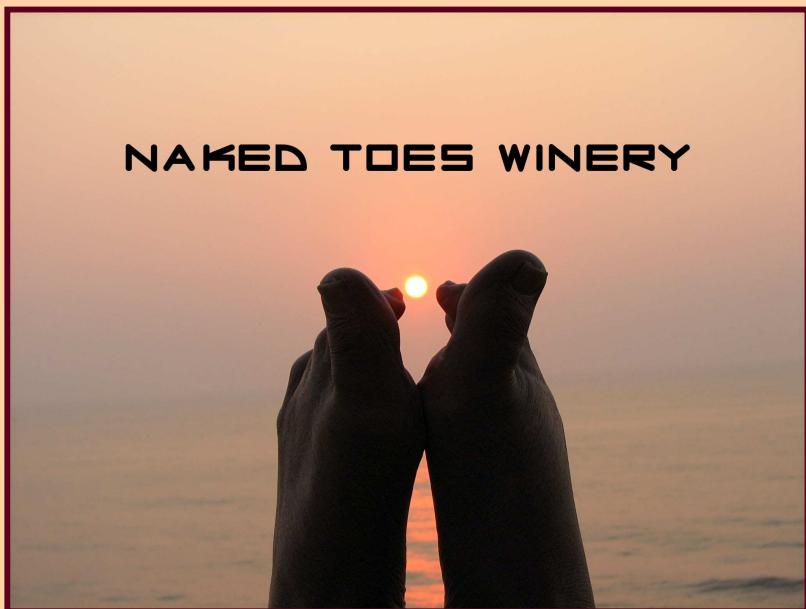


*“God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.” ~ Voltaire*

# Last Supper Red

## The Synaptic Edition



Previously published online as

### *Dialogues Upon Sundry Occasions*

Q, the reclusive and otherwise anonymous author of *the Dialogues*, intended that his title be so boring and abstruse no one would bother to read what he wrote. In this, at least, he was successful.

**James M. Truxell**

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This is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents in the text are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, as well as events, locations, and business establishments, houses of worship, institutions of learning, etc. is, for the most part, purely coincidental . . . or due to the work of Higgs Boson.

Any satire and/or snarkiness which may occur within these pages from time to time . . . be it directed toward named or unnamed others; be those persons living, dead, or in some as yet poorly defined state that is both-and-neither . . . is very likely the deliberate intention of the author. Any similar use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, derision, scorn (or other rhetorical devices too fierce to mention) directed at the author himself, is clearly the result of *egregiously* sloppy editing on the part of others. Once said editors are identified, they will be dealt with severely, *c.f.* chapter 4, p. 23, paragraph 3.

**Note to Parents:** In our opinion alone, we would give this e-book a **PG-13** rating. Some parents might disagree and want their children to wait until they are 16 or 17 to read it. Should they *prohibit* their younger children from reading it, this will ensure that these children will download it and surreptitiously devour its contents. Since an intense search for and interest in evolving a philosophy/theology of life usually does not emerge much before the end of the high school years anyhow, no harm will occur if they do.

We would, with considerably greater confidence, rate the Bible **MA** for “Mature Audiences” and strongly urge that *only mature people with a secure sense of values and boundaries should ever read it*. While Christian educators everywhere scream at this recommendation, we at least thank their colleagues at the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America for permission to quote from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, which they copyrighted in 1989, and with respect to which they reserve all rights . . . whatever that means.

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**LAST SUPPER RED** is a work of comedic fiction that satires how some of us in the Church understand, and consequently act upon, our beliefs. While the followers of any philosophy or theology are appropriately known and judged by their “fruits” . . . that is, by what they *do* and not just by what they say they *believe* . . . beliefs are often what motivate those behaviors.

Further, *our outward actions ultimately reflect our inward identities*: who we understand ourselves to be. *Last Supper Red* will, I hope, be useful in re-imagining our personal identities as something more expansive and durable than the narrow confines and fragile structures of our psychological egos. If that happens, then “religious” our not, our lives are more likely to express those fruits appropriately associated with Jesus of Nazareth: compassion, speaking truth to power in the pursuit of justice, reconciliation, forgiveness, hospitality, and love . . . even for those who are hard to love . . . people who are sometimes difficult to be around . . . people who are, no doubt, just like you and me.

*Last Supper Red* is primarily addressed to Seekers, which includes the “none’s, many of whom call themselves “spiritual-but-not-religious.” (See End Notes<sup>1</sup>) It is for those who may once have been a part of the Church, but who have left it in sad or angry disillusionment. It’s for those who say they are glad they never were a part of a Christian community. It is also for those in the pulpits and pews who are still searching.

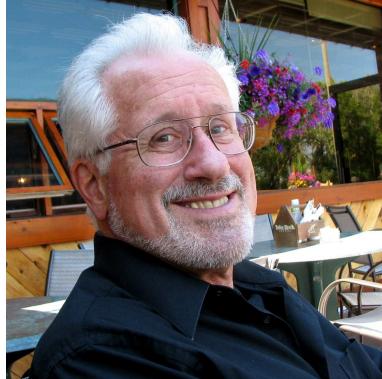
Seekers commonly are searching for a way to understand themselves and others that makes spiritual sense as citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, influenced as it is by the discoveries of the physical, biological, and social sciences. They are also looking for a community living out a way of life founded upon those understandings, and to which they might commit themselves. If you are such a Seeker, you are not alone. I’m a Seeker too.

Definitely meant to evoke laughter, *Last Supper Red* is intended to serve this serious purpose. Amidst of all the foolishness in it, you will learn of some different options for understanding the Christian faith, options that are presented by a movement within contemporary Christianity known as *Progressive Christianity*. (See End Notes<sup>2</sup>).

This book will definitely disappoint those accustomed to reading “literature” worthy of that name! In addition, if you hold your faith understandings in a rather rigid manner, you will find this book to be offensive, and reading it an exercise in aggravation.

Finally, the views I express in this book are my own, having evolved over a longish lifetime, and are not necessarily those of any groups to which I belong. So have fun with *Last Supper Red!* May it encourage you to keep seeking!

James M. Truxell  
Reston, Virginia  
January 5, 2015



Like some sort of modern Dead Sea Scrolls, nearly illegible documents are discovered sealed in plastic storage containers in an office building's sub-basement. They record the conversations between two improbable adversaries: the middle-aged Snark (of the Covenant), and (St.) Advocatus di Aboli, who knew some of the Roman emperors. After a complete falling out over a sacrilegious wine label intimating that Snark's wine is "The Official Wine of the Last Supper," a series of conversations and adventures begin that satires the

Church's clinging to an outmoded theology that brilliantly and successfully turns off many people who otherwise might be attracted to it, sending them heading for the doors. A subplot - *of absolutely no discernible relevance to our time* - explores what is often necessary for "my way or the highway" adversaries to experience a rapprochement.

At times outrageous, often hilarious, and always thought-provoking, **Last Supper Red** will have you caring not only about its colorful characters, but some of the most important issues of spirituality, religion and politics in contemporary American life.

James M. Truxell is a retired United Methodist clergyman. Like Snark, from the moment of his baptism as an infant he's had a life-long lover's quarrel with the church. After serving 12 years as a pastor in the local church, since 1976 he has been under episcopal appointment to the fulltime ministry of pastoral counseling.

Though he claims to have left the ministry of speaking for that of listening, those who know him well say that he is often very long-winded . . . a trait his family, friends and even clients usually forgive . . . for he combines outrageous, iconoclastic humor with a profound respect for the sacredness of persons and life itself. He makes his home in Reston, Virginia where he enjoys the company of his wife, Sandy, and their extended family. Unaccountably, across the nearly 48 years of their marriage, she still loves him dearly. Though encouraging of his efforts at writing this book, she should be spared any of the negative criticisms it so richly deserves.

*This book is for:*

*Sophia,*

*with love, appreciation, and encouragement.*

*You are discovering who you are.*

*Now you know a bit more who I am.*

*“Bubby”*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

*(To understand the suffixes following some of the Dialogues' titles, check out  
The Dialogues: Their Discovery, Deciphering and Interpretation  
found in the Appendix beginning on page 199 .)*

<b>Preface to this Edition of <i>Last Supper Red</i></b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Prologue to <i>The Dialogues</i></b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Dialogue 1 – What's In a Name?</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Dialogue 2 – Older Than Moses</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Dialogue 3 – Shootout at the Not Quite As Okay As It Might Be Corral NRSV</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Dialogue 4 – My Beautiful Balloon RSV, MSG</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Dialogue 5 – Black Hole of Resentment</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Dialogue 6 – The Advantage of Experience</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Dialogue 7 – Breaking the Silence</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Dialogue 8 – Elsewhere</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Dialogue 9 – Quantum Trinity RSV, MSG</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Dialogue 10 – A Profound Gas</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Dialogue 11 – Hooking Up At Elsewhere</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Dialogue 12 – The End of the World</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Dialogue 13 – Revealing Breakfast</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Dialogue 14 – The Charm of Fishing</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Dialogue 15 – The Harm of Fishing</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Dialogue 16 – Welcome to the Club RSV</b>	<b>73</b>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

<b>Dialogue 17 – Show Me Your Naked Toes!</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Dialogue 18 – A Taste of Transformation</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Dialogue 19 – <i>Vividi</i>, We Roll Along!</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Dialogue 20 – <i>Wiwidee</i>, We Stagger Back</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Dialogue 21 – There's Got to Be a Morning After</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Dialogue 22 – Cure For the Blahs RSV</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Dialogue 23 – Gandhi and Higgs At Work RSV</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Dialogue 24 – Sacrifice and Violence RSV</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Dialogue 25 – Magic Carpet Ride RSV</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>Dialogue 26 – Occupy a New Perspective</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Dialogue 27 – Atheists Welcome! RSV</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Dialogue 28 – Somewhere Over the Rainbow?</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Dialogue 29 – Imagine That!</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Dialogue 30 – Wake Me Before It's Over!</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Dialogue 31 – Where Everybody Knows Your Name</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>Dialogue 32 – A Circle of Sorts</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>Dialogue 33 – To Tell the Truth RSV</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Appendix – The Dialogues: Their Discovery, Deciphering And Interpretation</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>End Notes</b>	<b>202</b>

## PREFACE

by Abercrombie Papoofnick, CEO  
Another-Fine-Mess

**Last Supper Red** was originally published on our company's website in serial installments under the title, *Dialogues Upon Sundry Occasions*. That is the title given by "Q", the anonymous scribe of a cache of nearly illegible, hand-written documents. After having been rendered as accurately as possible, on July 20, 2012 the *Dialogues* were edited and published online as Last Supper Red. (The story of their discovery and deciphering can be found, beginning on page 199.)

A word about this 2015 Edition is in order. (Sheesh, alright . . . 300 words.)

A great many readers of the original 2012 version of **Last Supper Red** reported that their brains actually locked up and stopped working while slogging through the anonymous author's overly abundant verbiage. Believing as we do in the importance and wisdom of community, we decided to undertake a revision that, while remaining faithful to the meaning and language of the author, would also reduce the frequency of such reactions.

After doing so, we again consulted the community about a suitable title for this *somewhat* abbreviated revision. Some responded with the suggestion that it be called "The Synoptic Edition", after the three New Testament gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) that express the "same view", and on account of which they are therefore called the "syn-optic" gospels. Even though this suggestion has about it a scholarly ring, it really doesn't describe a volume written by a single author whose viewpoint is . . . well . . . singular.

When this was pointed out, one wag in the community suggested "The Synopsis Gospel" because of its reduced heft. But that seems to overstate the actual extent of its concision. (Many readers have pleaded for such a synopsis of no more than fifteen pages, tops.) In addition, it is a matter of some debate as to whether it is "gospel" or "good news" at all. So, as cute a play on words as this suggestion might be, we rejected it as not qualifying, even for us, as sufficiently "truthy."

We found ourselves returning again and again to the comment of one reader who emailed us: "I'd rather drink a Slurpee® too fast, because the resulting brain-freeze would be significantly less painful." Because of this sort of experience amongst so many of our readers, we have called it:

**Last Supper Red**  
**The Synaptic Edition**

## PROLOGUE

In the beginning, God laughed, and quite shamelessly so, for God's laughter was in response to one of God's *own* jokes. Somewhere down inside God's heart, the laughter began to swell. It then sought the assistance of God's lungs, which inflated themselves to such proportions, were God *not* to have expelled the air, God would have self-destructed. It is not given to us to know what the consequences of that demise would have been, since the universe had not yet been created. But we're getting ahead of the story.

Once God's funny bone was thus tickled, what happened next was inevitable. It was a head-back-full-force-pushing-out-the-air-from-the-diaphragm-doubled-over cosmic guffaw: the out-gassing of God's hilarity into what hitherto had been only the "tough crowd" somber darkness of the infinite void.

It is surmised by most reputable authorities that, along with the explosion of God's breath, there also spewed forth a number of tiny particles. Ever The Playful One, God gave these particles fanciful names like "Quark", "Muon", "Neutrino", and most bafflingly of all, "Higgs Boson." God's laughter kept on expanding, infinitely suffusing itself into the background of everywhere there was a "there" . . . a phenomenon modern physics humorously refers to as the "background radiation" left over from the Big Bang.

And then God said, "I think I've got a good thing going here! Lemme see what I can do with all this stuff."

To severely condense (for just this one time only) a 13.75 billion year-long story: very nearly at the end of all that time, God scooped up a handful of the remaining spare, left-over particles; told another cosmically funny story; and breathed God's laughter into the matter at hand, so to speak. "Then," as one highly metaphoric version of the story puts it without the slightest nod to gender-neutral language, "Man became a living soul." You probably have heard that story, and a fine one it is.

For our purposes, we'll further condense (actually, we were lying, since this is the second such condensation) that story too, skip over a lot of important details, and tell you a tall tale . . . or perhaps it's a myth about what happened shortly thereafter. So we'll call it a mythic tale.

But before we do, it may help to remember that tall tales . . . like their uptown cousins the myths . . . aren't just a bunch of lies and, well, "myths." Rather they communicate deep truths. As long as you don't get caught up in reading them as though they are *literally* an eyewitness-account-complete-with-videotape-at-eleven, they can reveal their truths to you. If you *do* take them literally, then you get all bound up in the irrelevant debates between scientists and "creationists." C'mon, people! We're talking about truths that are best stated by myths . . . truths of a different order than the empirically-demonstrated, factual truths science reveals to us. They're like apples and oranges (or, perhaps, aardvarks) and there's really no conflict between the two. They're just appropriately different ways of stating discoveries of very different sorts. Okay, end of this discursion.

It was turning into a rant anyway.

This next part of the much longer mythic tale tells of an aged couple, Abe and Sarah. They'd had their AARP cards longer than the life span of most people, and while generally happy, they were childless. God was especially fond of the couple and, as close companions sometimes do with each other, decided to have some fun with them by telling them what appeared to be God's own "tall tale."

So God donned a disguise and went to Abe, telling him that, by the same time the following year, Sarah would give birth to a son. We don't know what Abe said in reply because the tale doesn't specify it. But you can easily imagine him saying something like: "You gotta be kidding me! I'm 99 years old now and Sarah is 90! I don't see you handing out little blue pills, dude! And besides, we've only got *one* bathtub! Either you're either completely *meshuggeneh*, or else God - that Laughing Jokester - has put you up to this!"

Well, at least *we* can easily imagine that.

The story says that when she overheard the prediction she'd bear a child at 90, "Sarah laughed." Within a year they laughed again as their son was born. That's why, when the time came to give the boy a name, they figured it would be only fitting to name him "Laughter." In their language, the word for "laughter" was "Isaac."

The final element of this long, mythic tale, has Isaac and his dad hiking up into the mountains . . . a hike undertaken because the old man thought God was asking him to do something truly awful, dreadful, and violently obscene . . . to bind up Isaac, place him on a slab of rock, and kill him as an "offering" to God! Abe, quite naturally, dreaded all of this in the extreme. But what else was he going to do? When the One who laughs the world into being and knows all about Higgs Boson speaks, you tend to listen.

So up the mountain they trudged: the son following his father, blissfully unaware of the journey's despicable purpose. Abe's heart was in his mouth. Tears kept falling down his face. At the moment the bound-up Isaac saw his father's knife raised up . . . saw his father poised to kill him . . . a sort of call came through to Abe from the Governor granting a stay of execution, so to speak. Abe's heart returned to his chest. Wiping away his tears, the relieved and excited Abe again drew his knife and, cutting through the ropes he had wound around his son, Abe unbound Isaac.

There and then, somewhere . . . actually it was everywhere and forever . . . God laughed.

*"God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."*  
-- Voltaire

## Dialogue 1 - What's In a Name? RSV

Hilarity, before it saved it, usefully destroyed the Sunday morning worship service. The surprised, frightened, and loudly howling infant Gregory . . . having had what to him was an inordinate amount of cold water unexpectedly poured over his head as a sign of welcome to the Christian community . . . reached up with his tiny fingers and grasped the preacher's nostrils with all the desperation of a passenger on the Titanic clutching a piece of flotsam to keep from following that great vessel to its own watery doom. Entering into the anguish of the child by experiencing his own, the preacher let out a loud "Ieeeeeee!" That is when he noisily, odiferously, and stupendously crapped himself . . . thereby simultaneously voiding not only his bowels, but also the guarantee on the package of his undergarments that proclaimed them to be "Completely Leak-Proof or Your Money Back."

To be clear, it was *Gregory* who emptied his bowels and not, strangely, the preacher. Had it been otherwise, the unfortunate prelate could have been excused; for he was, along with Gregory's father, preoccupied for the next several minutes with loosening Gregory's tiny fingers from his nose; a nose which was by now a shade of red indistinguishable from that of the Pentecost stole he wore around his neck. Glancing down, the preacher noticed a few drops of blood had begun to fall from his nose into the baptismal font, having, thereby, quite unintentionally and without prior ecclesiastical authorization, created a mash-up of the only two sacraments the Protestant reformers had seen fit to preserve before flushing the other five down the commode of an overly-confident rationalism.

Because of all the ruckus at the chancel rail . . . a commotion involving howling, screeching, pleading, bloodletting, and various sorts of other assaults upon more than one nose . . . those in the congregation who had not already awakened after the sermon were now fully roused to attention.

The congregation's mirth, which had been building from the beginning, now erupted into waves of raucous laughter, swelling to a tsunami of snot-blowing, knee-slapping, high decibel hoo-hawing that overtook everything and everyone in its path. Tears of usually proper and sedate women washed their mascara bosomward. The carefully knotted silk ties of the men showed the stains of their own excessive amusement.

Gregory's parents exhibited somewhat different reactions. Red-faced and frowning, they held tightly onto their newly baptized, still leaking son and, all covered with embarrassment, shame and . . . not to put too fine a point on it . . . a slurry of fragrant putrefaction . . . hurried down the center aisle in search of the protective sanctuary of the nursery.

Upon witnessing the parents' ignominious retreat, the congregation experienced emotions so various and conflicted, that they rose to levels attaining (appropriately enough) Biblical proportions.

Some managed to guffaw with such unremitting gusto, they would later discover they had unwittingly created a condition which would justify their seeking recompense according to the provisions of a guarantee already in their own possession . . . assuming one had been issued with the purchase of their own Fruit-of-the-Looms.

Others abruptly ceased their laughter. Sorrow-tinged lines of Christian compassion began to trace over their faces as they watched the parents make their sad retreat. They thereby appropriated all by themselves that gift of the Spirit toward which the preacher's sermons had always pointed, and just as consistently had failed to inspire. Still others followed the parents down the aisle . . . heading for, it must be presumed, either the restrooms or the fresh air outside.

Since the baptism was near the end of the service, and in view of these circumstances, the preacher announced that the concluding hymn, "O Happy Day," would be omitted. He altered his planned benediction to a brief "Dear God, Peace!" and fairly sprinted out the church's main entrance, not even pausing to greet his parishioners upon their exit.

At Gregory's home later that afternoon, upon awakening from his well-deserved nap, the little child began to be troubled by a significant accumulation of mucous that was clinging tenaciously up high on the back of his soft palate. This was entirely understandable considering that, only a few hours before, he had barely survived what felt to him like a near-death experience at the hands of the church . . . an experience that, it turns out, would be repeated often in his life. With each attempt at dislodging the phlegm that so annoyed him, he made a loud glottal noise that at first sounded like "Snaaaarkkkk!" Soon, it evolved into "Snarrrrrkk!" and reached its triumphant culmination several minutes later with an exceedingly complex and refined "Snaaarque!"

And so it was that on the day Gregory received his Christian name, he also acquired from his doting parents the nickname by which he would thereafter be known: "Snark."

## Dialogue 2 – Older Than Moses

While the biographical origins of Snark are readily available to researchers, the same can not be said for Advocatus. He is a mysterious figure. Exceedingly learned scholars have undertaken their own Quest for the Historical Advocatus; but the only consensus they have attained is that his origins were located somewhere around the Mediterranean Sea. Some think him to be from Israel, while others insist he comes from Italy. Whatever the location, Advocatus does not appear to be Mediterranean.

He is exceedingly fair-skinned, slender almost to the point of appearing anorectic. At some inches over six feet in height, he gives the appearance of being rather more Nordic than Italian. Snark, on the other hand, stands a short five feet, nine inches. He is more pudgy about the middle than he cares to be, but regards his smooth olive skin with a private satisfaction akin to his similarly privately-held appreciation of his family's Jewish origins nearly a thousand years ago in Turkey. At some years over 60, Snark believes he is just past middle age. He bases this reckoning on Jewish tradition: if the great Moses had died at 120, then no other person is permitted to pass that limit.

Were the length of the human journey truly governed by that tradition, Advocatus would be a flagrant, serial offender of it. The man is both aged and ageless. Scholars reckon him to have been around far longer than Moses' span of years: for a great many centuries, in fact. As hard as that is to comprehend, they have turned up abundant evidence of him appearing in the historical record across nearly two millennia: seemingly blinking in and out of existence like the sub-atomic particles described by quantum physicists. Of course, these are the same learned scholars who contend that he is from the village of Aboli in the Italian Alps. On the face of it, this is a ridiculous assertion since, on maps and in documents both ancient and modern, there is no record of there ever having been such a place.

When you get close enough to him, you notice that crinkly, crows' feet of mirthful joy very faintly still linger at the outside corners of his hazel eyes. But these lines are almost totally eclipsed by an angry-looking vertical furrow rising from the top of his nose well up into his forehead. Perhaps it is, instead, a line plowed by the frequent plotting of strategies for defending himself against some fearful opponent. Below the line of his receding long gray hair, creases run uncertainly across his forehead, especially when his brows lift like the raising of a draw bridge. Yes, Advocatus has known sorrow too.

---

\* For a more modern example of such woodcuts, see the splendid block-print-like art in *Clip Art for Year A*, Steve Erspamer (Liturgy Training Publications, 2007). Marianist Brother Steve Erspamer's clip art is used extensively on the provocatively wonderful website created by Gordon Atkinson, <http://www.RealLivePreacher.com>. Atkinson's more recent writings can be found at: <http://www.laitylodge.org/author/pilgrim/>

If you Google the elongated image of a medieval bishop, perhaps a woodcut by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Albrecht Dürer, you'll be on the right track toward visualizing him. Find an image in black and white, for that is more nearly how *Advocatus* appears.\* And it is frequently how he thinks.

Whether the choice of how he now presents himself is at all influenced by his awareness of the aforementioned scholars' research cannot accurately be determined. Suffice it to say that the man is given to regularly wearing a bishop's miter, a matching robe, and usually carries a crosier, which provides him with (perhaps) dignity and (definitely) a measure of stability.

He exhibits a solemn, always formal, demeanor. When he is invited to attend, for example, a summer outdoor barbecue at a friend's house, he affects a more casual appearance by leaving his miter at home. When he arrives, he invariably introduces himself as Saint *Advocatus di Aboli*.\*

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\*\* Along with the usual manuscripts in the manila envelope containing this Dialogue, the anonymous author left a note to himself. It reads, "Make it clear to readers that *Advocatus'* affiliation, while not of any lasting significance in any case, is *not just* Roman Catholic, in spite of his appearance. He *is* that, of course, since until the early-16<sup>th</sup> century nearly all Christians in the west *were* Roman Catholic. But *Advocatus* is more - and other - as well." Since, to our knowledge, the anonymous author nowhere makes the gist of this note apparent in his manuscripts, we include the note here in the interest of clarity, scholarly completeness, and respecting his intentions., ~ Editors

### **Dialogue 3 – Shootout at the Not Quite As Okay As It Might Be Corral NRSV**

"Snark, I want to see you immediately! At my place. It's urgent." Even through his poor cell phone connection, Snark could tell that Advocatus was more upset than usual. The old man was dyspeptic by disposition, and over the years had frequently visited his frustrations upon Snark.

Snark had graduated many years ago from a seminary he described as "moderately liberal." In those more fortunate times, this was a label that communicated meaning; but in our current climate, befouled as it is by a fundamentalist extremism at both ends of the theological and political spectrums, "moderately liberal" is a term as understandable as dehydrated water . . . and just as rare.

By both his training and innate inclinations, Snark found much that he distrusted in Advocatus, for the old man was frequently rigid, judgmental, and had little by way of a sense of humor. Irony was lost on him, and he seemed completely blind to his own absurdities. And yet . . . there were times of late, when Snark thought he detected something else in Advocatus; and the discovery unsettled him. Was there in him the hint of a thoughtful humaneness beginning to emerge, like the first bright green shoots of a garden perennial in spring, sticking its leaves up from under the dank, musty soil that had, for a very long time, hidden it from the light of day? Perhaps. He wasn't sure. He would have to remain careful, for Advocatus possessed great power.

With an anxious curiosity vibrating under his sternum, Snark walked up the path to the house of Advocatus, wondering what had put the old man into such a pique this time. Advocatus, dressed in his full ecclesiastical regalia, ushered Snark into the somewhat dimly lit living room. Its pea soup green walls, dark oil paintings with rococo frames, and a horsehair-stuffed settee covered in worn maroon velvet radiated all the energy of a major depressive episode . . . or the ladies parlor of a church in steep decline.

Dispensing with any of the usual courtesies, Advocatus stood erect while he shook a boney finger in Snark's face. "You've finely done it, Snark!" he hissed. "You've gone *utterly 'round the bend* this time, you impudent little man! You have gone far past your usual nonsense and have become sacrilegious in the extreme. You very well may have committed the unpardonable sin!" Advocatus' complexion had turned from its usual pallid, ashen gray to a deepening shade of red, relieved only by some swollen purple veins running like interstate highways over the roadmap of his deeply lined face. He grasped his crosier tightly and, unsteadily, lowered himself into a chair.

Snark could see the old man's chest heaving fitfully as he tried to regain his normal pace of respiration. "Advocatus, I've seen you upset before, but never like this. What, exactly, do you think I've done?"

"You have mocked the most important of the sacraments, that's all!" replied the old man, breath once more filling his lungs. "After all the help and guidance I have given you

these many years, I would have thought that not even *you* would dare to do such a thing! Were I not so enraged, I might even feel sad, or hurt, or disappointed. I have forgiven you many times; sought to correct your thinking; attempted to moderate your behavior. But where has it gotten me, Snark?"

"Advo, slow down! Take your time! You're going to give yourself a coronary."

"I have told you before, Snark, my name is Advocatus. Dispense with your practice of giving me nicknames! You should have outgrown that puerile, insolent habit by the conclusion of your adolescence!"

"Oh, I don't know, Advocatus. I thought it might contribute significantly to the aura of my Presidential timbre should I ever decide to run for that office," teased Snark.

"Enough! Years ago you came to me saying you wanted to start your own version of the Christian Brothers winery; that you wanted to stomp the grapes yourself. Being the perverted hedonist you are at heart, you said you wanted to feel the pulp slippery itself up between your very own little naked toes. You promised I could freely use the wine you made for celebrating the Eucharist; that the profits from its sale would be applied to our respective charitable causes; that it would be a win-win for both of us. And I agreed. But what do I get for all my kindness? You begin bottling and selling your "Naked Toes Winery Last Supper Red," and advertising it all over the internet!"

"True enough," replied Snark, "but why are you so upset about it, Catus?"

"Because, you clueless little pagan, your label suggests that your wine is the official wine of The Last Supper! Your label \* is an abomination of desolation! First, you have the temerity to place on your label the great Leonardo's painting that so lovingly and accurately renders that holy meal, only you defaced it by showing bottles of your wretched wine being used by our Lord and his disciples! As if that weren't enough, you added to it a painting of the same event by the deranged degenerate Salvador Dali, who painted-in things that never were. In homage to Dali, you did the same! You put your wine on the table! Finally, you have the unspeakable *chutzpah* to place a third rendering of that sacred event on the label: Looney Tunes characters are at the table; and Bugs Bunny is sitting in our Lord's chair, reaching for a bottle of *your* wine! Your great offense is that you have sacrilegiously defamed the sacrament in the most extreme way imaginable. And I'm telling you again, Snark: knock off the nicknames! I am, after all, a Doctor of Theology."

"Ahhh, what's up, Doc?" Snark knew he probably shouldn't have blurted that out loud, but he was sorely tempted. (Concerning his temptation, it had been his experience that the prayerful petition in the Lord's Prayer that we not be led into it, often - and bafflingly - went unanswered.) Hoping to cover up his dangerous *faux passé*, he created a diversion by removing his handkerchief with a flourish and proceeded to wipe away some of the spittle that had splattered onto his face during the old man's tirade.



Assessing that his diversion seemed to have worked, Snark responded with just the faintest of impish grins: "I was attempting only to satirize the wine industry's snobbish and outrageous labels; to poke fun at their competitive hubris; to challenge a bit the ludicrous prevarications of their marketing departments."

"Nice try, Snark, but it won't do! Once you affixed this obscene label of yours to your wine, you changed it. There is no way that I could ever dare to pour your foul wine into a chalice and intone the words proclaiming it to be the Blood of our Lord! No words of mine could ever remove the bitterness and stench from your sacrilegious decanting. You're in serious trouble, Snark, and I'm eager to hear what you have to say for yourself."

The anxiety that had churned within Snark throughout their meeting was slowly, and without his conscious intention, transforming itself into something more solid, focused, and resilient. Snark was grateful for this change, and decided to trust it. "Then wait no longer, Advocatus," Snark replied.

"I was not attempting to defame the sacrament, for I hold it as dearly as you do, though I understand it quite differently. You are looking on the outside of the chalice. You are not looking on the inside; and no, I do not mean the wine contained within it. Advocatus, I was taught that everything that can be destroyed when it comes to religion ought to be; for when it comes to religion we should accept nothing less than the truth. As for the truth, it can never be destroyed. Although that may sound dangerous, and it is, it is precisely what the Biblical prophets were about."

"Here is my truth, Advocatus: Neither my label nor your words affect the wine in any way: my label does not sour it; and your words do not change it into the Blood of Christ. When you make your proclamation over whatever is in the chalice you are only

proclaiming what is *already* present: the presence of the Mysterious Holy One, inside of whom we have our life: the One who is to be found everywhere; the One who lives inside all people and all things.

"That's why Jesus used bread and wine: just the ordinary daily food of life. It might just as well be coffee and bagels, or Pepsi and chocolate bars. They're all just products of ordinary, daily commerce: and sometimes that means the commercial production and distribution of the bread and wine is tainted by greed, double-dealing, and fraud. That's just part of our flawed existence. Yet we routinely use that ordinary stuff in the sacrament, with all its problematic provenance.

"Here's another metaphor to point to this truth, Advocatus. The Holy One makes a covenant to be the Beyond in the midst of that ordinary, flawed life that you and I and everyone else lives. It's a covenant between a Lover who eternally pursues all of us - the beloved - in spite of the fact that no one in their right mind would ever counsel a lover to continue doing so, given that the object of the lover's affection has gone off with other suitors time and time again. Still, *this* Lover pursues, knowing that when the beloved turns and accepts the love being offered, they each can have a whole, new, free, joyful, and significant life together. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we're lifting up that reality so everyone can see it . . . so everyone can again choose to be part of that covenantal agreement. That's what the sacrament is about deep down.

"When the focus is on all the outward trappings - when we bring a literal, wooden understanding to this sacrament - we miss its deeper truth. It's not about the chalice, the words spoken over it, or the wine, Advocatus. It's about the Loving Mystery that surrounds us all."

When Snark had, at last, finished his oration, the room was utterly silent, save for the clock marking the passing of each second. Neither man spoke. After several minutes, Snark noticed Advocatus' hands trembling some as he grasped the arms of his chair. A faint shudder rippled upward through his body. The ancient rims of the old man's eyes slowly changed to a deep pinkish-red color, much as the sky sometimes does just before the light of dawn illuminates the earth. It was now his turn to withdraw a handkerchief from his pocket. As Advocatus affected blowing his nose, Snark noticed the old man surreptitiously wiping away some tears. A few more minutes passed before the old man grasped hold of his crosier and rose to his feet.

"Snark, although your words strain my credulity, and even though they are not free from the stench of heresy, there is nonetheless a note of truth and even a peculiar authenticity about them. I may have misunderstood your intentions. For that alone I am sorry."

"Thanks, Cati. That means a lot!" smiled Snark with a grin somewhat more toothy than the situation required.

