

My Heart, Uncaged

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 20 March 2018 12:43

"When I w



as growing up, Grandmama used to say, 'The Lord works in mysterious ways' or 'He might not be there when you want Him, but He's always right on time.' Evie used to say, 'God will do to you what He feels like needs to be done to you.' Then Grandmama would tell Evie to hush and remind her that getting left by a man was not the worst thing that ever happened to somebody. And Evie would say, 'It's the worst thing that ever happened to

me

. 'She said it so much that she came down with lupus. 'God wanted me to see what misery really was,' Evie said.' –

Tayari Jones, *An American Marriage* (2018, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill)

Folks, I've been a non-believer, if you will, my entire life. A data guy, nearly always zeroed in on the facts, and trying to get them straight. This trait formed the backbone of my original research in graduate school and beyond, though I always found it curious that roughly half of scientists believe in God, some kind of universal spirit or higher power

. Perhaps from any angle I was a bit off kilter, though certainly not an outlier.

In recent years, a sense of spiritualism has gradually replaced my agnosticism if not cool-hearted atheism. I found myself increasingly likely to shed tears over wrenching or touching stories, such as the abject misery that so many Syrian children have to endure every day or animal abuse. Even the sight and sound of MCAS fighters singeing holes in the sky can get my pulse gyrating and I'm a perpetual sucker for people who through no fault of their own just never catch a break in life. Old men who die debilitated in prison, juveniles in trouble with the law almost on autopilot. Kids born with crushing defects, abusive or emotionally absent parents. There's a lot to cry about in this pleasure-centered, 'put it on my card' society of ours.

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There's an old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. Recently, I found myself in one of those holes and it seemed bottomless. I recalled an ancient TV show from the 50's and 60's called "Queen for a Day," hosted by former vaudeville musician Jack Bailey (1907-1980), which focused on audience reactions to a series of down on their luck women. Whichever of them told the saddest story, according to the studio audience, was made Queen and awarded, for example, a washing machine or other essential appliance, a bouquet of roses and, of course, a crown.

My recent tale of woe actually involved several prongs of misery. On the one hand, we had a severe plumbing failure which flooded two bedrooms, a hallway, and guest bath. Enter Servpro, my carpenter and painter, Rooms To Go and Lowe's, plus—critically—our two wonderful sons, who dropped everything they had going on in Boston and came rushing down to help us. And did I mention needing two teeth extracted in the middle of all this? When it rains, it pours.

All that drama and reminiscing about Jack Bailey for some flooding and a couple of bad teeth? No, matters were seriously complicated as I succumbed to a simultaneous case of acute duodenitis, inflammation of the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine), which is located just below your stomach. My GI symptoms were awful, I couldn't eat for days (have now lost nearly 20 pounds, a fine outcome via a terrible means), and practically lived in the bathroom. All this was compounded by computer and television problems and other relatively minor—under normal circumstances—disruptions.

The duodenitis led to nearly a week at Beaufort Memorial Hospital via 911 and an ambulance, the emergency room, then a night in the ICU due to a regular room shortage, and then the extended care unit. The surge of nurses and other support personnel was like a parade of angels. They were caring, supportive, and just plain wonderful no matter how 'earthy' my needs became, from bathroom help to ice cream treats—the only food I enjoyed on my enforced liquid diet. My only real complaint was that my arthritic back was no match for standard hospital beds and the needles, beeps, bongs and bangs were incessant.

Some of the beeps were caused by me, as one night I went into atrial fibrillation, my heart rate doubling from 85 or so to 170. My heart hammered away and then it got worse via anxiety as I was told the problem and therapeutic options. Fortunately, my nurse at the time, a fellow nearly my age, took it all in stride, added an appropriate medication to my IV drip, and the problem receded. "The medicine did its job," he calmly intoned. The morphine helped too, it sure seemed, as my heart hopped back into my chest.

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The doctors insisted I would be okay, and on day 5 our older son Jack came to the hospital for my discharge. Another angel. I held onto him as if he alone had saved me, words failing me completely, and there were those tears again. Was I having a religious or perhaps 'just' another spiritual experience? The next day our younger son flew down. The two brothers were the "A-team" as my nurse practitioner Ronda called them.

Home now for several blessed weeks, I keep having spiritual epiphanies. Song lyrics rattle more noisily in my brain, e-mails from old friends across the country hoist more poignancy, and local friends keep coming out of the woodwork to wish me well. Just one example from musician Doyle Bramhall II in his "She's Alright":

*Well, I could-a
Could-a had religion
Well, this bad old same day
Tell now, whiskey an' women, won't now
Let the ol' poorboy pray
Let the poorboy pray
Let the poorboy pray*

*She's all right, she's all right
She's all right, she's all right*

Although I have battled this palate of grief with everything I had to defend myself, it still felt like bringing a knife to a gunfight without all the warm support and help I received. One of my nurse's aides, Liz, told me that God was always at my side and would follow me home. We hugged gloriously on my way out of her ward.

Every day I feel as if I'm coming into closer alignment with all my scientific cohorts who say yes, of course, we believe in a higher being. While I may not see you in church on Sundays, I'll be sitting next to you in spirit. Thoughts and prayers has become a hollow phrase, especially in the context of unabated school shootings. Though taken literally these words are fine, it feels much better to reach out and actually help someone, or even feed some of those feral cats around town.

And as for all those BMH nurses, every one of them, she's all right, she's all right.

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