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A CHEERIO TASTES LIKE THE BODY OF CHRIST

A MEMOIR

By

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BA English, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, 1977

Professional Paper

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A Cheerio Tastes Like the Body of Christ: A Memoir

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This memoir documents my personal spiritual journey from childhood to present day. I have selected six events from my history that illustrate this theme. The memoir describes my family's strong connection to the Roman Catholic religion, my participation in following the dogma of the Church, a rejection of the religion and the search for a philosophy that satisfied my needs. The settings for the pieces are in Idaho, Oregon, Italy, Sudan, Guatemala, and Montana.

For many years I have been on a path of self-discovery, trying to make sense of life's big questions concerning God and my purpose on this Earth. My extensive travels in Latin America, Europe, and North Africa were part of that search. I had many stories from those travels that I enjoyed sharing with family and friends. Although I was born into a traditional Catholic family, in my early twenties, I fell away from the Church. It was while I sat in Missoula's St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church in the summer of 2007 that I came upon the thread that could link my stories. I was in the church working on an assignment for Dr. Bolton's creative writing workshop when I was overcome by memories of the church and its significance in my life. Thirty years prior I had been seated in the same church attending my grandmother's funeral. I thought about my family's strong connection to St Ignatius Church. My mother was born in the town of St. Ignatius, Montana, and my grandfather worked cattle for the Jesuit fathers there. My mother's family moved to Missoula so she could go to Catholic schools. My grandmother lived in the same house across the street from the St. Ignatius Church for many years until her death at age 94. This was no ordinary church. It was a corner stone of our family history and was a part of who I am today.

The idea to write essays occurred to me while listening to Dr. Kriley's tales of his Catholic youth in Seattle. I felt we were kindred spirits, both hailing from an Irish Catholic family tradition and sharing a love and capacity for telling stories. Dr. Kriley, too, had admitted a falling away from the faith. The theme I was looking for became clear to me: the spiritual path from a Catholic upbringing to my personal philosophy of the present day fashioned by myriad experiences on three continents.

This project made even greater sense to me when I realized that thirty years ago as I traveled and worked my way through Europe and Africa, I dreamed of being a writer. I started but never finished a number of short stories. It was out of frustration with never finishing a work that I resorted to the simpler art form of writing poetry and song lyrics. This project offered the perfect vehicle to return to my original creative inspiration – prose writing.

I identified specific stories that carried this theme of a personal journey. I decided on six stories that I felt served as mile markers on my internal sojourn of spiritual growth and awakening. All were experiences I had verbally shared with others but had never written down. The first two pieces focus on my receiving the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation. Then I move to the time of falling away from the fold and an ironic visit I made to the Vatican in Rome to get my grandmother's rosary blessed. Next, I selected the story of the Sudan where I encountered the notion of past lives. The fifth memoir is located in Guatemala at the Mayan ruins of Tikal and describes an eerie vision I experienced. Finally, I tell of a sweat lodge experience on the Flathead Indian Reservation north of Missoula in western Montana.

I eagerly dove into the project, but it did not take long for me to realize writing was going to be a challenge. My personality is to work fast and ignore the minute details. For example, it is common for me to open a newly purchased electronic device, plug it in and turn it on, without ever reading the instruction manual. As I mentioned, for many years I have written poetry and song lyrics. There have been times that a song took months to develop and finish and others where my Muse delivered lyrics speedily. I was never one to labor over multiple revisions or drafts. This project forced me to leave my familiar style of writing. In order to do a competent job, I needed to write, think and revise multiple times. In addition to revisions that I made, I had four other individuals edit the work. I was often frustrated with the slow progress, but I learned

much about voice and style. I noticed reoccurring semantic and stylistic problems that these editors brought to my attention.

The proposal I submitted to the Creative Pulse Final Project committee outlined personal essays I intended to write; however, halfway through the project, I began to wonder if I was indeed writing personal essays. True to my nature, I was well into a project whose form I had not adequately defined. I researched memoir and found the book, *On Writing Well* by William K. Zinsser. A chapter in this book is dedicated to the memoir. Zinsser writes:

Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition. It may look like a casual and even random calling up of bygone events. It's not: it's a deliberate construction. (99)

I determined that I was engaged in writing memoir because what I was creating seemed more like autobiographical storytelling. It was not important that each piece strictly advance a singular theme, which is required of an essay, rather, the collection held a general theme that each piece would develop chronologically.

My wife, a Pulse graduate, suggested I read noted author Stephen King's book, *On Writing*. Once again, I did this reading well into the project. What I learned from King's book and incorporated into my revisions were his suggestions that come from what he calls his writer's toolbox. A first tool is vocabulary. He calls it "the bread of writing" (114) and explains:

The word is only a representation of the meaning: even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning. Given that, why in God's name would you want to make things worse by choosing a word which is only a cousin to the one you really wanted to use? (118)

In addition to learning to use the most precise word for the idea I wanted to communicate, I learned to be more active. King explains the role of verbs:

Verbs come in two types, active and passive. With an active verb, the subject of the sentence is doing something. With a passive verb, something is being done *to* the subject of the sentence. The subject is just letting it happen. *You should avoid the passive tense.*

(122)

King further makes his point for me when he notes:

I think timid writers like them (passive verbs) for the same reason timid lovers like passive partners. The passive voice is safe. (123)

In the grammar section of the toolbox, I found an explanation on the use of the adverb. I learned that over use of adverbs detracts from the goal of clear, direct, and succinct description. It is better to choose a strong verb and let it do its work alone, rather than modifying it with a string of adverbs. King writes:

The adverb is not your friend... With adverbs, the writer usually tells us he or she is afraid he or she is not expressing himself or herself clearly, that he or she is not getting the point or picture across. (125)

Finally, I learned about the notion of revision and drafting. King makes it very clear that writing needs to be looked at from many perspectives to ultimately reach the goal of direct and engaging writing. My wife related to me a quote from an unknown source that I will paraphrase: Sometimes you have to say goodbye to your favorite passages in order to produce solid writing.

With these tools and advice, I made corrections, said goodbye to some of my favorite clever passages, and saw my writing become tighter and easier to read, without letting go of my personal style of using simile and humor.

I found it fascinating to return to these experiences from my past, and I realized how these and other episodes from my life have fashioned me into the person I am today. The act of writing about life experiences has helped to clarify what I believe and why I believe it. Even though my personal philosophy of today is very different from what I learned as a child and young adult, I came to the conclusion that Catholic teachings on personal morality, compassion for others, and social responsibility are core values that guide me through my life today.

As I mention in the memoir, today I do the best I can to respect my parents' belief in the Catholic Church. When visiting them, I honor our long-held family tradition and attend mass. They have never made an issue of my breaking away from Catholicism, and I am greatly appreciative of their ability to accept my decision. Still, I was fearful of sharing with them the substance of my project. On a recent visit to their home, I told them about my memoir and asked them to read a few selections. True to form, they were open-minded and accepting, even though some of the topics were a bit radical for them.

So as I embrace middle age, what *is* my spiritual philosophy? Through writing this memoir, I concluded that for me the natural world is a place of peace, inspiration, and reflection. A life in Montana offers many opportunities to attend church among the mountains and rivers. Another conclusion is that positive human interaction is vital. During my time on the planet, I hope to embrace and understand as many people as possible.

In conclusion, I am very pleased with the results of this master's final project. Like any undertaking of value, it was challenging, time consuming, frustrating, yet in the end very



rewarding. This memoir is record of selected snapshots of my life that others can learn from or be inspired. I am excited to live the next chapters.