"I'm not finished yet, Snark!" snapped Advocatus, his face reddening once more. And for the last time: don't call me 'Cati' or any other of your juvenile nicknames! I am Saint Advocatus di Aboli!

"Though your intentions may be as I have just said, your methods are still abominable! You will needlessly wound many by employing them to spread your dangerous teachings. Your Tomfoolery is not only a dangerous distraction: it is of insufficient strength to carry the heavy meanings of the gospel. It will only come to ruin."

His pupils narrowing, Advocatus paused a moment and looked intently at Snark. Then, in a voice of rising irritation, he shouted: "Snark, you are an incorrigible! You are hopeless as an evangelist! You are an administrative nightmare! In short, Snark, you are one humongous pain in the ass!"

"On the contrary, Your Saintliness, I am The Snark of the Covenant!"

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*\* It should be noted that the anonymous author has used three paintings of "The Last Supper" in creating his mash-up of a wine label. Leonardo da Vinci's is, of course, the painting on the left, painted from 1496-1498. The only evidence of how the painting looked originally is a copy made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is housed in Tongerlo Abbey, Antwerp, Belgium. That is the version used here.*

*Salvador Dali's is the image at the top. "The Sacrament of the Last Supper" was painted in 1955, and is now part of the Chester Dale Collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.*

*The one at the bottom, though faithfully painted in the style of Warner Bros. Chief Animator, Chuck Jones, was not actually painted by Jones. It is, instead, a wonderful-if-controversial send-up of both Jones' characters and Leonardo's original painting. The Looney Tunes Last Supper was painted in 2009 by Glen Tarnowski, who named his painting "The Gathering." Immediately upon its being displayed in the window of The Chuck Jones Gallery in Old Town San Diego, heads turned and about 5% of those commenting by email said it was sacrilegious, though a Roman Catholic priest contacted by the Gallery said it wasn't.*

*To be on the safe side, the gallery added a biography of Dallas artist Glen Tarnowski in its window, explaining his intent and noting his background as a devout Christian who is an alumnus of California Lutheran University. Offered for sale at \$20,000, there have been, to our knowledge, no takers.*

*If only Snark had that kind of money! He'd probably hang it in Elsewhere. From what we can judge of him, Snark would be quite pleased that Tarnowski chose Bugs Bunny to sit in Jesus' seat. Tarnowski's choice, no doubt, reflects his superb Lutheran education.*

~ *The Editors*

## **Dialogue 4 – My Beautiful Balloon RSV, MSG**

Advocatus and Snark did not bid each other “goodbye” at the conclusion of their confrontation at the house of Advocatus. Each man was fully aware that, in an earlier century, our word "goodbye" had been rendered "God be with ye." Although they each understood their faith very differently, neither of them wanted to indulge in the hypocrisy of giving a blessing that had no authentic lodging in their hearts.

Instead, Snark exited the house of Advocatus with the same vigor and dispatch his parents exhibited as they retreated down the center aisle on the morning of his baptism: a story that came to mind as he was making his own retreat. He heard Advocatus slam the front door behind him with glass-shattering force, followed instantly by the voice of Advocatus thunderously yelling epithets. In spite of the many yards Snark had now succeeded in placing between them, he could hear the sounds of objects being tossed about, their crashing punctuating the shouting of the still raging old man. He ran quickly to his car and from thence to the refuge of his own home.

It might appear to the casual observer that Snark and Advocatus had fought one another to a draw, each deftly having deployed so much of their respective rhetorical ammunitions. Any damage either incurred might be dismissed as only the incidental scrapes and bruises of Hollywood stunt men who have just performed a carefully choreographed, well-rehearsed scene from a Hollywood shoot-'em-up. The truth was very much otherwise.

Actually, each still feared the other, though neither would admit it, either to themselves or, most particularly, to each other. When, in the collision of their love and fear, fear got the upper hand (as it so often does in all our lives), the result for each was much the same as when that failed BP drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico spewed its thick, tarry oil into the once clear and life-giving waters. Fierce winds and waves churned it into a slurry of ugly slipperiness, mindlessly coating everything in its path. The life of anything unlucky enough to have been in its way became threatened with extinction.

So too, when the fearful slurry of their resentments washed over the paths that connected their lives, neither Snark nor Advocatus could trust their footing sufficiently to risk a walk back toward the other. In the absence of frequent meetings together, their always contentious relationship devolved into one that resembled that of two across-the-street, mutually paranoid neighbors: the sort who peer furtively at the other through their drawn curtains, making certain they have remembered where their guns are hidden. To change the metaphor, their relationship resembled that of the Republican and Democratic members of the 113th U.S. Congress.

Over the years, they had often sparred in such a damaging manner that they wondered privately why they should bother to continue such a fractious relationship. By the end of their latest dustup, and in spite of the bravado each had affected, both men were suffering. Each needed a break from the other. They both spun the meaning of their hiatus as one of "maintaining a loving distance."

Fair enough, but for Snark and Advocatus, their time apart was essential to defending their bruised egos against the possibility of further damage.

Egos. Each of us needs our ego. Psychologists refer to the ego as that part of us that deals with the real world outside of us; and as “that part of us that we regard as who we *are*.” Without an ego we couldn’t make a shopping list, go to the store, pay for the goods, etc. Without an ego I couldn’t distinguish “me” from “you.” The ego is our sense of self . . . and it is *very* interested in our own safety and well-being. We need our egos.

But our egos get damaged. Insults, embarrassments, *faux pas*, misunderstandings, etc. can all lead to a sense of diminishment . . . of not being enough . . . a terribly painful condition that afflicts a great many people. It’s called “shame.” If “guilt” is an idiot light on the soul’s dashboard signaling that we’re out of integrity with our own values, “shame” signals that we are . . . deep-down-and-maybe-permanently . . . “not enough.” Not smart enough, pretty enough, wealthy enough, righteous enough . . . fill in the blank. Shame, thus understood, is the painful condition of the soul that *surprisingly* often underlies the behavior of even . . . and especially . . . the most inflated egos among us.

Though the idiot light of guilt turns off when we take actions to bring us back into harmony with our values, the idiot light of shame tends to burn red hot forever. Tragically, we often then act in ways that damage our relationships with others in order to prevent them from pointing out our own “not-enough-ness.”

Since both Advocatus and Snark could become quite puffed up, we will be rewarded throughout this narrative if we learn a bit more about the ego’s attempt to puff itself up in order to avoid its shame: its secret-but-terrible sense of inadequacy. Since you and I more than likely share that deep down sense, our reward may be quite personal as well.

Stories are often the best way of making sense of such painful aspects of our lives. The Roman poet Ovid (restating the more ancient Greek’s ancient myth of Narcissus) wrote a classic story about certain wounded egos and the consequences of their self-proclaimed omnipotence. He completed his story around the same year Jesus entered first grade.

We, ourselves, do not much care for those learned tomes in which the author tediously dissects some arcane, ancient myth in an effort to develop a theme that could otherwise be stated in a quite straightforward manner. There are reasons, however, why we will nonetheless proceed somewhat down along that longer path. \*

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\* The anonymous author’s original rendering of Ovid’s Myth of Narcissus is more extensive and will be of interest to readers who like that sort of thing. In this *Synaptic Edition* we are trying to reflect the sensibilities of our community of readers as well as to preserve the author’s words. If you wish to read the anonymous author’s fuller version, check out the End Notes, note number 3. ~ *The Editors*

First, this is no learned tome, but rather a frippery of a story, and the addition of a Greek myth will perhaps lend it some gravitas. Further, although we will explore it at some length, we propose to do so in a distinctly non-tedious manner. Finally, it is a story that will shed much light on the predicament of Snark and Advocatus . . . and perhaps on the condition of the rest of us and our world as well.

Herewith, we will put Ovid's myth of Narcissus into a nutshell the dimensions of which are, mercifully, more toward the pistachio end of the spectrum than that of the coconut.

Narcissus was the most handsome youth in all of Greece. And he knew it. As might be expected, his self-preoccupation, his self-adoration, his sense of being uniquely entitled, and his dividing the world into "my way and all the wrong ones," did not win him any friends. Suck-ups, yes. Friends, not so much.

He did, however, have a companion. She was not quite a full-fledged human being even though she sure looked like one. Wow!<sup>1</sup> Remember, we're in the realm of Greek myth here. She was a nymph and, because of her crossing one of the Greek gods, was forever cursed with not being able to use her heretofore spectacular voice. All she could do was to repeat back what was said to her. Her name was, appropriately enough, "Echo."

Since Narcissus was looking for someone who would basically adore him and have no contrary opinions of her own, they made a faaabulous couple! Echo was turned on by the physical beauty and strength of her lover, while Narcissus wouldn't have to listen to any of her "guff" . . . an interesting slang word that is no doubt derived from the original Greek and meaning "anything at all that remotely resembles a difference of opinion."

One day, when Narcissus leaned out a bit too far over a pond to gaze lovingly at his own reflection, he lost his balance, fell in and drowned. Echo was distraught and, believing that she could not live without him, committed suicide.

So there you have the story of someone who drowned in his own ego and of another who leaned so much on the ego of another she failed to develop one of her own. At a mere 244 words, it fits rather neatly into that pistachio shell. Okay, okay . . . a walnut then.

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<sup>1</sup> [Echo and Narcissus](#) (1903), a Pre-Raphaelite interpretation by [John William Waterhouse](#) (Public Domain)



Having briefly but emotionally immersed ourselves in Ovid's story of 2000 years ago, we must now be clear that the term "Narcissism" did not exist back then. It was first used by Sigmund Freud early in the 20th century. It would, therefore, be quite inappropriate to employ that term from our day to describe the condition that was the cause of Narcissus' suffering in his. Not only would it be inappropriate: it would also be absurd to create a definition using the very word that it the definition seeks to define. And not only would it be inappropriate and absurd: it would be dangerous to do so as well.

For, unless you are a Stephen Hawking, there is absolutely nothing to be gained by flippantly messing with whatever gods might be in charge of the space-time continuum, what with all the calamitous paradoxes involved in time-travel posing an existential threat to those travelers who may be ignorant of modern theoretical physics at its most extreme levels of speculation. (Travelers such as us; and who could blame us for our ignorance!)

Such a use of "Narcissism" would also surely serve to inflame the ire of certain lemon-sucking, needle-nosed, overly-well-compensated editors who - bowing in fundamentalist dedication before *The Elements of Style* - mistake the outdated, frozen-in-time grammatical and stylistic landscape presented in that map, for the territory of the exquisitely fresh, living, and precious text the author has deigned to give them; and who, committed unthinkingly to their editorial orthodoxy, prowl the halls of publishing houses like a pack of ravenous jackals pursuing their next meal, always looking for an opportunity to pounce gratuitously upon unsuspecting examples of stylistic and grammatical prey such as: the absence of noun-verb agreements; inaccurate verb-tense; overly complex sentence structures that run on and on so as to needlessly obfuscate a meaning that could, by their exceedingly pedantic and insufficient lights, be more effectively rendered by a construction of greater economy - which, they have the temerity to proclaim, would be effectively thus rendered - were it not for the author's hapless penchant for using a superfluity of needless, repetitive, and, it must candidly be said, completely unnecessary verbiage, including, most flagrantly, adjectives; and, finally, the excessive use of commas, which are only, after all, inserted into the sentence for the express and necessary purpose of handling participles, which would, without the comma's faithful contributions so felicitously and freely provided, certainly, and in a manner most precarious and frightening to behold, dangle.

There is nothing to be gained by any of that. Nothing whatsoever. So we shall not employ "Narcissism" in that manner here!

Narcissistic woundings to the sense of one's omnipotence are particularly painful, since they involve the puncturing of that carefully-crafted, gorgeously-colored hot air balloon by which many of us (Snark and Advocatus included) covertly attempt to hoist our secretly shabby . . . shame-filled and even hollow . . . sense of self up into the sky. Once up there, the balloon that hides this injured self can have *its surfaces* admired by others. Our hope, of course, is that with sufficient admiration, the wounds to our egos will thereby experience healing. Sadly, that admiration itself is eventually revealed to consist of little more than hot air - thus further inflating the ego's "Noon Balloon to Rangoon,"

without even for a moment attending to the frightened, painfully-wounded passenger suspended in the basket below.<sup>2</sup>

After reading the footnote below, you may be having a mind/body/spirit experience of what psychologists sometimes call, using their arcane terminology, “narcissistic rage.” In this case, it is a *healthy* rage prompted by the over-inflated, *definitely pathological* narcissism behind both the ridiculously long sentence and the footnote. Yours is not a full-blown, pathological narcissism. That’s reserved for folks who have perfected their narcissism to the point where they are *drowning* in it . . . tragically pulling others under the water along with them.

Having told these stories about narcissism, and indulging in a bit of it ourselves to further make the point, we can now stop this *exhausting* literary foolishness.

Thank God!

Snark and Advocatus, for all their chest-puffed-out bravado, were individuals very much like the majority of us: they were certainly not full-blown narcissists by any measure. (However, in view of Advocatus’ extraordinarily long life, it is probably accurate to say that there were periods of time for which that description *would* have been appropriate.) Nonetheless, they each protected their vulnerable egos by logging frequent-flyer miles in the balloons we have just been considering.

Two important realities serve to differentiate their everyday, run-of-the-mill narcissistic traits from that pernicious brand of narcissism that so tragically consumed not only the life of the myth’s main character, but which destroys the lives of so many in our time as well.

The first is that Narcissus was simply incapable of introspection and believed his own PR to be true. Consequently, he inflicted tremendous harm . . . both on himself and in his relationships. By contrast, Snark and Advocatus were each quite capable of stepping outside of themselves long enough to observe and to understand the self that wears a name tag.

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<sup>2</sup> A song by Nervous Norvus (1918 – 1968). We wish to offer a posthumous, heartfelt apology for our having used the title of his above-referenced song in the context of these rather different sorts of balloons. That is because we are trying to set a higher standard here: Norvus never apologized one bit for the lyrics of his songs, all of which, while quite clever, were completely nonsensical regardless of their context. (They were, therefore, quite unlike the foregoing 236-word sentence, which we quickly dashed off without even having to pour over it through many revisions. *It* is quite meaningful, even if read apart from its superbly constructed context. We are most appreciative of your thunderous applause and wish to remind you that it is the *only* appropriate response to us that you should . . . ever . . . make.) For this amply sufficient reason (and in spite of the fact that Norvus’ lyrics were embedded in catchy tunes that endlessly replayed in the mind, giving lasting pleasure), all existing representations of his lyrics should be removed far away from any public attention. We shall contact Google tomorrow.

Because of this capacity, they each purchased for themselves the opportunity to recognize *the gift, divinely-conferred upon them, of their exceptionally ordinary specialness* - the conscious awareness of which is humanity's greatest glory . . . a glory we will have occasion to consider further as their story unfolds.<sup>3</sup>

Narcissus, having never evolved that same capacity for honest self-reflection, mistakenly considered himself to be the most extraordinary of men, and was, therefore, incapable of personal spiritual growth and intimacy in relationships.

The second chief difference was, of course, that Narcissus did not ascend in a wicker basket, suspended by ropes beneath some un-named hot-air balloon. Not him! Instead, His Royal Haughtiness rode in the metal gondola seamlessly integrated into the gas-filled fuselage of an enormous Zeppelin dirigible. Three-foot high letters on the gondola's sides boldly spelled out its name for all to read, thus attracting the attention of observers on the ground, whose subsequent shouts of enthusiastic joy could clearly be heard and appreciated by the occupant inside.

The name of Narcissus' craft was printed, of course, in capitalized letters of the alphabet that was native to him. To state the matter somewhat redundantly, it would have been Greek to nearly every one of us. But when translated into English, its fearful name is as familiar as it was prescient: "HINDENBURG."

The tearful reporter at Lakehurst, New Jersey was quite right: "Oh, the humanity!"

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<sup>3</sup> See *Touching the Holy: Ordinariness, Self Esteem, and Friendship*, Robert Wicks (Sorin Books, 2007). See also *Immortal Diamond*, Richard Rohr (Jossey-Bass, 2013).

Getting the ego to occupy its appropriate place in our lives is a major task of both psychological healing and spiritual growth. When that effort is successful, we discover our own *Immortal Diamond* (Jossey-Bass, 2013) which is the title of a book by Richard Rohr and well deserving of your attention in exploring this divinely conferred gift. Rohr's earlier book, *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of life*, (Jossey-Bass, 2011) is especially relevant to developing the role of the ego in both halves of a person's life. These are two of the finer books on spiritual growth you are likely to read.

## Dialogue 5 – Black Hole of Resentment

Snark had slept only sporadically for months, his nights being punctuated by a fitfulness that periodically awakened him. He didn't know why, but speculated that one cause might be the full moon that currently shone outside his window. He reasoned that, if a full moon could overflow the hospital's obstetrical ward with mothers-to-be screaming for relief, surely it could interfere with his sleep. On the other hand, he knew that statistical studies had apparently debunked that observation so universally and reliably made by hospital maternity ward staffs the world around. "What a strange world this is sometimes," Snark thought. "They're probably confusing a printed statistical map for the territory observed by eyewitnesses on the ground. Typical."

One morning, after a particularly sleepless night, Snark sat at his kitchen table blankly staring out the window where the squirrels once again were plotting their daily assault on the bird feeder. Normally, he relished this, and delighted in his considerably ambivalent reactions to the squirrels. Sometimes he took a profound but simple pleasure in the acrobatic antics of these superb yard mimes, marveling at how their tiny brains could have evolved to the point where they rivaled those of the most ingenious and cunning of engineers, locksmiths, and burglars . . . at least when it came to the agenda they were pursuing.

Alternatively, and as the mood struck him, Snark would run out into the yard, cursing them loudly in a whimsical, kabuki-esque theater sort of way. Menacingly waving his arms at them, he looked for all the world like St. Francis of Assisi high on Angel Dust, so intent was he on fearlessly protecting the birds' divinely conferred rights to their share of the seeds – seeds which were after all, installed in a feeder intended for them and them alone.

None of that claimed his attention on this particular morning, for he had once again gotten onto the hamster-wheel of ruminations about his last meeting with the old man. Though he believed he had acquitted himself well in the house of Advocatus, he kept going back to those events. Maybe it wasn't the moon that had disturbed his sleep, so much as his mooning Advocatus: for that is what some of his humor had amounted to. "Even if that's so, why should I lose sleep over it?" he wondered. "The old man let loose on me more than ever before. What was I to do? I had to take care of myself somehow!"

If he had actually gone for a run, he would have felt so much better. His brain would have released endorphins, the naturally occurring, completely legal, of-no-consequence-to-the-DEA opiates within his body. They would have made him feel relaxed, alert and energized. His lungs would have filled with air; and his heart would have worked faster to take life-giving oxygen to every cell in his body. Yes, that would have been wonderful.

Sadly, it was only his brain that got a workout on this morning; and it was not a good one. Hopping up onto its little hamster wheel, Snark's brain ran on that endlessly obsessive wheel-to-nowhere. A call and response pattern quickly rose into his

consciousness. His brain, like a priest in a liturgy gone terribly wrong, would call up a memory of how his ancient nemesis had so misunderstood and excoriated him. Then . . . as his stomach tightened, as his jaw clenched, as cortisol raced through his bloodstream preparing him to fight for his life . . . the entire congregation of his body's reactions would, with one voice, answer the priest's call with their response: "THE BASTARD!" This liturgy continued for at least half the service.

Ordinarily, after a truly fine workout we're hungry and, some of us at least, enjoy the perverse pleasure of undoing the weight-loss benefits of our workout by eating a breakfast not unlike the one Snark had prepared for himself. Snark had a rather different experience when he finally climbed off the wheel in which his brain had been running.

The bacon and eggs he'd cooked for breakfast, now sat heavily on the plate before him, their once glassy sheen now as reflective as the finish on an old junker used more for hauling detritus to the landfill than for transporting human passengers. His coffee had turned cold; its welcoming aroma now blocked by the sticky brown film of cream that formed on its surface. Snark found he'd lost his appetite for what he had prepared.

Instead, he chewed on a rancid cud of resentment which, while providing no nourishment, was at least not likely to add to his waistline. With each bite he took of the apple-sized cud, he savored that bitter-sweet taste of self-righteousness to which all of us, fancying ourselves to be innocent victims, are drawn. Outside his window, the final triumphant conquest of the despotic squirrels over the bird's rightful food supply went unnoticed, though he was staring directly at it.

Once upon a time, Carnation milk advertised that its milk was sweetly superior since it came from "contented cows." Quite unintentionally no doubt, the ad was an early example of truth in advertising. Though it was created long before the recent revelations of brain science, the connection between contentment and sweetness is now demonstrably a fact. (While we can say for certain that the reverse is just as demonstrably true for humans, we cannot speak with authority on bovine matters of this nature. Nonetheless, when one is already into a serviceable metaphor, it seems a shame not to drive it into the ground, praying earnestly while down on one's knees, that doing so will not cause it to fail.) If the milk had come from a cow with Snark's disposition, it would not have been fit for market. Had it then been poured onto the ground in discard and disgust by the dairy farmer, any barnyard cat looking for an unexpected treat would not have received one. Any kitty that, upon seeing its white wonderfulness on the ground, chose to lap it up, would have had the unusual, and terribly painful, experience of forfeiting one of its nine lives.

Thus did Snark descend into an ego-shaped black hole of resentful bitterness. As he entered it, he was followed by an entire galaxy filled with the better angels of his spirit. Within the darkness of that place, he became doubly blind: to those flaws in his own nature which sometimes did, indeed, wound others so offensively; and to the mysterious workings of a startling grace that still, invisibly, surrounded him.

## Dialogue 6 – The Advantage of Experience

Some unfortunate people seem never to learn from experience. Not a few teenagers are that way, at least for awhile. The front-end part of the brain just behind the forehead . . . the pre-frontal cortex . . . is the area of the brain that keeps track of such learnings. It regulates our impulses as it considers cause and effect, assesses likely consequences, and titrates mixing the pursuit of our self-interest with the meeting of our responsibilities to others. For most of us, it doesn't fully come into its own until adolescence ends in the mid-twenties. This difficulty in learning from experience is sometimes particularly true for teenage boys. Their parents are often heard lamenting, "What were you thinking?"

Take, for example, the YouTube video showing a couple of young teens enjoying the pleasure of jumping on their pogo sticks. The unfortunate hero of this exemplary vignette decided it would be cool to do a back-flip in full layout position off of his own pogo stick, arc backward and . . . landing with his feet on the stand of a similar pogo stick held upright by his friend . . . continue thereby to pogo about some more without interruption. He nearly succeeds. We must give him that.

Jumping to an admirable height, he lets go of his stick and starts his flip. His rotation is about thirty degrees short of being complete when he loses altitude in a most precipitous manner. As a result, the top of the pogo stick his friend has been holding connects rather smartly with his groin, thus assuring him of a spot in the tenor section of his school's chorus.

Displaying remarkable empathy for his friend, the lad who has been holding the pogo stick grabs his own crotch, bends double, and looks away with a pained expression. His stick-jumping friend, his feet having successfully made contact with the steps on the target pogo stick, and in spite of the unfortunate angle with which that contact was made, now launches into low orbit and executes a perfect forward somersault, arcing headfirst toward the ground.<sup>4</sup>

To the relief of his parents, it appears likely that their son survived orthopedically. From a neurological point of view, their hapless son probably wasn't thinking at all about what might go wrong prior to attempting his stunt. It is, after all, difficult to use a tool that is not already in your possession. (This may explain why many teenage boys who . . . when that friendly neighborhood drug dealer, Puberty, shows up and distributes the first free-to-get-you-hooked sample of testosterone . . . begin to think with the front-end of the tool they have just, thereby, been given.)

Advocatus . . . owing to his status as one whose age had not only surpassed that of Moses, but who had known some Roman Emperors (liking rather well only one of them) . . . was abundantly past his own adolescence. Through his long life he had acquired some considerable wisdom.

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunate Pogo Stick Back Flip - To view, go to this address: <http://gifb.in/V2sV>

Part of what he had learned was how to deal with resentments, not that he always remembered what he had learned. For a long time following his acrimonious dispute with Snark, he was on his own hamster wheel as well, and with similar results. Similar, but not the same.

For Advocatus had learned . . . far too painfully and time after time after time . . . about resentment's fearful undertow. There had been the Crusades' disastrous conflict with Muslims, the Inquisition's reign of terror over dissidents, the terrible blaming of Jews for the death of the Christ . . . abominations that happened when he was in the black hole of his own overly-enlarged ego.

In that terrible darkness . . . though he was in deep denial of it at the time . . . he fancied himself something of a thunder-bolt-throwing Norse god bent on destroying whoever stood in the way of achieving his purposes . . . purposes which were, to his mind, divinely right. *Having thus forgotten the ordinariness of his own humanity, he could not find it in those who were of such very different persuasions.* Having not found humanness in his adversaries, it was rather easy to put them to the sword . . . or on the rack . . . or into the ghetto.

Those were such dark days, that when his mind began to approach the memory of them, he recoiled in horror and renewed his resolve never to forget what he had learned from them.

While fear and loathing would be a too-florid description of what he was currently feeling, some distant echoes of those emotions nonetheless lingered whenever he thought of his conflict with Snark. Because of the hard work he had done shrinking and moving his ego to an appropriate size and place, with the passing of several months Advocatus was able to stop the descent into his own resentful black hole. He began to take on nourishment, letting go of some of the bitter cud he, too, had been savoring.

As he patiently glued together the last pieces of the objects he had broken when Snark had fled his house, Advocatus thought to himself: "The young twerp is entirely too big for his britches . . . too full of new wine . . . it's gone to his head. I remember . . . I think I remember . . . sort of . . . being a little . . . like him? Or maybe not . . . I don't think I quite remember that . . . maybe . . . But I do remember what I did when the wine I drank was off . . . corked and turning to vinegar. . . . I'm in no position to cast the stones I've been tossing his way."

Advocatus was not one to act hastily in such matters. He knew he'd made some soulful headway, but still was in no mood to suffer any more of Snark's effronteries. So he prepared himself a simple meal, ate it slowly and, after a short walk when the night had sufficiently cooled, slipped into bed to sleep on the matter of what he'd need to do next.

We shall have occasion later to reflect on the benefits of sleep. Certainly Advocatus' rest prepared him for what would happen the next day . . . and what he would do. However, as wonderful as a night's rest is for our creativity and perspective, there is Something Else at work as well.

It cannot be seen, yet its effects are everywhere. Therefore, if you wish, call it the Wind. Whatever it is, and by whatever name you might know it, this invisible power is frequently experienced in nature.<sup>5</sup> This Something Else has intelligence, purpose, agency. When our activities are . . . consciously or otherwise . . . aligned with it, those actions and intentions carry a power not of their own making.

Before dawn the next morning, Advocatus awoke and, over a cup of coffee, read the newspaper. His second cup of coffee brewing, he peered out his window at the first light.

Something magic-like moves through the trees and over the grass when the dew begins to evaporate from the trees' dark, wet trunks as mist. Bright yellow rays of the morning's new sun pierce it casting shadows of the trees into the mist like silhouettes on a screen. When you are observing this scene, comfortably holding your warm porcelain mug filled with a second cup of coffee, you know the name of this magic: Sophia.

Sophia: the wisdom and feminine face of God . . . present with God at the creation in some traditions. And present now in this gift she has given you while you have been standing outside, silently observing. You feel the urge to take off your shoes, for you know you are standing on holy ground . . . yet you also feel the urge to run barefoot through the grass with the cool morning dew collecting on your feet . . . and you feel grateful for the realization these urges are not contradictory . . . that they are, in fact, one and the same.

So, when the sun had ascended higher, Advocatus picked up the empty cup he'd set down, dried off his feet before slipping them back into his shoes, and re-entered his house. He picked up his phone, and gave Snark a call.

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<sup>5</sup> The ancient Christian Celts of England had a sacramental approach to ordinary, everyday life. That is, the presence of God infused daily life and transformed it, so that at any moment, any object, any job of work, could become a place for encounter with God. Some of them spoke of 'thin places', holy ground, where it seemed that God was so near that one might touch the Infinite in the midst of otherwise ordinary surroundings. To learn more about Celtic Spirituality, click this link:  
<http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/articles/celtic-spirituality-a-beginners-guide/>

## Dialogue 7 - Breaking the Silence

Snark was awakened by his cell phone going off and fumbled for it on the nightstand. Didn't the caller know it was only 9:30 a.m.? Had he no respect for those who needed to block out reality with lengthy, if not restful, sleep? Finally, his eyes focused on the Caller ID and he discovered who was on the other end.

"What do you want?" asked Snark, additionally irritated because it was Advocatus. If the same four words of Snark's query were to be repeated four times, each time putting the major emphasis on a different word, a more complete understanding of the dimensions of his pique would be revealed.

"I take it I have perhaps called you too soon, Snark," continued Advocatus, hoping to sound understanding.

"Yeah, you have, and in more ways than one," Snark snapped as he rubbed some grit from the corners of his eyes. "What do you want?"

"That's a complicated question, Snark. On one level, I called you hoping to make myself feel better."

*"That figures! Well, you've succeeded in bothering me, so I guess you feel better now,"* grumped Snark in reply. "One more time, Advocatus, what in the hell do you want?"

"An interesting variation on your question, Snark. My calling you does have something to do with hell. The hell you're in and the hell I'm in."

Snark was getting awake. The adrenalin now being pumped through his bloodstream began to lift him out of his bitter lethargy and readied him for a more active expression of anger. "Don't be so arrogant, old man! How dare you pretend you can read my mind, and condescendingly tell me where I am! I'm glad you're already in hell, Advocatus! It saves me the trouble of telling you to go there!" He was shouting into the phone now; feeling more alive than he had in months . . . thus confirming the adage that "depression is just anger without enthusiasm."

"Cut the crap, Snark! You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. We've always seen things very differently, you and I. We always will! But we've had a long and, in our own way, close relationship. Over these last few months I've been in my own hell, Snark. And it was you who once observed that there aren't any one-way streets when it comes to such relationships: that when one party is in pain so is the other, even though the fact of that pain may be concealed. I'm hurting and you're hurting, Snark! We're both in hell: we're both physically close enough . . . but we're spiritually distant! That's hell, Snark, and I want to get the hell out! So, to answer your question, Snark, that's why I've called you, dammit!"

Snark silently took in what had just been said to him. He had heard Advocatus get on a roll before, but his intensity this time was not the familiar device of a debater attempting to bully an opponent so much as it was an earnest plea packaged in what were, Snark had to acknowledge to himself, words straight from the old man's heart: words that confronted Advocatus as much as himself. On the other end of the line, he could hear the soft wheeze of Advocatus' catching his breath.

Neither he nor Advocatus spoke for several long moments.

Silence in a relationship can be a bit like an ink-blot test administered by a psychologist: an opportunity to study the meanings projected onto the random shape, thus revealing the unconscious contents of the respondent's mind.

Silence can be a comfortable space that holds the heart-connection between two intimates as, side-by-side, they pursue different activities.

It can also represent the abandonment of one person by the other. That was the brand of silence addressed by Simon and Garfunkel in their long-ago hit "The Dangling Conversation."<sup>6</sup> It is a song about a couple, perhaps married, or one more like Snark and Advocatus. One verse portrays the couple sitting in a room, each silently withdrawn into their own private worlds. There they drink their coffee. They are as disconnected as sea shells long ago washed up on some seashore. The verse concludes:

You can hear the ocean roar  
In the dangling conversation  
And the superficial sighs,  
The borders of our lives.

Silence can also be, in the words of another poet, "the silence of eternity, interpreted by love."<sup>7</sup> Something in his unconscious went with this last understanding, and before he could consciously choose his words, Snark broke the silence.

"Advocatus," he replied in a softened voice, pausing only for a moment to cough away some piece of emotion sticking on his windpipe, "this time it is I who may have misjudged you, and for that, *I am truly sorry*. I'm beginning to feel a bit glad you called. It's been a long time."

"It has indeed, my short friend," replied Advocatus in a tone that echoed Snark's, but with the addition of a faint smile animating his words.

<sup>6</sup> "The Dangling Conversation", words and music by Paul Simon, first published by Columbia Records in 1966. The complete lyrics to this classic are available here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vjSK3oGF1g&feature=related>

<sup>7</sup> This beautiful line is from the Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier's longish poem of 1872, "The Brewing of Soma." [The complete poem](http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/soma.htm) can be found here: <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/soma.htm>. The poem was adapted as "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," a hymn that is found in many hymnals.

"I think, then, we should not waste any more of it," affirmed Snark, his own humor beginning its return trip home from whatever far country that had for so long demanded its allegiance. Without knowing it, Snark had run to meet his returning humor, which proceeded to fall into his arms in a joyful embrace. "I think that we should sit face-to-face across a drink, Your Extrudedness!"

"Oh, my! I didn't expect . . . Excellent idea, Snark! How about my place. Tonight. How about 7:30?" responded the surprised Advocatus.

"The time's good for me, but I think a more public venue would be appropriate. How 'bout we go elsewhere?" continued Snark, back to his old ways of setting the old man up for some fun.

"That sounds appropriate to me too, Snark, now that I think further about it. Where would you like to meet at 7:30?"

"Elsewhere," replied Snark.

