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laboratory

Fourteen people waiting for blood draw. Thirteen on a gadget and one fool with a pen. Good I have time. I called a guy I was in the childcare system with. There are only a few of us left. Last we had spoken, he hung-up on me. We had a disagreement. Politics? No – we argued over the Divine. I felt the need to re-engage with him and smooth things over. It began like this, “Look at the mess the world’s in, and you say there’s a higher being? What crap.”

I have a rule in life, I don’t step in front of freight trains. I find it’s best to let the anger flare on the rails and then cool. But I’m also listening. Not so much to the words. Never the words of human song. I go underneath, into the hidden places of language where inflection and tremble confess what words conceal.

Listening for the hurt and pain underneath the passing freight of hard words. In the end, after the winding down, the rails cooled and to the side I stood waiting. Listening for the pause when my friend said, “I need a sign. God owes me a sign.”

The underneath was clear; a nearly inaudible crack in the voice in naming the word ‘god’ like thin cracks in thick ice. I listened to a litany about corrupt politicians, children with cancer, murders, hatred and racism: all the whips and scorns of earth-time. I know these too.

In essence my best friend felt, “If there’s all this mess, there can’t be a god.” I let that sit a moment and then asked, “I’m wondering if you notice all that is bad you attribute to the divine. You saw no goodness here?”

“I don’t believe I have. You said he made all this. Right?”
This isn’t actually a question about the existence of; it’s a question of what I believe.

“I assure you it did not make itself.”

“Come on, dude.”

I replied to my friend, “You have shown me all the wastage and breakage of the world. A place that was given to us in paradise form. I know where the purity and beauty came from. I also know where ugliness and decay came from.

The challenge is to comprehend a universal, something vaster than anyone can imagine. Then to apply that idea to a particular, say a child with cancer. The universal does not interfere in the particulars of humans. That is not to say it is impossible. A sincere heart in prayer – anything is possible.”

“Give me an example of when prayer worked in your life?”

“My drinking ended.”

“From prayer?”

“Remember how we drank in the system? I drank from twelve until I was forty-four. I prayed and that was my last drink. Over twenty years ago.”

“How long did it take? Months? Years? Years in church? How long?”

“It took one prayer. One.”

“One prayer? Oh, please.”

“Yea.”

“Dude, cut the crap. I pray. Lots’a people pray. I don’t believe you.”

“Prayer is about sincerity. I don’t need ten thousand prayers or ten thousand days. A sincere heart is a direct, connective, force.”

“How can I be sure though that I’m sincere?”

I explained the only way it makes sense to me, “We tell our spouses we won’t cheat; tell ourselves we won’t gamble or drink. But in us, there’s a secret back room in the heart. A place where we know our intentions. We naturally bend toward deceit. When you pray after that backroom’s been swept clean,

sincerity becomes true power. Lying-at-prayer means to lose connective power.”

“I’m not sure about any back room, bro. But where’s all the beauty and good you been ramblin about since Middletown? Where the heck is it?”

I know to be careful here. Always, when the unseeing accuse the witness.

“You’re saying that seeing is believing. That you need some kind of sign.

What if the universe doesn’t work that way at all? What if you have to believe to see?”

My friend said, “Dude, give me an example of beauty in this world.”

This is always difficult for me. “I find beauty and goodness every day. In the little things; a flower in bloom, a child’s laughter, a baby’s cry, a bird on a branch, a woman singing her happy song.”

“D, you’re still weird. I don’t see beauty anywhere.” I replied, “You’ve hardened your heart. The eyes must follow.”

I waited, listening to the nerve I strummed. Life lets folks down - stony field in which to try growing new ways of being or seeing. My friend replied, “I still need to see something.” I replied, “You’re going to have to give a little. How could a being of good find a place in your heart? You have to clear it. Then send out an invite. It doesn’t happen without an invitation.”

I waited on the retort. On the evidence of how bitter and hard and unfair life is. No one who ever passed through a Catholic orphanage needs that lesson more than once. He asked, “We grew up with the nuns, the system, the old church, those ropes under their habits and all that. You still believe that pie in the sky stuff?” I drank some water. I’ve always struggled against the evidence of what was brutality in every placement, in every Catholic foster home. I replied carefully -

“I have never known doubt.” A moment of silence. “Say what?”

“I have never known doubt. It’s true there were some horrific places under the care-of-the-cross. That was just fallen people. It didn’t harden me. It had never occurred to me to blame or curse god for what happened. It was just humans doing what humans do.”

My friend said, “D, you lost everything. Your brothers got destroyed.”

“I know.”

“And you said you blame god for nothing? Nada? I don’t believe you.”

“Never. I have a life. It ain’t much but I’ve come to understand the roses.”

“Don’t it stink to be the last from all those guys, all those places and days?”

“Yea. People romanticize survival. They never think about what it costs.

They don’t know the worst part; surviving the loneliness of the valor.”

We were getting off task. I redirected to the point.

“Tell me, friend, what sign do you need to be satisfied?” It always happens, like they rubbed a genie’s lamp, “Make all the wars end. Make politicians honest. End cancer.” I softly explain, “That’s the world mankind made. It’s ours to fix. Give me something specific to your life.” He thought a minute and replied,

“I want him to cure my wife. I want my wife like she used to be. So I can love her again.” She’d suffered a breakdown and had not come back to whole. I replied, “That’s doable. That is what prayer is for. I will bring the light to it.”

I could hear the relief that he’d finally released the underneath of his words; named his anger at god. It also required he acknowledge the divine – regardless of his tone. It is progress. My friend asked, “How can you not know doubt? How is that even possible after the system and all that?”

“I had experiences since I was a boy. Saw things, things others could not see. I know that’s also part of schizophrenia. But I’m not talking about that.” We

had a good laugh. “I’ll also say this. The more I told what I saw, the more they pumped me with medication. They damaged my brain before I even hit puberty.” He asked, “Like, but what did you see?” I replied, “You know, first time I ever ran away, I ran away to a church. Confessionals were my safe place. All I ever wanted was to be a priest. After my brothers got rearranged at Sparkhill, I lost that, too.”

He insisted, “But, like what did you ever see?”

“I told the nuns I saw beings in bright coats that float on water.”

“Where?”

“The bridge at Astor creek. Other times in the forest.”

“That’s why they put you in the padded room, bro.”

“That and other things. They medicated me for seeing what they preached.”

“Come on, your heart never hardened a bit over it? Not a drop?”

“No. World never got at my innocence. I fought the world and kept it.”

“Do you really think prayer could heal my wife?”

“No. I don’t think it.”

“But you just said, say what?”

“I believe. Belief is the heart’s dominion. It’s not about what you think.”

“Okay. That’s it? Clean out that back room thingy and pray sincerely?”

“You will have to give a little.”

“It would satisfy me very much to have her back in my life,” he said.

“Yea, well. It would satisfy the Divine – if you would just ask for yourself.”

Where there is no rain, there can be no crops. Where there is no faith, there can be no miracles. Where there is no hope, there can be no beauty.