

THE MOM, THE BOOK, THE KID AND THE NUN

By Michael Ventura

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Psychology and sociology pretty much explain my life until about age 10. After that, something else, for which I have no name, took over.

My mother must have pondered what to do with her 10-year-old when New York City's public school system informed her the kid's reading score was that of a high school senior. Or junior. It was an "nior" sound. I can't swear which. What with caring for 5-year-old twins and a 3-year-old, Mama hadn't much to spare for her eldest anymore. (Pa, he went thataway months before.) But she made time to discover the Landmark Book Club, which sent out volumes designed for curious children.

I'd been reading encyclopedias hungrily since the end of third grade, but a Landmark volume, *The Wright Brothers*, was the first hardcover that was all my own, read again and again until the next arrived, *The First Men in the World* -- a book that changed our lives. On its colorful jacket a mastodon upset two blond men clad in furs. They held spears. Cro-Magnon men they were, successors to Neanderthals. Difficult, now, to express or decipher my love for that book -- read it so many times it was almost memorized, until the word "evolution" seemed, magically, the key to all mystery.

Wednesdays, Catholic kids left public school early to attend catechism classes at a Catholic school. We were instructed in our religion by a stern nun whose name I've forgotten. Came her lesson on Adam and Eve, I eagerly raised my hand and explained that Adam and Eve must have been Cro-Magnons, or perhaps Neanderthals. The word "evolution" passed my lips. Sister bade me step forth and put my hand on her desk, palm down. She rapped my knuckles with six swift strokes of a wooden ruler.

I didn't resent the punishment as such. If you messed up, you got hit. That's how things were. But I'd never been good at anything, and here it was recognized by no less an entity than New York City that I was good at something, even if it was only reading -- not much street cred for reading, but better than nothing. That nun's ruler drove me to tearful fury. I declared I was standing up for truths I'd discovered, but really my response had more to do with pride. To be punished for the one thing I was good at was more than my 10-year-old pride could tolerate.

"I'm never going back there," I announced to my mother when I got home. "I'm not a Catholic anymore."

I meant it, and my mother took me at my word. I was that kind of kid and she was that kind of mother.

We searched for a different church. Tried Quaker services twice, our tribe of five dressed in our best and even the twins awed into stillness. But Mama probably figured that, being Sicilian, we'd make lousy Quakers.

Next came a church with a name that didn't sound religious: Unitarian. Mama attended the service while my siblings and I were put into Sunday school classes by age. What was discussed in my first Sunday school session? Evolution! I was overjoyed. What a church! I needn't believe in God, I needn't believe in anything, and the people were so nice. As far as I ever learned, a commitment to reason and kindness was the ideal of Unitarian

belief. For them, the word “God” seemed to mean the principle of reason in a reasonable universe. (Not until I grew up did that seem as naïve a notion as any in Christendom.)

Now my tale becomes intricate and long, but its telling must be brief.

At that Unitarian Sunday school, I met Dave. Remember that name. Poverty and insanity plagued my family, and when I was 13 it fell apart. I was on my own. After a circuitous, solitary and serendipitous journey, a Unitarian minister’s family took me in, saving my life, while All Souls Unitarian Church of Manhattan supplied funds for my support. I attended a small, extraordinary high school, Coburn Classical Institute, in Waterville, Maine, where Mr. Carlo, Mr. Judson and Mrs. Willard taught English and history remarkably well. Without them I could not have become a writer. (I would spend two fragmentary years at colleges where education wasn’t nearly as rigorous. Those Coburn teachers constituted all my formal education.) Throughout high school Dave and I kept in touch.

And here it gets weird. Stripped of nuance, it goes like this.

I’m 20-ish. My siblings, my mother, and I live in a 2-bedroom apartment in the Bronx. Mama works as a file clerk, I’m a typist, and we make ends meet. While I’m doing that, enter Irene and Anne – women my age, of whose existence I am unaware. They meet by chance at a hostel in Europe. Their meeting is the most pivotal event of my adult life, and I wasn’t even there. Had no idea.

Not much time passes. Anne meets Dave. They marry. More time passes. Irene is now in New Mexico, where she meets Janette. Janette goes back to her native Texas to be with her boyfriend, Butch, in Lubbock. Irene drifts to Lubbock. Irene meets Crash. Crash has never seen the sea.

By this time, Anne and Dave live in Oakland. I’m drifting around the country, 27-ish by now. I stay a few weeks in Oakland with Anne and Dave, then head to Santa Cruz to live on the sofa of Sarah and Duke – Duke being a friend met at a Unitarian summer camp during high school. Irene and Crash visit Dave and Anne so that Crash can see the sea. I visit Dave and Anne while Irene and Crash are there. I’m about to hitchhike to Nashville for Mikey’s wedding. Crash invites me to ride with him and Irene as far as Lubbock. I’d never heard of Lubbock. I go with them and stay at 14th Street and Avenue W during a snowstorm -- among other residents of that house are Butch Hancock, Joe Ely and Jimmy Dale Gilmore. I dig it there. I bus to Nashville for Mikey’s wedding, hitch to New York to see my family, get a ride to Boston to see friends, and run into Watson, who was a camper in my cabin when I was a high school counselor at that Unitarian camp. Watson tells me he’s about to drive to New Mexico. I say, “Drop me off in Lubbock.” After two years in the Panhandle I drift down to Austin just as some wildcat journalists start *The Austin Sun*. They give me a job. The rest of my life happens next: 30-odd years, so far, as a working writer.

(A strange aside: I’d decided not to visit Dave and Anne’s for dinner with Irene and Crash. But, when standing quite alone, a voice said, “Go. It will change your life.” Cross-my-heart-and-spit, that happened.)

If Mama hadn’t subscribed to a book club... if I hadn’t protested my punishment... if Mama hadn’t found the Unitarians... if, through them, I hadn’t met Dave, Duke, and Watson, and gone to camp and Coburn... if Irene hadn’t met Anne, if Anne hadn’t met Dave... if Mikey hadn’t married Martha... if Irene hadn’t met Janette and Crash... well, my life is unimaginable without all that, yet these crisscrossing meetings had little to do

with me. What does one make of a pattern like this? What does one call it? How does one possibly untangle its elements?

That nun, whom I've maligned all my life – now I see that had she been tolerant and kind, she'd have ruined me! Nothing that guided my path after age 10 would have happened. What does one do with a fact like that?

Every now and again I go to Mass. I sit in the back. I like the atmosphere of Catholicism. Next time I mean to light a candle for that nun, thanking her and the saints she believed in – the Blessed Mother who looks after children, Saint Christopher who guides wanderers, and Saint Anthony who finds what's lost. Her vehement faith and stern ways had as much to do with setting me on my path as anything else, and, until now, I've never thanked her.

How did G'Kar of *Babylon 5* put it? “A brilliant cascade of cause and effect. Isn't the universe an amazing place? I wouldn't live anywhere else!”

My nun would have expressed the same idea differently: “God works in mysterious ways.”

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