"Uh, yes, Snark. Not my house but elsewhere. Where "elsewhere?"

"Down at the bottom of Main and Canal Street, Advocatus. Elsewhere," teased Snark.

"You're confusing me, Snark. That's a sketchy part of town. What's there?"

"Elsewhere."

"Dammit, Snark! Now I'm the one who's getting pissed at having called *you!* Talk in complete sentences, man. Main and Canal Street. What's the place I'm to meet you at?"

"It's sort of a coffee house, Advocatus. Its name is 'Elsewhere.'"

## Dialogue 8 - Elsewhere

In spite of Snark's assurance that the neighborhood around Elsewhere would be safe, Advocatus didn't wish to take unnecessary chances. He figured that anyone there who might pose a threat to domestic tranquility would already have problems with authority. Consequently, he'd have to dress-down and present himself in a more casual, just-one-of-the-guys manner. So he elected to leave his miter at home. Still anxious about his personal safety, he decided to take along his crosier; but not as a symbol of his authority, for goodness sake! Rather, it would not only afford its usual convenience in helping him into and out chairs: it would also come in handy in a fight.

Having satisfied himself that he had prepared as best he could, Advocatus succeeded in navigating into the neighborhood down by the canal Snark had mentioned. It was more rundown than Advocatus had remembered.

A very old part of the city, the neighborhood buildings here were a mix of storefronts and row houses constructed of crumbling bricks and matching mortar. Like many of the people in the neighborhood, some of the buildings were boarded up. Each seemed to be marking time, waiting for their eventual downward rot to oblivion. Others, in an attempt to hide the flaws in their increasingly geriatric skin, had received multiple coats of paint which now peeled unevenly, revealing previous attempts at recapturing a lost youth.

Trash cans stood filled to overflowing on the curbs: a symptom of intentional neglect by the city's refuse collectors who figured they could knock off early if they limited their runs to only once a week, rather than the mandated two. After all, they reasoned, the residents of this neighborhood weren't politically connected. Their minuscule tax remittances contributed little toward the city's budget. No one would raise a fuss. The elderly poor, the winos, the hookers plying their trade, the dock hands: they were all expendable: suitable for putting out on the curb, candidates for the landfill.

There is, however, in the human spirit an eventual dissatisfaction with rot. Something within our spirits often rises Phoenix-like out of the ashes of dissolution and despondency. Against all empirical evidence suggesting the futility of its doing so, it defiantly leans into the desire for transformation. So it was that, though most dismissed it as but a quixotic hope, some of the residents near Elsewhere . . . and certainly Snark himself . . . envisioned an eventual transformation of the neighborhood into a renewed "Historic Old Town."

In this neighborhood of obvious decline and latent hope, a few still-functioning street lamps barely illuminated Advocatus' path to where Snark was waiting for him, leaning against the weathered brick façade of a building whose store-front windows identified it: "Elsewhere."

"I see you've come casual tonight, Advocatus! Sorry I didn't mention the dress code when we were on the phone."

"Dress code? Should I have worn the miter?" asked Advocatus, an anxious, defensive stridency creeping into his voice.

"Not at all!" Snark replied. "It's usually a pretty casual bunch at Elsewhere. You'll fit right in. In fact, you'd fit in equally well even if you *had* worn it! Let's go in."

"You first," said Advocatus, still not sure what he was getting into.

Elsewhere was a cavernous room. Old floor lamps with fabric shades joined forces with some strategically placed lights hidden behind some ficus trees to wash the room with an inviting, warm glow. By the windows in front, a few small tables informally displayed some books. Their topics would satisfy the curiosities of an immense range of readers: recipes for vegetarian cuisine, the art of serigraphy, and various collections of poetry. And then there were the volumes on quantum physics, Jesus Seminar-inspired theology, and energy-based bodywork therapies.

A number of framed pictures hung on the freshly painted walls: acrylic and watercolor paintings, as well as enlarged black and white photographs of jazz, blues, and folk musicians. In the midst of these pictures the wall was also graced . . . perhaps not as incongruously as it first appeared . . . by an altar piece sculpted by an art major as a final course project. It depicted the Angel of the Annunciation and incorporated niches for votive candles, which now flickered their greeting to all who sat at the tables: virgins and otherwise alike. A jazz recording played softly in the background . . . something by Dave Brubeck from his *Time Out* album of over a half century earlier.

Angled against a long wall leading to the kitchen in the back was an old upright piano, apparently still in use since there were a few dollar bills in the fishbowl set on its top for the collection of tips. A studied jumble of overstuffed couches and chairs dotted the place. Each seating group was arranged around a low table holding some magazines and potted plants: an encouragement to conversation amongst their occupants. Bistro tables that could accommodate four persons were scattered about for those wishing to sample the kitchen's fare. The scents of freshly brewed coffee and a hot sandwich grilling on a Panini press occasionally caught the nose.

Snark motioned for Advocatus to join him at a table. The old man lowered himself into a chair and leaned his crosier against the nearby piano. "I had no idea a place like this existed, Snark, especially in this dilapidated neighborhood! It's a very welcoming, comfortable place."

Advocatus paused to look around the room some more. In the far back of the huge room, under a sign indicating the presence of a Wi-Fi signal, students from a local high school and the regional community college sat around tables, exploring on their laptops the topics their teachers and professors had assigned. Seated in one of the overstuffed groupings several young men and women with spiked hair, tattoos, and piercings talked and laughed together. At another table, two forty-something, mixed-race couples dressed in their suburban middle class uniforms passed a book of photos around, taking obvious

delight in the images. Several off-duty hookers and roustabouts were . . . quite improbably . . . engaged in an impassioned discussion about how urban renewal might have to begin by jacking up the city about its trash collections for starters.

"These people, Snark. I've never seen such a mix in one place before! I mean, they usually avoid one another. Or form a combustible mixture when they don't."

"Yeah," replied Snark, "sort of like you and me. I thought this might be an appropriate place for us to meet tonight."

"Ahh . . . yes. Snark, like so many of the others in this place tonight, you and I *are* a rather odd couple. I don't know why I let you get so under my skin, but I do. More than anyone else I can think of. Perversely, though, I came to miss you."

"I began to feel the same way, Advocatus. But it seemed like I'd been swallowed by a whale or something. It was so dark; so cold; so frighteningly lonely. I couldn't get out. In retrospect, it was only when you called, that the whale sort of beached itself and puked me right out onto the sand, and . . . ."

Before Snark could continue with his appetite-inhibiting metaphor, an attractive young woman approached the table. Looking directly at Snark, she greeted him with a broad smile: "Hi there, stranger! You come here often?"

"Susan!" responded Snark. "I used to. But not for the last few months. Been on a long trip. I'm glad to be back!"

"Nice walking stick!" Susan said, addressing Advocatus. And then to Snark, "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, you two. Susan this is Advocatus. We go back even further than you and I do. Advocatus, this is Susan and I imagine she's dropped by to see if we wanted anything to eat or drink. Right, Susan?"

"You bet. What'll you guys have?" After a brief back and forth, they both settled on a bowl of hummus with veggies and slices of pita bread. At Snark's suggestion two glasses of Pinot Grigio were added to the order. Susan walked the order back to the kitchen and the two returned to their conversation.

"Anyhow, Advocatus, if you hadn't come looking for me, I'd still be back there. So thank you." Snark paused and then added, "So how'd you do it, Advocatus? How did you get out of your own funk enough to call me in mine?"

"A long story, Snark. After all, I do have a few years on you!" replied Advocatus with a grin. "I guess after you fall down into as many sink holes of fear and resentment as I have, you begin to think that next time, maybe you shouldn't let yourself get so close to the edge. You never know when more sand will give way and take you with it."

"In truth, I think I caught myself . . . or perhaps I was caught . . . at the very last moment this time. It was one of those God moments. The Spirit was at work within me."

During the silence that followed Advocatus' confession, Susan returned with their snack and wine. Then, expressing her pleasure at seeing both of them, she withdrew to wait on some other guests.

Snark composed his reply. "Advocatus," he said in a lowered voice, "I know about those kind of moments, too. Frankly, my prickly friend, your call to me was one of them. And Susan . . . I think she's had some too. She wound up bruised and bleeding outside of Elsewhere a half-dozen years back. Her pimp had beaten her up. Thought she was cheating on him. Some of the staff brought her inside, patched her up and treated her to some food and drink. Sat and talked with her. It didn't take long before some of the folks here figured out her pimp's identity. In fact it was Ludvic, that roustabout over at that table near the kitchen, who identified him.

"He and a few of his hand-selected comrades confronted the pimp and threatened him with a forced hike across the canal . . . told him they'd supply him with some special concrete Jesus boots to assist him in his adventure. He soon left the area and hasn't returned. It wasn't long before Susan became a regular, and finally a part of the wait staff who welcome others . . . like she did with you tonight. She uses her skills at putting strangers at ease for a different purpose now. Like you said so well, Advocatus, Higgs Boson is at work among us . . . working between you and me right now, in fact. I can feel it."

"Higgs who, Snark? I thought you were going to say something about the Spirit working in her life and ours tonight."

"And so I did, Advocatus." Laughter at several unrelated tables erupted, seemingly in unison, as Snark and Advocatus downed the last sips of their wine together. "So I did."

## Dialogue 9 - Quantum Trinity RSV, MSG

"Snark," said Advocatus with a mixture of curiosity and weariness in his voice, "Higgs, whatever his last name is, sounds like something you just made up to further mess with me. Please don't ruin this otherwise splendid reunion of ours with more of your outrageous nonsense."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Advocatus. But I didn't just now make up that name and I'm not trying to mess with you . . . well, maybe just a little," Snark replied with a slight smile. "As for getting back into the recriminations that drove us apart, I'm as allergic to that state of affairs as you are. But, if you'd care for a cup of coffee and something sweet, I could tell you more about Higgs Boson. My treat."

"Well, okay, Snark. Tell Susan I'd like a 'Grande Americano, half-caff, with room and two mini-vanilla scones,'" responded Advocatus, affecting the with-it brio of Starbucks' cognoscenti when placing their orders. Snark got his humor, smiled broadly and placed their orders with Susan. After she returned with their order, Snark began.

"Advocatus, something unseen is definitely at work in our lives. You referred to it as the Spirit. I assume you were referring to the third person of the Holy Trinity when you said the Spirit was at work. Father, Son, Holy Spirit . . . the Holy Trinity . . . our faith's traditional formulation for the one God. Augustine wrote 15 books on the subject, back in the 5th century. Not three gods, but one God in three persons . . . the Blessed Trinity.

"Some people in Augustine's day said that understanding the Trinity was simply a mystery, the answer to which we might know in the next life, but not in this one. Nonetheless, over time the church made belief in the Holy Trinity an essential article of the faith. And because of that, more than one seminary student has had to take theology courses over a second and a third time until they could write a meaningful essay on the topic! It's not an easy concept. You were referring to the Spirit as a part of the Holy Trinity. Am I correct?"

"Just so, Snark. But what about Higgs-what's-his-name?"

"Well, Advocatus, Higgs Boson is the third person of the Theoretical Trinity! And, parenthetically Advocatus, I prefer to think of Higgs using the feminine gender. There are many reasons for my preference and we might get into them later. But as you know, both Hebrew and Greek render their words for 'Spirit' in the feminine gender. So the Holy Trinity includes the feminine; with Jesus the masculine; and God . . . God, I think, is beyond the category of 'gender.' So in the Theoretical Trinity we have 'Higgs-what's-her-name.' The other two are Dark Energy and Dark Matter.

"And they're also pretty tough to understand. But if I remember what Wikipedia had to say on the matter . . . no pun intended whatsoever . . . Dark Matter comprises about 25% of the universe. It's matter that is inferred to exist from gravitational effects on visible matter and background radiation, and which is otherwise undetectable by emitted or

scattered electromagnetic radiation. Its existence was hypothesized to account for discrepancies between measurements of the mass of galaxies, clusters of galaxies and the entire universe, and measurements based on the mass of the visible "luminous" matter these objects contain: stars and the gas and dust of the interstellar and intergalactic medium.

"Dark Energy, on the other hand, accounts for about 70% of the universe. About it, more is unknown than is known. We know how much dark energy there is because we know how it affects the universe's expansion. It's speeding up the rate of expansion, of all things! Other than that, it is a complete mystery.

"The third part of the Theoretical Trinity is a boson, the existence of which was first postulated back in the late 1970's by a cosmologist named Peter Higgs. As sub-atomic particles go, the Higgs boson is pretty large . . . a couple of hundred times larger than a proton. The Higgs boson is a theoretical particle believed to give everything in the universe mass. The particle is a key part of the standard model used in physics to describe how particles and atoms are made up. It's so essential, one Nobel Prize winning physicist called it 'The God Particle.'

"If we can find out more about these three mysterious things, Advocatus, we'll probably have a unified theory of everything. So you see, the Theoretical Trinity would explain what helped you to pull back from descending into the maelstrom of your resentments; it urged you to call me when I was swirling around in my own; and it would explain the roustabouts running off Susan's pimp, as well as her turning her life around. If you ask me, Advocatus, that's all the work of Higgs Boson."

"Well, I didn't ask you, Snark; so at least *my* conscience is clear! Good grief, man! What theoretical drivel have you just been spouting off for the past ten minutes! It's worse than Greek to me! Everything you've just talked about is pure conjecture. Even if they find this Higgs boson . . . whatever the hell a boson is anyhow . . . even if they find it, so what? It sounds like a lot of overheated theoretical speculation by a bunch of scientists working themselves up into a froth. The Theoretical Trinity? Ha! Sounds like intellectual masturbation on a cosmic scale to me . . . just an instance of pointy-headed sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Snark reached over, picked up Advocatus' cup of Americano and sniffed it quite dramatically. "Just checking your drink, Advocatus. From the sound of what you just said, I thought Susan might have put some Irish whiskey in it! You're in rare form! I like it!"

"I'm perfectly sober, Snark, which is more than I can confidently say about you! Now give: why all this mumbo jumbo?"

"Advocatus, the Theoretical Trinity isn't just a bunch of mumbo jumbo. Were it not for such scientists' investigations into quantum physics, Chuck back there in the Wi-Fi center wouldn't be working on a laptop. You and I wouldn't be able to call each other on our

cell phones. On the other hand . . . and here I say a sincere 'Thank God!' . . . you and I don't have to master the Theoretical Trinity to benefit from our computers and our phones. It's not in the User's Manual. We can safely remain ignorant of the theory if we wish, and quickly get about using the wonderful, very practical by-products of what you so vividly refer to as their masturbatory, theoretical speculations.

"In exactly the same way, Advocatus . . . and here I must beg you to tighten your seat belt for, truly, I mean no offense . . . we must be clear that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is *also* a kind of theoretical speculation. Understanding the Holy Trinity is an appropriate preoccupation for systematic theologians, but understanding it ought not to be required of those who might choose to follow Jesus. It ought not to be an article of faith any more than understanding quantum theory should be a prerequisite to firing up your laptop.

"Besides, the purpose of theology is really quite practical. Theology is a form of reflection upon our human experience that makes reference to Transcendence . . . to the sacred . . . to something beyond what is immediately apparent to the five senses. Of necessity, theology must resort to metaphor. The more philosophical-sounding theologies often forget that they, too, are trading in metaphors . . . just very abstract ones. Other theologies take a more candid view of what they are about and tell stories. But what is common to all theologizing is that it is an attempt to understand experience with reference to Transcendence.

"It's also an attempt to express such understandings in language that is meaningful to the community in which the person who is doing the theological reflection is a member. And for good reason! To recall again your vivid expression, Advocatus, theology is just so much theoretical masturbation with a God-ward tilt unless it succeeds in explaining one's own *experience* to another. Beyond that, theology has always been invitational. That is, it invites others to enter into the same experience that is being reflected upon. Finally, it invites *those* persons to reflect upon *their own* subsequent experience so that the process can continue.

"I think that the early Christians were doing *something* like that when they started describing their experience of God in terms of a divine community: a perspective unique amongst the world's major religions. And, to be fair Advocatus, there are some interesting things that *could* be done with that theoretical theological construct. For example, *if* our experience of Transcendence can best be described in communal terms, and *if* we are to follow the lead of Transcendence in patterning our own lives, *then* Christians will inescapably be focused on understanding community: building it, maintaining it, and celebrating it.

"If one wished to do so, one could make the very relevant and practical point that such an understanding of Transcendence is itself the theological bedrock for an *insistence upon building bridges rather than walls* . . . even with regard to ones enemies . . . so that humanity can have a communal relationship with one another just as Transcendence

does. A further benefit of such an understanding is that it would help prevent *the Church itself* from becoming exclusionary, judgmental, and arrogant.”<sup>8</sup>

The wrinkles on Advocatus’ face were now a-jumble with movement, hardly knowing what expression best suited this odd and confusing moment. “Snark, no seat belts would be needed if the Church were as long-winded as you; and to be fair, it often is. People would simply be bored to the point of stupefaction!

“But you sound serious now, Snark, so let me match your mood. What you’re talking about is like removing the keystone from an arch: take it out and the entire thing collapses! What would become of Christianity if you had your way?”

“Well, Advocatus, I think following Jesus would instantly become more attractive!” Snark replied, with a faint smile on his face. “One of the huge problems with Christianity is that we almost never throw anything away.<sup>9</sup> You know how it is with most of us: we collect a bunch of stuff we need at the time; we use it and then, when we have a chance to move to another house, we pack it up and take it along. Half of it stays boxed up and stored in the attic for 20 years! The other half constitutes impediments we are constantly tripping over. We never use the stuff, but we just can’t get rid of it. What was useful back then isn’t particularly so now; but we have continued to hang onto it. We’ve become hoarders of our old stuff. That’s fine if you’re the curator of an exhibit at the Smithsonian! But for the rest of us, after awhile all the accumulated drek of a lifetime *owns us!*”

“When the faith was new, Christians had to say to the world what distinguished them *from* everyone else. So we created theologies of identity. That was essential. After all, every human group has to define who it is and what it means to be a member, etc. That undertaking necessarily drew boundaries . . . fences with gates, or impregnable walls . . . that defined who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out.’ The problem with this enterprise of focusing so much on believing ‘correct’ ideas is that it led to division, acrimony, even bloodshed. Theologies of identity often devolve into the sort of nonsense on an old Vietnam War era bumper sticker that said, ‘Support Peace, Or I’ll Kill You!’

“The Way of Jesus . . . as St. Paul rightly understood . . . is about the practice of forging *bridges* rather than erecting walls. The Way of Jesus is about compassion. And the practice of compassion, by definition, enlarges the circle of our caring and, consequently, expands the roster of who is ‘in.’ Pursuing clarity about maintaining ‘the beliefs that make us different’ can . . . and often has . . . become more important than the practice of compassion. ‘Believing’ as in giving intellectual assent to six impossible things before breakfast, can . . . and did . . . replace ‘believing’ understood as following the Way of

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<sup>8</sup> See Brian D. McLaren’s *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* (Jericho Books, 2012). McLaren re-examines and expresses Christian doctrine so as to be faithful to its understandings *and* genuinely hospitable to others on their own terms without seeking to “convert” them.

<sup>9</sup> See Phyllis Tickle’s eminently readable book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, (Baker Books, 2012). She maintains that every 500 years or so, Christianity cleans out its attic and holds a great rummage sale, which results in a vastly different church. She says we are currently living through such a time.

Jesus. 'Faith' became a matter of affirming certain beliefs more than a way of being in the world. And catechisms . . . rather than educating us in how to become more loving in practical, everyday situations . . . became instruction in doctrines, many of which, frankly, have very little to do with everyday life.

"In short, Advocatus, concentrating overmuch on theological formulations such as the Holy Trinity can become just one more way for us to evade God and the life-in-God to which we are called. You don't have to believe in the Holy Trinity to follow the Christ. It's not in the User's Manual!"

"I see where you're headed, Snark. But that notion sounds downright anti-intellectual . . . surely a sin for those who believe that God gave us the brains we have and wanted us to use them."

"Hmmmm," said Snark, feigning curiosity. "What was that you said about those naughty theoretical physicists? Run that by me again, would you?"

*"Touché,* Snark! But, I still don't know what's got you off on this lengthy rant of yours."

"It's because of what happened to the two of us, Advocatus! You and I go way back. You mentored me for a little while after I'd graduated from seminary. We were never a match made in heaven, so to speak. But we respected each other; ate a sandwich together; shared some laughter even. But then, somehow, our theological differences got in the way of our relationship. We each got polarized on what we were cock-sure of; and we defensively protected our turf by hurling all manner of stuff at one another.\* It led, finally, to our breach. And then the soul-rotting resentment and isolation that followed.

"Advocatus, what happened to us is what's happening to the whole world: from Republicans and Democrats in Congress who view going out to dinner with each other as a betrayal of their party, to Christians and Muslims and Jews at each other's throats . . . each blaming the other for the sins of their fathers, none taking responsibility for their own obstinacy and evil.

It's also true of half the married couples who end up making marriage counselors and divorce lawyers rich because they have not understood their mate's own unique truth, insisting instead that the mate understand only their own point of view. They put 'being right' above the relationship itself and so the relationship crashes and burns.

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\* With regard to such "hurling," the Thwock! Bird (a name pronounced by making the sound of a champagne cork's popping out of the bottle) is a bird that flies in an ever-diminishing spiral until it flies up its own backside with a resounding "thwock!" From this advantageous position it is able to hurl feces at its adversaries. A bill has been introduced in the House of Representatives to replace the Bald Eagle with the Thwock! Bird. Its sponsors argue that it would be a more fitting symbol of contemporary American political discourse. Its opponents maintain that, to the contrary, the current bird of prey is more fitting. (Note: This particular footnote is that of the anonymous author. The version rendered here has been edited to conform to a PG rating. ~ *The Editors*)

"The power struggle *we* were in, Advocatus, is the kind of power struggle that's bringing the world to ruin. And our faith has something to say about power and privilege, speaking and listening, empathy and compassion, justice and forgiveness. And that is what we ought to be about. Learning what our faith has to contribute to the healing of these sorts of wounds is the Church's proper focus of attention.

"If we have to get into theological debates, let's not lose sight of what our theologies are saying about life as it is lived out daily. Debates about theological notions which may be of no real-world consequence are a waste of time and a distraction from our holy calling, Advocatus: building bridges over the troubled waters of the world's conflicts . . . including yours and mine. Everything else is, at best, commentary. More often than not, it's just an evasion."

"Hey, you two! If you want to go on with your bull session and solve all the world's problems, you'd better get a dorm room at the community college! We're closing!" It was Susan, walking over to their table with a newspaper in her hand. "Seriously, guys, we gotta close up. See you soon, I hope?"

Advocatus and Snark looked at each other, then back at Susan. "You bet!" they said, nodding their heads and smiling at her.

"Oh, here, Snark. I overheard you going on again about Higgs Boson. Thought you'd like to read the news," she said, dropping the paper on their table.

Snark picked it up and scanned it while Advocatus looked on. "Wow, Advocatus, what a coincidence! There's a leaked memo circulating that says one of the detectors of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN in Geneva, Switzerland may have detected what could be the Higgs boson! It's as yet unconfirmed and apparently there have been false sightings before. It's cost ten billion dollars to find such a small particle. Wow! The scientists say to stay tuned because they're not yet certain of their findings." \*

"From what you said earlier, Snark," responded Advocatus, "their uncertainty may be the *only* thing they can be certain of!

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\* A little over a year later, these same scientists would come to a consensus that they were 99.9% sure they had indeed detected the elusive Higgs boson . . . or an identical twin at least. Judging from Snark's delight and interest in the account he read, we can only assume that his delight has only intensified. ~ *The Editors*

## Dialogue 10 - A Profound Gas

Neither Snark nor Advocatus had spoken to one another for several weeks after their meeting at Elsewhere. Mercifully, this time their silence was not because of a breach: each was simply attending to other matters.

For his part, Advocatus was busy responding to the wide variety of needs, challenges and opportunities that any large congregation presented. He found the variety invigorating, but the pace exhausting. There were so many needs: people in the hospital, people beset with psychological and family problems, people facing births and deaths. And then there were the meetings: why did there have to be so many of them, he wondered. In his head he knew of their necessity; in his heart he was weary of attending them. There was also his work as a fireman: rushing to put out those small fires fueled by the combustible mixture of misperceptions and the human tendency towards gossiping to fill an inner emptiness. And now, thanks to the internet, gossip spread faster than ever. Small brush fires could become congregation-incinerating infernos literally overnight. He considered whether e-mails, Twitter, and Facebook were actually tools of Beelzebub.

Increasingly, he thought about Snark. When he did, something like appreciation began to fill him . . . which, given their history, was most odd. He ran their last meeting over in his mind . . . how it had been so different than the one before it. He was beginning to expect that Snark would set him up; but equally that when Snark sprang his little trap, it would be benign . . . and for a thoughtful purpose. He was outrageous, to be sure . . . and long-winded to the point of exhaustion . . . but not mean nor mindlessly destructive. Snark was, he thought, a bit like St. Peter: impetuous, over-the-top, sometimes rather blind . . . even though at other times he also saw clearly the hidden truth of things. "Of course," Advocatus thought to himself, "*I can remind me of St. Thomas sometimes: hesitant, fearful of the unexpected, needing proof before changing anything.* Maybe that's why I appreciate Snark: he's my shadow and I'm his . . . and what's more . . . he's not the only one who's given to temporary blindness."

At this moment, Advocatus had a mental image of Snark and him, each ridiculously trying to stomp on their own shadows . . . each trying to land a kick to their own shadow's head . . . each of them falling on their respective butts in the process. It was such a deliciously absurd and accurate image that he laughed out loud the instant he thought it. And it was not just a sedate chuckle, but a really, really loud hooting!

He hadn't laughed that way in years . . . and certainly not at himself. The deep vertical cleft between his eyes seemed to almost disappear while, at the outer edges of his eyes, the crows' feet wrinkles began to dance a little jig. His laugh had come from deep down within his belly. Pieces of the salad he'd wolfed down just minutes before, started to wiggle loose from between his teeth and . . . in a manner that would have pleased the most demanding of dental hygienists . . . launched themselves safely out of range of his mouth . . . landing, in fact, about four feet in front of him.

It would have been far less embarrassing for Advocatus, had his reverie-inspired, high-

decibel guffaw not taken place in the middle the church's Board meeting during a boring and long-winded reading of the minutes. Startled, every Board member turned to look at Advocatus, who was sitting in the front row of chairs directly in front of the secretary, on whose white springtime dress could now be seen some remnants of what had once been a lovely crisp tossed salad drizzled with raspberry vinaigrette dressing.

Advocatus was so caught off guard that he had a St. Peter moment himself. Impulsively, he blurted out: "Higgs Boson is at it again!" Upon hearing what he had just said, he burst into another round of raucous guffawing. This time, the secretary ducked.

Advocatus would have stayed in the meeting, inventing some sort of excuse for his most unusual behavior, were it not for an awareness that his laughter had found an additional way to make an exit from his body . . . one somewhat further south than his now salad-free and sparkling teeth. He excused himself and headed toward the restroom down the hall from the Board room . . . the one Snark had once called 1<sup>st</sup> John.

Creation happens when the hot air of the ego's narcissistic balloon is suddenly released in a loud peal of laughter at oneself. This was, of course, what happened 13.75 billion years ago at the moment of the Big Bang. That was the instant that God, who had been *kvetching* for eons about being so lonely, realized that it was his own solipsistic narcissism that was responsible for it all along . . . and that, being omni-this and omni-that, God could certainly do something about that loneliness, providing he could just get over his bad self. That's when God laughed. The rest is, if not quite accurate history or sophisticated cosmology, excellent theology.

Ministering to a congregation of people can be a joyful experience as long as one can allow such a continuing re-creation to take place within oneself. But when that internal transformational process is interrupted, ministry invariably becomes a high-burnout career. The late Peter Drucker, the great guru of organizational management, once observed that the four most difficult jobs in America are (in no particular order): President of the United States, president of a university, CEO of a hospital, and a pastor.

Long before Drucker's apt observations, this phenomenon of burnout went by another name. According to the desert fathers of the 4th century, if one is not careful it is possible to fall into a lassitude of spirit called *accidie* . . . a kind of spiritual depression frequently referred to as "sloth" . . . but which is better understood as a loss of faith in the divinely infused meaningfulness of life.<sup>10</sup> One symptom of the disease is that the people one is called upon to love become annoyances to an already over-drained and under-resourced spirit. Advocatus had been there before during his long life, and knew at first hand its many dangers. So he decided it was time to take care of himself for awhile. Leaving the care of the congregation for a week to the competent members of his church's Board, he set off to pay Snark an extended visit down at Elsewhere.

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<sup>10</sup> See Ian Fleming's *Seven Deadlier Sins and 007's Moral Compass*, (David Crumm Media, 2008). This excellent book is also a Bible Study of the Letter of James.

## Dialogue 11 - Hooking Up At Elsewhere

Being anxious to leave his responsibilities behind, Advocatus arrived at the locked doors of Elsewhere at 7:15 on a bright Saturday morning. A door sign advertised Saturday hours would begin at 8:00 a.m., and he was about to go back to his car to wait when he caught some movement at the rear of the room.

In back at the Wi-Fi center, a group of about six people sat around one of the large tables. Pressing his face discreetly to the window, he could make out Snark, Susan and four others, whom he assumed to be additional staff members. As his eyes adjusted to the relative darkness of the room, he saw that they sat in a relaxed manner, hands in their laps, leaning back comfortably in their chairs, eyes closed. On the table were some newspapers and various books, several of which Snark assumed to be Bibles, and also a brass bowl of some sort. The group was silent save for a blonde haired woman who appeared to speak, though very slowly and intermittently.

How long they had been sitting thusly he didn't know; but after watching them for about fifteen minutes, the same woman picked up a small xylophone-type mallet and struck the brass bowl. Wordlessly, the group raised their hands to the table and joined them together, all the while maintaining their silence. After a minute or two, the blonde woman spoke a few words; the group opened their eyes, stretched their arms and necks; and engaged in a bit of conversation.

When Snark glanced toward the front window, Advocatus instinctively drew back. Snark soon unlocked the door and greeted Advocatus. "Well, well, well! You're the first ecclesiastical peeper we've had! Come in, Advocatus! We hoped you'd come early!"

Nonplussed, Advocatus entered Elsewhere where Susan and the blonde woman also greeted him. "Advocatus, you already know Susan from your previous visit here." Susan winked at Advocatus and smiled coyly. "You've met Margaret before," said Snark, putting his arm around the blonde woman's waist, but it was long ago and you may not remember her.

Advocatus rapidly searched his memory, but uselessly so. He simply couldn't place her, though her name was frustratingly familiar in the context of Snark. He *should* know her, he thought, chastising himself. Advocatus was a bit of an introvert and was constantly frustrated by his difficulty remembering the names of people he'd met only briefly. He envied those pastors who could meet a person for a few minutes and remember their name, seemingly forever.

"You're right, Snark," replied Advocatus, some redness forming on the sides of his neck. Looking at Margaret he said, "I'm sorry, Margaret. I wish I was better at remembering names, but I console myself that I have good company. Cornelia Otis Skinner once wrote an essay titled, 'I Never Remember A Name, But I Always Forget A Face.' Please forgive me."

Margaret threw her head back and laughed. She grasped Advocatus' hand in hers and said, "It's alright, Advocatus! I'm married to Snark. We met only once before . . . when Snark had graduated from seminary and you were, for awhile, his mentor. Snark said he didn't talk about me to you in your meetings back then . . . although he often told me stories about *you*. I'm glad to see you after all these years. Welcome again to Elsewhere!"

"Margaret! Now your name falls into place for me. It was your hair . . . oh my, this is awkward . . . I don't think I should say out loud that your hair's a different color than I remember it back then! I think you were a brunette?"

Margaret's continued laughter put Advocatus at ease as she said, "Your memory's not so bad, Advocatus! The brunette turned gray . . . I'm only a few years younger than Snark, you know. I didn't like the color of gray it was turning, so I had it changed to blonde."

"A very, very smart blonde!" Snark interjected! Nothing dumb about Margaret here! Elsewhere wouldn't exist without her. It was originally her idea and she sees to the day-by-day running of the ministry."

"The ministry?" asked Advocatus, confused.

"Sure, Advocatus," replied Margaret. "Elsewhere is, like most of what Snark does, a sort of incognito ministry.<sup>11</sup> Just as Jesus represented one disguised expression of God, we hope to be another one here. We don't refer to it as a ministry when we serve our customers. Being heavy-handed isn't our style.

"We just want to provide a place for the community to gather, to swap stories over simple fare and drinks, to explore current events, celebrate the arts, and just to be. We don't have a program we push. We believe God is at work in the life of everyone who comes here. It's our hope that they might come to discover that activity and respond to it; and that what they experience here can help.

"We know that the church is not only in the lovely buildings such as your congregation gathers in. And we know that, while God certainly works through the conventional expressions of the church, God is also at work elsewhere. That's why we gave it its name; and that's why it's purpose is not obvious."

"My goodness!" said Advocatus, appreciatively. "That's a lot to take in and think about. Since I'm hoping to visit here each day for the next week or so, I'd like to learn more about what you're doing. It only took an hour or so to get here, so I should have lots of time each day."

