination, by the desire to look death in the face and to look away.³¹ Death was *Das Heilige*, the Holy, the "Wholly Other" that I needed to grasp with the two hands of my mind. It was this repulsive desire and desire for the repulsive that I had to explore. It is common knowledge, at least in intellectual circles, that depressed, highly reflective people sometimes romanticize death. I do not believe that I did. Others might beg to differ. In any event, my syllabus for Religion 212, "Theories of Religion," which I taught in the spring of 1996, included the following subject heading—DEATH AS THE MUSE OF RELIGION: SCHOPENHAUER, NIETZSCHE, AND BAUMAN. The readings for weeks three and four were "On Death And Its Relation To the Indestructibility Of Our True Nature," by Arthur Schopenhauer, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, by Zygmunt Bauman, and various selections pertaining to death from *The Portable Nietzsche*. Under the following headings, we read the following texts:

(1) A PHENOMENOLOGY OF VIOLENCE? David Carrasco, "Give me some skin: the charisma of the Aztec warrior," Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynching*, Sergio Cotta, "The violent act and its phenomenology," from *Why Violence?*

(2) VIOLENCE AS CATHARSIS (the colonial context): Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 7-106 and Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

(3) VIOLENCE AS CATHARSIS (the religious context): Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

(4) RESISTING DOMINATION: James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

(5) RESISTING PAIN: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

(6) RESISTING TERROR: Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*

(7) RESISTING DEATH: Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

(8) DECONSTRUCTING DEATH: Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*

(9) THE NON-DUALITY OF LIFE AND DEATH: David Loy, *Lack and Transcendence*.

I chose these authors and texts not only because they are important to the humanities and to religion studies in particular but because they were personally important to me. Schopenhauer is the most important, persistent and rigorous explorer of death and its various intimations—dread, disease, and despair, of the dark and pessimistic side of human existence in the Western tradition. Long before *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's ambivalent critique of European colonialism in Africa and before Hollywood appropriated that critique in "Apocalypse Now," Schopenhauer explored and charted the heart of darkness and the darkness of the human heart in meticulous detail. ("The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" Jeremiah

17: 9 NOAB.) So thorough and pessimistic was his account that Nietzsche, who regarded himself as Schopenhauer's student, eventually rejected his teacher with disgust. But that rejection was incomplete. The sense that death is the motive power, the zest of life is never far away in Nietzsche's work. If our virtues are nothing, if they are meaningless without our vices, then life is meaningless without death. Because we die, we cling to life. I used every intellectual resource that I had to cling to life.