

Pastor's Pen: A Lost Sheep Comes Home Part 2

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This is a continuation of last week's pastor's pen. When we left off, I had finally left the Catholic faith.

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Give Me Something to Believe In

During my time in the desert, the one place I found any solace was in music. I listened to the radio quite a lot. In 1990, a song by Poison, called "Give Me Something to Believe In" was released and became a hit. It nailed where I was in my life. The song, a heart wrenching ballad written by the lead singer after the death of a close friend, is the pleading of a man who sees so much pain and strife, so much hypocrisy, and wants something to make sense of it all.

I wanted to believe in something. I wanted all of this to make sense. I had tried the whole religion thing and found it wanting. I wasn't angry so much as I was despondent and confused. If God was who I was told He was, why did my family break up? Why was I bullied by those who said they believed? Why was there pain? This led to my owning agnosticism. I could never make the jump that creation spontaneously happened, so atheism was out. However, I figured there might well be a god, but who He is is inaccessible to us. We were all just grasping at straws trying to make a god who fit our own predilections.

Like my other approaches, this didn't fulfill me either. There was still some longing there and I had no idea where to go with it. Like so many others, I tried to fill that longing. I became the master of keeping up appearances. Deep inside I was restless and getting more and more resentful. That resentment found its way in my attitude toward 'organized religion' as a farce that preyed upon those honestly seeking for truth and toward the 'true believers' who sneered at those who didn't believe as they believed. When I was seeking a deeper bond somewhere, religion drove me further and further away.

Toy Soldiers

Nature abhors a vacuum. So does the human heart. I found solace in many things as well. I worked. I worked a lot. I dated. I had a knack for picking poorly. That might have had something to do with looking in bars for something. If I couldn't walk out with a girl, at least I could walk out with a buzz. I found that alcohol (beer specifically, hard liquor and I just didn't agree) took the edge off of the emptiness. I went from wanting it to needing it. I was good at keeping up respectable appearances, though. I may be many things, but I am not stupid. I knew where this was going. I was just having a hard time hitting the brakes.

Without God, it is said, all things are permissible. Maybe all things aren't legal, but laws can be changed. My attempt to find something I could believe in was heading south. I knew it. I remember one night lying in bed with the radio on. The bed felt like it was spinning. I hated that feeling. I remember an old song coming on, 'Toy Soldiers' by Martika. It is sad song about someone struggling with an addiction. When the line, "How could I be so blind to this addiction? If I don't stop, the next one is going to be me" was sung, it was like a dagger to my heart. It was probably one of the hardest cries I have ever had. I was on the wrong road. I had this emptiness and I believed in nothing to fill it. That night marked the last time I went out to a bar to get drunk.

I cleaned up my act. But I was restless. I thought I needed a change of venue. I had the girl I loved and the job I loved, but it wasn't enough. I took the first promotion that my company offered which got me out of New York. Maybe a new beginning would help things. So off to Missouri again I went.

Hole Hearted

I have to admit I was a bit of a hair band kind of guy. Of all the albums I had, it was Extreme's 'Pornograffiti' that I liked the most. I was especially fond of the harder rock songs on the album. The two acoustic songs I didn't really care for. My neighbors in the condo heard it more than once.

How is this relevant? Well, you see, I put my heart and soul into the new position. Once again, though, it was unfulfilling. I ran into a few friends from my prior years in Missouri. They were people of great faith. In just a few discussions, being very careful to stay off the topic of religion, it started to occur to me that maybe the hole and emptiness I had could only be filled with one thing: God. Honestly, I bristled at the idea. I tried religion, heck, I was going to be a priest. It didn't work. But it would not leave me alone.

One night, while playing the above mentioned album, the song 'Hole Hearted', came on. I had been distracted by trying to figure out my life and I heard in the background, "If I'm not blind, why can't I see that circle can't fit where a square should be?" Right words at the right time. It occurred to me that what I had spent the last 4 years doing was trying to fill a hole with something that wouldn't fill it. It was time to give this God thing another chance.

It was timid business though. I knew that I still wanted nothing to do with either angry god or fluffy god. I went out and tried to find God on my own. This, too, was unfulfilling, because I caught on rather quickly that all I was doing was creating a God I could be comfortable with. It seemed to me that that was already done by others. If I was going to do this whole God thing, I wanted to find the real one.

The Road Home

For me, I started out with a basic question, "If I were a God who created, why would I do it and what would I desire?" That led me to find the God of Judeo-Christianity. Unlike other religions, where creation was bad and man especially evil, in Judeo-Christianity, God created on purpose and with purpose, out of love. This made sense to me. How then all the turmoil? It made sense to me that if that creation turned on Him by not loving Him back, that the obvious result would be turmoil. That He doesn't destroy that creation and start again, however much it deserves it, spoke to that love. The whole Jesus event then made incredible sense. If a God who loves His fallen creation really loves them, He will do what is necessary to draw them back in without destroying them; He would destroy what separated them.

What then was I to do with a lifetime of seeing His followers not getting that? What was I going to do with those followers who presented Him as angry god or as fluffy god? If I were going to re-engage in faith, I had to search for what was authentic, even if what was authentic challenged me to my core. In fact, I was hoping that an encounter with God would shake me to my very core. I wanted to get as close as I could to that creator who loved.

Why, then, do I need a Church? Can't I just find this God on my own? Why? Because I knew there were other people looking as well. There were other people who wanted something to fill that emptiness just like I did. I started looking at what various churches taught about God. I saw a lot of the angry god and fluffy god. It was St. John Paul II who captured me. I read what he wrote and listened to his words and it became clear that what he believed...that's what I was looking for. His God was neither angry nor fluffy. Then, as I looked at what the Church actually taught, I realized that I had found what I was looking for in the last place I would find it. I had written off Catholicism as hijacked by crazies.

I was content to be a layman who would engage in this. I could be a teacher. I could volunteer. The problem was that the more I engaged in faith the more empty the rest of my life seemed.

I had found my love. I wasn't ready to commit though.

To be continued next week