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<sup>11</sup> *Journey Inward; Journey Outward*, Elizabeth O'Connor (Harper Collins, 1975). O'Connor describes the formation of The Church of the Savior's many inner city ministries, including a coffee house ministry on Columbia Road, NW, Washington, DC called The Potter's House.

"You mean you're going to commute from your house all the way down here, Advocatus?" asked Margaret. Advocatus nodded. "But that's a 45 minute trip . . . well over an hour when the traffic's heavy!" she continued.

Susan, who had been attentively following the conversation, now broke her silence. "You don't have to commute, Advocatus! You can sleep in my room upstairs!" she said with enthusiasm, winking at him once again . . . somewhat seductively so, Advocatus thought.

"Oh . . . I . . . I couldn't do that, Susan," stammered Advocatus.

"Of course you can!" exclaimed Susan, with that "come hither" grin on her face. "I have plenty of room. You'll be very comfortable there. I'll see to it. I have a queen size bed that's very cozy. You can dim the lights and put on some music and . . ."

Advocatus, red-faced and feeling more nonplussed than ever, interrupted Susan saying, "I simply couldn't, Susan! It wouldn't be right! I'm a man of the cloth, after all . . . and you . . . well you used to have a rather different career, but the way you're talking now, it sounds like . . ."

"Like I haven't moved on, Advocatus?" laughed Susan.

"Advocatus," said Margaret, trying to catch her breath from her own laughter at Susan's teasing, "Susan's just having some fun with you! She's going home to visit her mother this week and is offering her room to you so you don't have to commute. I think it's a splendid idea, Susan. Thank you! Advocatus, you've *got* to take her up on it!"

"Well . . . I don't . . ." said Advocatus wishing he could, for just once, feel "plussed."

"It will be our secret, Advocatus!" said Snark, crossing his heart. With matching serious grins, Margaret and Susan joined him in crossing their hearts, too.

"Very well then" said Advocatus. "But I'll hold each of you to your word!"

## Dialogue 12 - The End of the World

Advocatus knew a thing or two about brothels. Over the course of his exceptionally long life he had retrieved more than one errant clergyman from such places. That was when he served as an enforcer of the church's regulations. Serving in a very different capacity, and in a time he believed was best forgotten, he had accompanied a pope or two to such places. He knew the sights and smells of the brothels: the diaphanous curtains; the lurid color schemes of purple and pink and red; the scent of incense burning.

Susan escorted him upstairs to the floor above Elsewhere where there were a number of rooms. Susan's was directly over the Wi-Fi center. Advocatus didn't expect what he saw. The room was neatly tailored in soft, light beige, and trimmed with contrasting shades of brown. A few blue and green, geometric patterned throw pillows accented the furniture. A vase of fresh flowers was on a small table by the window overlooking the canal in the near distance. A slight hint of fresh, air-dried linens infused the air.

"Make yourself at home, Advocatus!" said Susan. You can hang your robe and miter and stuff in the closet where I've made room for you. I generally keep the door locked when I leave Elsewhere. Here's a spare key. My only rule is there are to be no cats here: they make me sneeze! You can bring anybody here you desire, but no catting around in my room if you do! I'm a proper woman now! Understand?" she said with a giggle.

Advocatus tried once more to affect a "plussed" expression, failing miserably yet again. "Sure, Susan," he replied. "You're . . . you're most gracious."

Back down in Elsewhere, Advocatus informed Margaret of Susan's hospitality and said he'd be going back to his house to fetch some clothing for his stay at Elsewhere, but would return after the lunch hour. "Well don't let anyone from your church see you back in the neighborhood, Advocatus! They'll suck you in and you'll miss out on your R & R with us. Remember, that's why you're here!"

"Don't worry, Margaret! I've at least learned *that* from experience! I'll slip in and out as undetected as a foreign agent!" And with that, Advocatus left.

"Snark, what do you have planned for your old mentor this afternoon?" Margaret asked.

"Well, I thought I'd tell him about the very limited batch of Shiraz I've decanted to celebrate the end of the world. The Rapture is supposed to happen today at 6:00 p.m., you know. It's been all over the news. CNN's having a field day reporting it. I know we're serving up some roast lamb and I thought the Shiraz would compliment it well. I've even created an appropriate label for the batch."

"Not again, Snark! You're not going to taunt him with another label are you? Look what happened last time. He practically had a coronary over *Last Supper Red*, and you were hardly worth living with for the longest time afterward! Please be careful, hon!" said Margaret, placing her hand on his forearm.

"Don't worry, dear. Now that we're getting to know each other better, I don't think that's likely to happen. Besides, on this issue at least, I think Advocatus and I are in more agreement than we are on some others. But I hear you. I still regret being emotionally AWOL after that fracas over *Last Supper Red*. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again." They gave each other an embrace and a kiss and then joined the rest of the staff in preparing for the lunch crowd.

True to his word, Advocatus had been in stealth mode when he got his clothes from his house, and his presence had not been noticed. After he returned to Elsewhere, he hung them up in Susan's closet, and went downstairs to find Snark waiting for him at a table.

"Glad you got back without being discovered, Advocatus! Let me get us a cup of coffee. As I recall you're a fan of Americano with room. That's something we have in common!" said Snark in a welcoming tone.

"That works for me, Snark!" Snark made them each a cup and, after Advocatus had added some cream, both sat down at a table together.

"Advocatus, I guess you've heard the news about how the Rapture is supposed to happen today around 6:00 p.m." Snark began.

"Yes, Snark, I've heard some about it. Sounds like the same old, same old one more time," Advocatus said wearily.

"I agree with you there, Advocatus. This old geezer, Harold Camping, has seduced many frightened folks into spreading the word about his preposterous theory. He claims that he has deduced the exact date and time from a careful reading of the Bible. If so he reads it more closely than I was taught in seminary!"

"Quite so, Snark, but watch out who you're calling an old geezer! The guy's only 89 . . . a mere baby compared to me! Besides, Snark, there you go again with your name-calling. Not a good thing," observed Advocatus.

"Both points noted, Advocatus. But lots of his followers, believing his crap, have cashed in their pensions and sold everything to fund their spreading the alarm! That strikes me as really irresponsible for both Camping and his followers. I mean, what are they going to do when May 22<sup>nd</sup> dawns bright and sunny and nothing has changed?"

"I agree, Snark. But I imagine that the same thing could have been said of Jesus and his disciples. He told them to leave everything behind, to live radically new lives, and follow him into God's Kingdom, the arrival of which he expected at any moment. After Jesus' crucifixion, I imagine they were wondering just how they were going to survive. After all, their whole thing with Jesus had, to use your infelicitous phrase, turned to "crap." So I'm not sure we can fault Camping's followers completely. His theory has touched something deep in them or they wouldn't follow him. Same thing with the disciples and

Jesus," responded Advocatus, now playing the role for which he was so aptly named.

"True enough, Advocatus, but I think Jesus touched something very different in the disciples. I think Jesus saw the inborn divine image in those fishermen, tax collectors and such . . . the divine image of which they were quite probably unaware, though their tradition assured them they were the bearers of it. That image is *the special, divine ordinariness we all are heirs to*. It's our glory! I think he touched them at the point of that gift of divine greatness, suggesting that they could, with God's help, responsibly grow into it.

"Camping has touched something very different. I believe he has touched his followers' fear. From what I can tell, the man isn't exploiting their fears for personal gain, but their fears are what his message appeals to. Whereas Jesus' touch ignited ordinary folks to believe in the extraordinary possibilities their lives contained, Camping's touch makes his followers hunker down and cringe . . . even though they are going to heroic-if-misguided-lengths to spread their fear-filled message."

Advocatus sat silently for a few moments, letting what Snark had said sink in before replying. "That's a useful distinction, Snark. Camping does remind me of countless clerics through the centuries who have worked their followers up into a froth of fearful expectation. Having scared the Bejesus out of them, so to speak, they then called the people to repentance before it was too late."

"On the other hand, Advocatus, isn't that precisely what the Biblical prophets were doing?" asked Snark, feigning innocence and trying on Advocatus' role himself. Again.

"No, it isn't, Snark. If I didn't know better . . . and maybe I do . . . I'd swear you are toying with me right now! The prophets of the Bible, for the most part, confronted people with their addictions and the lapses in their ethical behaviors. Of course they didn't use the words "addictions" or "ethics" as such; instead they talked of the people's whoring after other gods . . . idolatry . . . and the people's refusal to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God . . . ethics. Their doom-saying was simply announcing the natural consequences of their having something other than God at the center of life; and of treating others as objects to be exploited rather than persons to be cherished.

"Camping, on the other hand, starts with an imminent, cataclysmic end to history and says that folks ought to get their house in order by believing in Jesus. As you observed, Snark, Camping doesn't call his followers to a future-oriented, expansive-yet-responsible greatness in the here and now. Instead, he calls them to a cringing, soul-cramping awareness at the end of everything."

It was now Snark's turn to take in and ponder what his old mentor had so correctly said. Had the old man learned a thing or two since they met weekly in those mentoring sessions so long ago? Or did Snark just not appreciate Advocatus back then, filled as he was with the bravado and know-it-all-cocksureness of one newly ordained?

"Right you are, Advocatus. Well said! Another distinction would probably be how Jesus and Camping experience and talk about God. I think Jesus knew that if God has a name, it is surely "Compassion." Camping's God is probably named something like "Narcissus-In-The-Sky-With-Lightning-Bolts." Of course both of those names and descriptions are human projections onto the heavens, and on that point, at least, Freud was right. We finite creatures have no other option than to project onto the heavens when we do theology. It's just that Jesus projected the *best* that humanity knows. Camping projects a *pathologic narcissism* onto the skies. The latter understandably makes us cringe. The former gives us hope for ourselves and one another."

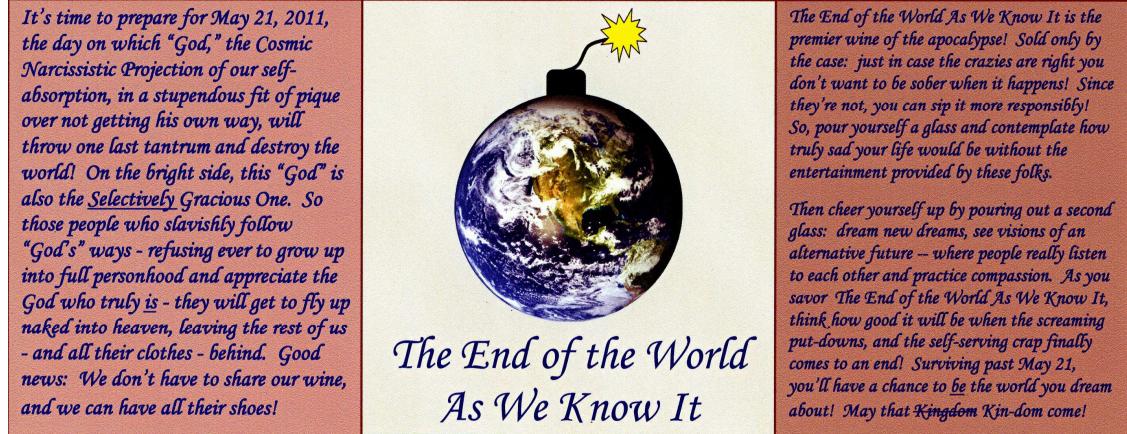
"Snark, you've been doing some good thinking since I knew you years ago. I confess I doubted you'd ever develop the maturity I hear in you today. Kudos! But all this talk has made me hungry. You don't suppose we could get ourselves a snack, do you?"

"Done!" said the now jubilant Snark. A few minutes later, Snark emerged from the kitchen with two smoked salmon grilled Panini sandwiches, along with applesauce and chips on the side. "Here you go, Advocatus, I think you'll like this. I've also brought a chilled bottle of an appropriate wine, so we can pour ourselves a glass along with the sandwiches."

Before they ate, Snark made one last observation. "You know, Advocatus, a final distinction occurs to me. Camping, like Jesus before him, preaches the coming of God's kingdom on earth. Camping's take can be summed up as 'Jesus is coming again and, boy is he pissed!' Jesus, on the other hand, announced the presence of God as the enslaved being set free, the blind regaining their sight, the stranger being welcomed into the community . . . and he said that wherever two or three were gathered in his spirit, there he was in their midst! It seems to me that . . . between you and me right now . . . the kingdom won't have to wait any longer to get here. It's already arrived!"

Advocatus smiled broadly and knowingly at Snark. "I'll drink to that!" he exclaimed. "Pour us a glass of your wine, Snark. What's it called, by the way?"

"It's a nice, spicy Shiraz called *The End of the World as We Know It*. It's the premier wine of the apocalypse, Advocatus. Sköl!"



### **Dialogue 13 - Revealing Breakfast RSV**

Advocatus' alarm went off at 7:00 a.m. on Sunday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>. He was not at all surprised when he opened his eyes to find himself in Susan's room. Well, it *was* unusual for him to wake up in the bedroom of a former hooker, but other than that . . . He shared not a bit of the anxiety that convulsed the followers of Harold Camping. If the Rapture had occurred, it certainly was an over-hyped event.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, as he dressed, Advocatus wondered where he would worship this Sunday. While it is true that there are a few preachers who delight in not worshipping at all in church when they are on vacation, the majority enjoy taking a busman's holiday by worshipping at some unfamiliar congregation where somebody else has to lead it. No matter how familiar one is with the worship service, leading it deprives the leader of the opportunity to let the mind become discursive, the spirit to wander, and to pay attention to whatever emerges from within: all of which are essential to entering into worship completely . . . something not really possible all that much when one is leading it.

It was nearly 8:00 a.m. when Advocatus walked downstairs to Elsewhere. He could smell the welcome aromas of bacon slowly frying in a skillet. "Hi, Margaret!" he said with a warm smile. "I see you're still here too. And while I don't yet see him, I'd bet the church budget that Snark wasn't levitated up into heaven last night. Not *him!*" he said, his smile widening into a grin.

"Advocatus, you have *no* idea! Don't tell Snark, but I thoroughly agree with you there!" she replied.

As she was speaking, seven or eight people came in Elsewhere's front door followed by Snark. "Don't tell Snark what?" asked Snark, closing the door behind him.

"Oh, hi, Snark! I was just telling Margaret that the Rapture had misfired if you were left behind!" said Advocatus with a playful snort.

"Lies! Lies! Nothing but lies!" retorted Snark, laughing.

"Seriously, Snark, I was just about to ask Margaret if you and she could suggest a church nearby where I could worship this morning."

"Snark and I beat you to the punch, Advocatus," said Margaret. "We've selected a place and already made arrangements for you. Do you like your eggs scrambled or sunny side up, Advocatus?"

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<sup>12</sup> Camping would later say that it was a "spiritual rapture" but that on October 21 the world would definitely come to an end, both physically and spiritually. When that also failed to happen, Camping had the decency and courage to admit publically that he had been wrong and, quoting Matthew 24:36, said that attempting to predict the exact time and date was "sinful."

"Uh, scrambled is good. How long will it take me to get to the church; and when will the worship start?"

"About five seconds to get there, ten minutes until it starts. Pull up a chair, Advocatus!" teased Snark. "We've got some Georgia grits this morning and the bacon's almost done."

"I . . . I don't understand," said Advocatus. "I thought you said worship would begin in ten minutes. I'm afraid I won't have time to eat. I'd better leave now and . . . ."

Margaret laughingly interrupted Advocatus and said, "Advocatus, pull up a chair and join us. This morning we're worshipping here at Elsewhere. We do most Sundays. We're sort of a "house church" here. The food is nearly ready. Would you be good enough to say a prayer as we begin?"

A smile began to replace the confusion on Advocatus' face as he nodded his assent and took his seat. Those who had come in with Snark also found a place at the tables with the many others already in the room. Margaret handed him a sheet of paper. "Advocatus, you're accustomed to the high church liturgy where printed prayers of the church are read. So that you'll feel more at home, I've printed out one we sometimes use here. It's called "Prayer to the God Who Fell from Heaven" and was written by the Jesuit John Shea.<sup>13</sup> Just begin when you're ready, Advocatus." So, reading it, Advocatus prayed:

"If you had stayed  
tightfisted in the sky  
and watched us thrash  
with all the patience of a pipe smoker,  
I would pray  
like a golden bullet  
aimed at your heart.  
But the story says  
you cried  
and so heavy was the tear  
you fell with it to earth  
where like a baritone in a bar  
it is never time to go home.  
So you move among us  
twisting every straight line  
into Picasso,  
stealing kisses from pinched lips,  
holding our hand in the dark.  
So now when I pray  
I sit and turn my mind

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<sup>13</sup> "Prayer To The God Who Fell From Heaven" in *The God Who Fell From Heaven ~ The Hour of the Unexpected, Encore Edition in One Volume*, John Shea (Thomas More Press), p. 75. Used with the kind permission of the author. If you liked the prayer that was used, check out his other titles. You can find him at his website: <http://www.jackshea.org/>

like a television knob  
 till you are there  
 with your large, open hands  
 spreading my life before me  
 like a Sunday tablecloth  
 and pulling up a chair yourself  
 for by now  
 the secret is out.  
 You are home."

When Advocatus had finished, a couple of people at another table stood up and moved to the front of the room. One had a 12-string guitar; another, a banjo. He recognized the 12-string player as Ludvic, one of the dock hands that had run Susan's pimp out of town. "This morning's opening song is one of Sidney Carter's called 'The Bell of Creation,'" Margaret announced. "Afterwards, the breakfast will be ready and we can all serve ourselves buffet style." The duo set the pace and the syncopation . . . up-tempo . . . almost like a sea chantey . . . and everybody sang:

"The Bell of Creation is ringing forever  
 In all of the things that are coming to be;  
 The Bell of Creation is ringing forever  
 And all of the while it is ringing in me.

*Chorus*

Swing, Bell, over the land  
 Swing, Bell, under the sea!  
 The Bell of Creation is ringing forever  
 And all of the while it is swinging in me.

In all of my loving, and all of my labor,  
 In all of the things that are coming to be,  
 In all of my loving, in all of my labor,  
 The Bell of creation is swinging in me.

*Chorus*

I look for the life that is living forever  
 In all of the things that are coming to be;  
 I look for the life that is living forever  
 And all of the while it is looking for me.

*Chorus*

I'll swing with the Bell that is swinging forever  
 In all of the things that are coming to be;

I'll swing with the Bell that is swinging forever  
And all of the while it is swinging in me."

*Chorus* <sup>14</sup>

As Advocatus queued up to get his food, he reflected on the odd worship service he was experiencing. Almost everything about it was different from what he was used to at his gothic cathedral of a church. There, the huge pipe organ and large choir celebrated the great hymns and anthems of the church . . . all of which had been familiar to him for almost half of his long life. There was pageantry . . . a certain majesty even . . . to the worship he was used to. The high-vaulted ceiling of the church's sanctuary seemed to speak of the *mysterium tremendum* of God's complete otherness.<sup>15</sup> The prayers implored God's presence. The robes and familiar, stylized movements of the worship leaders gave the worship he was used to a dignity and solemnity that spoke to him. And, if there was going to be any food served on Sunday mornings, it wouldn't be *during* the service!

In contrast to the people at Elsewhere, his own congregation was a homogeneous group of now-aging white people who had grown up attending the church. Although their numbers were reduced, and their voices were not as robust as when they were half their present age, they came back week after week. Even though a portion of the congregation's offerings underwrote mission projects in foreign countries, as well as a few in rural and inner-city locations in other parts of the United States, for the most part Advocatus' church was concerned with "hatchings, matchings, and dispatchings." Of late, there was an emphasis on the "dispatchings" as the aging saints of his church increasingly took up residence in the cemetery next to the church.

Seated at their tables, the people of Elsewhere ate their breakfast and talked with one another about a vast number of subjects: their children, their jobs, what the ever-gridlocked Congress wasn't doing, their plans for vacations. When the breakfast was over, some went from table to table collecting the empty plates and took them to the kitchen. A couple of others replenished coffee, tea, and fruit juices. When all of this was finished, Margaret nodded in Snark's direction and Snark began to address the group.

"Welcome to the first day after the Rapture. I guess we've been left behind!" he said, with a chuckle in his voice that was echoed from people seated at the tables. "Since Harold Camping has put this issue into the news, I'd like for us all to consider it this morning. The Book of Revelation is often called "The Apocalypse of John."

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<sup>14</sup> "The Bell of Creation" Words and Music: Sydney Carter © 1969 Stainer & Bell Ltd.  
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<sup>15</sup> See *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolph Otto (Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1958). Originally published in 1917, Otto described the holy as the *mysterium tremendum* or "fascinating yet terrifying mystery" which one accesses as a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling." His writings influenced, among others, Paul Tillich, Mircea Eliade, John Sanford and Richard Rohr.

"Apocalypse" means "revealing." So the first thing I'm curious about is what we think is being revealed in John's strange writings. Anybody have some ideas?"

Ludvic, the dock hand, was the first to stand at his table and speak. "Well, Snark, I'd say that what the Apocalypse of John reveals is just how crazy a lot of people are!" A few of the people at the tables started to hoot in agreement. Ludvic continued: "It seems to me people are going back to a book nearly 2000 years old and reading it like it's one of Nostradamus' prophecies about our own day. They find symbolism all over the place and are positive it must be pointing to something in our world. Like back when the Cold War was going strong: some folks thought that the book's references to the eagle and the bear doing battle were references to the United States and the Soviet Union!"

"If I want to waste my time and money on fortune-telling like that, I can go over to Madame Sylvia's on 14th Street, give her ten bucks and she'll read my palm or something. But a fat lot of good that'll do me. She can't predict the future and I don't think John could either, although I can read his book for free . . . so I guess he's at least a bargain! Just look at that Camping fellow: he gets people frothing at the mouth about the end of the world . . . cashing in their pensions . . . and says the Bible foretells it with mathematical certainty. I hope I don't sound too sacrilegious, but I think that's just a pile of crap!"

Ludvic sat down to laughter and applause. "Ludvic, we can always depend on you to keep us honest in your straightforward, earthy way!" said Margaret with appreciative good humor. "Bravo! What do the rest of you think?" Others began to talk with one another at their tables. Sometimes one table would enter into conversation with those at another table with great animation. After about ten minutes of this, Snark spoke again.

"In the history of Christianity, there have been a lot of folks who didn't think John's Apocalypse belonged in the agreed upon books of the Bible. Martin Luther didn't like the book and thought it just caused problems for believers. John Calvin may have shared something of Luther's opinion. So, Ludvic, you've got good company!" Ludvic beamed and received a few high fives from others at his table. Had he not been new to Elsewhere, Advocatus probably would have given Ludvic a high-five himself, for Advocatus tended to agree with Luther on this matter.

"But there may be another way to appreciate what John has to say. He was an early Christian who had ticked off the Roman's with his teaching and preaching. He was lucky they didn't execute him like they had Jesus and so many others. Instead, John was sentenced by the Roman authorities to live out the rest of his days in exile on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea. John seems to have been given to vivid dreams and maybe waking visions of some sort. In any case, he wanted to deliver an important message to seven churches in Asia Minor but had to figure out a way to get it to them.

"The Roman Emperor Domitian was in charge back then, and he was raising an entire zoo full of lions on a diet of Christians. Everywhere, Christians were being persecuted. Some of you know what that's like. Some of you here today emigrated here and ran into

a bunch of bigotry that put you down. You went into hiding, trying to blend in, even saying that you weren't from abroad at all. Something like that is what a bunch of the early Christians were tempted to do as well: to deny their faith, try to blend into the surrounding culture, not attract attention. And, of course, that would have meant defeat for their dream, and the new reality of life lived in a beloved community that had embraced them . . . and which they had embraced in return.

"John had heard of this and sent them his letter in response, basically telling them to hang tough. But what if John's messenger were to be stopped by a Roman centurion? If the centurion saw that the messenger carried words of hope and support to other Christians, it wouldn't go so well for the messenger . . . or for John either.

"So John, using the metaphors and slang of his day made references to Rome and what was happening in John's own time: to the persecutions, to Jesus and the church, but never calling them by direct, recognizable names. Any Roman centurion looking at John's scroll, would have concluded it was just more of the usual Jewish gibberish, and let the messenger go on his way."

Snark saw that he had the group's attention so he continued. "I was talking to Chuck the other day about this material and Chuck had an interesting take on John's writings. As many of you know, Chuck is also powerfully drawn to the teachings of the Buddha and hangs out a lot in the Wi-Fi center where he's doing some of the research for his book . . . a novel about global warming. It includes science fiction, science fact, a whole lot of wonderfully outrageous humor, and a number of goofy characters! Have I said too much, Chuck?"

Chuck was a tall, fit, white-haired fellow with a broad face and affable grin. He was enjoying his new vocation as a writer since his retirement from a career in information technology. He rose at his table and replied, "Not at all, Snark! Thanks, in fact, for plugging the book in advance! What I had said to Snark about John's apocalypse is based on what I'm doing with my novel.

"You see, once I finish my research I'll be setting up a web site where I'll publish the book - a chapter each week or so. Part of the fun will be getting my characters into a situation in each chapter. Then, in the next chapter, I'll have to see if and how I can get them back out . . . while still advancing the plot of the novel. So I have a loose sort of idea about how it will go, but nothing more specific than that. The characters will take on a life of their own and the story will go in directions I hadn't anticipated.

"But, in order to do this, I've had to write the last chapter of my novel early in the game. I've got to know how it's going to turn out in advance. Then I'm better able to get my characters into and out of their situations while moving toward the conclusion that only I know. There will be the usual links on the web site so people can navigate from chapter to chapter, etc. But there are no links to the last chapter, even though it's stored on the server with the rest of the website.

"So, using my experience as a metaphor, what if John's vision provided him with something like a link to how the whole Christian experience will turn out in the very long run . . . in the exceedingly indefinite, but nonetheless certain, future? What if John's vision sort of accesses the last chapter in the story that is otherwise known only to God.

"Then, using his code language, he writes to the seven churches something like the following: 'Hey, everyone! Listen up! I've had a vision of how our story ends. Right now it's not going well for us. We're winding up being fed to the lions for Christ's sake! But I've been to the mountaintop, as it were. I've been to the end of time and seen how our story ends! And it's a great ending! So what I want to tell you all is: Hang in there! *We win!*'"<sup>16</sup>

Chuck sat down to relative silence as everyone took in what he had said. "You know, Chuck," Ludvic said, breaking the silence, "I really, really like what you and Snark just said. I think I'm going to plow back through John's book and see if that hangs together. If so, wow! John's giving us some really good news. I mean, on nearly every hand, the mainline church seems to be dwindling . . . Christianity gets ignored . . . and understandably, for it's routinely confused with a caricature of it called 'The Religious Right.' Sometimes the press thinks that's the real thing.

"It can feel really lonely being a different kind of Christian: one who works to include the forgotten and to welcome and protect those who are ostracized . . . one who pays more attention to how one *is* rather than to what someone *thinks*. When some of us have tried to get some political action going . . . on things like immigration reform, or just getting the city to pick up our trash . . . well, the resistance we encounter is downright mind-numbing. So maybe there's something encouraging in John's book for me . . . and for the rest of us too. Thanks, Chuck!"

"Hhrrummph!" Advocatus thought to himself. "A fine metaphor, but not bloody likely. When it comes to people having visions, more often than not it's gas pains and not God that prompts them." As Advocatus continued to think in this way, he was aware of a discomfort in his gut . . . it might have been the scrambled eggs . . . but it felt more like anxiety. "The Biblical record is full of visions and dreams. Who am I to question the Bible? On the other hand, I've been doing that for centuries anyhow. I've even put the church's tradition right up there as an authority equal to the Bible. No, visions like John's too often provoke just more unfortunate . . . and even outright destructive . . . behavior like that of Harold Camping and his followers." As he returned to that thought, his tummy relaxed once more.

After the group had finished their conversations, Margaret offered an extemporaneous prayer that seemed to collect much of the conversation and concerns expressed around

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<sup>16</sup> *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible: Making Sense Out of Revelation*, Vernard Eller (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981). Chuck's idea sounds a lot like what Eller develops in this book. A creative writer and author of nearly two dozen books, Eller also published *The Mad Morality*, his exegesis of the Ten Commandments using cartoons from *Mad* magazine. Sadly, this Church of the Brethren scholar died in 2007, just three weeks shy of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

the room. She prayed that each of them would be given the gift of listening to their own deep self, and also to hear the spoken and unspoken pains and joys of others in the week ahead. She prayed for the courage to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with compassion through God's world in the coming days. Then, in unison, the group prayed aloud The Lord's Prayer.

Margaret then invited everyone to sing one of their favorite hymns as the closing song: "Spirit of God" by Sr. Miriam Therese Winter.<sup>17</sup> Ludvic got out his 12-string and Roger his banjo. All began to sing:

Spirit of God in the clear running water  
 Blowing to greatness the trees on the hill.  
 Spirit of God in the finger of morning,  
 Fill the earth, bring it to birth  
 And blow where you will.  
 Blow, blow, blow till I be  
 But breath of the Spirit blowing in me.

Down in the meadow the willows are moaning  
 Sheep in the pasture land cannot lie still.  
 Spirit of God, creation is groaning,  
 Fill the earth, bring it to birth  
 And blow where you will.  
 Blow, blow, blow till I be  
 But breath of the Spirit blowing in me.

I saw the scar of a year that lay dying  
 Heard the lament of a lone whippoorwill.  
 Spirit of God, see that cloud crying,  
 Fill the earth, bring it to birth  
 And blow where you will.  
 Blow, blow, blow till I be  
 But breath of the Spirit blowing in me.

Spirit of God, everyone's heart is lonely,  
 Watching and waiting and hungry until  
 Spirit of God, we long that you only  
 Fulfill the earth, bring it to birth  
 And blow where you will.  
 Blow, blow, blow till I be  
 But breath of the Spirit blowing in me.

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<sup>17</sup> "Spirit of God" by Sister Miriam Therese Winter, in the album *Joy Is Like The Rain*, (Medical Mission Sisters, Philadelphia, PA/ Vanguard Music Corporation, 1966). Used with the kind permission of Sister Miriam Therese Winter. The Medical Mission Sisters typically put Biblical stories and themes to music that is well-suited to Sister Miriam's lyrics. Often written as ballads, they are easily learned and sung.

Following the singing, everyone faced the front of the building while a couple of folks at a table went to the front door of Elsewhere and gave the "Welcome" mat a turn of 180°, so that upon leaving Elsewhere, its gathered people would be welcomed as they scattered back into the world beyond it.

After they had done this, Snark gave the blessing: "Go back into the many elsewherees of your lives beyond this place: God's presence is already there and will never abandon you; listen, speak, and act so that you may become that for which you have just prayed. Be open to the Spirit and restore the work of the Creator by being Christ to others. Amen!"

And that was it: that was this Sunday's worship in this strange "house church" called Elsewhere. Advocatus hardly knew what to make of it. It had none of the grandeur and drama of the worship he routinely led. Yet there was something very real about it. He missed the sense of God's otherness in this worship. But there was, he had to admit, a kind of intimacy here that . . . just possibly . . . was reminiscent of Jesus' saying "Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there I am in your midst."

Advocatus knew he wanted to talk to Snark about all this, but decided to wait until later in the day. As he felt a bit tired, he retreated to Susan's boudoir and lay down on her bed where, like the newly pregnant Mary, he pondered all these things in his heart. When he heard himself thinking *that* thought, he simultaneously laughed and farted. "I must be losing my mind, for sure! First I blurt out 'It's Higgs Boson!' in a church meeting. And now . . . well . . . what if it *is* Higgs Boson?"

And, with that thought, Advocatus was convulsed by another bout of gaseous laughter and drifted off to sleep. Shortly, he fell into a dream that began with his seeing, suspended in mid-air, some underlined words rendered in blue. He approached these words in order to see them more clearly. As he put out his hand to touch them, they disappeared.

Instantly he was transported to a huge banquet hall. All about him people who were black, white, brown, yellow and red were eating meals of their own particular ethnic foods. They were young and old, gay and straight. Some were obviously well to do; others clearly were amongst the poor. Each wore clothes native to their culture. While they all were speaking in their own separate languages and accents, they apparently were hearing each other as though they all spoke the same tongue. They talked earnestly while sharing their food generously with one another as they did. Someone put on some music, and many got up and began to dance. Every few minutes, loud peals of joyful, raucous laughter ricocheted about the room.

Advocatus was startled into wakefulness by the siren of a passing ambulance outside his window. Recalling what he had been dreaming, he thought about it for a moment. "Must've been the scrambled eggs I just had. Definitely. Nothing but gas pains."

## Dialogue 14 – The Charm of Fishing

It was later on that same Sunday, at about one o'clock, when Snark turned to Advocatus and, without attribution, made the following observation: "'The charm of fishing', Advocatus, 'is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive, but attainable: a perpetual series of occasions for hope.'"

They had set up some umbrella chairs under a weeping willow a few feet from the water's edge. It was beside a wide basin of the canal where the canal boats could execute a U-turn. They were fishing upstream from the city where the canal waters were considerably clearer and cleaner than they would become once they'd passed through it. Thanks to the myopic vision of the body politic and its leaders, a lot of foul runoff and debris regularly wound up in the canal, so that eating the fish caught downstream risked uncertain hazards.

