

2nd Place Winner 2009 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Competition

DIVINE MALFEASANCE

By Holly Welker

ONE SACRAMENT MEETING IN THE LATE 1980s, an aggressively cheerful nineteen-year-old lectured the university ward I attended on the fact that we could achieve anything—absolutely *anything*—if we worked hard enough, adding derisively, “Hard work never killed anyone, people—remember that.” Her statement was indeed memorable for its breathtaking inaccuracy and the smug ignorance it revealed: Had she really never heard of the horrible ways coal mining can kill you, or the Poles who had toiled as slave labor for the Nazis til they dropped dead, or the million or so people worked to death in Soviet labor camps?

It wasn't what I attended church for, so when the meeting ended, I accosted my bishop. “I want you to let me give a talk next week,” I said.

“What about?” he asked.

“Humor,” I said grimly. “I want to talk about humor.”

“Are you sure? Two weeks ago, I couldn't help noticing you looked miserable. I almost expected you to start crying. You don't look very happy right now, either.”

“That's why I need to talk about humor,” I insisted. The next week I delivered a talk about God's sense of humor, my conviction that he had to have one, even though it went unmentioned in our Topical Guide. Surely God could understand a joke, I said. Surely he could tell one. Look at the story of Job—OK, not a funny joke, but a joke nonetheless, arguably the original practical joke (Hey! Let's ruin this guy's life, and see what he does!), the ur-text not only of tragedy, but of *Candid Camera* and *Punk'd!* If God could feel anger, love, approval, and grief, surely he could feel amusement. Surely there was something not only healing but divine about a good laugh. Surely, I said, though I didn't feel sure at all, God wasn't some joyless

authoritarian. Wouldn't it be nice if God laughed not only *at* us, in the superior way evoked by the joke, “Know how to make God laugh? Tell him your plans,” but with us? Surely Isak Dinesen was right in “The Dreamers,” when she had a character declare, “I have been trying for a long time to understand God. Now I have made friends with him. To love him truly you must love change, and you must love a joke, these being the true inclinations of his heart.” Or maybe not. The talk bombed. My university ward disliked the idea of a god who could tell or get a joke, though they apparently had no problem with one who demanded the sacrifice of firstborn children.

Talks like that didn't proceed from pure contrariness, though I'm sure some who heard them thought so. Instead, I gave the kinds of talks I wanted to hear, talks that explored alternate theologies, respected doubt, acknowledged suffering and sorrow, drew on wisdom from unconventional sources, and tried to determine and supply what was missing in the Church, because I'd noticed a profound lack for most of my life.

I was a child both dutiful and plagued by guilt and doubt. I prayed and read scripture daily but agonized over whether I did either with enough sincerity of heart. I accepted that scripture meant what we were told it meant, but questioned the logical and ethical premises preceding and following a particular statement. I believed completely that we must “offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (D&C 59:8). But how broken was broken enough, how contrite was contrite enough, and *why*? Why did God require those things? What, ultimately, did he do with them?

In my teens, all that doubt and guilt translated into severe depression. In the 1970s, when I first dealt with it, depression, especially in the young, was often viewed as self-indulgent malingering. I experienced it not as a medical condition but as a world view and a personal failing. What was wrong with me, that I felt the world was fundamentally unjust, that I fixated on abuses of power, that I was obsessed with the nature of suffering?

In an effort to discover and fix what was wrong with me, I served a mission. My mission succeeded in that I



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baptized well above the average number of converts for my area, fulfilled all 18 months of service, and was honorably released. In other ways, it wasn't so successful. My questions were more numerous, more complex, and more urgent after my mission, and I was more fatigued and aggrieved than ever by anyone who met my questions with platitudes or clichés. And ironically, given that God requires a broken heart and a contrite spirit, coming home with one of each should have been a mark of success, but it didn't feel like one: it felt like a failure, since I couldn't say with enthusiasm that my mission had been the best period of my life. Furthermore, no one wanted to hear—no one could hear—my first, confused attempts to explain what I'd learned about suffering, the thing I knew best by the time my mission ended.