## Works Cited

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Zinsser, William K. *On Writing Well*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994

A CHEERIO TASTES LIKE THE BODY OF CHRIST

A MEMOIR

BY

STEVEN J. SCHWAB

## Preface

“Since the beginning of time, people have experienced a hunger, a deep instinctual need to make sense out of life. This sensation creates the idea that there is something, with which we long to make contact. This recognition is a prayer in itself. You could begin to define prayer as the attentiveness to this primal urge.” (Mary Faulkner and Bob O’Gorman, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Catholicism*, p. 185)

I was born into a strong Roman Catholic family tradition with a history of unwavering belief that goes back for generations. As a child and young adult, I willingly accepted the teachings of the Church and participated in its rituals and ceremonies. But once I was away from home and making my own way in the world, I began to question this belief system. I eventually became disillusioned with the Church and fell away. This was hard for my parents to understand, but thankfully this circumstance did not harm our relationship. Even though I rejected their faith, they did not want to lose a son over it.

For many years I felt no need to seek a meaningful belief system that provided a framework for my faith. However, a series of personal experiences eventually led me to search for answers concerning my personal spirituality. Mexico, Central America, Europe, Africa, and an Indian reservation in Montana were the settings for the forging of this personal philosophy.

I would like to thank my wife Susan for the many hours she patiently listened to me review these stories, and for her fine editing skills. Another special thanks goes out to Jean Munch and Lisa Gunther, who graciously agreed to edit my work. Also, I want to thank my brother, Jack Schwab, for doing the final edit. I asked him to be my editor a long time ago, when I had romantic notions of being a writer. It only took me 30 years to deliver a manuscript to him.

I want to dedicate this work to my parents John and Pat Schwab of Portland, Oregon. Thank you for instilling in me a curiosity about the world and the independence to travel geographic and soul-searching miles to discover for myself what it means to inhabit the planet.

## A Cheerio Tastes Like the Body of Christ

### For Heaven's Sake

Don't eat breakfast just before you go to Mass! Out of respect for the sacrament, Catholics refrain from eating or drinking anything but water for an hour before receiving Communion. Before Vatican II (1960), Catholics were not supposed to eat or drink from midnight until they received the Eucharist." (Mary Faulkner and Bob O'Gorman, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Catholicism*, p145)

My ancestors from Ireland and Germany were cut from the same cloth. Their lives were tightly woven into the fabric of the Catholic Church. Mother Church met their spiritual, educational and social needs. I am a part of that family quilt that has been cast over many generations providing comfort and meaning to life. This family history has strongly influenced who I am. My Irish ancestors gave me their wit, skill at telling a story, sense of fun and periodic dark moods. My German forbearers passed to me a sense of responsibility, respect for hard work and achieving goals. All that they were and all that I came to be was wrapped in the Church. It was a tightly wrapped world with unchallenged rules. The Catholic Church was our family. Priests are referred to as *Father* and nuns are called *Sister* and *Mother*. The Pope is the father of the Church on earth. This creates a very paternalistic relationship. Grandparents through infants were the children of the Church.

The year was 1959, Salmon, Idaho. The Catholic Church was prominently situated off of Main Street. It was a quaint, stone structure with a cool, shaded grassy area and a small stream bending and turning through the property. Because Salmon didn't have a Catholic school, I started first grade in public school and attended my first Catechism classes at the church on Sundays.

We gathered in a basement room to read Bible stories and recite prayers like the "Our Father" and "Hail Mary." The well-meaning Catechism teacher spoke with a lilting voice and

excitement in her eyes as she told us about the life and lessons of Christ. I tolerated the religious studies as well as I could. I tapped my right foot incessantly and rocked back and forth on the metal folding chair. The stories from large picture books piqued my curiosity. Adoring disciples surround Christ dressed in white flowing robes. In the garden of Gethsemane, Judas gestures toward Jesus in betrayal. The Son of God bloody and crowned with thorns carries his wooden cross through the cobbled streets jeered by spectators. Those graphic and realistic depictions of Jesus fascinated me. Jesus lived in an exotic place in an ancient time.

At such a tender age, not even well illustrated picture books held my attention for very long. I looked forward to a break in the lessons where we would play in the nearby meandering stream under the cool cover of aspens. I loved to make small boats out of leaves and sticks and launch them. I delighted in watching them find a path through the small stones and tree roots and float along the gentle current. I also enjoyed it when Father Donohue, our parish priest, wandered over to investigate. He was a round and ruddy faced, jovial clergyman who took the time to enter the world of children.

I knew Father Donohue fairly well because he was a regular guest at our home for dinner. This notion of offering priests a home-cooked meal was a tradition that my mother learned from her childhood experiences growing up on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana. Her family lived across the street from the St. Ignatius Mission Church in the small reservation town of St. Ignatius. The priests were from the Jesuit order, and the town was named for the founder of the order, St. Ignatius Loyola.

When we moved south to Rupert, Idaho in 1962, Father Malachy McNeil became the next recipient of the frequent offer to dinner. He stood tall with clear blue eyes, had a prominent mole on his face and combed his dishwater blond hair straight back. Father McNeil hailed from

Ireland and enjoyed a shot of whiskey after a meal. We all loved his Irish brogue, especially my mother who was all-Irish herself.

The family meals with Father Mc Neil were raucous and robust dining experiences. Four kids from ages eleven to three flanked Mom and Dad. The menu would include entrées like scalloped potatoes and ham, tuna casserole with crispy Chinese noodles generously sprinkled on top or pot roast with potatoes and carrots. Our parish priests were like extended family. Those evenings around the table were imbued with humor, discussions of current events, and a genuine enjoyment of each other's company.

Even though Catechism was the focus of my Catholic education, I was also learning about the Catholic community. It was as if I were a member of an exclusive club. Our lives were woven into the fabric of the Church. This exclusivity first became apparent while living in Rupert. My parents bought a huge home on a prominent downtown corner across the street from the imposing Mormon Church. The previous owner was a Mormon bishop, and that became the scuttlebutt around town. A Catholic family was living in the bishop's old home. I remember a neighbor kid asking me what it was like to be a Catholic. He said, "Some people think Catholics are weird. But I don't. I like you people." For the first time I felt singled out or suspect because of my religion. I asked my mom why people didn't like us because we were Catholic. She comforted me by explaining that people are basically all the same, but they can be cruel to each other for silly reasons.

St. Nicholas Church in Rupert supported an elementary school. As a third grader, I entered parochial school for the first time. The hallmark of third grade was the right of passage ceremony, the First Holy Communion. The preparation process consumed the good nun, my teacher. We spent our religious education hours becoming spiritually ready for receiving the

body of Christ, symbolized as a thin wafer of bread called a host. When blessed by a priest during mass, this bread was transformed into the body of Christ. Jesus performed this same ritual at the Last Supper.

Sister schooled us on the importance of this sacrament, and we practiced our solemn procession into the church with measured steps like a wedding march, hands placed together in prayer. Filing up to the altar to receive the host had to be executed with precision. The entire congregation would be watching closely. My teacher's reputation depended on a flawless ceremony all could be proud of.