"I believe it was the Scottish historian and writer John Buchan who said that, Snark" returned Advocatus with a wicked glint in his eye.

"Ah, you found me out! How do you know of him, Advocatus?"

"To live for a time close to great minds is the best kind of education,"" Advocatus replied. "Buchan said that, too. In fact that's what he told me on one occasion."

"I yield to your many years, more extensive education, and superb acquaintances," smiled Snark, feigning a bow to Advocatus.

"Buchan also told me, 'An atheist is a man who has no invisible means of support.' And that, I suppose, provides a good segue to considering this morning's worship service, Snark. It was . . . interesting."

"I was wondering what you made of our time together, Advocatus. It's different from what you're familiar with, I know."

"To say the least, Snark! Actually, I liked that song called *The Bell of Creation* by Sidney Carter . . . found myself tapping my foot and swaying slightly. I must say that at first I found the 12-string guitar and banjo jarring. Not quite a pipe organ, but I got caught up in the music nonetheless. And I liked the intimacy of the gathering, Snark. That's new to me. But to tell you the truth, I missed a sense of the expansiveness and majesty of God, of God's otherness. I don't think I could do with worship that didn't connect me to that. Not as a steady diet."

"I know that same feeling, Advocatus. Lots of us at Elsewhere go to larger churches on occasion to have that sort of worship experience. At other times, we'll go out into the hills at the winery where the light from the city doesn't contaminate the sky. We'll have worship there, by the light of lanterns or candles . . . and from stars that are so far away they may not even be shining anymore. That's a wonderful worship experience.

"Hey, Advocatus, you've got a bite!"

Advocatus gave his line a gentle pull, set the hook, and reeled in a nice perch. "First one of the day, Advocatus! Good for you! If we catch enough we'll have them for dinner with a salad . . . maybe some arugula, jicama, orange slices and corn with balsamic Dijon dressing. How's that sound?"

"Makes my mouth water, Snark. We'd better see to it that we catch some more," said Advocatus casting out his line again. His smile relaxed and, in a few moments, changed to something more somber . . . worried even. "Snark, there's something that puzzles me about the worship at Elsewhere. More than that, it worries me. I never heard Jesus mentioned at all. There was reference to God the Creator and to the Spirit. What happened to Jesus?"

Snark answered with a wry smile, "Advocatus, you're asking the same question Mary asked the angel at the empty tomb on the first Easter: 'What happened to Jesus?' I think you know what happened to him!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Snark. But that's not what I meant and you know it. What I want to know is how come your worship service didn't mention him once. At my church we even invite his presence as did the early disciples when they chanted 'Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!' The church I serve has prayers that at least end with 'in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.' My congregation would find it most strange if we didn't recite a creed like The Apostles' Creed that recounts what Jesus did. So, again Snark, where's Jesus in your worship?"

The tip of his rod vibrated and, after setting the hook, Snark pulled in a perch himself. "Looks like we might have that meal after all, Advocatus!" Snark didn't cast his line out now, but laid his rod down and looked at Advocatus.

"Advocatus, again I'll answer you like the angel answered Mary: Jesus is not in the tomb of a creed or a liturgy or even a church. No! He has burst the bonds of such contrivances and is let loose in the world. From a liturgical point of view, that's what the resurrection means, I think. Where was Jesus in our worship? Look around the room! Everyone there is trying . . . at least on their good days . . . to be their own version of Jesus in their everyday lives. They're trying to do the only thing Jesus ever asked his disciples to do: to pick up the burden of leaving an old, ego-bound, life behind and to follow him into Something Else and Something More . . . the name of which is Love and Justice and Compassion. Where is Jesus in our worship? Sitting at every table, Advocatus . . . sitting at every table."

Again, the sinker at the end of Snark's line traced a graceful arc over the canal, striking the water with a deep "ker-plop!" Slowly, the bait sank toward their hoped-for supper. "Snark, how am I supposed to get any R & R when you answer questions that way? My head feels like it's going to explode. Not a headache: more like a headstretch.

"I scarcely know what to make of what you said. "But let's take it one at a time. How about the lack of a creed? What's that about?"

"Advocatus, do you remember that 1972 song by Jim Croce called 'Time in a Bottle'? 'If I could put time in a bottle . . .'" Snark began to sing softly. "Geez, I wish he hadn't died so soon . . . such a wonderful poet and performer." Snark paused to clear his throat of some emotion. "Well, anyhow, it's a wonderful poetic image . . . but of course it's impossible. Advocatus, when Margaret was in her first year of nursing school, part of the hazing led by the seniors was to have the probationary nurses bring them a bottle of flatus. Those poor 'probies' didn't know what that was and each one was led on a hilarious wild goose chase all over the hospital. The amused hospital staff looked forward to this ritual every year. Advocatus . . . did you ever try to fart in a jar?"

"Snark! For the love of God, what are you going *on* about? I asked you about why you all don't use the Apostles' Creed or *something* that tells what Jesus did and you respond with this nonsense about bottling time and farts! Well, for your information, no . . . I never did and never would try to fart in a jar! What an absurd, sophomoric thing to do!"

"My point precisely, Advocatus. Why would *anyone* try to bottle up the wind? And yet that is what the Spirit is, is it not? Breath, wind, air, spirit. The Old and New Testaments use those words interchangeably. But a creed, Advocatus, is a bottle . . . a bottle of words. When we try to contain the Spirit in a creedal bottle it's about as absurd as trying to fart in a jar . . . speaking of wind. While the thought of you in your miter and robes, steadying yourself with your crosier while squatting over a jar is certainly repellent, Advocatus, it *is* interesting . . . and most amusing. Perhaps after a third or fourth glass of wine tonight you might try it?"

"Snark!" growled Advocatus, his face reddening.

"Okay, Advocatus. I hear you. I just think we ought to be a bit more humble when we theologize or make up creeds. It was T. S. Eliot, I think, who said that poets "make a raid on the inarticulate" when they write. That's appropriately humble. It expresses a certain self-awareness about futility of freezing into language something that's alive, flowing, mysterious, ever-changing, ever-surprising, breaking out of all bounds. At Elsewhere, we try to have due respect for the absurdity of such undertakings. We rather like the take of some early Christian mystics who believed that silence is the best theology."

"But it's even more than that, Advocatus. If you look at our creeds, what are they about? They're a brief, liturgical synopsis of theological battles that, in the past, sometimes literally cost people their lives. They represent a statement by the victors in such battles of what the "official" party line was to be . . . a statement that drew a line in the sand about who's in and who's out."

"Advocatus, I'm willing to bet you a lot that most of the people in the pews in your church have to mentally cross their fingers when they recite the creeds. And there are countless more who will never darken our doors lest they have to publicly sign-on to a

statement of things that are either incomprehensible to them, or to which they would never give their intellectual assent."

"That may be, Snark," replied the old man, "but the creeds are a necessary means of helping us to remember what's really important about Jesus. If we don't remind ourselves of that by their recitation, then we'll eventually forget. We'll become . . . well, I don't know what we'll become . . . but we won't be the church!"

"I respect your passion, Advocatus. Actually, we have already become something else . . . maybe the Rotary Club or the Republican Party at prayer. Seriously, Advocatus . . . the creeds miss the point entirely. Most of them say not one word about what Jesus *taught* about how we should actually live our lives . . . even though that's what he spent a whole lot of his last three years doing.<sup>18</sup> No! Our creeds, instead, tell of what Jesus purportedly did for our sake with regard to God: how he set us right with God. That's what the talk about his death on the cross is usually about, and it's what the creeds would have us remember. They would have us remember the church's theology *about* Jesus.

"The ancient creeds locate the human predicament as lying between people and God. But that is inadequate and misses the point! The problem is within people, between people, and between people and God! And it is to *each of those relationships* that Jesus directed his teachings: things like envy, harboring resentments, pride of place and prancing about trying to gain more status; things like taking advantage of widows and orphans and not caring for strangers and discriminating against others just because they are different. Those things are internal to us, exist among us, and put up barriers to God from the human side. That's what Jesus focused on; that's what got him killed; and that's what the creeds ignore!"

"Snark, did you bring a bottle of wine with our lunch? I could use a glass about now . . . and a second one for certain. Do you realize what you're saying? You're going down a very dangerous road. You're messing with the keystone in the arch again!"

"Sure, Advocatus. And I'll join you in a glass. As it happens, I have a nice Pinot Grigio we decanted last spring for our Passover celebration. Here, try a sip of *Oy Gevalt!* It goes really well with these slices of Havarti with dill that Margaret packed. And here are some crackers to go with it."

"*Oy Gevalt!*" Advocatus began as he took a sip of his wine. Isn't that a Yiddish term that expresses dismay? I think I heard once it was composed of words meaning 'ouch!' and 'woe.'"

"You've got the etymological origins of the Yiddish right, Advocatus," Snark replied. "But the wine label relates that 'Oy Gevalt!' was what the Hebrew at the head of the line going into the Red Sea during the Exodus exclaimed as its waters threatened to drown

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<sup>18</sup> See *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, Robin R. Meyers (Harper One, 2010).

him. It was only then that the waters were parted by Yahweh. Might be an apocryphal story, though. . . . Who can tell about these things!" he added after a pause.

Face it: life doesn't always go according to plan! Just ask Abu ben Schwartz, at the head of the queue on Egypt's beach at the Red Sea. Moses told him to step into the water. Up to his waist, the water hadn't parted. Abu turned and looked at Moses; who looked to God, and then back at Abu, telling him to proceed. Abu was then up to his shoulders. Again he looked to Moses and said, "Hey! It's not parting!" Moses consulted God and again urged Abu on, pleading for a little bit more faith on his part, already. Abu, now up to his nostrils, stopped. Same dialogue. Same response. "Keep walking, Abu!" yelled Moses, himself ready to plotz with fear. Abu then gave voice to what he knew would surely be his last words: "Oy, gevalt!" he screamed as he took his next step. Only then did the waters part! From this we learn two important lessons: when God says to go, you go; and to give us strength to obey, summon up an "Oy, gevalt!" Now that you've got your own bottle, enjoy! And Mazel Tov to the freedom God has given!



Grown in the highest, most fertile soils of Israel, the pinot noir grapes we started with were organically grown, gently crushed and received the utmost attention by the master vintners of Naked Toes Winery. The entire process was, of course, carefully supervised by the appropriate rabbis to ensure kosher standards were adhered to.

We then aged the wine for 7 years in olive wood casks to give this pinot grigio its smooth finish on the tongue. Every month they were given a quarter-turn – two turns when Purim came, for reasons yet unknown but fully supported by all of us at NTW. So, when we finally poured a glass for the rebbie, anticipating his stamp of approval, imagine our surprise when he rejected it! Oy, Gevalt!

Have a glass of it, anyhow!

**SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:** Contents are not Kosher for Passover. The consumption of this wine may result in a devastating plague of locusts for which neither CDC nor DHS has a remedy. On the other hand - and other than that - how bad could it be?

Advocatus smiled and, after the two men sipped their wine and enjoyed the food for a few more minutes, Snark continued.

"Advocatus, I'm quite aware that I'm pulling hard on a keystone. And I hope that when I do the arch comes down! But it's not an attempt on my part to destroy the Christian faith . . . as though that were even possible! My intent is, rather, to more clearly reveal it.

"Unintentionally, Advocatus, I think much of the Christian enterprise has missed Jesus altogether. Instead of *following* Jesus and teaching people what that means *and how to do it*, the church has taught people to *worship* Jesus. We have put Jesus himself up on a pedestal . . . some even claim he is God. John did that in his gospel. But John wrote sixty or more years after Jesus was executed. By then the oral and written traditions had morphed into exalting Jesus more and more.

"I think we need to appreciate, Advocatus, that Christian tradition *has always been* a living, dynamic, changing thing right from the start. If we take that fact seriously, I think we will want to be informed deeply by what others before us have said and done. But equally, *we will ourselves feel free to contribute to the evolution of this living thing we call 'tradition.'* We'll find our own words and ideas. And they will both build upon and diverge from what others before us have created.

"The earliest gospel we have is Mark's and in it Jesus never asked us to regard him as God and to worship him. I think the best reading is that he never claimed to be other than the human rabbi he was.

"But Jesus' followers were *transformed in his presence as they followed him*. So it was a universal human tendency they succumbed to in wanting to worship him, I think. It was the same with the Buddha and his followers: he told them not to worship him but to

follow him. Many didn't listen to him either. There's something in humanity . . . something not altogether admirable . . . that wants to worship its leaders.

"I think that when we put Jesus up there with God and worship him, we take ourselves off the hook. We say 'Well, Jesus could have compassion . . . Jesus could pray for his enemies . . . Jesus could do these fantastic things because he was, after all divine. And we're just mere humans.'

"When we do that we deny our heritage, *Advocatus*. We fail to realize, celebrate, and learn how to live into the reality that *we too are divine* . . . for that is what it means to be made in the image of God. We bear the *Imago Dei* within us, *Advocatus*. Jesus himself said that we would do greater things than he did.<sup>19</sup> And so we might . . . if we'd stop denying our kinship with him . . . if only we'd own that, we too could incarnate God. Is that not what it means to be the Body of Christ . . . the church . . . the New Being that Paul wrote about even before Mark lifted up a quill?

"My ancient friend, I have a keen sense that this world is like the runaway horse Robert Frost wrote about in his poem called 'Riders.'<sup>20</sup> In the poem, he likened humanity to riders of an unbridled, runaway horse. He said that even though we seem helpless to gain control of the runaway beast, "we have ideas yet that we haven't tried."

"*Advocatus*, G. K. Chesterton once said that the only problem with Christianity is that it's never been tried. The Christianity of the creeds represents more of a misunderstanding than a synopsis of the significance of Jesus. Unless our theologies call us to our own God-given greatness and challenge us to be who we *really* are . . . *and Jesus shows us what that looks like* . . . then I fear for this world that God loves so much.

"I think Jesus knew who we really are, and in calling us to follow him, hoped we would live into our true identities and thereby become compassionate as God is compassionate. *Advocatus*, I do want to pull the keystone out of the arch that blocks our view of that truth about who we are. I realize that for many that would be a disaster. *I recognize that we are all at different points in our journeys. But many of us hunger for something like what I am trying so hard to put into these feeble words of mine.* I want to help find the food that satisfies for those who share that hunger."

"Snark!" exclaimed *Advocatus*, pulling mightily on his rod which was now bending downward into an inverted 'U', "I'd like nothing better than to debate you . . . or even better, to push you into this damn canal . . . but I've got a monster on the end of my line! Quickly, pour me another glass of *Oy Gevalt!* . . . and save me enough for even one more!"

"That's the spirit, *Advocatus*! See! All you need to do to take another step toward what you fear the most! And remember: sometimes, *Advocatus*, you've just got to scream '*Oy Gevalt!*'"

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<sup>19</sup> John 14:12

<sup>20</sup> The poem can be read here: <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/robertfrost/12159>

## Dialogue 15 – The Harm of Fishing RSV

Advocatus was generally not one to accept unsolicited advice . . . particularly not from the likes of Snark. Nonetheless, the huge fish pulling mightily on the end of his line was clearly intent on heading straight for the deepest part of the canal. Not wishing to lose his catch, Advocatus did take a couple of steps forward, lost his balance and stumbled into the water, whereupon he reflexively shouted, "Sweet Jesus!"

He did not, at that moment, have the luxury of congratulating himself on employing this more Christocentric exclamation, clearly a rebellion against Snark's urging him to scream the Yiddish "Oy Gevalt!" Instinctively, he held onto the rod as though it was his only means of security . . . a security that it might have provided, had not a huge, bottom-seeking fish been attached to the far end of its line. The result was that Advocatus was pulled further off balance and, as the sides of the canal descended steeply, was now up to his armpits in the water. His robes quickly did their best to absorb the surrounding water, causing Advocatus to experience a certain sinking sensation.

"Advocatus!" Snark shouted with great alarm, "Let go of the rod! Let go of the rod!" Involuntarily, and despite his conscious convictions to the contrary, Advocatus did as he was commanded. Simultaneously, Snark plunged into the canal and got alongside of his floundering\* companion. "Stop thrashing, Advocatus! I'm going to help you get your robe off!" Again, Advocatus complied. With a few deft tugs on the sleeves, Snark freed the old man from the anchor of his robe, and the two of them made their way to the safety of the canal's grassy bank.

"Snark! The fish . . . the rod and reel . . . my robe . . . they're at the bottom of the canal! I've lost them all!" exclaimed Advocatus.

"Does your miter float, Advocatus?" queried Snark.

"I don't know. Why?" replied Advocatus rather absently, his gaze still fixed on the waters where he'd just nearly drowned.

"You don't know? When you've baptized a new Christian by total immersion surely your miter has fallen off!" Snark continued to tease. "Did it float?"

\* The anonymous author of the Dialogues used both "floundering" and "foundering" to describe Advocatus' dire situation in the canal. "Foundering" means "to sink beneath the surface of the waters." "Floundering" means "to struggle; to move with difficulty, as in mud . . . or, to behave awkwardly; make mistakes." It is a George W. Bush type of word, being a mash-up of "founder" and "blunder," sort of like his September 26, 2001 use of "misunderestimate." Then, of course, there was the time when he was discussing the decline of the French economy with British Prime Minister Tony Blair when he said: "The problem with the French is that they don't have a word for 'entrepreneur.'" But we digress. Since the anonymous author used both words in his multiple manuscripts, we have opted to go with "floundering" since this dialogue is, after all, about fishing. ~ *The Editors*

"Snark!" growled Advocatus, his face a mélange of relief, confusion, and exasperation. "You know good and well I only sprinkle or pour the water! I never totally immersed . . ." Advocatus reached for his miter and didn't find it on his head. "Oh no! It's gone too!" moaned the old man. "And it was my favorite summer-weight miter! It was rated SPF 50!" With that, Advocatus sat down hard upon the grass . . . a slump of dejection.

"Advocatus, I know you've always thought I was too optimistic, but I just can't help observing that at least you're alive. You nearly drowned a moment ago," said Snark, his voice betraying a genuine incredulity at the old man's reaction.

Snark's comment pulled Advocatus back into his more usual state of mind. "Oh . . . oh good grief, Snark. You pulled me out . . . I could have . . . Snark, I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened just now . . . If you hadn't jumped in . . ."

"It's okay, Advocatus. I'm glad that the rest of you finally *has* made it out of the canal! It's good to have you back."

"Thank you, Snark. I would have drowned if I'd held onto that fish. If you hadn't helped me, I'd be down at the canal's bottom along with it," replied Advocatus, smiling slightly at Snark with what appeared to be a tear in the corner of his eye. "Still, I wish I'd been able to bring that fish in. It was too big for me, I guess. I feel quite embarrassed to have been dragged into the canal by it. Please promise me you won't tell anyone about it, Snark! And also don't mention I lost my robe and miter. Okay?"

"No problem, Advocatus. Besides, your being dragged into the canal is nothing to be ashamed of. I don't think it was the fish that dragged you in anyhow."

"Well, of course it was the fish, Snark! What else could it have been?" asked Advocatus, his confusion beginning to surface again.

"Probably, Higgs Boson," replied Snark matter of factly. "Oh sure, it was more than likely an overgrown channel catfish or something like that on the end of your line; but I think Higgs was behind it ultimately."

"Snark, you're surely not going to theologize about my being pulled into the canal are you? Well, of course you are. You're a lunatic. All this talk of Higgs Boson! Lunatics will say and do anything. But just for the sake of argument . . . and understand, Snark, I'm humoring you now since you *did* save me a few minutes ago . . . for the sake of argument, what possible motive could your Third Person of the Theoretical Trinity have for causing me to lose your rod and reel and my robe . . . and, oh yes . . . my miter too? Not to mention nearly my life?"

"Well, Advocatus," Snark replied, "someone once said that the only way to find a new life is to lose the old one first.<sup>21</sup> You didn't lose your physical life, and for that we can both be glad. But you did lose the trappings of your office: your robe . . . your miter. You look sort of like a very much older, somewhat taller, but equally soggy version of yours truly! If you're not careful, people will begin saying to you, 'Gee, you don't look like a minister.' Or a saint. Or a prelate. That's when the fun begins, Advocatus!"

"Snark, pour me another glass of that wine of yours while we talk. I'm beginning to get the shivers as I dry out here."

"Okay, Advocatus, but just one . . . two glasses more, tops . . . or else you'll need to dry out in another way entirely!" Snark poured another glass of *Oy Gevalt!* for the two of them. After taking a sip of wine, it was Advocatus who spoke next.

"Snark, what did you mean 'that's when the fun begins'?"

"Well, Advocatus, you know this better than I, since you were there. Early on, women in religious orders dressed in the manner of the women they were trying to help: the widows in their black mourning dresses. Their black habits helped them blend in and no one could tell them from the people they served. They were incognito. But when widows no longer dressed that way, these sisters kept on wearing their black garb. Society changed but they didn't. The camouflage apparel that had initially helped them to go about their work unnoticed by others became an identifying uniform that set them apart from everyone else. Their habits then called attention to them as 'holy' women.

"I hope you won't take this the wrong way, Advocatus, but I think Higgs Boson was just helping you to become a little more old-fashioned in the very best sense imaginable: now you look like the rumpled, humid rest of us! No one would suspect you are who you are when they look at you now! And when you go about with your crosier, they'll just think, 'Wow! Look at that old guy with the cool walking stick! Wish I had one like that! That's when the fun begins!'"

"I take your point, Snark. But look here, my robes and miter are a sign of my office. People need examples to look up to; they need authority figures they can trust. I certainly have had my lapses, but on my good days, I'd like to think that's who and what I am. In a world where heroes keep falling off their pedestals, even in the church . . . doping scandals, extramarital affairs, hacking into other people's emails, child and substance abuse . . . in such a world it's good to find an authority that's not like that. That's why I need the robe and miter. It identifies me as an authority. Hopefully, I'll be worthy of their trust."

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<sup>21</sup> *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Richard Rohr (Jossey-Bass, 2011). This book has been mentioned already, and it is a splendid, inspiring, and practical meditation on this paraphrase of one of Jesus' central teachings.

"Advocatus, I like your good intentions. I really do! And I know people want to find a worthy authority to look up to. But that's really part of the problem, I think. It's part of what you like to call our Original Sin, Advocatus."

"What! My wanting to be a good authority?" demanded Advocatus.

"No, no, Advocatus. That's not what I meant . . . although that *could* become an aspect of it. Our original sin is to forget who and whose we are. It is to deny or forget that, behind the façade of our own parochial little egos, we are each and all of us divine. Original Sin is the refusal to grow up into that. Original Sin is projecting our divinity onto certain others and having *them* bear the burden of living that out for us. And, of course, those whom we thus empower, we take even more delight in destroying. Their attempts at incarnating the expansive, divine light judges our ego's narrow darkness. Rather than our shining, we extinguish their brilliance.

"When we parade our authority before others, we invite them to continue to be like little children needing someone powerful . . . like a parent . . . to look up to. No, Advocatus, you'll make a more faithful witness without your robe and miter."

Advocatus sat quietly and took several more sips of *Oy Gevalt!* before responding. "Snark, while much of what you say makes sense, I believe this is yet another example of your somewhat adolescent . . . nay, protest-ant . . . rebellion against authority. Without authorities the world would descend into chaos. We need the police; we need parents; we need lawyers; we need the government; we need the church. Authorities are all that stand between civilization and chaos. What we need are for all these authorities to be good, fair, and decent people. Then it all works. I need my miter and my robes."

"As I recall, Advocatus, Jesus' robe was of simple homespun. Picking him out of a large crowd would have been harder than playing 'Where's Waldo?' He looked like nearly everyone else then: dark hair, brown eyes, Middle Eastern hooked nose, dark complexion, long hair and full beard. And for the record, yes, he crapped in the woods. His authority lay in his lived-out commitments to a different way of life . . . what he called the Kingdom.

"His authority emerged as he lived out the same divine nature you and I share with him. People are at their best when they don't look up to authorities but, instead, assume the authority that comes from the authentic, unique incarnation of who they most essentially *are*. The role of so-called authorities like you and me is to point them to that task . . . the task of letting the God-given gift of their own light truly shine. With all due respect, Advocatus, your robe and miter get in the way."

"Snark, your talking this way about Jesus' nature and our own is treading on very thin ice. I fear you're going to make Jesus into just a regular Joe like anyone else and forget how special and unique he was and is. After all, he's the Son of God, you know!"

"The same claim was made of all the Caesars of ancient Rome. 'King of Kings', 'Son of God' . . . all those titles. And all for what, Advocatus? So that others would follow and obey the Caesar. *And when the first followers of Jesus wanted others to follow him, they applied the same phrases to Jesus.* Just as the Romans worshipped the Caesar, some of the early Christians eventually began to worship Jesus. Poor Jesus! He just claimed to be someone who was worthy of being followed and invited us to do just that! We're back again at that same point, Advocatus.

"I grant you that, just as St. Paul said, God was surely working through Jesus, the guy who came from a little backwater place called Nazareth.<sup>22</sup> And he most certainly is worthy of being followed . . . imitated even. But what the church has too often forgotten is that God would work through *us* just as much as he did through Jesus. Again, Jesus himself is claimed to have said that his followers would do greater things than he did.

"So I think we need to keep on following his lead and seek to learn how to do what he did: *how* to forgive, *how* to heal, *how* to speak truth to power, *how* to teach, *how* to show compassion, *how* to hold the world and each other lovingly. The *how* of what Jesus did has everything to do with his relationship to God. If our relationship to God is as Jesus' was, then perhaps we will do what he did!"

"Snark," interrupted Advocatus, "Stop! You've filled my head too full with your novel ideas. I've nearly drowned in the water and now I'm drowning in your ideas. The afternoon is late and we've caught enough fish for a good meal back at Elsewhere. How about we gather up our gear and go back? Maybe I can think up *some* sort of explanation for why I'm not wearing my robe and miter.

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<sup>22</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19

## Dialogue 16 - Welcome to the Club RSV

Advocatus searched through the clothing he had packed for his stay at Elsewhere and put on one of the two sport shirts he'd brought. He rarely left his house dressed so casually, so it was with a substantial amount of discomfort that he walked down the stairs to Elsewhere where Margaret was preparing the fish he and Snark had caught.

"There you are, Advocatus!" Margaret's liltingly warm greeting met his anxiety and calmed it some. Still, though, he cast a fretful glance at the rest of Elsewhere's room, scanning for people who would react negatively to seeing him out of uniform.

Finding the place empty save for Margaret and Snark, the relieved Advocatus simply responded with a quiet "Hi, Margaret. Yep, here I am."

Snark looked up from the Sunday paper he'd been reading at one of the tables and welcomed the old man. "Hi, Advocatus! It sure felt good to get cleaned up, didn't it! You look refreshed. All relaxed and better now?"

"Yeah, it was good, but I'm not relaxed, Snark. I feel . . . well . . . I feel uncomfortably naked. I'm not used to dressing casually when others are about . . . and please don't remind me of the nuns' habits again. I just feel awkward and embarrassed."

"Welcome to the club, Advocatus! I'm a charter member. Pull up a chair. Margaret told me she doesn't need any help just now with dinner."

"Just as well, Snark. I'm pooped! It's been quite a day," replied the old man, clutching his crosier and lowering himself into a chair opposite Snark. "So, Snark, you're a charter member of the Awkward and Embarrassed Club?"

"You bet, Advocatus. I'm a clubber alright. I come by it naturally . . . being as how I'm a Talipson."

"And here, all along, I thought you were a Methodist! What's a talipson, Snark?"

"Talipson, Advocatus. That's my name. Gregory Talipson. But you can still call me 'Snark' . . . in fact *please do!*"

"You know, Snark, in all these years I don't think I ever knew that. I've never heard the name 'Talipson' before. What's its derivation?"

"Many hundreds of years ago, Advocatus, my ancestors lived in Turkey. Their name was Talip. The Arabic word 'talib' is probably the original spelling. The family was Jewish. They migrated into Greece and then found their way up into Switzerland. In the 1740's they came to this country, so I'm told."

"Interesting, Snark. I imagine that your Jewish heritage no doubt informs your rather low Christology," replied Advocatus with a smile that was as genuine as was his concern for Snark's falling so far short of orthodoxy. "Does 'talip' or 'talib' have a meaning that you know of?"

"There are several meanings to it, Advocatus. One dictionary says it can mean 'to have an earnest desire, wish, or longing, as for something high and good, not yet attained.' So it's often used to describe a person who seeks or aspires to knowledge of God. Such a person would be called a Talip in Turkish or a Talib in Arabic."

"Talib!" exclaimed Advocatus. You mean as in 'Taliban'?"

"I'm afraid so, Advocatus. But please don't confuse me with the Taliban currently in Afghanistan! Yes, their name means "students" or "seekers" just as mine, but their fundamentalist approach to Islam leads them down the path toward division, repression, and violence as assuredly as is the case with Jewish and Christian fundamentalists. Movements seeking political change often follow the same well-trodden path and that can lead to similar results. The Tea Party in our day and The Weathermen in 1969 are each examples of groups characterized by fundamentalist approaches to social change.

"There are other negative meanings of my name, I'm afraid. Some medical dictionaries define 'talip' as 'a non-traumatic, usually congenital, twisting defect.' It shows up as a clubfoot, for example. Told you I was a 'clubber'!"

"Goodness, Snark, your name certainly has a rather checkered provenance! No wonder most folks just know you by 'Snark.' And it's appropriately descriptive of you as well!"

Snark laughed and said, "Advocatus, I hope you'll also think of more positive examples of my name. Like Talip Ozkan, the Turkish folk music artist whose mastery of the saz was unmatched. He was from the beautiful modern city of Izmir, whose modern boundaries include the Biblical towns of Smyrna and Ephesus. Some of Ozkan's pieces remind me of the dervishes whirling in their ecstatic trance dance of union with the divine. Musically, he seems to me to have been just the sort of seeker his first name implies. Check him out on You Tube, Advocatus.<sup>23</sup> Although he died in 2010, his music lives on.

"Our names are . . . appropriately, I think . . . like we are ourselves, Advocatus: an exceedingly mixed bag! If you go online and enter 'talip' into a Turkish to English translator, it will return the English word 'suitor.' If you enter 'pretender' into an English to Turkish translator, it will return the Turkish word 'talip.' How cool is that, Advocatus, for what suitor doesn't pretend just a little bit as he woos his beloved! You know . . . he pads his résumé, hoping for a favorable response!"

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<sup>23</sup> To watch and listen to Talip Ozkan play the saz, go to the following address:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGbCu7qmRNE&feature=related>

"It's the same when we pursue God and seek to know God: we pretend a lot. Nowhere, probably, do we pretend quite so much as we do in our churches. Sometimes we gussy ourselves up like the Pharisee in front of the altar who thanked God that he was not like other men! And, of course, we often fool others . . . even ourselves . . . by our pretending. But we don't fool God. God sees us for who we really are . . . behind our masks and fig leaves . . . stripped of our pretense."

"Ahhh! I see where you're going, Snark! You've talked of this before. It's like Adam in the Garden of Eden: we're afraid of being known for who we are, lest we be judged. So we put on our fig leaves and hide . . . or pretend. Is that what you're saying?"

"Quite so! It's our human condition: we are lonely and long to be known; yet we are incredibly afraid to be, lest we be rejected by the one who knows us. Fortunately for us, though, there's good news . . ."

"And I think I know what it is, Snark! It's found everywhere in the Biblical record, but I'm thinking of what the angels said . . . more or less . . . to the shepherds when Jesus was born: "Don't be afraid! Come as you are!"

"You got it, Advocatus!" said Snark, almost levitating out of his chair with excitement that the old man was putting it all together. "We don't have to pretend around God . . . and we shouldn't have to pretend around those who are trying to live in God's spirit either! 'Don't be afraid: come as you are!' That's the gospel . . . the good news . . . the divine response to our human condition. That's what, in our informality, we try to live out here at Elsewhere . . . however imperfectly.

"As you no doubt remember, Advocatus, in the High Middle Ages, people often expressed their spiritual hunger as the desire for a savior. They sought someone to save them from their sins so they could go to heaven. But times change, don't they? People in our day, when they feel free to phrase the matter in their own words, probably express their spiritual longings not so much as the search for a savior as the hunger for a gracious community. Well, Jesus shows us what being a gracious host looks like. Think of the relief it would be if we didn't have to pretend! In a gracious community, we could give up trying to keep up with the Joneses; our self-esteem would no longer be in hock to the opinions of others; and we could get about the task of human evolution."

"I was with you until you said, 'human evolution', Snark. What do you mean?"

"It was Father Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>24</sup> Advocatus, who said that for the human race to continue, it would need to continue evolving. As a Jesuit paleontologist, he said that such evolution wouldn't be reflected in our bone structures but in our having a new consciousness . . . perhaps something like what Matthew Fox calls the 'Christ consciousness' or what St. Paul called 'the mind of Christ.' If we would stop wasting our energy holding up our self-protective fig leaves, we could evolve into this new kind of

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<sup>24</sup> See *The Phenomenon of Man*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Harper Perennial Modern Classics; 1 edition - 2008).

self-and-other awareness. Teilhard was right, I think. We all either learn to love, or we all of us die as a human community."