During and after my mission, I repeatedly offered God my broken heart and contrite spirit. He gave both back to me, and that's what I was left with. Neither was much use in trying to figure out how to live in a world dominated by vanity and vexation of spirit.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, I brooded over the story of Job. Many people are moved by Job's refusal to do as Satan predicts after diverse afflictions are heaped upon him, namely to "curse God to his face," nor what Job's wife advises, which is basically the same thing, with the added gesture of dying afterwards—whether by suicide or by being smitten by God for blasphemy isn't made clear. Job's refusal is remarkable, particularly as God is, if not the author of his suffering, at least involved in it, the friend whose complicity is necessary for the punking to proceed: God gives Satan permission to torment Job any way he desires, save killing him outright. So before smiting Job with boils, Satan kills all Job's livestock and servants, as well as his children, a tradeoff that frankly seems more affliction than blessing: most parents I know would sacrifice their own lives to prevent the violent deaths of all their children. And all this happens because God accepts Satan's bet.

What always struck me as the most important point in the entire story was Job's commitment to justice and accountability on a cosmic scale. Upbraided by friends for complaining that his suffering is undeserved, Job replies, "Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: and cause me to understand wherein I have erred" (Job 6:24). But his friends can't show where Job has erred, because he hasn't erred. He is afflicted not because he deserves it, but precisely because he doesn't deserve it. That's what makes God's bet with Satan interesting.

What Job wants most isn't even an end to his suffering, but an explanation for it, to the point that he demands an audience with and accountability from God, in such a way that God knows Job deserves at least the audience if not the accountability. It never escaped me that God refuses to answer Job's questions about the ultimate causes of suffering. Instead, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind (a

symbol and agent, after all, of chaos), saying, essentially, "Who are you? Do you think you're my equal in power, might, or knowledge? If not, don't dare question me."

Job cowers before the show of force and withdraws his demands, saying "I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee . . . I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2-6). All of which constituted strong evidence, I thought, that self-loathing and despair were appropriate responses to greater knowledge of God and his workings.

Although God denies Job the explanation he desired, God tacitly admits the injustice done to Job, and God's role in it, by replacing what Job had lost. He gives Job a completely new family, as if the children who'd been killed were interchangeable with the new ones. And everyone who didn't die in the beginning of the story lives happily ever after.

I never considered my suffering equal to Job's; I never thought that Satan had engineered my travails because I was particularly special to God. I just wanted clarity on who was in charge and how the system worked. Thus, I wrote things like this in my journal:

Talked to my MTC companion. We agreed that it would be totally cool to have, say, a fifteen-minute interview with God. Just meet him for lunch somewhere, and ask a few questions. Seriously, there are things I would like to have explained. We have interviews with all kinds of other Church leaders; why not God? We are accountable to *him* and to other people for our stewardship; since we are part of God's stewardship, is *he* accountable to *us*?

One thing that worried me on my mission was God's success rate—I had a feeling that if he were accountable to someone, he might not get glowing performance reviews. I was well acquainted with Moses 1:39, which states, "For this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." Considering the fact that when I began my mission in 1985, only about nine million of the earth's five billion inhabitants were Mormon, I couldn't help thinking, "For someone who's supposedly omnipotent, God isn't meeting with much success in his work and his glory." Surely if it mattered to him that the whole world hear the message of Mormonism, he'd work harder to get it out there. The Church had only been around for about 150 years; if he were really anxious to offer the truth to every last human who ever drew breath on this planet, why wait so long to reveal it? I saw several logical conclusions to draw from this state of affairs: perhaps God wasn't omnipotent, or he didn't really care about us, or the Church wasn't as necessary to salvation as its adherents liked to claim—or per-



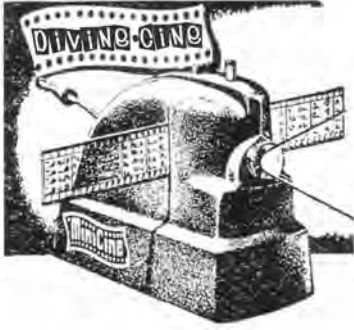
God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, saying, essentially, “Who are you? Do you think you’re my equal in power, might, or knowledge? If not, don’t dare question me.”

haps all those things were true.

And yet, during my mission and after, I continued to accept fundamental aspects of the plan of salvation—the idea, for instance, that we would someday be judged for our choices and actions, and that it was vital that we learn to forgive. In fact, I still believe those things. But how far did forgiveness extend, I wondered? What was the greatest act of forgiveness an individual could make?