The day I was to receive my First Holy Communion finally arrived. I was excited over being specially recognized. I wore a new suit, white shirt, and clip-on bow tie. My hairstyle was a crew cut with a bit of Brylcreem rubbed in to harness the untamed cowlick. As I dashed through the kitchen to the bathroom, I passed my baby sister Barb sitting in her high chair munching Cheerios. I felt a bit hungry, but I had learned from my studies that Catholics must fast from midnight Saturday until mass on Sunday to be spiritually prepared to receive the body of Christ. Fasting was a sacrifice, denying the body nourishment to make it more pure. It was while straightening my tie for the last time in the bathroom mirror that I tasted a flavor I knew well: a Cheerio. My stomach collapsed as if I had been sucker punched by a bullying eighth grader. I knew it was only a toasted oat morsel ironically shaped like a life preserver, but because I knew I had broken the fast, I instantly spit it out. I realized I had unconsciously popped the morning appetizer into my mouth as I passed Barb's high chair. I immediately ran to my mom and informed her of my transgression. She and my dad decided they had to call Father McNeil for guidance. He determined that I had broken the fast, and that I could not go through the



ceremony. I would have to wait to receive my First Holy Communion until the mass that followed our ceremony later that day. No fanfare, no measured steps. I had to go it alone.

In these formative years of my Catholic education, I learned about the basic doctrine of the church, a respect for our parish priests and the family tradition of welcoming them into our home for socializing and home cooked meals. Looking back now I realize that for my parents the word of a priest was not to be overruled. As religious servants of God the clergy wielded near absolute power. I learned that to be a part of the Catholic family, I must adhere to the rules. My innocence and excitement about receiving my First Holy Communion was smothered by guilt and shame.

## **Boot Camp for a Soldier of Christ**

“To receive Confirmation one must be in a state of grace. One should receive the sacrament of Penance in order to be cleansed for the gift of the Holy Spirit. More intense prayer should prepare one to receive the strength and graces of the Holy Spirit with docility and readiness to act.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 365)

I was born into a family with a Catholic tradition that found its way to America from Ireland and Germany. The Church was placed at the center of our lives. We followed the doctrine of the church and participated in all religious ceremonies and sacraments. For my family, a greater level of involvement was expected. We were encouraged to serve. Just as a young man may enlist in military service to uphold and protect the ideals of a nation, we were enlisted to do the same for our Catholic community. This sense of duty was manifested in many ways.

My great grandfather, Adolph Schwab, and his brothers were instrumental in bringing monks from Germany to Oregon to administer the faith. The Schwabs, along with other German immigrants, built an abbey in the Willamette Valley to house the monks and provide a space for a seminary to train young men to be members of the clergy. The abbey, still active today, is situated on a prominent hill in Mt Angel, Oregon.

My grandfather, Joe Owens, worked on the Flathead Reservation for the Jesuits running their cattle operation at their mission at St. Ignatius, Montana. Grandma Owens worked in service to the church in many capacities on the Reservation and in Missoula, Montana where she lived across the street from St. Ignatius Loyola Church for many years.

Some in our family were called to the clergy. My father has a cousin who is a priest and another who is a former nun. I have a cousin who was a priest with the Maryknoll Order until he left a life of celibacy and married a nun. The most colorful was Father Charles Owens. He was

commonly known as Faf. His nickname came from one of his young nieces who could not correctly produce the word *Father*. He was a member of the Jesuit Order and spent over 30 years on the Crow Reservation in Montana. The crooner, Bing Crosby, was one of his students at Gonzaga University, and stayed a lifelong friend. He was also given the honor of being accepted as a tribal member in the Crow Nation.

This sense of service was evident in my immediate family. My father was an usher for church services for many years. My mother was a member of Order of Mary whose task was to keep fresh flowers adorning the church altar, and my three brothers and I served as altar boys and read from the scriptures during Sunday mass. We were all enlisted in various capacities to be in service to the Church.

When I began serving as an altar boy, the mass was in Latin. There were various prayers that altar boys needed to recite. Because memorizing liturgical passages in Latin was a bit of a stretch for a third grader, my task was simple: ring the bells at the appropriate time. I concentrated very hard on ringing them at the right moment and for the proper length of time. I made a few mistakes at first and everyone in the congregation was aware of them because the ritual was the same every Sunday. Father Malachy McNeil was patient with me. After a short time my accuracy improved, and I felt proud of my part in the ritual.

Within my family another ritual was emerging. That ritual was loading up the moving van and hitting the highway to a new life in a new town. We moved four times before I was in the fourth grade. We lived in Rupert, Idaho for less than two years, and then we moved to Portland, Oregon. We rented a house in north Portland, and my brothers and I enrolled in Holy

Cross Catholic School. My dad's cousin, Father Elwin Schwab, presided as the parish priest. I felt like a celebrity because I was related to him.

I began fourth grade at St. Charles Catholic School because we moved again, this time to northeast Portland. Our teachers were principally nuns from the Holy Child Order, although there were a few matronly lay instructors. We referred to our nuns as *Mother* rather than *Sister*. I can still envision the faces of Mother Gemma, Mother Rose of Lima, Mother Ellen and Mother Gregory Mary. Some of the nuns were the subjects of our myths and stories. It was said that Mother Ellen once stabbed a boy in the hand with her red correcting pen when he was caught cheating. We were very afraid of her.

Mother Gregory Mary was a cool and contemporary nun. I was present when she brought a television set to school so we could watch a National Baseball League playoff game. Her favorite team, the Los Angeles Dodgers were playing the San Francisco Giants, and the winner would go to the World Series. Sometimes at recess she would roll up her sleeves, exposing her pale arms, and play softball with us. The strict nature of her religious order became apparent, when Mother Gregory Mary was denied a request to watch us play basketball. Compared to the others she was a rare commodity: a nun from another planet.

Another myth held that there was a tunnel that extended two hundred yards from the priests' residence to the nun's convent. No real proof was ever unearthed.

The Holy Child nuns wore a traditional black habit that covered all but their hands and faces. A white headpiece encircled their faces covering the ears, forehead and neck. They looked like they were kids at a carnival getting their picture taken by placing their faces in a plywood cutout of a clown. Each of them had a large, beaded rosary with a cross at their hip, and each wore medium heeled, black shoes that reminded me of shoes worn by the Wicked Witch of the

West. We often discussed what might lurk under those stark and sterile habits. Did they wear underwear? Were they bald?

At St. Charles, we were required to wear a uniform, which immediately pegged us as Catholic school kids as we walked or pedaled to and from school each day. Boys wore a long or short sleeved white shirt, a long-sleeved, green v-neck sweater and salt and pepper cords. The girls donned a white blouse, a green sweater, and a plaid skirt. There was a rigid regimentation to our school days, and it was reflected in the uniforms worn by students and teachers alike.

Baptism and receiving the First Holy Communion were the first acts of initiation; the next important step in becoming a full-fledged practicing Catholic was to be confirmed. The Confirmation ceremony happened in the seventh grade. Similar to First Communion, it was incumbent on the teacher to educate the class well regarding the doctrine of the Church. As a result of our confirmation we were termed soldiers of Christ. From this point on we were expected to be in service to the Church.

I first experienced a Confirmation ceremony the year before my own Confirmation, when I was a sixth grader. I volunteered to serve the mass and aide in the ceremony. Confirmation is a very serious step in the eyes of the Church, the congregation and parents. The focal point of the ceremony is when the presiding archbishop queries the Confirmation students about their faith. I can recall feeling sorry for the seventh grade kids being put on the spot to respond to questions on our religion. I started to get nervous about the coming year when I may well have to stand on shaking legs and speak with a hushed and confused voice in response to a question from *His Grace* the Archbishop.

When the Confirmation ceremony was over and I was back in the sacristy or preparation room behind the altar with my fellow altar boy Gerry, our parish priest waved us over to

officially meet the Archbishop. Our pastor, Father Reynolds, introduced me first. The archbishop extended his hand to me palm facing down. I gave it a firm grasp and then a quarter turn to the left and I shook vigorously. “Nice to meet you, sir,” I said. Gerry followed suit. The archbishop smiled. The glare radiating from Father Reynolds’ stern eyes informed me that we had done something wrong; some aspect of archbishop decorum had been innocently ignored. Father Reynolds quickly ushered us away, and when we were far enough down the back hallway to have some privacy, he scolded us: the hand offered to us by the leader of the Archdiocese of Oregon bore a ring that we were supposed to kiss, not grab and shake like a dog toy; and he is referred to as *Your Grace* not Sir. Father sent us into the changing room and stomped away down the narrow, dark hallway. We were shaken by the interaction and swore to never tell anyone.

