

ARTICLES OF FAITH

By Michael Ventura

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I was 18, about to be 19, and learning the meaning of necessity. My task was to contribute to the support of my mother, my siblings, and myself. We'd rented a one-bedroom in the Bronx, but I wanted to work in Manhattan. I'd ride the Woodlawn line to Grand Central Station and read the want ads at a funky diner there, nursing a cup of coffee purchased for a dime (no refills).

I'd been a Times Square counter man on the night shift. That hadn't worked out. But I knew I'd find a day-shift job because I could type. Back then, if you were presentable and typed 100 words a minute, there was always work, so it didn't take long before I secured a position suitable to my skill set: \$70 per week take-home, no sick days, no benefits, but, in that era, and for how we lived, \$70-per would just do.

I was proud to work. Proud to fulfill my responsibilities as my mother's eldest son. Proud to be a legitimate face in the crowd, pulling my own weight, a working stiff – and, in the eyes of the working world, a man. Now all I had to do was grow up.

My siblings weren't yet in high school so there was nothing temporary about this arrangement. Meanwhile, the great world would spin, and, like everyone else, I'd spin with it, wondering, wondering: What the fuck is all this about, what and who am I, and how the fuck do I really grow up?

And this: What do I believe?

I was green, but had enough sense to know that opinion is not belief and that it can be hard to learn what you believe. Not what you want to believe, or think you believe, or feel you're supposed to believe, but what, in your bones, you really believe – believe without even knowing you believe.

And what about my education? If I was to be decently educated, I'd have to do it myself, and the only way was to read. So I was never without a book, and, in books, I found signs of belief. I mean, signs like billboards. Sentences that stare you down and say, with unnerving certainty, "I am you. I am a part of you. Something you believe."

Often adding, "You may not like it, but it's so."

I was still looking for my day job, not quite 19, when I stopped at a Sixth Avenue newsstand to look at its revolving rack of pocket books – books that fit in a man's back pocket. I'd recently seen my first Charlie Chaplin feature, *Limelight*, for the stiff ticket price of 75 cents. On the rack I found *Charlie Chaplin (Orig. Title: The Great God Pan)*, by Robert Payne. Fifty cents.

Payne introduced me to someone named Soren Kierkegaard: "It seemed to [Kierkegaard] that the comic stage, with its paradoxes and absurdities, was quite extraordinarily close to the explosive world of theology, where he was at home. [Kierkegaard] examined 'the category of the absurd' tranquilly, always walking on a tightrope and always in danger of falling[.]"

I had to meet this Kierkegaard. I met him mostly on the subway, in Walter Lowrie's translation, convinced that Mr. K would have dug the dirty, dusty subways of that long-gone New York, for he loved saying things like: "The slaves of paltriness, the frogs in life's swamp ... [l]et them croak in the swamp undisturbed" (*Fear and Trembling*).

And he said this: “Possibility is the only saving remedy ... [and] in the last resort, that is, when the point is to *believe* [in possibility], the only help is this, that for God all things are possible. ... [I]t may be said that this is what God is[.] ... God is that all things are possible, and that all things are possible *is* God” (*Sickness Unto Death*).

What I felt at those words was extraordinary and had nothing to do with agreeing or disagreeing. I didn’t understand enough to agree or disagree, yet felt a leaping in my heart, a thrilled sense of, “That’s true!”

True for me. To discover not only that I did believe, somehow, in God, but that this, exactly, is what I believed: “God *is* that all things are possible.” It felt, still feels, as though I was born believing that. I would take that belief in many directions all my life, but, in me, it has never lost its force.

I could have told this to you without giving you the working-stiff context and putting you on a subway – except, no, I couldn’t. Because maybe the whole point – or a whole point – is that those words traveled far from their origin and time, to be read somewhere under the Harlem River, and again in a Bronx kitchen, and again and again, and, well, maybe you have to have been poor to understand just what an amazing miracle that is. “Miracle” not in some exaggerated religious sense, no; the opposite: all that is miraculous in what’s taken for granted every day.

I think of lines in Ted Allan’s screenplay, *Lies My Father Told Me*:

“Grandfather, do you believe in miracles?”

“No ... but I have come to rely on them.”

Still a working-stiff typist supporting a family at age 21, I received another such jolt from Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*.

At the beginning Miller quotes Swami Vivekananda. “Swami” was not a serious word on my block and I’d never seen a name like Vivekananda. This was a first contact with an entirely foreign mode of thought:

“*The highest men are calm, silent, and unknown. They are the men who really know the power of thought; they are sure that even if they go into a cave and close the door and simply think five true thoughts and then pass away, these five thoughts of theirs will live throughout eternity. Indeed, such thoughts as theirs will ... enter deep into human hearts and brains and raise up men and women who will give them practical expression in the workings of human life.*”

I felt the heart jolt of: “That’s true.” But if it was true – and my whole being believed those words, whether or not my mind agreed – well, that tore up all my maps.

If, if, if – if what this swami says is true, then most truths broadcasted by my world are half-truths at best, ignorance amplified by certainty.

Still a working stiff at 23, but a typesetter, \$100 a week, no sick days, no benefits, no union – talk union and you got fired, which was illegal, but so what? There was a war on. I was ripe for the draft, but had a “hardship deferment”: I was necessary to the support of a family. Yet that war was in the air we breathed as no war has been since – in that sense, inescapable.

On the subway again, Henry Miller again, and, again, something he quoted. (And, hey: Henry Miller, Willa Cather, and Mark Twain are the only American novelists certain to outlast the era of America’s primacy.) In Miller’s *Remember to Remember*, you find this, from Fred Perlès’ *The Renegade*:

“It may sound cruel, and I dare say it is not altogether your own fault, but the fact remains that you are personally responsible for the war to the extent that you have not lived your own life: the sum total of innumerable pasts like yours has to bear the responsibility for the catastrophe.”

Was I living my own life? Yes. No. Both. Not enough.

There it was. The authentic task, the only authentic task, was to live my own life. To find out what that was and could be. Not the position in life assigned me by society, not the life my family wanted of me, and (this is crucial) not even the life I had imagined for myself – but the life that was authentically mine.

As you might expect, that took a good deal of time.

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