One fast Sunday shortly after my talk on God’s sense of humor, the bishop began testimony meeting by discussing a time when he and his wife had gone away for a week, leaving their eldest child, a high school senior, in charge of the five younger children. The parents had issued explicit instructions: Feed the dog regularly. Lock the doors

before leaving the house. Since no shopping can be done on Sunday, buy milk Saturday night so there’s still milk for Monday morning. Make sure everybody gets to church. Make sure everyone survives. The parents returned Sunday afternoon to find all the doors unlocked and the refrigerator empty of milk. However, the dog had been fed and the kids were all at church. “They didn’t do everything right,” the bishop said, “but they got the biggest things. Everyone was alive and well, and everyone went to church. So we didn’t have milk. So what. It was good to know we could trust our children to take care of one another and not play hooky from church. And I loved them so much when I saw how they were trying to be good, and I felt grateful that I’d managed to teach them



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anything at all, because as any parent can tell you, parenting is hard. We call God ‘our Heavenly Father,’ and I think we need to keep in mind the ways his relationship with us is that of a loving parent. Yes, he gives us all kinds of rules and responsibility, but he understands the difficulty in learning to obey those rules. And he knows what the most important rules are, and he’s grateful when we manage to obey them.”

I got up immediately after he sat down, and said, “I think the bishop is right in every part of the analogy he drew. He mentions feeling grateful that he managed to teach his children anything at all, because parenting is difficult. I imagine God often feels the same way. Recently one of my teachers said, ‘The parent-child relationship goes like this: I forgive you, you forgive me, throughout all eternity.’ I think that’s right. We believe in the doctrine of eternal progression, we believe God was once like us. What that might mean, and what we don’t often acknowledge, is that God might still be learning.

“In any event, we have to acquit God of responsibility for all the horrible things that happen in the world, one way or another. All the time, people point to something like the Holocaust, and ask, ‘How could a loving god let that happen?’ And people come up with some doctrinal explanation or another, or just say there is no god.

“I sometimes have this vision of the final judgment. God judges everyone, gives his assessment of our sins and our virtues. Then he says, ‘OK, everybody, sit down: we’re going to watch a movie.’ And we see a movie of all the events of the world from his perspective. We see the miracles he could have performed but didn’t. We see the mistakes he made. We see the things he learned along the way. Then he turns the projector off, and says, ‘OK, what do you all think?’

“And I imagine people responding in one of three ways. The first group will say, ‘Oh, but you’re God, so whatever you did was OK; after all, you’re in charge, and we agreed to be obedient.’ And their reward will be their own complacency, and their punishment will be their willful ignorance and inability to accept responsibility. The second group will be very angry and will say, ‘You lied. You said you were perfect. You said you were fair.’ Their reward will be their understanding of justice, and their punishment will be an implacable rage. And the

final group will give God a hug and will say, ‘We never expected you to be perfect; we were trying to do our best and we knew you were too. It’s OK.’ And their reward will be their ability to love and forgive, and their punishment will be their understanding of the truth that despite what Einstein said about ‘I can’t believe that the gods play dice with the universe,’ the universe really is a crap shoot.”

No one got up afterwards and condemned me for blasphemy—in fact, a few people complimented me on my “bravery.” But neither did anyone engage seriously with what I’d tried to say. And within a year, I left the church. I couldn’t bear the resounding indifference to this issue of accountability, justice, and forgiveness that obsessed me so. Let me assure everyone that not for a moment did I imagine myself or even aspire to be among those who could forgive God: I was firmly with the enraged justice seekers, those who resented being deceived and manipulated—even if as part of some benevolent plan and for our own good. And I was angry not only at God but at those in the first category, those who took Richard Nixon’s claim, that “If the president does it, it’s not illegal,” and elevated it to divine status, so that “If God does it, it’s not evil.”