In almost exactly one year’s time I was back in St. Charles Church on the threshold of becoming a confirmed soldier of Christ. Once again the church was filled to capacity with family, friends and congregation members. Beautiful flower arrangements adorned the altar and excitement was in the air. This was partly because the highly respected Archbishop Howard was present to query us individually on the doctrine of the Church and bestow on us the sacrament of Confirmation. Our parents and the congregation may have been in a high state of excitement, but we who were about to be confirmed were shaking with fear. I had a case of the butterflies to an extent that I had never experienced before. All the symptoms associated with nervous stress were there. I had the cotton ball dry mouth, the washrag damp palms, and the neatly pressed dress shirt plastered to my back with salty moisture. The problems that arose with receiving my First Holy Communion were like a walk in the park compared to this Confirmation ceremony. This was serious pressure for a thirteen year old to endure.

The Archbishop wore ornate vestments and a hat shaped like a bird's open beak as he entered the church with much fanfare. Two priests, four altar boys and the scent of incense accompanied him. He approached the altar and carefully sat in a regal throne-like chair. A small table was situated to his left. On that table was only one item—a typed sheet of paper with our names on it. He was seated for a few moments, and then he carefully lifted the sheet off the table. He looked it over for what seemed like an eternity. He called out a name. The student rose and waited for the question. The future soldier answered it as best as he could, and His Grace uttered those words born on the wings of angels, "You may sit down." He called on three or four of my fellow students before it was finally my time to pay for the crude hand shaking incident. "Steven Schwab," he said in a booming voice. I stood up trembling and perspiring as much as a thirteen-year-old pre-pubescent freckled lad could. He asked me a question. "What is a sacrament? I shifted in my shoes and swallowed hard. "I know this," I told myself. My pause was uncomfortably long before my shaking voice produced a brief and inaccurate answer. He responded, "Don't you mean a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace?" "Yes, *Your Grace*," I answered. With that he spoke the blessed words, " You may sit down."

When the questioning was completed, we began our well- practiced march up to the altar. A sponsor escorted each member of our class. This was someone we selected to be our role model, as an exemplary adult member of the Church. One by one we stood before the Archbishop, with our sponsor's hand resting at the shoulder. Then His Grace administered a symbolic slap across the face with a white glove to represent Jesus' parable that to be a true Christian one must turn the other cheek. From that moment forward we were in Christ's army of the faithful.

My coming-of-age ceremony was completed. Mine was not as challenging as some I had read about. I did not have to fast and live in a cave and hunt for my own food like boys in Africa. Still, I stood before my Catholic community and paid a price in sweat and brief humiliation. I successfully graduated from Confirmation boot camp. The ritual had taken place following strict guidelines, but realistically at age thirteen I really did not feel prepared to be a soldier in service of Christ. I was not ready to follow in the footsteps of generations of my family who had dedicated so much time to the Church. Instead my mind was focused on improving my jump shot at the hoop in the driveway, and weekend bike rides to distant neighborhoods.



## **A Backpackers Guide to the Vatican**

“The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter’s successor, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful. For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as the pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 254))

My family history is deeply rooted in the Catholic faith, and the influence of the Church has been woven into the fabric of the lives of my ancestors and my immediate family. It defines, in part, who we are, and it is the glue that keeps us united and respectful of each other.

But the fabric frayed in time and my affiliation to the Church came to an end when I drifted away from the fold. How could it be that the Catholic faith could provide many generations of my family with comfort and the answers to life’s most compelling questions, yet not speak to me? How did this falling away transpire? Was it that I came of age in the late 60’s and early 70’s when a major shift in our popular culture shook the very foundation of America? The new societal dogma was to question authority and long held traditions. A new sense of community emerged embracing millions of young people – regardless of race or creed - as long as they were of the same mind. A seismic rift developed between much of America’s youth and their parents. I recall prominent anti-war activist Jerry Rubin’s words, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty.” The Woodstock Music Festival, the Age of Aquarius, experimentation with drugs, free love, and protests against the war in Vietnam coalesced to create a new sense of brotherhood, sisterhood and belonging. The Catholic community no longer seemed relevant.

Still, I could not deny the importance and the impact the Church had on my family. Thus, I graciously participated in worship when I knew my presence was important to them. It was therefore wildly ironic, that in the midst of my falling away from Catholicism, I journeyed thousands of miles to its geographic heart.

The Holy See. Vatican City, the heart, soul and history of the Catholic Church, is situated on a little over 108 acres. The walled city located within the embrace of Rome, Italy is the smallest independent city-state in the world. For as long as I can remember, I have known of St. Peter's Basilica, the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Square and the Swiss Guard who provide security for the pope and his great city. I arrived at the gates of this fabled city because I was on an important mission. I needed to see Pope Paul.

Ten years of parochial schooling ended with my graduation from Central Catholic High School. The following fall I moved to Salem, Oregon, home to the state capital and Willamette University. I had mediocre success in my academic pursuits and routinely skipped mass on Sundays to recover from the weekly Saturday night bacchanal at the fraternity house.

In time I decided to be an English major. As such, I learned to analyze literary works and to think critically. I applied this newfound ability to the question of my spiritual beliefs. The Catholic mass is heavily laden with rituals that were first enacted by Christ at the Last Supper. Catholic priests repeat his famous words, "Do this in memory of me," each time they say the Mass. I saw little value in the centuries old rituals. While visiting my parents on weekends and during the summer break, I attended mass as a courtesy. At best, I hoped for a good sermon from our parish priest. If he could inspire me to be a better human being with insightful words from the pulpit, then it was worth the hour spent. But, I was seldom moved by the words that rang out in that sanctuary of towering stained glass.

I know I hurt my parents by abandoning the ship of our family's long held faith. They struggled to understand why. I was never lectured or threatened. Voices were never raised. I did however suffer the occasional snipe, such as, "When I am at church on Sunday I will pray for you."

After my sophomore year, I decided to take time off from my college studies to travel to Europe for three months with a friend from high school. My Grandma Molly happened to be visiting from Missoula, Montana on the day of my departure. She insisted I take her rosary with me to keep me safe. I tried to say no because I knew she had used it to pray at the funerals of her husband, a grandfather I never knew, and five of her eight children. I knew the rosary had great sentimental value and was an artifact of family history. I was no longer a practicing Catholic, and I felt that it would be sacrilegious for me to possess such an important family symbol of faith. Additionally, I was worried how secure it might be as I rambled and hitchhiked through Europe with my backpack, bellbottoms and scraggly beard.

As a compromise, I told my dear grandma that I would get it blessed by the pope and then return it to her. I was not sure how it might happen, but I was going to try my hardest to bring it to fruition.

The snoring bothered me the most. My high school friend sawed Douglas Firs, Western Red Cedars and Hemlocks from our native Oregon every night that first month in Europe. Over beers in Munich, I broached the subject of separating and traveling on our own for a time. He agreed, and we planned to meet in one month at the American Express office in that same city. And so, I was off to Italy to experience Italian history, art, and architecture, and to fulfill my promise to Grandma Molly.