"Thanks, Snark. I take your meaning, and, in the main, I agree with you. But, my, we DO get going, Snark! All this began with your saying you were a charter member of the Awkward and Embarrassed Club . . . and now look where we are!"

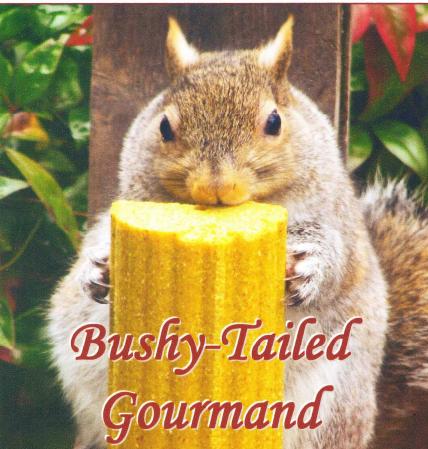
"Yeah!" laughed Snark. "But what else would you expect from the twisted son of a pretender who seeks to know God?"

"Hey, you two gassers! I hope you're at a stopping point because supper is ready!" called Margaret from outside the kitchen. Snark and Advocatus got up, helped Margaret lift the food, and they all sat down to eat. Margaret offered a brief thanksgiving over the food:

"Holy One! Thank you for this food we have before us, as well as for those we have beside us. As we eat these fish that have lived beneath the surface of the water, may we know Your Presence beneath the surface of our lives! May we be nourished by your Presence and one another . . . and inspired toward having the courage to love! Amen."

After two 'Amen's were given in response, Margaret said, "I overheard some of your conversation just now, so I uncorked a bottle of *Bushy-Tailed Gourmand*. It's a nice, light, white wine and the label says that it pairs well with life's complexities and imponderables . . . so it ought to go well with the likes of you two!" Margaret gave in to a delightful giggle and poured three glasses. After they passed the salad bowl and the platter of fish around, Margaret continued, "Advocatus, I notice that you're dressed much more casually tonight! Tell me, where is your robe and miter?"

*Bushy-Tailed Gourmand* gets its name from the little fellow on our label. The Eastern Grey Squirrel is remarkable for its agility, intelligence, ingenuity and persistence. In teams of two or three, it exhibits behaviors reminiscent of the Marx Brothers or Monty Python in their most outrageous movies: absurd, counter-cultural, hilarious. True gourmands, they are quite happy feasting on last fall's acorns, though they prefer all sorts of the ineptly named "bird seeds." They can also be quite destructive, chewing through a few dollars worth of automotive plastic or wiring insulation, resulting in repairs costing thousands. Car owners are not amused. The squirrels are in their cross-hairs. So buy a number of bottles: while there is still time!



*Bushy-Tailed Gourmand*, for whenever you have a groaning board of pot luck contributions. Equally at home with Mac-n-Cheese, Caribbean Crab Cakes Benedict, Caviar d'Aubergine, Boeuf Bourguignon, or the ever-popular Lutefisk Soufflé der Fricka, it also pairs nicely with, Indiana delicacies such as Tangerine Jell-o with Marshmallow Peanuts. Pour a glass when ever you face an abundance of confusion and complexity: such as whether the words "anal" and "retentive" should be hyphen-ated (like this); or whether, in fact, OCD should be renamed CDO so as to put the letters in the correct order. *Bushy-Tailed Gourmand*: for all of life's groaning imponderables!

"I forget, Margaret," the old man answered, the slightest hint of playfulness forming in the lines radiating from the corners of his eyes.

"You forget where they are?" asked the surprised Margaret.

"No, Margaret. I forget sometimes the things I need to remember."

"Okaaaaaay . . ." drawled Margaret, casting a concerned look in Snark's direction. "But so do I. So does Snark. Welcome also to the Those Who Forget to Remember Club! But what did you forget today on account of which you are without your robe and miter?"

"Margaret, let me answer you this way. The first thing I forgot was that, when an enormous but invisible fish bit my hook and started to pull me into the water, I should have let go of the rod and reel! Instead, I foolishly tried to control that fish and exert my mastery over it. I wanted so much to possess it, to have bragging rights, and provide us all with a true feast. But, like Jacob wrestling with the stranger, I lost the battle . . . and nearly my life! And I suspect there may be a parable or a sermon in all that!"

"Anyhow, Snark called for me to let go of the rod and reel. And I did. But it was too late. For you see, Margaret, the second thing I forgot was that my mostly cotton robe could absorb 25 times its weight in water. By the time I let go of the rod and reel, I was being pulled under by the weight of my robe. Had not Snark jumped in to help me out of it, I wouldn't be here to enjoy your company." As he said that, Advocatus, reached out and gave Snark an affectionate and appreciative tap on his shoulder. "On account of my forgetfulness, my robe and miter are at the bottom of the canal!"

"Good heavens, Advocatus!" exclaimed Margaret. "What a harrowing experience you had!" Margaret turned to Snark and gave him a hug. "I'm so glad you got Advocatus out . . . and that you're okay and here with me too!" Tears formed in Margaret's eyes and, after she blotted them on her napkin, Snark gave her a long, reassuring hug and grin.

"There's one more thing I forgot," said Advocatus. "And it's huge: I . . . of all people . . . I forgot the good news. I'm ashamed to admit that. But I did. I forgot those wonderful words of the humorist Abner Dean in his book *Wake Me When It's Over*: 'Remember the word, the one from the manger? It means only this . . . you can dance with a stranger.' I forgot that it would be okay . . . maybe even better by your lights Snark . . . for me to dispense with the robe and miter while I'm here at Elsewhere. That I can risk just being who I am . . . forgetful warts and all . . . that it's okay to come out of hiding, drop any pretense and just . . . just be. So I'm not going to go home and fetch replacements. I'll just be . . . casual . . . and therefore a bit awkward and embarrassed. But, *Mrs. Talipson*, I imagine that it will be okay with you as well if I succeed in forgetting to pretend!"

"Now . . . for God's sake and ours . . . let's eat!"

## Dialogue 17 – Show Me Your Naked Toes!

The morning dawned pleasantly warm for a late spring day, and the forecast indicated blue skies and moderate temperatures throughout the region. Margaret, Snark and Advocatus sat around the table finishing up their early breakfast when Snark began, "Advocatus, I'm thinking that a somewhat more laid back schedule might be in order today. Yesterday was, after all, rather more chock full of excitement than either of us had anticipated!"

"I couldn't agree more, Snark," said Advocatus, reaching for another piece of toast. "I wonder, since it's so nice outside, if a trip to your winery would be in order? I've never seen it, you know."

"Sounds like a winner to me!" said Snark. "I've cleared my schedule of appointments this week so we can be together, Advocatus. Margaret, can you join us?"

"I'd love to, Snark, but I promised some of the staff I'd meet with them later on and orient a couple of new folks who want to participate as servers and greeters. One of them writes poetry on occasion and he'd like to give some readings this summer. So I'm afraid I'll be tied up. But I've got time to pack you two a picnic lunch if you want. It won't take me but a moment."

"I'll miss you, Margaret, but the picnic sounds good. If you can, it would be nice if you included some cheese and crackers. I'm not sure we have any on hand out at the winery. We should be back in plenty of time to help you set up for the evening crowd," replied Snark while giving Margaret a hug that she leaned into with pleasure.

Naked Toes Winery is about a 45 minute drive west and slightly north of the city up into the rolling hills from whose heights the land quickly falls away to a vast flood plain. Although the most direct route would have taken them through the city and the immediate environs of Advocatus' church, Snark made sure to drive far west of there, taking the more scenic route. "No sense risking church responsibilities intruding on his week of rest and recuperation," Snark mused to himself, a broad smile spreading across his face as he contemplated the experiences he and Advocatus were having. They were certainly not what most folks would include on a list of restful and restorative activities.

There is, however, some debate amongst scholars on this point. Some psychologists maintain that a certain level of stress, providing it is of a different sort than what one is used to day in and day out, makes for a more effective use of vacation time. Others disagree, saying that wasting away in Margaritaville . . . or the equivalent thereof . . . is, indeed, more conducive to rest and recuperation.

Actually, the sentence with which the foregoing paragraph began is itself superfluous. For human beings can and do argue about everything. Even though human beings have acquired an immense knowledge . . . from aardvarks to zebras, from the singularity of the Big Bang to the single-celled creatures illuminating the waters around parts of Puerto

Rico . . . still, this knowledge is, as St. Paul once said, "imperfect," as though we see things "through a darkened glass." As we earlier learned, modern physicists are only adding to the darkened nature of that glass. Now we know that, at best, we know information about only 5% of what's "out there" in the universe. Of Dark Energy, Dark Matter, and Higgs Boson, almost nothing is known.

Absent the ability to know significantly more, people argue about whatever little shards of factoids and opinions they *do* possess, assuming all along that perhaps that's what their brains are for. (An example would be the last sentence, which ends with a preposition . . . and whether that is the kind of nonsense up with which they should put. Or not.)

"Tell me something about the winery, Snark," said Advocatus while he adjusted his seat to give his legs some room to stretch. I've been to wineries before . . . but it was so very long ago that the Brothers crushed the grapes by hand. Actually, I should say 'by foot' for they trod round and round in the wooden vats until nary a grape escaped with its hide intact. Sort of reminds me of my being in the canal!" he added with a chuckle.

"Advocatus, you never cease to amaze me! I didn't know you knew about winemaking," returned Snark, stealing a quick glance in Advocatus' direction, though not for long as the road they were on twisted around the monadnocks like a snake.

"Glad I can amaze you, Snark. It's good for you to be amazed," Advocatus teased with a smile broadening on his face. "Later on, of course, monks like Dom Pérignon insisted on using presses so that the skins wouldn't get so macerated. Péri was a guy I liked very much. He had a good head on his shoulders and cared a lot for his fellow monks. Not a few of them had been injured when the white wines began a second fermentation in the hotter months. If they didn't blow their corks first, they'd explode, sending shards of bottle glass careening into other bottles in a sort of chain reaction. The result was, literally, a bloody mess. So, Péri insisted on using only the red Pinot Noir grapes, since they were less likely to undergo a spontaneous second fermentation."

"And you called him 'Péri'?" asked the startled and amused Snark as he downshifted midway up a steep incline.

"Oh, sure, Snark. We were on a first name basis."

"I thought his first name was 'Dom.'"

"Not actually, Snark. It wasn't short for 'Dominic.' 'Dom' was more his title. It means 'lord.' Nope, I called him 'Péri' and he seemed to like it."

"And by what first name did he call you, Advocatus," asked Snark, feeling a bit of excitement that he might learn more about the old man's identity.

"Later, Snark. For now, tell me if you will about Naked Toes Winery."

After a short pause that was filled with just a tinge of disappointment, Snark replied.

"Well, Advocatus, we're not a huge operation. We sit on about 25 acres. We've got room for cultivating a number of varietals like Pinot Noir, Cabernet, Merlot, Shiraz, and Pinot Grigio. Next year we might try some white Muscatel also. Like your old friend, we lean toward the reds a lot. We get long summer days for ripening the grapes on our southeast-facing slopes, and in the evening fog often rolls in off the water. The grapes like that moisture. These factors, combined with the limestone-rich topsoil that drains well, means that it's a pretty good spot for grape growing in this part of the world."

"Margaret and I decided we wanted to integrate some of our other interests with Naked Toes. So we've partnered with some immigrant assistance organizations and have hired some immigrants who are new to the area. They help with the grape cultivation and maintenance around the winery. Since they're here throughout the summer, we work with the schools and have high school students with an interest in language and teaching come out to assist these folks in learning English. In return, the students often get help from native speakers learning the language and culture they're studying."

"We're also interested in being as environmentally friendly as we can. To that end, we've set up a wind-turbine on top of the ridge that generates about 1800 watts. Even if the wind is just 2.5 mph it still produces some. It doesn't supply all the energy we need, but it helps. Perhaps more importantly, its presence generates useful conversations about the environment. Our hope is that others might become interested and put wind technology to work on a larger scale."

"Very clever of you, Snark!" said Advocatus with some enthusiasm. "Do you give tours to the public as well?"

"Sure. We open up the winery for tours, though only on weekends until June comes. We give tastings along with some cheese, crackers and sandwiches. People like to come up here for a picnic and we encourage them to do so whether they buy any wine or not. We even have an old wooden vat that we put unusable grapes in and let the folks mash the grapes up with their feet. The kids, especially, like that."

"I think I could go for that too, Snark!" said Advocatus to a surprised Snark. "Do you suppose that would be possible today?"

"Well, I don't know, Advocatus. It's a bit early in the year . . . but maybe. You in a wine vat . . . now that's a sight I think I'd like to see!"

They rode alongside a narrow, half-mile-long lake for a few minutes. Then the road started going steadily upward, twisting and turning its way until, up ahead, they could see the sign rendered in Arts and Crafts style letters: "Naked Toes Winery." In smaller type, centered beneath it were the words: "Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground. ~ Exodus 3:5"

## Dialogue 18 – A Taste of Transformation

"Here we are, Advocatus. Welcome to Naked Toes Winery!"

"So this is it! I'm anxious for a tour and a wine tasting, Snark. But what's with the sign? As I recall, God gave that command about removing shoes to Moses when He spoke to him out of that mysterious burning bush that was not consumed. Surely I don't have to go barefoot here! Or do I?"

"No, indeed!" laughed Snark, stepping out of the car fully shod himself. "But we thought it would be a good thing to put under our sign. It expresses our reverence for life . . . our respect for the environment . . . our stewardship-sense that all of life is sacred. The poet Elizabeth Browning said it best, Advocatus:

'Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.'<sup>25</sup>

"We pick our share of berries and grapes here, Advocatus . . . but we always want to do so mindful that we are the recipients of a precious gift . . . and consequently, that we have a sacred obligation to preserve it even as we enjoy it.

"'Taking off our shoes' is a fine metaphor. Literal understandings often commit the offense of murdering meaning. Of course, if you want to stomp some grapes later on, taking off your shoes would be a splendid idea!"

"I should have known, Snark! Everything's a metaphor for you! But it's a beautiful perspective you have and I share it . . . at least on my good days! I guess that's how you came up with the name 'Naked Toes'?"

"That's right, Advocatus; and 'Barefoot' was a name already taken."<sup>26</sup>

"Well, after all these years I'm glad to know the story and also glad to be here. But tell me, Snark, of all the ventures you and Margaret might have gotten into beyond Elsewhere, why wine?"

"Ahh! Are you ready for another metaphor, Advocatus, or have I already worn you out?"

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<sup>25</sup> This verse is but a tiny piece of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "novel in a poem form": *Aurora Leigh*. It is one of the longest poems in the English language and is a largely autobiographical novel in verse.

<sup>26</sup> Barefoot Wineries is located in Modesto, California. They produce very good, low-cost wines and donate a percentage of their profits to a number of worthy causes worldwide. You can learn more at: [www.BarefootWines.com](http://www.BarefootWines.com)

"Lay on, MacDuff, and damned be him that first cries, 'Hold! Enough!'" said Advocatus with a dramatic flourish.

"I must say that you're in rare form today, Advocatus! You must have had a good night's sleep. If I didn't know better, I'd say you've already been into the wine!"

"Sober as a Methodist, Snark! Hmmmm . . . better make that a Southern Baptist . . . hrrumph! . . . that won't do either. A Methodist and a Baptist friend ran into each other in a liquor store, but neither would acknowledge the other's presence. I'm sober, Snark. Got a breathalyzer?!"

"You sound a bit manic, Advocatus! You're not bi-polar, are you?" asked Snark with both genuine concern and genuine . . . well . . . snarkiness.

"Cut the crap, Snark! I'm ready for your next metaphor. But, for the love of God, if not for the love of me, keep it brief if you would."

"Well, I love God . . . and I'm growing rather fond of you despite myself, Advocatus . . . but me being brief is, again, like dehydrated water. But I'll try.

"The reason, I suppose, that Margaret and I thought of getting into wine production is that wine is a superlative metaphor for transformation. And transformation is what Christianity is all about: new life . . . being born all over again . . . but not just as individuals. That's been the usual emphasis of most evangelical Christians. Some of us insist that being born again . . . transformed . . . includes the institutions of society . . . economics, politics, the military, education, and yes, the church . . . individuals and institutions both being changed from within and without until each supports the agenda of peace through justice . . . of equity and forgiveness . . . of hospitality . . . of challenge and support for each and all . . . and particularly the marginalized. Transformation is the agenda. Wine is its metaphor.

"I suppose you know the process by which grape juice is transformed so that it becomes wine, Advocatus?"

"Well, Snark, I've never had a substantial hand in its production but yes, I know something of it. As I recall, it typically goes something like this: the grapes are picked early in the morning so as to avoid spoilage. They're quickly taken to the wine press, washed and doused with sulfites to kill unwanted yeasts and bacteria. Then, after the stems are removed, the juice is squeezed from them. But you have to take care not to mash the seeds lest too many tannins be introduced. And if you're making red wines, the skins are left in with the juice for a few days. They give it both flavor and color.

"Then . . . let's see . . . oh, yes: the skins are removed and a bit more sulfur dioxide is added to kill off any remaining, unwanted, naturally occurring yeasts and bacteria. All of this is then placed in fermenting vats . . . when I had a hand in the process with Péri, oak barrels were sometimes used to lend a further flavor. . . but today sometimes stainless

steel vats are used, I've been told. Yeast is then added and the excess air is removed from the vat. That helps insure that the grapes don't oxidize. It also eliminates the further growth of bacteria.

"Then . . . let's see . . . oh, yes. After a couple of weeks . . . maybe a month . . . the fermentation automatically stops when the alcohol level reaches 12 - 15%. That's because the yeast can't survive in a more potent environment. When the cloudiness is gone, the fermentation has stopped and the wine can be carefully removed, leaving bits of yeast and other sediments behind. A couple of more chillings and siphonings are enough to clarify the wine. Then it's bottled and stored. Red wines can often improve with age, whereas white wines are ready to drink as soon as they're bottled."

"Good lord, Advocatus! Tell me you got that by Googling the subject last night!" <sup>27</sup>

"Sorry, Snark. I don't know the first thing about computers. Don't care for them. To err is human: it takes a computer to really screw things up! No, I learned this from Péri, as well as from some monks centuries before him . . . and from some of my friends down through more recent years.

"You know, Snark, if it hadn't been for the Church, winemaking would have been lost after Rome fell 1400 years ago. Much knowledge was, of course, preserved by the Islamic cultures, but their faith forbade the production of alcohol. So it was the Church, which needed wine for the Eucharist, which preserved the vintner's methods and traditions. As a footnote, you can perhaps further understand why I was so exercised over your now infamous wine label."

"Well, Advocatus, you've taught me something I hadn't heard before . . . about the role of the Church in preserving the winemaking methods. As for the wine label, I'm just glad that we seem to have reached something of an understanding of each other's passions on the subject. In any case, I'm glad you're here and that we're having this conversation."

"As am I, Snark. Now I get why you and Margaret chose winemaking as an endeavor. Wine is the end product of a mysterious transformation . . . and now that I think of it . . . a transformation that involves sacrifice . . . for without the yeast, the fermentation could not take place. And without the yeast dying, the taste wouldn't be palatable. It's a splendid metaphor for the transformation our Christian enterprise is about, Snark! I can hardly wait to try a glass so I can raise a toast to you!"

"Well, then! Let's attend to that at once, Advocatus. If you'll follow me we'll get a good view of the vineyards and I'll point out the various grapes to you. We'll wind up at the tasting room where we can uncork some of last year's wine and have a sip."

The two walked carefully over some fields that led upward to a rocky prominence from which the valley spread out below them to the south and east. Snark pointed out the various plots of grapes: Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Pinot Noir, and Pinot

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed. Sounds to us like Advocatus consulted Wikipedia or some similar source. ~ *The Editors*

Grigio. Here and there some of the immigrant workers could be seen tending to the vines. At Snark's invitation, the two turned around and saw, high up on the ridge, the wind turbine turning quietly, generating free, environmentally friendly electricity.

"It's a beautiful place, Snark. And a beautiful day to be here!"

"I agree, Advocatus. I wouldn't mind being buried up here. Someday. Why don't we go over to the winery now and uncork a bottle. What would you like first?"

"Well, Snark, seeing how it's only 10:30 in the morning, I think a sip of Pinot Grigio would be a nice way to start."

At the tasting room, Snark found a bottle and uncorked it. He poured a quarter-glass for Advocatus and himself and they found a place to sit under a vine-covered pergola overlooking the vineyard and the valley floor below. In the cooler of goodies Margaret had packed, Snark found some grilled shrimp with their shells on and pulled a few out for the two of them.

"This Pinot Grigio is very good, Snark." And then, after eating a shrimp and taking another sip, he declared, "It's absolutely wonderful with the shrimp! Wow! Fill my glass up to the brim, would you?"

After they had had the last of the shrimp and wine, they got up and stretched their legs by walking across a narrow meadow. Proceeding further, they found a path leading down through a copse of trees toward a stream that cascaded its way toward the valley. In the meadow, blue-eyed grass, an occasional early-blooming orange hawkweed, and pussytoes predominated. Near the stream, under the canopy of oaks and maples, jewelweeds and lilies of the valley carpeted the shadowy areas. When they came to the stream, they found a large boulder and took a seat on it.

"What's that I hear, Snark? Sounds like drumming! Don't tell me you have a drum circle up here!"

"No, Advocatus," Snark chuckled in a hushed voice. "I think we're hearing a ruffed grouse nearby. The males use their wings to make drumming sounds to attract mates or ward off predators. Tell me, Advocatus, you don't have an erotic attraction to birds do you?"

"Oh for Chri . . . ! No, Snark! I don't!"

"Just checking, Advocatus. In that case, he must think we mean him harm. He's trying to scare us off. In just a few weeks the eggs of his missus will hatch. There are usually a dozen or so eggs . . . in a nest on the ground. It's a precarious time for the grouse, Advocatus. He's probably trying to scare us off and . . ."

Just then, as Advocatus stood up to adjust his position, the woods seemed to explode not 35 feet from where they were sitting. A male ruffed grouse rocketed into the air, landing on a tree where it proceeded to flatten itself against the trunk, apparently in an attempt at camouflage. The startled Advocatus sat down and exclaimed "Wow! That scared me out of a year's growth!"

"Would that make you appear younger, your eminence; or has it shortened your life expectancy?" Snark playfully wondered. Advocatus growled loudly, much like the former Vice President of the United States might have growled just before he inadvertently shot his barrister friend in the face; simultaneously confusing him for a clay pigeon, and lending additional verisimilitude to a remark by one of Shakespeare's characters: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

"We just saw a wonderful thing, Advocatus. The average grouse seldom makes it past its first birthday. If it reaches three years it is, by comparison, as old as you are. Not that I'd ever think of you as an old ruffed grouse, though your growl . . . ."

"Enough, you . . . you Snark, you!" blurted Advocatus, completely failing to suppress a grin. Then, in a more sweet-tempered tone, he added, "Let's try another glass of wine."

Back at the tasting room, Snark suggested they consider a Shiraz. Advocatus agreed and the two made their way to the pergola again with a bottle and their glasses. "Advocatus, this Shiraz is quite peppery on the tongue. You'll taste its blackberry and plum flavors and maybe a bit of licorice. The Aussies consider it their finest wine. Surprisingly, though, it doesn't come from either Australia or Persia, although there's an old Persian town with that name. The grape's origin is actually in France. In any case, it goes well with beef and hearty foods, including Indian and Mexican foods."

Appropriately enough, at this very moment one of the immigrant workers approached the pergola and Snark greeted him. "*;Cesaro! Como estas, mi amigo?*"

*";Muy bien!"* responded Cesaro.

The two exchanged some more pleasantries in English and Snark soon learned that Cesaro was planning to eat his lunch as the noon hour was upon them. "Cesaro, we are about to taste some Shiraz. Could we interest you in trading some of our food for yours? We'll pour you a glass for your troubles!"

*"Eso sería maravilloso, señor,"* replied Cesaro. So Snark traded some of the grilled shrimp for a spicy Mexican taco and poured Cesaro a glass of Shiraz. Cesaro, after eating some shrimp and taking some sips of his wine thanked them for their hospitality and said that some of his friends would be wondering where he was. After handshakes he left to rejoin them.

"Cesaro is a good man, Advocatus. He came here from Mexico a couple of years ago. This will be his third growing season with us. He's smart, a quick learner, and as you

could probably tell, committed to his friends. So what do you think about your Shiraz with the spicy taco, Advocatus?"

"Again, Snark, wow! It seems like the wine and the food act synergistically to bring out the best flavors in each."

"Yep! That's what pairing is all about . . . finding the foods that go best with the wine and vice versa."

"Would you fill my glass up again, Snark? This Shiraz is mysterious . . . whether it comes from Persia, France, Down Under or just down the hill!" So Advocatus and Snark lingered awhile longer over their food and drink, under the pergola, on that warm spring day.

"Snark, I think I'm going to put my feet up and maybe doze off for a few minutes. Don't let me sleep more than half an hour, though. I don't want to miss this day. By then I should be ready to try your Pinot Noir!" So Advocatus leaned back, lowered his lids and slipped into a restful sleep.

As it had been a couple of weeks since Snark had been at the winery, he left Advocatus to take his nap and explored the equipment at the winery. Winemaking is certainly an art, but scientifically speaking, cleanliness of the equipment is an essential. The winery would go to great lengths to insure that the equipment was rigorously maintained, sterilizing it just prior to the grapes being fed into it. This was essential, lest bacteria or undesirable yeast spoil the lot. So Snark inspected the crusher and de-stemmer, the press and some of the vats to insure their integrity after their not being used during the winter.

"John Wesley would approve," thought Snark. "After all it was Wesley who said that 'cleanliness is next to Godliness,' even though mothers throughout the Western world assure their children that the saying has behind it the authority of the Good Book itself. Poor John, he'd have apoplexy if he knew there was a winery northwest of Sacramento, California that bears his name. On second thought, John liked wine . . . in moderation. Less so, Methodists in America: my bishop probably wouldn't be real pleased that I run this winery!"

Satisfied that the equipment seemed to be in good order, even if some of his Methodist practices were not, Snark returned to the snoring Advocatus under the pergola, and gently awakened him.

## **Dialogue 19 - Vividi, We Roll Along!**

*Pandiculation* has not yet received the same level of scientific investigation as has yawning.

*Yawning* begins for the fetus as early as 11 weeks after conception. While all vertebrates yawn, only humans, chimpanzees, and dogs exhibit *social yawning*. This occurs when one person observes another in the act of yawning. In the brain of the observer, "mirror neurons" located in the premotor cortex are stimulated. These neurons then create an empathic resonance with the one who is yawning. The observer's brain is thus cued to mirror back a yawn by the mere act of observing the other doing so. This is part of the neurological process that leads to two or more people bonding through this ordinary, highly underrated, shared activity. Helpfully, it can lead to laughter among strangers.

In fact, yawning is for us humans such an essentially social phenomenon, it is a matter of no small curiosity why someone has not yet created a social networking site devoted to it. Call it Yawnbook. Pictures of your many "friends" could be posted on the wall, each of them caught in mid-yawn. When visitors to the site looked at the pictures, they would also begin to yawn. Some might even fall asleep. This would provide a great public health benefit, since aficionados of social networking sites are among the more sleep-deprived of all our citizens. Corporate sponsorship, or at least advertising, could be solicited from businesses such as Sleepy's or Starbucks. Or, perhaps, this is just another idea whose time has not yet come: such as a 12-step group for extreme introverts.

Sometimes, in fact, just reading about yawning can cause the reader to do the same. If you are having that experience right now, then you have joined me, the author of this Dialogue. For in writing about it, I too have felt the need to yawn. I have just done so. How about you? \*

Whatever the explanation for it, once roused from his slumber, *Advocatus pandiculatus*. That is, he leaned back, yawned broadly, simultaneously giving both of his arms a good stretch. Naturally, he was joined immediately by *Snark*, who did the same thing.

This would not be the first time on this day that *Snark* would involuntarily follow *Advocatus'* lead.

"Feeling refreshed, *Advocatus?*" *Snark* inquired.

"Absolutely. Refreshed and ready to sample a taste of your Pinot Noir!"

\* If you have found yourself yawning frequently as you read *Last Supper Red*, you could try complaining to the anonymous author at SnarkAndAdvocatus@gmail.com. If you do, be patient . . . Q is probably sound asleep by now. ~ *The Editors*

"I have a bottle right here, Advocatus, but I think your word 'taste' is one we should take literally and not metaphorically. You've already had two very full glasses. A fellow vintner of my acquaintance recently observed that 'you can never drink too much wine, but sometimes you can have too much wine to drink.'<sup>28</sup> After the Pinot Noir we'll still have the Merlot and the Cabernet Sauvignon to taste!"

"Unaccustomed as you are to bringing a smile to the lips of the late John Wesley, Snark, I think that you nonetheless just succeeded in doing so! But not to worry. The day is still young, I don't have to drive, and I'm safely in your good Methodist company. If I should get a wee bit tipsy, I think I will be perfectly okay."

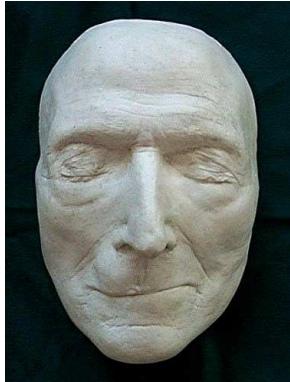
"Suit yourself, Advocatus. I follow your logic . . . except for the bit about Wesley's lips smiling again two centuries after his death . . . which I admit creeps me out . . . but I can leave that for another day. Actually, Advocatus, I've seen a picture of the death mask cast of John Wesley. There's a *smile* on his face! Imagine that!" \*

"Snark!" exclaimed Advocatus. "Perhaps it's now my turn to caution *you* against literal interpretations! I meant it as a metaphor, son! And a right jolly good one it is!"

"*Touché* again, Advocatus!" Snark poured a small amount of wine into Advocatus' glass. "This Pinot Noir is a wine that pairs well with just about any food around. So, reach into the basket Margaret packed for us and pull out anything you wish and we'll have 'a taste' along with it."

Advocatus reached in and pulled out a small bowl filled with chicken Caesar salad. He divided it between them and sampled the Pinot Noir along with the salad. "Yummy, Snark! Even though this is a red wine and the salad has the white meat of chicken in it, they go together quite nicely. You know, since it's only 11:30, just pour some more in my glass. I find that it takes a full glass for my aged and somewhat inexperienced taste buds to fully evaluate the superb complexity of these wines!"

\* This is a picture of the death mask of John Wesley, cast several hours after his death on March 2, 1791. His last recorded words are: "The best of all, God is with us! Farewell." It is housed in the World Methodist Council Museum, Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.



If you are reading this, you are probably weird enough to appreciate knowing that for \$19.95, Cokesbury (the United Methodist outlet for religious paraphernalia) will sell you a John Wesley Bobblehead. We are not making this up.



<sup>28</sup> Dave Lindsay of Leonard Oakes Estate Winery is probably the source of this fine phrase. Check it out at: [www.OakesWinery.com](http://www.OakesWinery.com)

Snark knew a thing or two about rationalizations and, as a duly ordained clergyman, was himself an accomplished practitioner of the bullshitting arts.\* So he simply noted the old man's jest and poured him a full glass. After all, what, indeed, could go wrong?

In what would prove to be an unmistakably clear answer to Snark's internally voiced and quite rhetorical question, they saw at that very moment the distinctive yellow of a smallish school bus rise into view down by the winery's entrance. They heard the sound of its engine misfiring badly and saw worrisome black puffs of smoke belching out of its tailpipe. It travelled perhaps another 40 yards past the sign and then, in what may have been an attempt at a faithful, if mechanical, response to the command on the sign, backfired once again, came to a complete stop, and proceeded to maintain a silence worthy of Benedictine monks. The black block lettering on the side of the bus announced that it belonged to "St. Apassionata's Academy."

A nun . . . dressed in her black tunic, complete with wimple, scapular and rosary beads . . . descended the steps of the bus and approached Snark and Advocatus. Advocatus gave an involuntary shudder and appeared as though he was trying to draw his thin body further into itself so that he might become invisible. "Someone you know, Advocatus?" whispered Snark.

"No, but I hope she doesn't recognize *me!*" responded Advocatus in a voice thin enough to match his body's attempted in-folding. "If you have to refer to me by name, just call me 'Mark.'"

"God's Peace to you, gentlemen!" the nun said as she approached them. I'm Sister Mary Agatha and have a bus full of second grade children from our school, along with several of their mothers. We're on an extended trip up to the northwestern part of the state and our bus has been giving us some problems. A service station mechanic down in the city put in some new spark plugs and that seemed to fix it for awhile. But as soon as we encountered these hills, the engine began to misfire terribly. I don't want to get stranded a million miles from nowhere . . . particularly with this busload of God's little ones. By any chance, do either of you know anything about what may be wrong with the bus? And do you think you could repair it if you do?"