Many religions include in their pantheon a god or goddess of death—deities neither righteous nor benevolent, merely powerful expressions of real forces. Only in monotheism does “God” automatically equal “righteous.” Like many children raised on that idea, I was horrified when I first read Graeco-Roman mythology, replete with gods who assumed animal form in order to rape, torture and torment human beings; gods frankly and unapologetically selfish, deceitful, and cruel. They weren’t any more ethical than human beings, just more powerful and long-lived. For the longest time, the situation repulsed me. But at some point, I realized that I admired the Greeks and Romans for judging their gods. An immoral act was still immoral, even when committed by a god. Divine beings might be much harder to hold accountable than mere mortals, but the patricide, infanticide, and trickery they engaged in were still patricide, infanticide, and trickery.

WITH THAT IN mind, consider this story. Imagine that a man deems all his offspring unworthy and unrighteous, and in disgust de-

cides the world would be better off without them. Without consulting his wife, he insists that all his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren attend a family reunion—except for one son and the son’s family, whom the father sends away because he wants some of his DNA to persist. When everyone else is at the family reunion, the father takes out a rifle and kills them all. Then he tells the son he didn’t kill that because he and his family were spared, they must henceforth worship the father, praising his compassion, generosity, and loving-kindness, because he’s in charge, and if he decrees his actions compassionate, generous, and lovingly kind, well then, they are.

This, of course, parallels the story of Noah. In that story, God engineers the planet’s first genocide.

What do we do with the story of God killing all but a handful of people? I believe that once we examine it closely, we cannot claim that it demonstrates God’s goodness, even if he did promise afterwards never again to destroy the earth by flood. We shirk our intellectual, moral, and spiritual responsibility if we assert that genocide isn’t genocide if God commits it.

So what do we do instead? Do we consider the story evidence that God is indeed progressing, outgrowing behavior unworthy of a loving deity? Do we say it’s simply a myth explaining the origin of rainbows? How do we let it teach us a truth other than the one we’re used to?

I believe that we who were taught this story are obligated to consider these questions. I believe that one way a religion offers redemption, salvation, and growth to believers is by giving them something to question and struggle against. Religion asks us to determine what constitutes goodness and righteousness, and it offers us standards by which to make those assessments. For instance, Mormonism teaches that “almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose . . . will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion”—or in other words, our leaders (both religious and political) can sin. Jesus told us that “by their fruits ye shall know them”—or that actions are judged by their consequences.

I reject the idea that the moral nature of an action is determined primarily by the reputation, role, or affiliation of the person who does it—i.e., if the guy in the white hat kills someone, it’s necessarily justified; if the guy in a black hat kills someone, it’s necessarily depraved; if the U.S. engages in waterboarding, it’s justified; if anyone else does it, it’s cruel and sadistic torture. The concepts of mistakes, sins, and errors are meaningful only if they are things the “righteous” can be guilty of, and the concepts of repentance, spiritual growth, and forgiveness matter only if they are also available to the “wicked.”

I confess that I haven’t managed to forgive the God I grew up with, which is another way of saying I lost faith in him. Instead, I’ve learned to question the actions and attitudes attributed to him. I’ve found ways to chart, if not his progression, then *my* progression in terms of what I

think ethics and righteousness truly consist of. I still believe in a god of sorts, a supreme force beyond our comprehension that animates the universe and endows life with ultimate meaning. I cannot believe that it engineers a genocide when humanity disappoints it; I cannot believe it expects us to accept that if a personage is powerful enough, his crimes are not crimes, his cruelty not cruelty.

And so I say: Let us all emulate Job, and reject the logic and ethics of Richard Nixon, even in our theology. Let us demand that God provide an account of his stewardship. Chances are slim that we’ll get it. But perhaps we will acquire an understanding of how divine righteousness is possible if divine malfeasance is not—or perhaps we will learn that if divine malfeasance is impossible, divine righteousness is too. Perhaps we will learn to hold ourselves, our scripture, our leaders, and our concept of the divine to a higher standard, one that elevates us all. *...*



EBB

What chance does this moon have
for a few hours every day, held down

as the thirst that never lets go
and you swallow hillside into hillside
—a few hours! that’s all and the moon

still trying, takes from your jawbone
some ancient sea half marrow

heavier and heavier with the Earth
backing you up when the moon is lifted whole
from inside your mouth, to be returned

for the fire that is nothing
without the night sky
still claiming you with headwinds and rain

even when there is no rain
—there is no fire left though the moon

never dries, clings to your lips
and everything it touches is want
empty with all these flowers.

— SIMON PERCHIK