I traveled through northern Italy and arrived in Rome by train. My senses – my very being were captive to the romanticism of the art and ancient culture of the Apennine Peninsula. I sat reflectively for hours writing journal entries and penning poetry. Curiously, I was not moved in any spiritual way by the experience. Rather, it was a humanistic attraction. Even though faith

inspired Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo Da Vinci to accept artistic commissions by the Church and its leaders, I was drawn into their work because of who they were and the history of their times.

In 1973, Pope Paul VI was the Pontiff, or head bishop, of the Catholic Church. His many titles suggest his stature: the Vicar of Christ, the Rock of the church and Shepherd of the faithful. He was one of the world's most powerful men, and I needed to make an appointment with him. He gave a public audience once a week in a huge Vatican auditorium. He spoke a few words to the international gathering and then blessed them with the papal sign of the cross. I secured a ticket and arrived promptly at the gigantic stone structure adjacent to St. Peter's Basilica. A crowd had begun to form. People of all ages hailing from many points on the globe eagerly awaited the opportunity of a lifetime: to witness God's representative on Earth, to be that much closer to God himself.

I felt out of place. A towering Swiss Guard took our tickets, and we pilgrims entered the spacious edifice with rows of pews that stretched across the marble floor like orderly crops in rich farmland. I took my seat somewhere near the middle of the building. Short, matronly Italian women clad in black dresses, their heads covered in lacy black veils, surrounded me. I attempted eye contact and smiled nervously. I was very self-conscious.

A profound hush came over the capacity crowd. This was it: the pope, the rosary, and the fulfillment of my promise to Grandma. Eight Swiss Guards in orange, blue and red striped uniforms and with metal helmets sporting red ostrich feathers bore the weight of the Pope seated on a litter. They paraded Pope Paul VI into the assemblage with the slow practiced steps of a wedding march. All who were able stood out of respect and took in the spectacle. When they delivered him to the front of the auditorium, the Swiss Guards carefully set the litter down, and

the pontiff stepped off and proceeded up a short series of steps to the podium. Then Pope Paul, in a white cassock trimmed in gold, and a white skullcap, greeted the faithful in Italian, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. The greeting was simple and sincere. He welcomed us saying he would pray for us and for a more peaceful world. He spoke for about ten minutes and then methodically returned down the steps to walk down the aisle and exit the building. The diminutive Italian mothers and grandmothers who circled me quickly stood, took their rosaries, and held them aloft. I reached for the rosary lodged with my passport for safekeeping and timidly stood up. I towered over the women on both sides of me. They mournfully pleaded again and again, "Papa, Papa, Papa," as they held out their rosaries. I was reminded of the painful look of Christ on the cross and the tortured and sculptured countenances of countless saints I had seen in churches and cathedrals where suffering was heralded as a virtuous undertaking. These women wore that same face of suffering.

The pope walked down the center of the aisle, and with his right hand made the sign of the cross directing his blessing to the pews and pilgrims from one side to the other. As he drew nearer, two of my black veiled neighbors elbowed past me to have better access to the pontiff, their rosaries dangling from their insistent fingers. I reached over the head of a woman pressed against my side just as the pope looked my way and delicately drew a cross with his hand. In that same instant I held up Grandma Molly's blue glass beaded rosary to meet his blessing. For a moment, I questioned for my Grandma's sake, whether the rosary was in the right trajectory of the air born blessing. Finally, I figured if it wasn't a bull's eye it was mighty close. Pope Paul slowly moved down the wide marble aisle. I watched him from the back and caught glimpses of his countenance as he methodically cast his blessing from right to left and back. And then he was gone. As we filed out, a profound and reverent quiet hung in the air. There was only the shuffle

of hundreds of feet from people in a reflective mood knowing they had just witnessed something very special. I, too, was moved by the experience. Not because I had been in the presence of Pope Paul. Instead it was the satisfying pleasure I derived from doing something special for my grandma.

Some weeks after my return home, I made my way to Grandma's house on West Broadway in Missoula. I returned the blessed rosary, and she delighted in hearing my account of being in the presence of Pope Paul.

My appointment with the pope did not inspire me or move me spiritually, but I hoped that through my visit to the Vatican, my Irish-Catholic Grandma Molly could from that day forward hold his spirit and grace in her frail hands. She prayed daily with that rosary for five more years until her death at age ninety-two.

At her funeral I reflected on what I remembered from my religious studies and my experiences with saying the rosary, which is constructed very much like a chant. Supplicants repeat the prayers aloud as they move their fingers from bead to bead. The Hail Mary is the most common prayer as it is repeated fifty times.

Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee  
Blessed art thou among women and blessed is  
The fruit of thy womb, Jesus  
Holy Mary, Mother of God  
Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death  
Amen

I remembered kneeling in our living room with aching knees and saying the rosary with my parents, siblings and grandparents. I recalled fighting the urge to rest my butt on my heels to take the pressure from my bony knees. In our own small way, we were to suffer like Christ had suffered. I realized after my visit to the Vatican that for me, the rote and monastic repetition of scripted words was not prayer. However, the genuine act getting my grandma's rosary blessed

was. Human to human contact borne out of love and respect was a type of prayer I could believe in.

## Past Lives in North Africa

“And as it is reserved for men to die once for all with judgment following,”  
(Hebrews 9:27)

Question authority, break from tradition, and if it feels good do it: these were standard themes that resonated from the doctrine of the youth revolution of the late 60s and early 70s. During that time, I walked away from the Catholic faith that had been at the center of my family’s long history, and I searched for a spiritual path that spoke to me. I was not sure what the alternative would be, but I hoped I would know it when I encountered it.

It was on a three month trip to Europe in the winter of 1974 that I became convinced that the best path to a satisfying spiritual life and a peaceful afterlife was to engage and connect positively with as many people as possible. This very humanistic approach was tangible. I could *feel* the power of warm and loving relationships. It was a philosophy that spoke to me.

The sojourn through Europe gave me a love of travel, so four years later I embarked on a return trip to Europe and North Africa. It was in Egypt and Sudan that I encountered a philosophy of reincarnation so radical and foreign that it both angered and frightened me. I knew the Roman Catholic way was not for me, and I considered myself an open-minded child of Aquarius. But when it came to the concept of past lives my mind closed like a steel trap.

My travel partner, Robert Berg, and I felt trapped as we sat on a truckload of baskets. The truck bed had the spring action of a trampoline. The sun baked our skin and left our lips dry and cracked. The truck followed no road, only the ruts of trucks that had gone before us. The uneven ground turned this trip into something more like a bronco ride at a rodeo. Robert and I had to hold on desperately just to stay in the English-made lorry. The Sudanese Sahara revealed an endless landscape of dry desolation. The extreme heat and discomfort challenged my endurance.



Robert was holding up better than I was. According to him, he had lived this life in the desert before, during a past life as an Arab trader.

We met while waiting for a ferry to take us across Lake Nasser from Aswan in Egypt to Wadi Halfa, the first city in Sudan. The Aswan Dam on the Nile River created the immense lake. As the only Western travelers among the hundred or more gathered to make the crossing, we quickly found each other. Sharing travel stories created a degree of comfort, so we decided to travel together into Sudan and then on to Khartoum, the capital. But after a few days my initial impression of Robert changed with his talk of past lives.

Robert Berg had a full head of auburn colored hair, a beard to match, steely blue eyes, and the delicate hands of an artist. He wore a khaki long-sleeved shirt, jeans and hiking boots. He spoke in measured, hushed tones that communicated a contemplation of each word or phrase before releasing it out into the world. Robert's demeanor was mostly serious and reverent, as if he were a medicine man or high priest walking gently through the world. I was the complete opposite, and his way of being disconcerted me.

He spoke passable Arabic, and the purpose of his trip was to purchase blankets, pottery and jewelry to resell in the States. He had been to the region twice previously.

