

SORRY WE MISSED CHURCH

By Michael Ventura

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Driving 19th Street in Lubbock alongside the sprawling edifices of Texas Tech, the little tin-can car in front of me sported quite a bumper sticker: SORRY WE MISSED CHURCH, WE WERE BUSY/LEARNING WITCHCRAFT AND BECOMING LESBIANS.

That bumper sticker won't cost you in Los Angeles or Austin, but it takes rare nerve to paste those words on your tail in the Bible Belt. (Lubbock has, I am told, more churches per capita than any city anywhere.) The tin can had Texas plates, and any Texan knows that sticker won't be taken lightly around here. I had to see who was driving that car. I pulled up alongside. The driver and her passenger were women of about 18, maybe 20. They wore tractor hats or maybe baseball caps, with brims pulled backwards, and they were laughing. They didn't notice me salute them, and they couldn't know that I was thinking, Next to these kids, I'm a wuss.

I write under the ever-flimsier protection of the First Amendment. They drive around a famously right-wing town daring anyone to say them nay.

Those young women surely know that cops may pull them over on any pretext. And they must know that – coming out of a movie, say – they might find their car surrounded by a gaggle of repressed guys in desperate need to prove themselves real men. To the surprise of many, Brokeback Mountain is playing in Lubbock – the sight of a cowboy hat will never be quite the same, will never quite mean what it used to mean. There are lots of cowboy hats hereabouts, many no doubt a little less sure of their image because of Brokeback Mountain (they won't see the film, but they'll see the previews). Insecure cowboy wannabes won't take that sticker lightly. But, unlike most Americans these days, those young women weren't letting fear set their limits.

Your freedom may be backed by law, but your freedom can't be given you by law. You give it to yourself by how far you're willing to go. You give it to yourself by what stakes you're willing to play for. Do your loved ones – or your town, or your country – limit how free you are by what they can and cannot tolerate? How much of that are you willing to take? Is your freedom limited by your own fear? In this case, the freedom we're talking about is basic: the freedom to be oneself. That's what these women were putting to the test – testing themselves, testing their society. And risking all kinds of hell to do it. East and West Coast writers pontificating about "the red states" don't imagine that those very states are also places of the purest rebellions, where rebels walk their talk on tightropes.

I wear a hat, a beat-up kind of fedora, and I took it off to those women – and said a prayer for their protection. (They may miss church, but church shouldn't miss them.)

During World War I, the hunchbacked piano-playing intellectual Randolph Bourne was hounded literally to death for wondering such things as whether, in a time when all the

bullying forces of society were bent on useless destruction, there were any "desperate spiritual outlaws" with "a lust to create." That question is still important, and here were two spiritual outlaws making a desperate move, standing up for creativity as well as lust, through a medium more immediate – and hence more dangerous – than any essay or e-mail: the bumper sticker. It is the signature of our era that we live in a world so unstable that its limits may be tested merely by a bumper sticker – or, as in Europe and Islam right now, by a cartoon.

There were other bumper stickers on that street, bumper stickers I see wherever I drive (which is saying a lot, because in the last 19 months I've driven 40 of the contiguous 48 states): USA #1, UNITED WE STAND, SUPPORT OUR TROOPS, PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN. But many of us can remember when we never saw such stickers, and for good reason. When the United States seemed really united (give or take someone's ethnicity or race), the average person felt no need to bray "United We Stand." When the United States was really dominant you never heard people proclaim "USA #1!" The whole world knew we were No. 1, the Soviet Union was No. 2, and nobody came in third. When we really supported our troops – giving combat soldiers and vets all they needed – you never saw stickers pleading for their support. A country convinced its wars are righteous doesn't have to convince itself to support its troops.

And PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN? For many, that phrase has become an incantation to ward off the demons of our time and deny the darkness in our national identity. I am proud to be an American, and always have been, because, more than most nations, our history is the record of demons we've battled within ourselves as a people; win or lose, the courage, dignity, and nobility demonstrated in these struggles is something to be proud of. Like any nation, we've been as bad as we've been good, but unlike any other nation, we have been original from the start, in our form of government, our engineering and inventions, our arts, and the never-before-tried experiment of mingling ethnicities – that's a lot to be proud of. But hiding or ignoring our sins behind PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN is merely shame turned inside out.

Our national self-doubt and self-conflict are nothing new; they've been going on, in one form or another, since before 1776. What is relatively new, in the last 40 years or so, is a state of confused and conflicted values that leave us, as a people, with no shared means by which to measure our actions. Now we actually argue about whether torture is justified, or whether it's right to spy on Americans without warrants, or whether it's right to invade a country that has not attacked us. The answer to those questions – no, no, and no – would have been obvious to nearly every American 50 years ago, right and left alike. Now, in an increasingly complex world, what is obvious to one faction is blasphemy to another – which means that nothing is obvious.

Stirling Silliphant saw evidence of this dissolution of values as early as 1962, when he wrote the Route 66 episode "Go Read the River": "Do you know what's right, what's wrong? Somehow, somewhere, a simple beautiful thing, a single morality, a single set of standards, was smashed like an atom into 10 million pieces. And now – now what's right for a man can be wrong for his business, what's right for his business can be wrong for his country, and

what's right for his country can be wrong for the world." We are being torn apart by this state of uncertainty. Most people simply can't stand it – and, unable to stand it, many insist fanatically upon their proclaimed certainties in order to bear their unadmitted uncertainty.

It isn't that post-9/11, Americans are hungry to be safe; it's that post-9/11, Americans are hungry to be certain. Bush/Cheney & Co. know how to imitate certainty. The people who love them, that's what they love them for: Bush/Cheney seem certain. To people who crave certainty, no logical or factual argument can stand against this administration's impersonation of certainty.

Those brave lesbian/witchcraft gals in their cheap tin-can car sporting their bravado bumper sticker – if they can drive unmolested for even a block down Lubbock's 19th Street, their very existence (regardless of what price they may pay) testifies to a tectonic shift in the solidity of what Americans can assume is real or normal. The more you must enforce a dictum of normality, the less that normality actually exists. Those gals are saying to Lubbock, "Your idea of normal is over. Now it's normal for you to have to deal with us. However threatening we are to you – that's the measure of how little you really believe in your own reality, and that's the gauge of your desperate clinging to notions that no longer work. If you were sure of your beliefs, you wouldn't be threatened. Nice cowboy hat – free tickets to Brokeback Mountain anyone?"

If these gals are – as they clearly are – as much a product of Lubbock as Buddy Holly, then there's a crack in the world, and what's breaking through that crack is unpredictable and not to be tamed. You might kill it, but that's not the same as taming it. The very fact that you need or want to kill it, proves its dominance over your psyche. If I obsess you, I own you – even if I'm dead. (So Islam and the West now own each other.) What we may fail to recognize in our fear is that this state of almost unbearable flux is a state of becoming. Something unheard of, for good and/or ill, is steaming out from the cracks of what we thought was our world. It is still unformed, so no one has yet been able name it convincingly. But every end is some kind of beginning. We are at an end and a beginning, but most of us are too scared and distracted to recognize that.

Well, we don't have to. It will present itself in its own time, when it's gathered sufficient force and form. Only then will our chaos reveal its true nature by what it has birthed.

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