Snark and Advocatus exchanged glances. Snark replied. "Sister Mary Agatha, my name is Gregory and I operate the winery here. I'm afraid that neither Mark nor I know much

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\* To the younger readers of this Dialogue, and/or their parents, we offer the following explanation concerning the anonymous author's use of this vulgar term . . . perhaps not so much as an apology as a rationalization. From the Wikipedia entry on "bullshit" we learn that "bollocks", literally "testicles," is a comparable expletive in British slang and, along with "bullshit," has been in use as such for a very long time. From the entry on "bollocks" we learn that: "From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, bollocks . . . was allegedly used as a slang term for a clergyman . . . It has been suggested that bollocks came to have its modern meaning of "nonsense" since clergymen were notorious for talking nonsense during their sermons." We rest our case. ~ *The Editors*

about engines. But I think one or two of my field hands might. I'd be happy to bring them here and they can take a look."

"Oh, that would be most kind of you Gregory!" replied the grateful nun, a warm smile spreading across her face.

Advocatus had been sizing up the situation and was satisfied that he didn't know the nun . . . though a part of Advocatus wished that he had, for she had lovely light green eyes and spoke in a lilting Irish voice. But, in truth, he'd never even heard of St. Apassionata, doubted her existence, and most certainly knew of no academy bearing her name. Since he was not wearing his clerical garb, he figured she wouldn't take him for clergy. "Snark may have been right about the fun beginning if I'm in disguise," he thought to himself. If only Advocatus had remembered Snark's warning about drinking too much as well as he did Snark's comments about being in disguise, things might have gone somewhat differently.

In any case, as Snark left to go looking for Cesaro, Advocatus turned to the nun and said: "Sister Mary Agatha, Gregory and I were engaged in a wine tasting under this pergola when you drove up. It would be my pleasure to pour for you and the mothers on the bus a glass of Merlot, for that is the next wine we were going to sample. We have plenty to go around and you're welcome to have some of our lunch as well. If you and the children have lunches of your own, we could have a picnic. I think it could work. At least it wouldn't be as much of a challenge as our Lord faced when he fed the 5,000. . . . That's for sure!" he added with a charming grin.

"That's a lovely offer, Mark, but I wouldn't want the children to wander all over the place. Maybe we should all just stay on the bus."

"I understand your concern, Sister Mary Agatha, but I think we can provide a focus for the children beyond the picnic itself. Gregory sometimes lets children stomp a few grapes in a low-sided barrel, just like the monks did hundreds of years ago. He says the kids like it. I'd be delighted to set up the barrel, throw in some grapes and show the children how it's done. They could join me in this ancient endeavor. You might, later on, even turn their experience into a teaching opportunity. Wine's a great metaphor for Christian transformation you know!"

Sister Mary Agatha studied Advocatus for a moment, thinking there was maybe something familiar about him. Familiar or not, she decided he looked harmless enough: awfully gaunt . . . but harmless. And it sounded as though he might have an interesting knowledge of the Christian faith.

"Very well, Mark! I'll have the mothers bring the children up to the pergola with our lunches and we'll corral them there. After we all have some lunch, and while Gregory's people are looking at the bus, maybe I can help you set things up for the grape stomping."

By the time Snark, Cesaro and his co-worker, Juan, were climbing back up the hill, they could hear the high-pitched chatter of a dozen children, and the combined laughter of several women and one very old . . . very, very mellow . . . gentleman. When they reached the pergola itself, they saw open bottles of Merlot and heard the tinkling of wine glasses as the adults toasted one another at this most unusual picnic and wine-tasting party, which was proceeding with great, noisy gusto.

Snark nodded to the ladies, shot a concerned glance not so much *to* Advocatus as *at* him, and led Cesaro and Juan down to the school bus. When he returned a moment later, Advocatus approached Snark, a bit of unstableness marking his gait.

"Snark! Where do you keep the little barrel for the wine stompings? I told Sister Mary Agatha I'd keep the kids entertained stomping grapes while your men look at the bus."

"Oh, good grief, Advocatus! Well, it's over there in the garage next to the wine crusher. You'll have to help me pull it out and I'll see if I can scout up some grapes. But I'm not sure this is a good idea, Advocatus. Does Sister Mary Agatha approve?"

"Well, she did twenty minutes ago, Snark. And that was even before she sampled that wonderful Merlot of yours. She seems to like it as well as I do. Did you know that Merlot pairs exceedingly well with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches? But what really brings out its flavors is when you pair it with cheese doodles!"

"Advocatus!" hissed Snark, "you're going 'round the bend' in the wrong direction! You've got to be careful! For the sake of the children . . . for your sake . . . and for Naked Toes! For crying out loud, Advocatus!"

"Not to worry, Snark. I have just one more toast to make and then we can set up the stomping vat. Sister Mary Agatha said she'd help too."

Snark took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he watched Advocatus make his way somewhat unsteadily back to the pergola. In the garage, Snark removed a few items blocking access to the stomping vat and, when he looked up, was surprised to see Advocatus and Sister Mary Agatha walking back toward him. Sister Mary Agatha was on Advocatus' arm.

"Are you sure you want us to provide the stomping vat for the children, Sister Mary Agatha? Mark sometimes gets carried away with his ideas . . . and not all of them are good."

"Oh, I think it will be just fine, Gregory. Mark has a lot of grandfather energy in him, I think. I believe he and the children will take to each other just fine. Let us help you with the vat."

So, the three of them rolled the ungainly vat into a clearing. Snark managed to find some red and white grapes to toss into the vat, and added in a little water from a hose.

"Mark, this is your party. What's next?" asked Snark.

"Sister Mary Agatha," began Advocatus, "if you'll have the mothers bring the children here, I'll tell them about stomping grapes. Then they can help the children remove their shoes and roll up their pant legs. I'll do the same and lead them in the grape stomping. Maybe by the time they tire of it your bus will be back in business. And if not, well, at least we'll all have had some fun."

When the children had been assembled around the vat, Advocatus began. "Children, a long, long time ago . . . in a time long before your great, great, great, great grandfather and grandmother were born, monks used to make wine by stomping on the grapes like we're going to do today. That way, the juice inside the grapes would come out. Then they'd do some stuff to it and in about a month it would become wine that could even be used in the Eucharist. I know this, because I knew some of those monks!"

The eyes of the second graders grew large, while the mothers and Sister Mary Agatha all sought to stifle the guffaws that were rising in their throats.

"It's true!" said Advocatus, looking at the women as directly as his now somewhat googley eyes were capable of doing. "Now watch what I'm going to do and you do the same." Advocatus removed his shoes and socks and rolled his trouser legs up. All the children followed suit. "Now, because I'm so very old, I'm going to use my walking stick here to steady myself and step into the vat." Steadying himself with his crosier, Advocatus placed one foot and then another into the cool liquid in the little barrel vat. "Brrrr! It's a bit cold now, but once we all get in and start stomping it'll warm up. Now before the mothers help you into the vat, I have a question: do any of you know Latin?"

The children looked at each other and one or two raised a tentative hand. Advocatus pointed to one little boy who said, "Is that what the Reverend Father speaks during the Mass?"

"That's right, my smart little friend! And for knowing that, you shall be the first into the stomping vat." With that, Advocatus gave the little child a hand into the tub. "Do you know why I asked you all that question?"

"Are we going to have to pray in Latin now? I just wanted to walk on the grapes," said a little girl.

"Oh, nothing as serious as all that," responded Advocatus in a mellow, avuncular tone. "But you can be the second in the vat. No, I thought I'd teach you a grape-stomping song we could sing while we're all in the vat. Its words are all in Latin, but they're really easy and, besides you all know the tune. When I stomped the grapes hundreds of years ago with those monks, we sang a wine stomping song to the same tune . . . but the words were different then. You all want to learn it and sing it with me?"

"Yaaaaay!" the children shouted with one voice. So the mothers and Sister Mary Agatha helped the children into the vat.

Advocatus began marching along the circumference of the vat. "Follow me everyone!" And they did. Round and round they went until one child prompted the already dizzy Advocatus: "When do we get to sing the song?"

"Good point! We get to sing it right now. But first, let's all stop so we don't get too dizzy and I'll teach it to you. The tune had a different name 500 years ago but you know it as 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.' You do know that song don't you?" After the children had stopped reassuring the old man that indeed they did know it, Advocatus continued.

"So let me teach you the words. You don't have to know Latin or what the words mean . . . but I think you can guess their meaning because they're an exact translation into Latin of that song you already know!"

"One last thing: in Latin, words that begin with the letter 'v' are pronounced as though they begin with a 'w.' That may sound strange to your ears, but I think you'll really, really, really like it when you hear yourselves singing it. Are you ready?"

"Ready!" responded his eager apprentices.

"Good. I'll sing the whole song through for you by myself first. And then we'll all do it a couple of times . . . maybe three times . . . so we can learn it. After that, we'll resume our grape stomping and sing the grape stomping song in Latin. Here's how it goes, and remember, every 'v' sound is pronounced as a 'w':

Duc, duc ramos duc, \*  
 Fluminae servando!  
 Vividi, vividi, vividi, vividi!  
 Vitae est in somnio."

It has been the experience of everyone who has ever introduced this song to children that, by the time the third line is sung, the children are laughing so uproariously that many additional repetitions are needed in order to learn it. So Advocatus sang it again. The third time he invited the children to join in. By the fifth or sixth iteration they had it and were belting it out with enthusiasm.

"Von-erful, a-von-erful!" said Advocatus, doing his best Lawrence Welk impersonation for the mothers and, particularly it seemed, for Sister Mary Agatha. As they began to laugh at his antics he corrected himself: "I mean wonderful, wonderful! Those 'w' and 'v' sounds are confusing! Okay everyone, let's stomp those grapes and get every bit of their juice out. Just be careful when you do. The mixture's going to get pretty slippery!"

\* The Latin word "Duc" is pronounced like the English word "Duke." ~ *The Editors*

So round and round marched this unlikely band, lustily singing their ridiculous song . . . and nearly collapsing with laughter every time they sang the 'vividi' line. "Louder!" shouted Advocatus. "God loves it when you sing loudly! The devil can't stand loud singing! Here we go again!" On and on they went, their voices making what surely had to be as "joyful a noise unto the Lord" as ever the Psalmist could have imagined or desired.

After 15 minutes or so of this, a dozen children and one very old man were growing weary.

"Okay, everyone, it's time to stop. Let's carefully look at the grapes. Does it look like they've all been thoroughly stomped?" The children examined the mush at the bottom of the barrel and all agreed that not one grape had escaped their efforts intact. "Great!" exclaimed Advocatus. "Now, let the adults help you out so you can get your feet washed and dried off and your shoes back on."

By this time Cesaro and Juan had joined the group at the stomping vat. Their faces wore expressions of equal parts confusion and delight. When the children had all been gathered together up at the pergola, Snark introduced Cesaro and Juan to the mothers and to Sister Mary Agatha. Both men crossed themselves when the latter introduction was made. Then Snark delivered their news.

"Cesaro and Juan found the source of the engine's problems, Sister Mary Agatha. Apparently, when the mechanic installed the spark plugs, he didn't tighten them down into the cylinder head adequately. When the bus had to labor up these hills, compression escaped past the plugs and the engine acted like it was misfiring. Certainly that would account for its loss of power. In addition, two of the spark plug wires had some insulation that was quite frayed. With the engine's vibrations, they would sometimes randomly send their sparks elsewhere. That's probably what made the bus backfire and belch all that black smoke. They put some tape around those places in the wires and you should eventually get them replaced. But it seems to be working well, now. I'd say you're good to go on with your trip!"

"Heaven be praised! I can't thank you two enough!" said Sister Mary Agatha to Cesaro and Juan. And then, doubtless unencumbered by any thought process . . . and who's to say whether that was because of the Merlot wine, or perhaps even the playful activity of Higgs Boson . . . Sister Mary Agatha threw her arms first around Cesaro and then around Juan, giving to each a big, sustained, very un-nun hug. The men blushed, crossed themselves again, thanked Sister Mary Agatha, and made a hurried retreat back down the hill to the vineyard.

Sister Mary Agatha had two more hugs in her. She gave one to Snark and the other to Advocatus, with whom she lingered just a wee bit longer. "Mark and Gregory," she said after she broke from the hug, "surely the Lord knew what He was doing in directing us to this place! Your hospitality and help . . . not to mention the hilarious grape stomping . . . have been a blessing to us all!"

And with that she gave them a more formal blessing asking God that His peace would be theirs as well.

Snark and Advocatus walked with the children, the mothers and Sister Mary Agatha back to the bus. They bade one another goodbye, and watched as the bus smoothly and quietly made its way back down the hill from the winery.

"Well, Advocatus, you and I have witnessed a great many strange things. But that has to be right up there at the top of the list! What are the odds of their having engine trouble, finding us, getting their engine fixed, and . . . as an extra added attraction . . . having a wine tasting picnic and grape stomping party to boot?"

"It's hard to say, Snark. But the New Testament says that we should be kind to strangers since, without knowing it, we sometimes entertain angels when we do. I imagine Sister Mary Agatha may have undergone something of a Wesleyan-like 'heart-warming experience' while she was here. Of course, it could have been the Merlot. Speaking of the Merlot, there's just a bit left and the remnants of the lunch Margaret packed. Why don't we consider the matter further over the last of the feast?

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Advocatus. You've had an awful lot to drink already and it's beginning to get late. We've got to get back to Elsewhere and help Margaret set up for tonight's crowd."

"Oh, come on, Snark! Don't be such a buzzkill! It was, after all, your John Wesley himself who said that 'a long face is the devil's religion!' We're having fun, are we not? So we must be doing something right. Let's just finish up the food and wine. Then we can put the vat back in the garage and go home."

Although Snark knew Advocatus was again blowing smoke, against his better judgment he relented. He figured that now was not the time to remind Advocatus that Wesley's bias against too much alcoholic drink was born of his working amongst the gin-besotted working class in 18th century England. He had seen the devastation alcohol had caused and warned his people against it. It made sense then. Variants of his cautions made sense in today's America. But Advocatus was by now too far gone to have taken in such a nuanced train of thought.

So, under the pergola, with the sun making its way toward the western horizon, the two finished up the food, made a toast to the Creator for the day's events, and walked down to the clearing where the vat was. Advocatus carried with him several opened, half-full bottles of the red varietals they'd been sampling. "What will you do with the wine in these bottles, Snark?"

"Just pour it out on the ground, Advocatus. Save the bottles though. We'll use them later."

"I've got a better idea, Snark," said Advocatus as he now, with an obvious weave in his step, made his way over to the stomping vat, into which he poured the remaining wine. "Once more for old times' sake, Snark!" he wheezed as he stepped back into the vat without bothering to remove his shoes or roll up his trousers. "Back in the day old Péri just stomped on the red stuff. Just like what we've got here now! Just one more time! Wow, this sure takes me back! I can almost see him smiling at me!"

So Advocatus began marching slowly around the stomping vat. After a couple of revolutions he began to sing the song he'd taught the children. This would have been a somewhat frustrating scene had not Advocatus experienced a sustained outburst of hilarity when he came to the third line with all the "vividi's" in it.

Unfortunately, his mirthful out-gassing was destabilizing. As laughter drained his muscles of their strength, Advocatus lost his footing and collapsed into the center of the barrel, coating himself quite effectively and evenly with the now magenta-colored slippery slop that covered the bottom of the barrel. Fortunately, his body suffered no serious harm and he was able to regain his footing, returning to an upright position with the assistance of his crosier. Unfortunately, the slipperiness made his taking the few steps to the barrel's side utterly impossible.

"Snark!" Advocatus yelled. "Grab the end of my crosier and help me get out!"

Snark reached for the end of the crosier and grasped it with both hands. It was then that Advocatus again lost his footing in the slippery goo, fell once more into the vat, and caused the hitherto pristine Snark to follow after him . . . quite involuntarily . . . for the second time that day.

## Dialogue 20 – *Wiwiddee, We Stagger Back*

One of Margaret's many virtues was her patience. Though Margaret herself often complained of being overweight, most people thought she didn't have much to worry about . . . maybe an extra five pounds, ten at most. In fact, most people who knew her well realized that the "fattest" part of Margaret was not her body but her patience . . . which she overfed by means of a rich and nourishing diet of laughter. Margaret could laugh at almost everything: Snark, *Advocatus*, and the church for starters; not to mention petty thieves, embezzlers, litterbugs, politicians and other similar low lifes. But most of all, Margaret could laugh at herself. And the more she laughed the more robust and rotund became her patience.

Around 5:30 in the afternoon Margaret heard the door to Snark's car slam shut in the parking lot at the rear of Elsewhere. He was returning later than he'd indicated and although Margaret was disappointed that Snark had not returned as promised to help her set up for the evening crowd, her more-than-well-fed patience secured her equanimity.

As Margaret walked toward the rear of Elsewhere, her patience waddled along beside her. Together, they opened the back door. Her patience was still present even when she saw her magenta-colored husband and a somewhat more gentian-appearing *Advocatus* walking toward her, the latter being supported by Snark's arm wrapped around the old man's waist.

But when Margaret heard the staggering *Advocatus* continuously mumbling something in a sing-song tone that sounded like "wiwidee, wiwidee, wiwidee, wiwidee" . . . and most especially when she began to smell the unmistakable aroma of Pinot Noir emanating from the both of them . . . her patience had an out-of-Margaret's-body experience, leaving her fairly foaming at the mouth in exasperation.

"Snark! What the devil have you done?" she screamed. "You're both drunk as skunks; and *Advocatus* could die from the stress! How *could* you?" Snark felt a flush of red heat travel up his neck, whereupon it quickly spread out across his face, stopping only when it reached the edges of his ears which were now pinned back by the force and content of Margaret's challenge.

As he drew closer to her, Snark found his voice and said, "Margaret, the only one who's drunk is *Advocatus*. I tried all day to get him to limit his intake, but he refused. You know how hard-headed he can be. As for our colorful appearance, *Advocatus* slipped in the wine stomping vat and then pulled me in when I attempted to help him get out. I'm sorry I'm late . . . and that my clothes are likely ruined. But here we are."

Margaret had never known Snark to lie to her and, as unexpected as his explanation was, she believed him. "Oh, my! C'mon in dear. I'm sorry I went off on you so! It's just that when I saw how purple you both are and smelled . . ."

Snark cut her off in mid-sentence. He leaned in toward her, affected a very lecherous grin, and planted a very large, winey kiss directly on her lips. It was a sloppy but wonderful kiss: one that, to use the descriptive phrase of wine connoisseurs, "lingered long upon the tongue."

After they broke from their kiss, Snark pulled himself up to his full height, straightened his back as best he could and, in his most stentorian, preacherly voice loudly intoned: "Love of my life and everyone living near Elsewhere! You must understand something, so pay close attention to my words. I take as my text Acts, Chapter 2, Verses 13 - 17. Some have made fun of us and said 'They have had too much wine.' Well of course! These men are not sober and filled with the Spirit as you suppose, for it is, after all, 5:30 and time for Happy Hour! This is precisely the reverse of what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your young men will see visions; your old men will dream dreams!"

It was at this point that Margaret's patience returned to her. Complaining immediately that it was quite famished, Margaret immediately fed her patience a five-course meal of eye-watering laughter . . . a hilarity which was prompted by the deliciously absurd situation she had at first only beheld, but was now becoming a part of.

"I'll tell you all about our weird day tomorrow, Margaret," said Snark. "For now, I'm taking this old sot up to Susan's quarters, strip him down in her bathroom before he does any damage to her bedroom furnishings, and put him under the shower. I know we open soon, but if you've the time and inclination, I think a pitcher of water and maybe some coffee might help Advocatus return to any senses he may still have left. I'll be down as soon as I can."

With that, Snark and Margaret kissed again, and enjoyed some laughter together while Snark maneuvered the still 'wiwideeing' Advocatus toward the stairs.

Not long afterward, one of the staff at Elsewhere brought some water and coffee up to Susan's room, explained to Snark that Margaret sent her love but was busy with some visitors, and then returned downstairs.

Snark had succeeded in getting Advocatus cleaned up, although he couldn't yet get all the wine out of the old man's gray hair. It now had some rather garish red highlights not unlike some of the punk hairdos sported by a few of the teenage girls who brought their homework to Elsewhere after school. He found Advocatus' pajamas, somehow got them onto him, and successfully propped the old man upright in his borrowed bed.

The woozy old prelate assured Snark he'd be alright, so Snark decamped to his and Margaret's quarters, where he tended to his own lamentable state of disrepair. A half hour later, as he walked down the hallway toward Susan's quarters, he heard Advocatus singing. It sounded at first like a sea chantey but, as he drew nearer, he realized Advocatus was singing a vintage drinking song popular back in the 1960s, only with Advocatus' own bastardized lyrics as an added feature.

"At least the old man has some synaptic activity left; he must be coming out of his stupor," Snark reasoned to himself. When he opened the door, sure enough, Advocatus was sitting on the side of the bed, swaying back and forth while his feet tapped along to the song's upbeat rhythm as he sang:

"Snark and Advocatus sat in Elsewhere's kitchen;  
 Snark and Advocatus sat in Elsewhere's kitchen;  
 And they decided, and they decided,  
 And they decided . . . To have another carafe!"

"Margaret, pour some Cabernet until it doth run over;  
 Margaret, pour some Cabernet until it doth run over;  
 For tonight we'll merry be, for tonight we'll merry be,  
 For tonight we'll merry be . . . Tomorrow we'll be sober!"

"Here's to the man who drinks Shiraz and goes to bed quite mellow!  
 Here's to the man who drinks Shiraz and goes to bed quite mellow!  
 He lives as he ought to live, he lives as he ought to live,  
 He lives as he ought to live . . . And dies a jolly good fellow!"

"Here's to the nun who drove the bus and all of those who love her!  
 Here's to the nun who drove the bus and all of those who love her!  
 She gave her hugs to one and all, she gave her hugs to one and all;  
 She gave her hugs to one and all . . . She'll be the convent's Mother!"<sup>29</sup>

As Advocatus' lyrics were beginning to take an overly imaginative but questionable turn, Snark felt it best to intervene and let Advocatus know of his presence. "Well, I see you're somewhat improved, Advocatus! Let me pour us both a cup of coffee and we'll just sit a spell with one another."

"Okay, Snark. I think I'd like some cream and sugar in mine, if you don't mind. Straight coffee might interfere with my beauty rest." And so the two sipped their coffee and made occasional conversation until Advocatus allowed as how the day had been rather full, though the details of it were, he confessed, somewhat fuzzy in his mind. "If it's all the same to you, Snark, I think I'll turn in early tonight. I might even sleep in tomorrow if that would be okay."

"It would be more than okay, Advocatus. It would be absolutely perfect. Don't forget to drink plenty of water. It'll help you feel better when you wake up. See you sometime tomorrow. Sleep well!"

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<sup>29</sup> Judging from the meter of Advocatus' lyrics and their structure, the Editors believe the song he was parodying was the traditional English folksong, "Three Jolly Coachmen," made famous by The Kingston Trio in their 1958 debut album *The Kingston Trio*. Click here to view the original lyrics and listen to a bard singing them. <http://chivalry.com/cantaria/lyrics/3jolly.html> ~ *The Editors*

With that, Snark retreated out of Advocatus' room, gently closed the door, and joined Margaret downstairs where he helped her fill the food orders and visited with some of the guests. After Elsewhere had closed and they were cleaning up the kitchen, he turned to Margaret.

"Advocatus wants to sleep in late tomorrow. That's the most sensible thing I've heard him say all day. I think he's going to be just fine, but he'll need a full day to recuperate."

"Quite so, Snark," replied Margaret while she dried a large skillet. "If we keep him here at Elsewhere tomorrow, I think that's likely to happen. I mean, it's pretty quiet here during the day . . . I can't imagine anything getting in the way of everyone resting up."

Snark dried the last pot, put it in its place on the shelf, turned to Margaret and, wrapping his towel around her back, drew her to him. Smiling at her with playful affection he said, "Neither can I, Margaret. But I'm sure Higgs will think of something!"

## Dialogue 21 - There's Got to Be a Morning After

Snark was the first to awaken and, after writing a note which he left beside Margaret's pillow, made his way down to the kitchen where he started a pot of coffee. He was reading the morning paper when he heard Margaret quietly coming up behind him. She wrapped her arms about him and nuzzled her face next to his, kissing the back of his neck.

"What a lovely poem you left me this morning! It's made me feel warm all over! Is it one of Rumi's?" she asked, placing the poem on the table in front of Snark.

"It sure is." responded Snark, reaching up with both his hands to hold Margaret's, now resting on his chest. "I'm glad you like it. It seemed appropriate . . . and in more ways than one!" he said with a sly, warm grin on his face.

Margaret blushed and returned the grin. "It's so appropriate, in fact, I think I'll take it upstairs and put it on the night stand by my side of the bed," she said, breaking the embrace. Then she added, "I wouldn't want Advocatus to see it! I'll be back after I've dressed for the day."

This is the poem that Snark had left for Margaret:

"At night we fall into each other with such grace.  
When it's light, you throw me back  
like you do your hair.  
Your eyes now drunk with God,  
mine with looking at you,  
one drunkard takes care of another."<sup>30</sup>

Mevlana Jelaluddin was a 13th century Muslim mystic and poet, best known by his nickname, Rumi. Born in Afghanistan, when he was a child his parents fled the invading Mongols and settled in the Turkish town of Konya. Following in his father's footsteps, Rumi became a Sufi talip and founded that Sufi sect best known by the spiritual practice of its dancing adherents: the "whirling dervishes." No wonder Gregory Talipson found him so compelling.

Margaret returned, saying, "I passed by Advocatus' room and heard him stirring. I'm glad he's still alive! How much did he have to drink . . . and what all happened yesterday, anyhow?"

Snark poured Margaret her first cup of coffee, refilled his own. While he assembled the breakfast ingredients for the two of them, he proceeded to recount all the details of the previous day's improbable events at the winery. Margaret sometimes audibly drew in a

<sup>30</sup> *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*, translated by John Moyne and Coleman Barks (Threshold Books, 1984). Used with permission.

breath, and at others broke into unrestrained laughter, depending on the details of the narrative.

After Snark had recounted the lengthy story, Margaret responded in a voice filled with lilting laughter, "I see! So it was just an average, boring day between the two of you. And you were seeing to Advocatus' rest and recuperation!" It had been her laughter as well as her good looks that had initially drawn Snark's attention when he met her, quite by chance, in the cafeteria of a hospital where she was a student nurse. As the two of them got to know one another better, each also fell in love with the compassionate heart, and the streak of rebelliousness, they saw in each other.

"What's all the laughter about?" asked Advocatus, who had just successfully descended the stairs without, thank God, giving a faithful rendition of Larry Morris' *Nude Descending A Staircase*.<sup>31</sup> The old man had changed into one of his last remaining sport shirt and his last pair of trousers. His shoes had dried out but were clearly the worse for wear, having seen service in the wine vat the day before. He made his way to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for himself. Backlit by the morning sun, his hair glistened with Pinot Noir-tinged highlights.

"Snark was just telling me about the adventures the two of you had up at Naked Toes yesterday. My laughter at your wonderfully absurd day probably woke you up! I imagine Higgs Boson was ready to pee her pants with laughter, too, Advocatus!" Margaret exclaimed, a grin lighting up her face. "Did you sleep alright last night?"

"I slept like a dead man, Margaret! Thanks to Snark, I hope and imagine, I spent it in Susan's bed. But I'm awake enough now to have caught your remark about Higgs Boson. Don't tell me you buy into Snark's crazy talk about the Third Person of his Theoretical Trinity!"

"I'm glad you slept well. And, yes, I think Higgs Boson is as good an explanation as I can think of, Advocatus! Call it whatever you like, I say. 'Holy Spirit' is the familiar name in our shared tradition and that works for me, particularly since our tradition makes the Holy Spirit a 'she.' But 'Higgs Boson' works as well. The Hindus might call this

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<sup>31</sup> Larry Morris' "Nude Descending A Staircase." Morris is a sculptor who works mainly in welded steel.



His whimsical works are on display at his studio at The Torpedo Factory in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia and may be viewed online at [http://www.torpedofactory.org/artists/morris\\_1.htm](http://www.torpedofactory.org/artists/morris_1.htm)

spirit Shiva or Kāli, whereas the Navajos might call it 'Coyote,' the trickster. In any case, there seems to be a spirit loose in the world that upends our certainties, creates the synchronicities we suppose to be mere coincidences, and rearranges the contents of our neatly organized Day Timers into a chaotic mess so that re-creation or transformation can take place. So, whatever its name is, I imagine it's doing stand-up somewhere. I expect I'll see it on Comedy Central any night now!"

"Margaret!" rejoined the old man, "Don't tell me *you've* started drinking this early in the day! That's a whole mouthful . . . and I haven't even had my coffee yet!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Advocatus," Margaret said, pouring him a cup. "But it's nearly 11:00 a.m. and, in a pinch, that's maybe not too early to have some wine . . . although, I wouldn't recommend it for you this morning!" she added with a giggle. "Would you care for some breakfast with us?"

"That would be good, Margaret; and thanks for the coffee. I must admit, yesterday was certainly different from what I'd expected it to be just 24 hours ago. Parts of it, though, are a bit muddled in my mind."

"That's too bad, Advocatus," piped up Snark. I wish I had a video of the whole day: it would immediately go viral on YouTube . . . especially the part with you leading Sister Mary Agatha's little charges in stomping the grapes!"

"Oh . . . yes . . . I remember some of that . . . the children were having such a good time!"

"So were you, Advocatus! In fact, I've never seen you so . . . so . . . good grief, the word doesn't seem to fit you . . . but yesterday it sure did . . . I've never seen you so 'youthful', Advocatus. Child-like, even!"

"Oh come on, Snark. I hardly think I was acting childish at all. That would be unseemly."

"Not 'childish,' Advocatus: 'child-like.' There's a difference. Of course, all of us regress and act childish at times, unseemly or not. No, yesterday I think you were acting in a child-like way. That isn't regressive at all."

"That's right, Advocatus," Margaret chimed in. "Jesus once said that unless one became like a little child they couldn't enter God's kingdom or way of life. Scholars debate just what Jesus had in mind in saying that . . . so we're in good company as we advance our own ideas. But of all the things that it could mean, I like best the idea that children are, above all else, playfully, joyfully imaginative. They're naturally imaginative, and especially in their play. If they're fortunate, and neither parents nor other adults discourage them from it, they retain this quality into their adult lives.

"It's a lovely thing . . . and, for Jesus, it was essential. From what Snark has told me, it sounds like you were being very playful and imaginative up at the winery with the children!"

Snark looked across the table at Margaret and smiled as he nodded in agreement. "Yep, you were certainly in the kingdom yesterday when you marched around that vat singing 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' in Latin! You and the children really bonded and they had a great time. It was fun to watch . . . bizarre, but fun! Some of our Christian friends . . . especially the Pentecostal ones . . . would have regarded you as 'being filled with the Holy Spirit.' 'Vividi' Advocatus!" said Snark, raising his glass of orange juice in the manner of making a toast.

"Oh good grief! I didn't teach them *that* did I?" asked the embarrassed Advocatus as a blush spread over his face.

"Not only that," rejoined Snark. "You told them that 500 years ago you and the monks sang it in the vats as you stomped on the grapes!"

"Well, at least I didn't bend the truth," replied Advocatus with a serious look.

"And last night, when you came back to Elsewhere, you kept singing 'vividi, vividi, vividi, vividi' over and over and over again!" put in Margaret.

"Of course, by the time you'd sobered up a bit, Advocatus," continued Snark, "you were singing a tending-toward-the-bawdy drinking song in which you raised a toast to Sister Mary Agatha and sang that she'd soon be a mother!"

"No! He didn't!" exclaimed Margaret, sounding equally shocked and amused. "That does sound a bit undignified, Advocatus . . . *and I love you for it!* At that point, I reckon it wasn't particularly the *Holy Spirit* you were intoxicated with!"

"I've no recollection of that at all. Are you sure you aren't just having more of your puerile fun at my expense, Snark? Surely, I would have remembered that!"

"I'm enjoying you, alright, Advocatus. But, no, I'm not doing so at your expense. Do you remember Sister Mary Agatha? You seemed quite fond of her and I believe she took a liking to you as well."

"That's an outrage, Snark!" Advocatus fairly shouted. "Of course I remember her. She was from St. Apassionata's Academy . . . wherever that is! But I most certainly was *not* attracted to her Irish accent . . . and her lovely green eyes that . . . Oh, my! I think I *was* . . . I also seem to remember us walking down the hill from the pergola to help you with the stomping vat . . . and we were arm and arm! Oh no! Tell me that's all, Snark! Please!"

The old man was now in something of a dither and, even if Snark had wanted to be playful with him, he knew that now was certainly not the time. "Don't worry, Advocatus," he said, fixing Advocatus' eyes with his. "That's all there was to it. On your part, anyhow. When Sister Mary Agatha hugged us all at the end of her visit, though, she lingered somewhat longer hugging you! You both even swayed back and forth a bit. I do hope the wine hasn't robbed you of that memory!"

"Either the wine or my psyche has, Snark. I don't remember that . . . and on balance that may be a good thing. It sounds like I had two of the three requisite ingredients for realizing the motto, 'Wine, Women and Song.' I had the wine and the song . . . Yikes! I must have come close to losing my way."