We disembarked from the ferry and caught a bus to Wadi Halfa. From there we traveled by train to Atbara in central Sudan. The train ride tested my patience and endurance. The four-hour wait on the train before departure was a harbinger of the trip ahead of us.

Once we finally pulled out of the station, the vintage locomotive traveled slowly across the desert landscape. The temperature was well over 100 degrees under a cloudless blue sky. The train overflowed with weary passengers squeezed onto concrete-hard wooden benches, while others stood or sat in the aisles. Most men wore colorful skullcaps and solid colored galabayas,

the customary floor length gown. Other men sported white turbans that reminded me of enormous wasp nests. Most of the women were Sudanese, and they wore beautiful flowing gowns and scarves of scarlet, jade and magenta.

Robert and I were presented with a serious dilemma. Was it better to have the windows closed or opened during the trip? If the windows were left open, air was able to circulate through the train car, but that also meant fine sand kicked up by the train sifted in through the windows and covered every person and surface. With the windows closed, the heat became unbearable. The dilemma was short-lived; everyone opted for the open windows. As a result, our clothes, hair and faces were covered in fine Sahara sand. Apparently, we were the only ones bothered by this because the other passengers sat proudly like pottery glazed in desert beige as if nothing were amiss.

The wooden bench became so uncomfortable that I finally decided to **lie** down, but the only available space was under the bench seats. I got down on my back and scooted my cramped body under the seat. I had a very narrow space to recline because I was competing with luggage, boxes, and bags, as well as a weary Sudanese traveler who was already there. Once I settled into my narrow coffin, I closed my eyes to sleep, hoping to endure the next six hours of slow, suffocating travel.

We reached Atbara at night. We found lodging and tried to survive the heat and dry air by sleeping under a creaking ceiling fan. The two days we spent in Atbara gave us a chance to visit on a deeper level. Robert challenged my belief system by relating to me his experiences with reincarnation. While I had decided that the Catholic Church did not have the doctrine I was looking for as I pondered my personal spirituality, I really was not sure what I believed when it

came to the major questions about life and death. His beliefs threw me a curve. The idea of reincarnation was so alien and incomprehensible that it agitated me and I reacted in anger.

He believed that he once lived in the Middle East as a trader, and that he had traveled across vast stretches of desert by horse and camel selling and trading goods. That was why this world we now experienced was familiar to him. Aware of my skepticism, he reminded me that he was now doing what he had done in a previous life; working as a trader. It was the familiarity of that prior lifetime which drew him back to the Middle East in this life. My physical surroundings and Robert's alien philosophy tested me. If I lived a life of deceit and cruelty, could I be reincarnated as a maggot or cockroach? How many bodies can the soul inhabit? Does the soul ever find rest, or is it reincarnated in perpetuity?

After a few days' rest, we continued our journey south to Khartoum. Fellow travelers told us that the cheapest and most culturally stimulating form of travel was by lorry, the British term for a truck. We went to the marketplace in Atbara and inquired about a lorry going to Khartoum. After three or four inquiries, we were directed to a certain driver who had a full load of baskets. He was not going all way to Khartoum, but at least he could take us as far as Shendi, 132 kilometers down the road. We negotiated a price and climbed aboard the basket-laden lorry.

We found ourselves once again on a tire-rutted and desolate stretch of desert, with no sign of civilization for much of the ride. At first we thought that riding on the soft and spring-like baskets would be easy enough to endure, but that idea was dispelled quickly as the ruts repeatedly launched us into the air. The combination of a bumpy lunar-like landscape and the spring action baskets made for a very uncomfortable ride. We desperately held on to the railed sides of the lorry in order to avoid being catapulted from the moving vehicle.

After four hours of this never-ending carnival ride from hell in 100-degree heat, every muscle in my arms, neck and back ached. I had successfully competed in high school and college athletics, enduring some punishing workouts. Yet, I had never been subjected to this kind of physical challenge. There were moments when I was not sure if I could tolerate much more. The hours dragged on. We asked how much longer it would be until we reached Shendi; the response always began with, “*Inshallah* (If God wills it) two more hours.” After the two hours passed, a fellow passenger answered our inquiry by saying, “*Inshalla*, two more hours.” Finally, after six hours we arrived in Shendi.

Although we were dirty, sore, and hungry we quickly arranged for the second leg of our journey to the capital. This time the load was sesame seed barrels. We welcomed the hard surface. I became calloused to the discomfort, just as bare hands on a shovel callous over time. *Inshallah*... This was no place to follow a timetable. I began to understand that my Western mind set would not work here. Living in such a harsh environment, these people could not predict times for arrival or departure. *Inshallah*... God would determine the outcome, God would determine all the details. It was for man to be patient and wait.

And so I became patient, and as a result my attention was not focused solely on how I felt physically. I enjoyed the desert scenery, and I was fascinated to watch our drivers stop to pray. First they would roll out their small prayer rugs on the fine sand of the Sudanese Sahara. Methodically they cleaned themselves with water from a long-necked liquor bottle: hands, arms, face, behind the ears, the neck. Then, facing Mecca, they would pray. I had not known much about Islam before this journey. The more I witnessed the quiet devotion of these men to their God, the more confused I grew about my own beliefs.

We arrived in Khartoum 16 hours after leaving Atbara. Robert and I spent three days in the capital resting, eating fine meals at the American Club, investigating the exotic Sudanese city, and visiting more about reincarnation. The harsh environment and the mystical Islamic world created a crack in my resistance. I felt more open to the notion of past lives. But that fissure closed when Robert told me about yet another past life he had become aware of through recurring dreams.

In his quiet, almost reverent way, he related how he had been a fighter pilot in WWII. Japanese gunners shot down his plane over an island in the Pacific. He survived the crash landing, but Japanese soldiers soon pursued him. His demise came after a brutal hand-to-hand fight, after he was stabbed in the chest by one of the Emperor's foot soldiers.

I was shocked by this revelation. The flack of his far-fetched story riddled the open mindedness I had only recently managed to embrace. I had no words to express my confusion, disbelief and agitation. How could he be so convinced of the truth of his beliefs? How could he believe that a dream was a window into what was once a reality, a life lived in the past?

Robert and I traveled together for another month. Like good friends who realize it is best not to discuss politics, we avoided the topic of religion and spirituality. He was firmly committed to his beliefs, while I still needed some time to let these experiences percolate.

I spent fourteen months traveling and working my way through Europe and Africa. After all the miles, I felt no closer to finding answers to life's big questions. The belief that continued to resonate with me was that our time here is about the people we encounter. If nothing else, I managed to entwine my life with unforgettable characters from England, Germany, Greece, Holland and Belgium.

## Tikal and the Transforming Toucan

“The Catholic Church defines an apparition as the appearance of a being in a supernatural state who would normally be beyond the human senses. Generally speaking, then, an apparition is the appearance of someone who has died. Apparitions of Jesus, Mary, and the saints are a part of Catholic Culture. There have been numerous appearances of Mary around the world. Some of her most celebrated are appearances at Lourdes, France; Portugal and Guadalupe, Mexico.”  
(Mary Faulkner and Bob O’Gorman, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Catholicism*, p. 165)

The arduous truck rides through the Sudanese desert had a profound impact on me. First, I discovered a new threshold for dealing with heat and physical discomfort, and second, Robert, my travel partner, and his unbelievable tales of past lives and reincarnation challenged my belief system. I struggled with the notion of one true God in Heaven. And Jesus? Was he truly the Son of God or a charismatic prophet? Although no longer a practicing Catholic, the concept of reincarnation was nevertheless difficult for me to fathom. It seemed eerie, and it made me uncomfortable. It took travel to Central America and a personal experience with the concept of past lives to open my mind to the idea of reincarnation.

Central America has a jewel of a country. The country is Guatemala, and the jewel is jade, a mix of sky blue and the verdant green of the rainforest. As I sat at the top of Temple III at Tikal, the largest of the Mayan ruins, the vast forest canopy of the Petén stretched before me. In the fading daylight, I reflected on the circumstances that had brought me here, to this remote, ancient city of Mayan mystery and intrigue.

In the early 80s, I journeyed to Guatemala twice during the winter months to study Spanish and to experience third-world travel. Huehuetenango, located in the northern reaches of the altiplano, served as my home base for language learning. Huehue, as locals refer it to, is a busy regional center for commerce. Many people in nearby Mayan villages take advantage of the sprawling market and shops to sell, trade, and purchase the things they need to run their daily

lives. About sixty percent of Guatemalans are indigenous people of Mayan ancestry, who speak Mayan languages such as Cakchiquel, Kekchí, Quiché, Tzutujil, and Mam, as well as Spanish. The remainder of the population is either Ladino, those Guatemalans of mixed indigenous and European ancestry, or the few who are of pure Spanish blood.

I became captive to the mysteries of Guatemala long before I traveled to this jewel of Central America. My younger brother, Dave, had visited there earlier and described to me about the colorful Maya people; Tikal, the ancient city of ruins and the temples in the remote jungles of the Petén, a department or state, in the far northeastern reaches of the country. My motivation to one day visit Tikal, was nearly as strong as my drive to learn Spanish

During the two winters I spent in Huehuetenango, I lived with Ruth and Carlos and their infant son, Jorge Luis. I worked with Ruth six hours a day, five days a week, studying Spanish grammar, vocabulary, and conversational skills. The intense study made me long for vacation breaks and the opportunity to visit various regions of the country, where I could practice my newly learned skills. I often dreamed of visiting Tikal. It seemed like an enchanted place. I even loved saying the word *Tikal*.

Circumstances finally allowed me to visit the ruin site during my second winter. After an eighteen-hour trip by bus, I arrived at the fabled lost city of the Maya. It was all that I had expected. Mystery and enchantment cloaked the well-preserved temples that reached up to 200 feet in height, while howler monkeys, parrots, and toucans inhabited the surrounding vibrant rainforest.

I met other travelers in the park's campground, and for two days we wandered Guatemala's most famous national park. On the morning of the third day, we heard that the park administration would keep the site open after dark as a special offering to tourists who wanted to

climb Tikal's temples and witness the sunset over the infinite sea of rainforest. All we had to do was ask for a special pass and show the security guards we carried a flashlight.

Our small international group of four entered the park an hour before sunset. We noticed a crowd was gathering to climb the west facing Temple II, which stood in the Grand Plaza directly opposite Temple I. We did not like the idea of a crowd detracting from the solemnity of the event, so we decided to walk farther along the jungle path to Temple III, where we could appreciate the descent of the sun in solitude.

As the sun descended over the deep green of the Petén, the view from Temple III included the back of Temple I, otherwise known as the Temple of the Grand Jaguar, and a frontal view of Temple II, or the Temple of Masks. Both imposing stone structures loomed out of the rainforest canopy like stalks of maize reaching to the sky.

Temple III was only partially excavated. It had a steep trail to the top, where we found a stone ledge that had been cleared of vines and trees. It stood above the jungle giving us a wonderful view. We sat on the ledge in silence and gazed at the expanse of the Petén. Colorful toucans gently swooped, then winged higher before us with their oversized beaks and iridescent black bodies. Joining them in the early evening dance were the more plentiful parrots cloaked in healing green with splashes of red and yellow. Dimitri, from Switzerland, drew a wooden flute from his pack and played a simple melody that soared like our winged friends. The primal and mournful wail of howler monkeys joined his melodies to create a cacophony that echoed in surround sound. With the fading light, the scene grew otherworldly and mystical.

I felt compelled to close my eyes and breathe in the wonder of the moment. I was familiar with simple techniques of breathing for relaxation and meditation, so with calculated deep



inhalation and slow and deliberate exhalation, I descended into a meditative state. I felt my body slowly relax, and I gently fell back and rested my head on the ancient stone ledge.

I reclined there in a semi-conscious state, when suddenly I saw a large and splendid toucan appear on the screen of my mind. I knew immediately that I was that bird. I watched it soar and dive and then, with rapid wing beats, it began to fall to Earth. With its head and prominent beak pointed toward the sky, it dropped to the ground tail first. Within a few feet of landing, the toucan began to transform into a man. Beak, feathers and talons became human flesh, bone and the sandaled feet of a Mayan peasant. In the same way I knew I was the bird, I knew that at one time I had been this man.

He stood on a cobbled plaza, looked around and then walked from the stone surface to a dirt path that snaked through the jungle in the scant evening light. Approaching a simple hut of grass and tree boughs, the man opened a flap and entered a room illuminated by a small fire. The hut felt very warm, welcoming. It was home. A young woman bathed in the yellow light and dancing flames of the fire, sat on the dirt floor with her infant child. No words were exchanged. I could feel their love for one another and the joy the man experienced in seeing his family. The scene inside the simple hut grew dim, until the screen of my mind faded to black, and I opened my eyes.

I knew that something extraordinary had happened. I spent a restless night replaying the vision and contemplating its significance. For most of the following day I was detached and confused. I thought of my skeptical impressions of the concept of past lives introduced to me by Robert Berg amidst the expanse of the Sudanese Sahara. I was certain that the scene from the Mayan world I witnessed had been my past life. The clarity of the vision and the sensations I felt in my whole being had been too real to be anything else. It explained my fascination with the

Maya and my being drawn to Guatemala, the cradle of their civilization. Tikal and the toucan led me to a new truth I could not deny. I added this truth to the quiver of my personal spirituality.

## Salish Sweat Lodge

“In Jesus’ culture, a shared meal was a sign of a community’s true intimacy. It was based on peace, trust and nurturing. During the Last Supper, Jesus connected God’s gift of nourishment, in the form of bread and wine, with his own body and blood.” (Mary Faulkner and Bob O’Gorman, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Catholicism*, p. 134)

In my early twenties, I began to search for a spiritual philosophy, traveling widely and experiencing ancient and diverse cultures and peoples. At first, the fascinating history and hand-hewn stone pyramids and monuments drew me to the worlds of ancient Egypt and the Mayan highlands of Central America. I reveled in imagining the daily lives of the common people, as I sat among the ruins of the impressive cities that were shrouded in mystery and mysticism. I came to understand that the natural world wrapping those great monoliths in verdant rainforest and shifting sands had deeply impacted the inhabitants. The notion of spirituality rooted in the natural world made much more sense to me than the notion of a God watching our every move and noting every transgression.

For many years I enjoyed the splendor of the expansive forests and rugged beaches of the state of Oregon. A move to Montana, seduced me with the craggy peaks of the Rockies and the emerald lakes that lie cradled beneath, with rivers of wild trout, and high plains of sage, juniper and darting bluebirds. I found more meaning in reflecting about life and its mysteries in pristine, wild places than I had experienced in the brick, mortar and stained glass of a traditional church. My search for spiritual meaning wrought from nature ultimately led me to the sweat lodge: a Native American place of prayer and reflection where a sense of community is strong and the natural world is central.

I first met Danny Vollen as he stood outside his humble trailer. Respected by his people as a medicine man and a healer, he invited us to sweat in his lodge adjacent to a small creek near

his home. Our group of twelve traveled from Missoula, Montana to take part in a sweat at Danny's property near the small town of Arlee located on the Flathead Indian Reservation. His home was only a half hour by car from the St. Ignatius Mission, where my mother was born and where my grandparents actively supported the Jesuit priests and their Catholic mission.

Danny stood six feet tall, wore large dark-rimmed glasses and had gray and thinning hair. His Native American ancestry was apparent. He welcomed me warmly with a handshake. With a hand on my shoulder, his eyes met mine, and I felt he was sizing me up.

Danny poked fun and joked good-naturedly as he drew the sights of his wit on the oversized rodeo buckle of a friend. "Buster, mind if we serve fry bread on that buckle after the sweat? We are kinda low on serving platters around here." The hearty laughter calmed my nerves, as I was the only non-Indian in the group.

Eventually, Danny announced that we should head into the trailer and change clothes in preparation for the sweat. The men went into one bedroom and the women into another. I changed into baggy workout shorts. The women wore swimsuits and bathrobes to ensure modesty. A friend suggested I bring some food to offer during the sweat, so I clutched a tin of canned salmon, and my towel, and joined the other men and women on a trail through the fractured sunlight in a forest of lodge pole pines.

Blankets and tarps covered the dome-shaped lodge frame constructed of willow branches. A large fire pit filled with red hot rocks was located a few feet from its opening. Danny gathered our group of about twenty locals and newcomers into a circle. Using a large pipe beautifully adorned with beadwork and feathers, he blessed us and pointed the pipe toward the sky acknowledging the sacred four directions. We walked around the lodge once, and then the

women entered first moving left to right. The other men and I entered and sat on our separate side. Blankets covered the floor except for a small pit at the center for the rocks.

Like salmon crowding a creek, we squeezed everyone into the lodge. Danny sat in the center with a bucket of water, a pine bough, some sage leaves and an eagle feather. Light conversation and laughter filled the space, and Danny seemed in no great hurry to begin the ceremony.

Finally, he asked that we introduce ourselves and explain what we wanted the group to pray for. Some shared general concerns about their own health and the well being of family, financial matters, and safe travel for loved ones. Others very openly admitted the battle they were waging against the drug and alcohol spirits. They expressed hope that returning to the traditions of their culture would help them succeed.

The sincerity and sense of trust that characterized these appeals touched me deeply. I felt part of a community of people; though I hardly knew them. In his own appeal for prayer, Danny referred to humankind as pitiful in contrast to *Tupia*, the Creator. This comment could have been taken from the doctrine of many of the world's religions, and at that moment I realized we were all the same, and that our fears and hopes were endemic to being human. Danny joked and giggled like a trickster coyote, as we shared an assortment of canned fruit and fish.

After the feasting concluded, two members of the group removed the empty cans and utensils and, using a pitchfork, placed the heated rocks into the pit. Danny asked that the door flap be dropped, and we sat in complete darkness. With the pine bough, he splashed water on the red glowing rocks and sprinkled them with dried sage leaves. He began singing a repetitious chant, and we all joined in.

Hey yah, hey yah, hey yah, hey  
Hey yah, nay, nay hey yah

Previously he had explained that we would go through four rounds of sweating and then exit the lodge for a break. He suggested we sing as loud as possible and keep our heads low to the ground as a way to deal with the extreme heat and thick steam.

We concluded the first round and left the lodge to enjoy the fresh air. I found the heat to be tolerable and the experience fascinating. I felt privileged. After about fifteen minutes, Danny directed us to return, and we entered as we had earlier and took our same spots on the floor.

The next two rounds followed the same pattern of steam and wailing chants, as more rocks were added to the pit. I combated the heat and discomfort of each round by singing passionately while sweat poured from every pore. Struggling to take in the thick air, I felt on the edge of suffocation. My head hung low just inches from the ground, and I squeezed my eyes against the intense heat. In the primal darkness of that womb-like lodge, I heard their prayers, and I sang to *Tupia*, asking him to answer their appeals. My prayers, focused on the welfare of my family and seeking guidance for important life-changing decisions, were periodically interrupted by the fear that I would not be able to endure the heat much longer. Finally, Danny sang a refrain that signaled the end, the flap opened and light flooded in.

After the break, we congregated in the lodge for a final time. Danny explained that during this round he would perform a healing ceremony on a woman from our group; he asked that we all pray hard for her and held up the eagle feather he would use on her behalf. Soon we were in darkness, and Danny liberally soaked the fired rocks. We sang as the heat became intense, and even harder to endure than before. I employed the same survival skills and drew in deep breaths to feed my choking lungs.

Suddenly, I felt air being pushed around inside the sweat lodge with a cadence like the beating of wings. An audible swoosh accompanied each movement, and my sense was that this was a large bird, possibly an eagle. It felt as if the great bird was swooping low, only inches from my head. I didn't know what to think so I kept singing with all my strength. The presence of the bird persisted for what seemed like many minutes. Slowly the beating of wings subsided, and Danny ended the round. A huddled and exhausted humanity sat in the rich darkness. With a hushed and solemn tone Danny spoke, "We had a visit from our friend and protector the eagle. Take his gift of strength with you."

My rational mind questioned the veracity of the notion that the spirit of an eagle had entered the lodge, but I could feel my body had concluded otherwise. I had learned this from the apparition I had experienced at the Mayan ruin site of Tikal, that there is more to reality than what we see in the physical world. This was an event that was real to me -- that was all that mattered.

I returned to the sweat lodge a handful of times over the next several months, seeking prayer, reflection, and the tangible sense of community. Eventually, I left the area for a new job and found it difficult to find the time to pursue sweating with my new friends on the Flathead Reservation. Still, I took with me the incredible experiences and the belief that spiritual power is alive in the natural world.

Some years later, when I reflected on the sweat lodge and how it compared with the Catholic faith of my youth, I found some similarities. The sacrament of Baptism, the first step in becoming a member of the Church, is similar to the anointing of rocks with water and the cleansing of the body through perspiration, as the infant is bathed in cleansing holy water.

Receiving the Eucharist or Holy Communion is partaking of a wafer of bread representing the body of Christ. The entire Church community files to the front of the church to participate in this communal breaking of bread during mass. In the sweat lodge ceremony, each participant shares offerings of food. Feeding the body becomes symbolic for feeding the soul.

The sacrament of Confirmation is characterized as an acceptance of the laws and beliefs of the Church, and a willingness to profess those beliefs before the church community. In the sweat lodge, the participants speak candidly of their belief that the group can collectively support and comfort each individual, and that the Creator will listen to their prayers for help and guidance. The parallels were clear.

My search for answers about the existence of God or a Creator began with Catholic catechism classes in Salmon, Idaho, and eventually brought me to the Salish sweat lodge in Western Montana. Experiences I had on my travels and encounters with unforgettable people characterized this personal journey. Nearly fifty years have passed since those nascent forays into my study of spiritual life, and as a result I have come to embrace some core beliefs. I believe in the power of human contact. I believe positive encounters with a diversity of people will enrich both participants and spread to the world at large. I also believe that spirituality lies in the intimate relationships we share. Our life partners are mirrors that reflect who we are back for us to see: the good and also the bad. Didn't Christ tell his followers, "Know thyself"? Through honesty and trust in a relationship, we can know ourselves, and, therefore, spiritually evolve and grow as humans on this Earth. I believe the natural world is a source of great spiritual power. The majesty and beauty of wild places inspires beauty in each of us. I often feel small and insignificant in awe of the grandeur and threatening power that nature possesses as it surrounds me. Still I am searching, but the search today does not cover geographic miles. Rather it is a



journey inside myself. Finally, I believe a higher power can be found within me; to know myself is to be at peace and know the spirit of the Creator.

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