"So what if you'd had all three, Advocatus?" asked Margaret rhetorically. "You'd be in good company if you did. It's like that good, beer-drinking monk, Martin Luther once said:

'Who loves not wine, women and song,  
Remains a fool his whole life long.'"

"I'm glad you don't want to lose your way, Advocatus," said Snark. "And you certainly didn't yesterday. Did you have way too much to drink? Certainly. But you were with someone who could take care of you, as you pointed out to me at the time. And here you are: safe and sound!"

Advocatus still had a somewhat stricken look on his face, so Snark continued. "Advocatus, in my pastoral counseling office I have a graphic<sup>32</sup> hanging on the wall that, in a very attractive calligraphy, quotes something else Martin Luther said. I think it's fitting for this occasion, so let me tell you how it goes:

'This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness,  
Not health but healing,  
Not being but becoming,  
Not rest but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.  
The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.  
This is not the end,  
But it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory  
But all is being purified.'"

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<sup>32</sup> While we, of course, have no knowledge of Snark's particular graphic, one with this very quote of Luther's can be seen and purchased at: <http://www.michaelpodesa.com/Luther-p114.html>

"Well, I think I've sobered up enough to play the quotation game with you two," said Advocatus, a faint smile of relief on his lips. Charlie Brown once said: "Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, 'Where have I gone wrong?' Then a voice says to me, 'This is going to take more than one night.' I can identify with Charlie Brown, although last night I was too tipsy to have engaged in such introspection! You've both spoken to my angst in a most graceful way, and I thank you for it."

"Well then!" said Snark, holding a platter of scrambled eggs, and the bacon he'd just removed from the microwave. "Now that that's settled, let's eat!"

## Dialogue 22 - Cure for the Blahs RSV

After they cleaned up the breakfast dishes, Advocatus and Snark joined Margaret who was already reading the morning's newspaper. The early morning sun had already called it quits for the day and the sky turned a smudgy, gray overcast. Brisk, unseasonably cool winds blew down on them. "It says here that a cool front's knocking on our back door," Margaret said. "It's supposed to kick off a few showers later today. I'd say that's a good thing. It'll keep you two indoors and out of trouble . . . for a change!"

"I could use some down time," joined in Advocatus as he adjusted the pillows on his end of the couch opposite Margaret. "Besides, it's been awhile since I've just sat and read the paper through. That's a luxury I seldom get to enjoy."

"I used to enjoy that opportunity more than I do these days," Snark sighed as he took a sip of his coffee and inspected a package the mailman had just delivered. "Maybe I'm just getting older and crotchety, but the daily cataloguing of murder, mayhem, fraud, hypocrisy, and finger-pointing is a bit like taking a tour of a meat-rendering plant: it satisfies a certain morbid curiosity but leaves one feeling the need to run screaming outside, gulp down some fresh air, and head for the nearest shower."

"Now there's a vivid image!" said Margaret, screwing up her face into an expression of intense displeasure.

"Your husband does have a way with his metaphors," laughed Advocatus, joining in.

"Laugh, fools!" said Snark, as he cut though the tape on the package. But you've got to admit that events on so many different fronts today seem to be moving toward some sort of truly awful crisis."

"Sounds to me like you're going over to Harold Camping's side!" teased Advocatus.

Snark chuckled and said, "No, but I don't fault his cataloguing of the awful events. Why, just in the past month or so, I read in the newspaper that 20% of the children in this country live in poverty; and that's the highest number since the Census Bureau started tracking it in 1960. We rank 46th in the infant mortality rate . . . which is a useful proxy in sizing up the overall health of a population. Wealth is getting concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Income inequality is becoming like it was in the days of the Robber Barons."

His chuckle now gone, Snark continued in a tone of disgust. "We resemble a banana republic: the top 1% of wealthy Americans control a third of the country's wealth. Included in their number are more than half the members of the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. Capitol Hill is awash in money from billionaire lobbyists and influence peddlers. And now the Supreme Court argues that corporations have the rights of citizens! Will Rogers was right: 'We've got the finest government money can buy!' So much for all the chest-thumping about 'American Exceptionalism!'

"And I haven't even mentioned our folly internationally . . . ."

"*Please don't!*" Advocatus quickly interrupted. "Good grief! Here it is, barely past the noon hour, Snark, and you've already pulled a pall over the day that's gloomier than the sky!" Then, in a more gentle tone, he continued, "I wonder if that reflects some sort of gloomy weather down inside you. You sound like someone in danger of succumbing to *accidie*."

"Acid what', Advocatus?" asked Margaret.

"*Accidie*, Margaret. It's pronounced 'ak'-si-dee' . . . it's a Greek word. Since 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians living in Syrian monasteries created a list of the Seven Deadly Sins, the church has traditionally considered *accidie* to be one of them. In fact, it was right in the middle of their list. They said that first our egos get so puffed up as we try to live without God that Pride defines us. When that doesn't lead us into a life of significance and meaning, we usually become envious of what others have and wish we had it instead. When the second deadly sin of Envy doesn't get us the life we're after, we can become wrathful or rageful. And then, when our Anger has not secured our happiness, we can become like burned-out cinders and fall into a kind of spiritual torpor that was called *accidie*.

"Unfortunately, *accidie* has usually been translated as 'Sloth.' But that doesn't capture it at all. It's more like a loss of faith in the mercies of God . . . or a loss of faith that life . . . for all its heartache and pain . . . is good as it is given. It's sort of a spiritual depression . . . a lassitude of spirit . . . a dropping out of life.

"Those Desert Fathers in Syria were shrewd observers and psychologically astute too. They observed that when life loses its savor, we either kill ourselves in despair, or turn to something . . . anything . . . to spice it up. That's where the last of the three seven deadly sins come in: Greed, Lust, and Gluttony are the 'spices' we pull down from the rack. Unfortunately, they don't work either.

"Snark," Advocatus continued, turning toward him, "a James Bond scholar recently wrote an article reflecting on the terrible events of 9/11. He wrote that *accidie* is something like 'the temptation, after we are shaken, not to stir. . . . a sorrowfulness so heavy, any effort to improve the world seems pointless.'<sup>33</sup> As I listened to your comments a moment ago, I thought you sounded a bit like that."

"Well, that sounds all too familiar, Advocatus," Snark responded in a thoughtful tone. "And I appreciate your concern for me . . . I really do, Advocatus . . . especially *yours* . . . for I did fall into *accidie* after our blowup over the wine label. But I don't think I've succumbed to it by reading the papers these days. Yet the daily recounting of all the world's bad news *can* be overwhelming, and I sometimes have to struggle against it.

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<sup>33</sup> We believe Advocatus is referring to the shaken-but-not-stirred author, W. Benjamin Pratt. Read his reflection on 9-11-2001 using this metaphor [here](#). Also, see his book *Ian Fleming's Seven Deadlier Sins and 007's Moral Compass* (David Crumm Media, LLC, 2008) [here](#). Fascinating reading!

"So, to keep myself from going there, I *do* need the help of Jon Stewart and the newspaper's Comics section. They help me maintain some perspective. So does my habit of making a 'gratitude list' of the things I'm thankful for. It reminds me that *not all* of the news is bad. Why, just last night I wrote: 'In this world of sin and sorrow there is always something to be thankful for; as for me, I rejoice that I am not a Republican.'"

"Snark! You're incorrigible!" snorted Margaret.

"I've said exactly the same thing to him, Margaret, but he doesn't listen!" said Advocatus with a laugh, obviously relishing the moment and piling on.

"I couldn't agree with you more, Advocatus. Tell me something I *don't* already know! Anyhow, Snark, it was H. L. Mencken who said that. It's a good thing you don't write for a living: you'd be sued for quoting without attribution! And on top of that, dear, you keep busting the Republicans! Even though the Democrats ideas often mesh better with ours, the they're are still a mess! Don't forget what Will Rogers said of them: 'I'm not a member of any organized political party: I'm a Democrat!'"

"Snark, I'm glad to know you haven't been swallowed by the whale of *accidie* and I imagine that your humor just now testifies to that," said Advocatus. Turning to Margaret, he began, "Margaret, does the news of the day tend to get you down as well?"

"Yes, the news certainly is frequently awful and overwhelming. I think what helps me most is the time I spend in meditation. In fact, Advocatus, we were meditating when you showed up and peered in the front window of Elsewhere on Saturday. We'd just finished reading the newspapers and some texts from the Bible along with a good commentary." Then, with a giggle, she added: "That's always a 'pairing' as good as any you and Snark discovered in your wine-tasting yesterday!"

"When we put together the newspaper with an informed reading of the Bible, it's often easier to discern what God might be up to in our world . . . and, consequently, what *we* might need to be up to. At the very least, it keeps us focused on the way the world is, along with the ongoing activity of God *in* our world. Our meditative practices aim to center us in *both* of those realities.\* But I agree with my quote-dropping husband, it *is* a struggle to keep a creative tension between the two, and the church has often emphasized one at the expense of the other."

"Ah, yes, meditation . . ." Advocatus began, his words trailing off. "Meditation is part of the contemplative tradition of some of the medieval mystics. I confess I wasn't always fond of the mystics, Margaret. It's not that they were an unruly bunch . . . just that they thought *so differently* from the orthodoxy I was more comfortable with. Also, and more

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\* Even the names of some organizations reflect their commitment to preserving this balanced tension. For example, the Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, heads up the [Center for Action and Contemplation](#) in Albuquerque, NM; and the motto of the now 67 year-old [Kirkridge Retreat Center](#) in Bangor, PA is "Picket and Pray." ~ *The Editors*

problematically for me, they sometimes quietly went their own way, not caring overmuch for the differing opinions of their superiors in the church's hierarchy. But I've noticed recently that people such as Father Thomas Keating are bringing back contemplative prayer and meditation into the church.<sup>34</sup> I believe he calls it, 'Centering Prayer.'

"If I'm not prying too much, Margaret, would you tell me about that particular meditation I saw you all were doing last Saturday?"

"You're not prying at all, Advocatus, and I'd be happy to. You saw us engaged in what we've come to call 'Colorful Prayer.' I think the best way to explain it to you is to invite all of us to engage in a few moments of it right now, if you're willing."

"More than willing, Margaret," responded Advocatus as Snark smiled and nodded.

"Great! But first, we need to begin with some theology. We think of prayer as a way in which we relate to the Holy. Prayer of any sort implies a particular understanding of God. For this form of prayer, we don't imagine God as a Supreme Being so much as we imagine God as being like the air. As odd as that may first seem, it's actually quite Biblical. In both Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Jewish and Christian Bibles, there is a word that can mean 'air,' 'wind,' 'breath,' and 'spirit.' The Hebrew word is *ruach* and the Greek is *pneuma*.

"When we spend time in 'colorful prayer,' we imagine God being like the air in the room. There isn't anywhere in the room where the air isn't; we are in the surrounding air, and when we breathe, the air is in us. Furthermore, it doesn't matter who is sitting in the room: the air is equally available to each and all. It doesn't play favorites or require anything of anyone, except that they receive the air through the act of breathing. And, of course, if you don't receive the air . . . well, then, you're dead! So you can see how this is a notion of God as both gracious and life-giving. This is very much the metaphor for God in the 'perennial tradition' called mysticism. It's a panentheistic idea: God is in all things . . . and all things are in God. It's really quite traditional: Paul, in Acts 17:28 says that *in* God 'we live and move and have our being.'"

"You know, Margaret," Advocatus replied, "For many years I've known those Hebrew and Greek words, but I never thought about them in connection with prayer. You've piqued my interest. Go on!"

Margaret smiled at Advocatus. "I'm glad I can share a new thing with you! Once we imagine God in this way, we next ask ourselves what it is that we need. Is it to be reassured, to be peaceful, to be given courage, to forgive and be reconciled, to be stirred up to action, to be healed in body/mind/spirit? Whatever it is that we need, we assume that those things come from the Holy that surrounds us. So we then give what we are seeking a specific color. For the sake of my teaching this prayer today, let's pretend that we each need the same thing: the experience of God's deep peace or calmness in the presence of the newspapers' awful news. Advocatus, since you're our guest, what color

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<sup>34</sup> Click [here](#) to learn more about Thomas Keating and Contemplative Spirituality.

would you like to assign to God's peace?"

"Oh my . . . well, uh . . . I'm not sure . . . I mean, I never thought of doing such a thing. I may have to think a lot about this. I want to get it right."

"There's no such thing as getting it 'right' or 'wrong,' Advocatus," Snark interjected with a smile and what he hoped was a visible twinkle in his eye.

"Oh . . . well then . . . yellow . . . yes, a deep rich yellow . . . sort of like the color of daffodils. I hope that's an okay color?"

"It will do splendidly, Advocatus!" Margaret smiled at him. "So, for this sort of prayer we'll take our time. It's not something to rush through the way people do when they '*say*' their prayers.' Instead, we'll sort of '*listen*' our prayer,' if that makes any sense."

"Up until now I've been with you, Margaret. I get it that we all might do well to slow down our prayers a bit . . . you know . . . so that we don't approach the Almighty as though we've got a pot on the stove we've got to get to before it boils over. I think I'm guilty of doing that myself . . . particularly in public worship where I lead worshippers in 'saying' prayers. But I'm not sure what you mean by 'listening' our prayer."

"I suppose it *is* confusing, Advocatus. Let me see if this helps. So often in our prayers, we can hardly wait to tell God what's on our mind, as though God doesn't know already! (Of course, I'll grant you, *we* may need to put words to what is on our hearts in order for *us* to understand ourselves.) We tell God what we need, what our aches are, what troubles us, who we want God to heal or motivate or bless. We aim our words *at* God almost like they're coming from an assault rifle on full automatic. Poor God!"

"And poor us! For we miss a lot when we don't give God a chance to get a word in edgewise. We're so busy talking at God . . . filling the silence with our verbiage . . . that we don't listen to God. I suspect we might be allergic to the silence in which we might experience God's reply . . . a reply that often comes as an *awareness of Presence*. So we need, I think, to be still as part of our praying. We need to listen . . . to take a receptive stance toward God . . . to experience God's nearness and presence. So that's why I like to call it 'listening our prayers.'"

"Wow . . . that's a lot to think about, Margaret. But what you just said does clarify for me what you mean. What happens next?"

"Well, after we've assigned a color to that for which we are praying, we become listeners. To do so, we just sit quietly and relax. We might follow our breathing for awhile, noticing how the air comes in cool . . . and is expelled slightly warmer. We might notice that, gradually, our breathing becomes deeper and slower . . . that, instead of the breath being in the top of our lungs and our chest going up and down with our breathing, now it's becoming a fuller inhalation . . . and our tummies move out when we take in our breath . . . and in when we exhale. This 'diaphragmatic' or 'belly breathing' is

associated with a state of relaxation and well-being. We pay attention to our breathing so that we can adopt the relaxed attentiveness of a listener.

"Then we get colorful! If God is like the air in the room, and if God's peace is a deep, rich yellow color . . . then, as we sit here . . . perhaps with our eyes closed if that's comfortable . . . we gently breathe in and out at our own pace. Now imagine that the air up at the ceiling has turned that rich, yellow color of God's peace. It's always touching the ceiling, is wall-to-wall, and is completely transparent. But now it has slowly moved toward us, extending downward a couple of feet.

"As we continue to sit here, imagine that now that deep yellow color of God's peace extends from the ceiling half-way down to the floor. In your imagination you might feel it gently brush against your hair as it . . . now . . . moves on down until it touches the floor . . . and so you briefly lift your feet up and rest them again on the floor. The air in the room . . . wall-to-wall and ceiling-to-floor . . . has now turned the deep, rich yellow color of God's peace. That peace has descended on us. You are now fully in this part of God . . . God's peace. It is in this peace of God that we are now living, and moving, and having our life. Take a moment to just let that thought in . . . let it move from your head to your heart. Really let that in: you are in God's peace!

"Now become aware of your breathing. And at some point when you inhale, imagine you are inhaling the deep, rich, yellow-colored air of God's peace. This is then taken to every cell of your body . . . all 50 trillion of them. God's peace is now in you . . . deeply within you . . . surrounding all of you outside and inside . . . even the synapses (those tiny spaces between the ends of the neurons in your brain) glow with the rich, deep yellow of God's peace. Again, take a moment just to let that thought in . . . not only are you in God's peace . . . God's peace is now in you!"

The three of them sat in silence for a few moments, experiencing God's peace in perhaps a new way. Then Margaret continued.

"If you should wish to do so, you could end your time of colorful prayer right here. But you could also wonder if there might be any other persons who would need, desire, or benefit from the experience you are having right now. If so, you can pray for them now in a colorful way . . . and here's how.

"If the person you're praying for is one you'd feel comfortable sitting beside, then imagine that person being here with you right now. They, too, are fully in the rich, deep yellow air of God's peace. And as they breathe, God's peace is fully entering into them. If the person you're praying for is someone you'd be reluctant to be in close proximity to . . . perhaps it's even an enemy . . . you can simply imagine them wherever they may be sharing the same experience of God's peace. In this way, we can practice "intercessory" prayer in a colorful sort of way.

"So now, or in a few moments . . . whenever you are ready to conclude your time of prayer . . . you might silently or out loud, say 'Thank you!' Then open your eyes, give

yourself a good stretch . . . and go on with your day. You will do so as a person who has been changed by your experience. So the day you go on with will be different too."

The three of them slowly blinked their way back into the room and it was Snark who spoke first. "Margaret, thanks for leading us in that! I feel much better . . . encouraged actually."

"For once I agree *completely* with your husband, Margaret!" Advocatus added with a grin. I'm glad we're talking about how to keep ourselves from throwing in the towel in this world of 24/7 media saturation. Otherwise, we would 'grow weary in well-doing' as St. Paul once observed to a church that he started."

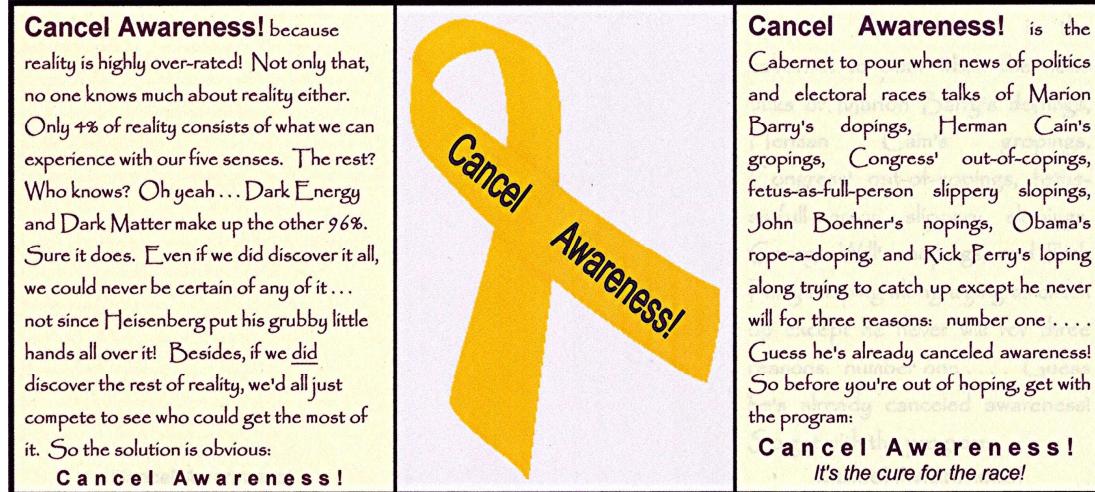
"Well put, Advocatus. Why don't we finish our papers . . . and perhaps catch a brief nap. It won't be long before school lets out. We'll have some kids in here doing their homework, and some will want help with it. Hanging out with them and giving them a hand is as sure a cure for *accidie* as we're likely to find today . . . though you may want to take a pass and get some more rest, Advocatus. By the way, hon," she continued, turning toward Snark, "I see you've opened your package. What's in it?"

"It's a graphic that I'm going to hang up tomorrow in Elsewhere."

Margaret and Advocatus examined the graphic Snark had purchased. It read:

**"Seven social sins: politics without principles, wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice."** ~ Mahatma Gandhi, ! "#

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\* We are pleased to report that the package was *not* a bottle of wine with this label on it, for that would have presented us with a mystery we probably couldn't solve: why would Snark mail a bottle of wine with his own label to himself? ~ *The Editors*

### Dialogue 23 - Gandhi and Higgs At Work RSV

"It takes only one drink to get me drunk. The trouble is, I can't remember if it's the thirteenth or the fourteenth." It was not Advocatus who said that; it was George Burns. A contemporary of Burns' . . . the humorist Robert Benchley . . . once observed that "drinking makes such fools of people, and people are such fools to begin with, that it's compounding a felony."

Although a typical serving of brandy, a bottle of beer, a shot of bourbon, and a 5-ounce glass of wine each contain about the same amount of alcohol . . . and each can eventually induce a state of drunkenness and the symptoms of its subsequent hangover . . . their reputations vary considerably.

For example, Ambrose Bierce published *The Devil's Dictionary* in 1911 and defined brandy in the following way:

"Brandy, n. A cordial composed of one part thunder-and-lightning, one part remorse, two parts bloody murder, one part death-hell-and-the-grave and four parts clarified Satan."

Beer has been around nearly as long as humans and has been praised by many. Ben Franklin is widely and fondly remembered for his saying "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." The humorist Dave Barry, perhaps hoping that one day *his* face will be on the \$100 bill, observed that "Without question, the greatest invention in the history of mankind is beer. Oh, I grant you that the wheel was also a fine invention, but the wheel does not go nearly as well with pizza."

When it comes to wine, however . . . and you knew we would get to wine eventually! . . . Galileo had a gentler and lovelier description: "Wine is sunlight, held together by water." That is a definition that simply cannot be improved upon!

Nevertheless, drinking too much wine produces the same altered state and ensuing discomfort as any other form of alcohol. As someone once observed about consuming too much wine, "A hangover is the wrath of grapes." \*

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\* IMPORTANT NOTE: The author's light-hearted treatment of drinking too much glosses over the seriousness of such behavior. We do not argue that alcohol can certainly have its appropriate place in most adults' lives. But, as with many things, the consumption of alcohol is frequently overdone. This can result in incredible misery to ones' physical health as well as to ones' relationships. Please . . . if you or someone you love is drinking too much and it is beginning to interfere with an appropriate level of functioning, the best course is first to get educated. One source is Alcoholics Anonymous <http://www.aa.org>. The group provides a wealth of information on the subject as well as a recovery program that has proven itself to be effective. *Alcoholism is ultimately a fatal disease if left untreated.* If you have a concern about your drinking or that of a friend, talk to a knowledgeable professional: clergy, physicians, counselors, or a friend who is in the AA program. ~ *The Editors*

In spite of certain appearances to the contrary, Advocatus' body was still feeling the effects of his "wine tasting" the day before, even though he had forced himself to drink plenty of water. His overconsumption of wine had dehydrated his brain along with the rest of his body. And so it was that, after their discussions about *accidie* and meditation, Advocatus retired to his room. He did some reading and dozed off and on throughout the afternoon. By suppertime, he joined Margaret and Snark for a light meal and retired early, feeling doubly grateful: that his hangover had not been more severe, and that his hosts truly cared for him.

Early in the afternoon of the next day, Snark was hanging up his new graphic when Billy, the first of the day's high school students, walked in, plopped his 6'2" frame on the sofa with one leg hooked over its arm and said, "What's up, Mr. T.?"

"Hi there, Billy!" Snark responded. "Glad to see you looking relaxed! I'm just putting up this quotation from Mahatma Gandhi. I figure it might spark some discussion."

Billy's sandy-colored hair was on the longish side, and could best be described as a mash-up between the neat rows of a precision military band and a plate full of spaghetti noodles. Yes . . . that is the best description available. It was obvious that a lot of careful attention had been given to his hair; but just as clearly, that this attention had been insufficient to resolve the issue of whether his hair would be proceeding on the straight and narrow, or just weaving haphazardly all over the place.

"I've read a little about Gandhi in History, Mr. T." said Billy, extricating himself from the couch and going over to the wall where the plaque now hung in a place of prominence. "I think he was a strange but neat sort of guy."

Snark observed Billy as he read Gandhi's words. He saw concentration, and then fascination, spread over Billy's face as his eyes took in their meanings; and he heard Billy's whistle and his "Wow!" when he'd finished reading it.

"I think I might be able to use some of what Gandhi said in our civics class this week. We've been discussing some of the headlines about the country's financial mess and the gridlock in Washington. I think his words about 'politics without principles' and 'commerce without morality' would fit right in. And I bet nobody else in class will quote Gandhi . . . so it'd be really cool if I did!" And then, after a couple of beats, he added, "Of course, I guess it'd be okay if someone else beat me to the punch. Like you said to me once, Mr. T., 'Grades aren't the goal: learning is.' I like what Gandhi said. Glad you put them up."

Before they could continue their conversation further, Jen came through Elsewhere's door and sang out a "Hi!" to Margaret, who was arranging some books on a table nearby. Jen's greeting came with a look of affection and respect for Margaret on her face . . . a lovely face decorated with piercings in her nose and eyebrows . . . an oval face framed by a rather short-cropped do of brunette hair with a streak of it dyed the color of claret wine.

Jen was also in her junior year and shared several classes with Billy. Trying to conceal the excitement he felt at her arrival, Billy looked over at her and simply said, "Hey, Jen!"

Jen returned the greeting and added one for Snark. "Hey, Mr. T.! Haven't seen you in awhile!"

As Jen and Margaret walked past Snark and Billy, Jen slowed ever so slightly and looked at . . . well, it was difficult to tell if she was looking at either one or both of them, so let's just say she looked their way . . . and said with a slightly shy smile and a rising blush on her cheeks, "Must be my lucky day!" She and Margaret continued walking back to the Wi-Fi center, where Jen put her books on the desk and fell into a conversation with Margaret.

Upon first glance, many adults would have dismissed Jen as "just another dumb, punk kid," never realizing that she was smart, inquisitive and imaginative. Nor would they have known that Jen's dad had been an Army sergeant whose 2004 death in Iraq by an IED that exploded under his then un-reinforced Humvee was a loss she still mourned. Jen had been ten at the time and he had been her hero.

Her mother, who worked long hours at a low-wage job for a freight company, loved her daughter. But she had too little time and energy left over at the end of her long days to express that love as much as she wished. As a result, she didn't know much about Jen's inner life . . . her grief, her hopes and fears, and the angst-ridden saga of the boys Jen thought she might actually love, but wasn't sure if pursuing them was worth the pain of a possible break-up later on. Jen understood her mother's predicament as much as anyone her age could, but felt a genuine loneliness for caring, adult energy in her life.

So when Margaret returned Jen's greeting with a broad smile and a "Hi there, yourself, lovely Jen!" it's no wonder the young girl sat down and started to tell Margaret some of the things she and her mom seldom had the opportunity to share. With some regularity, Jen's conversation turned to her father and her complicated, ongoing emotions about losing him so soon. Margaret listened with her "third ear" and heard Jen out.

Our outward appearance always tells a story, whether we intend it or not. In Billy's case, his hair was a metaphor for his family. His mother worked as a part-time accountant for two small businesses. An attractive-but-tired-looking woman of considerable organizational skills and exactitude, her ability to express warmth and humor were, apparently, still missing in action.

Billy's father, as is often the case in marriages, was nearly the opposite of Billy's mother. An affable, outgoing but broken man, he suffered from life-long low self-esteem resulting from his having had an emotionally distant father who, sometimes with great hostility, shamed him. And his mother, who was warm enough, was ineffectual in setting self-protective boundaries in the relationship with her depressed husband.

Billy's father had seldom succeeded in his attempts at a career, thus fulfilling his own father's "prophesies" that he'd never amount to much. As failure built upon failure, the unhappy man found solace in alcohol. But eventually, even as the alcohol dampened down his emotional pain, it further contributed to his failures. The marriage became one that alternated between distance and vituperation on the part of Billy's mother . . . followed by remorseful regret, and then more retaliatory drinking on the part of his father. (This cyclical dynamic is why alcoholism is often considered a family disease and treated as such.)

Billy had other siblings, each of whom played their own roles in their dysfunctional family's drama. Billy played the role of the Heroic Child, whose "script" called for him to present to the outside world a view of his family as entirely "normal." To this end, he became a high achiever and a model of responsibility. There are worse roles for children of such families to play as they try to make sense out of the interpersonal chaos that surrounds them. But Billy's role still cost him dearly: for in order for him to play his heroic role, he had to deny the reality of his own emotions, suppress his spontaneity, and censor any thoughts about his family that diverged from "the party line."

To others, Billy could at times appear "too good to be true." Privately, at 2 a.m. when he couldn't get back to sleep, Billy had also thought he might be an imposter, a fake, a phony. The ensuing self-deprecation further robbed him of his sleep.

A little over a year before this particular day, Snark had referred Billy to one of his colleagues for counseling. While neither of his parents could see their way clear to seek help for themselves, Billy stuck with his counselor in their weekly appointments and began to get some perspective on his family and on himself. He was becoming more and more real as a result.

"Hey, Jen," said Billy, affecting a quite casual walk back to where Jen and Margaret sat. "Take a look at the new graphic Mr. T. just put up over there by the piano."

Jen got up and looked at Gandhi's words. "Some of those would be good for us to bring up in Mr. Evans' Civics class, Billy." Then, her attention seemingly focused somewhere else, she added: "I get them all, I think . . . except for the bit about 'worship without sacrifice.' I don't like that word 'sacrifice.'

"That's what my dad did: he 'sacrificed' himself in that war we should never have fought. So did more than 4,000 others on our side. It's such a waste. It looks to me like 'politics without principles' is what got us into Iraq. There were no weapons of mass destruction . . . Iraq wasn't a threat to us . . . we were just angry that we'd been attacked by the terrorists and lashed out. It all seems so stupid . . ." Jen's words trailed off and she wiped some tears out of her eyes.

Billy reached for a box of tissues on the piano and passed them to Jen, who took some and blew her nose. Billy used his fingers to wipe some tears out of his own eyes, but not quickly enough to escape Jen's notice. Almost instinctively, while thanking Billy for the

tissues Jen put her arms around him and the two of them stood there, holding each other and mutually sharing this moment of sadness, of warmth, of attraction, and awkwardness.

Margaret and Snark quietly joined them at the graphic.

"It's a confusing and sometimes terrible world we live in, isn't it?" Margaret asked, somewhat rhetorically. "But what you both are doing is the other side of life . . . the beautiful side. You've seen each other's pain and you've entered into it with caring and compassion. You neither one have answers to why there's war . . . why good people sometimes suffer. Neither do we. None of us have the answers, but all of us can respond. Your response to each other is beautiful." Then, fixing them with her gaze and a quiet smile she added, "*Please . . . don't ever lose that!*"

"Drinks are on the house!" said Snark with a quiet brightness. "We've got Coke and Dr. Pepper. What'll it be?" Snark brought everyone their choice and the four of them adjourned to one of the small round tables designed to foster intimate conversation.

Billy began it. "You know, Mrs. T., what you said about not having answers but still being able to respond? Well, that's sort of how my counselor is with me. He doesn't have a lot of answers either. But he *is* able to respond to me and let me know he's at least trying to be with me where I'm at. Usually he succeeds. And that feels pretty good. I know he cares.

"Jen, I'm thinking that I don't much like the word 'sacrifice' either. My counselor tells me I've learned to 'sacrifice' my childhood in order to take care of my crazy family . . . you know, to make them look good I have to shine . . . even when I don't want to. And he's right about that. I also like what Gandhi said, but I'm not so sure about 'sacrifice' . . . and I sure as hell wouldn't want to link sacrifice to worship. That doesn't seem to make much sense. It sounds gross . . . maybe even obscene . . . like throwing a virgin down a volcano or something."

Snark made a silent, appreciative mental note that Billy hadn't bothered to "clean up his language" and "be good." The boy was, indeed, making progress!

The four of them heard footsteps in the stairway. When they looked up, saw Advocatus emerging from his quarters upstairs. Though still in his casual clothes, he had his crosier with him, and steadied himself with it as he approached them.

"Hello, everyone," he said, deliberately making eye contact with Billy and Jen, and flashing a sincere smile. If this is a private conversation, I can settle in by the door with a good book."

"This is our friend, Advocatus," said Snark to Jen and Billy. He's the pastor of a large congregation at the other end of the county and is visiting us this week. Would you all prefer to continue as just the four of us, or should we invite Advocatus to join us?"

Our motives are almost always a mixture which is almost always hidden behind our actions. Jen and Billy had just shared an emotionally intimate moment; and, clearly, there was already a mutual . . . if unacknowledged . . . attraction between them. If they invited Advocatus to stay, it would change their dynamic and reintroduce some distance between them. On the one hand, this would be a loss for them. On the other, such a distance would provide some relieving space to assimilate the intimacy they had just experienced.

Just as problematic for Billy was whether extending such an invitation would be the "proper" and expected response that the Heroic Child part of him was so adept at giving; or simply an expression of his own, genuine hospitality. As for Jen, such an invitation might indulge her inborn sense of inquisitiveness and curiosity; or it might defend her against any further immediate intimacy, and her anxiety about the subsequent loss of it.

But all of this analysis is what therapists sometimes do with their clients as they each look retrospectively at the latter's behaviors. There was no apparent analysis going on at all after Snark asked for their opinion. Jen and Billy simply looked at each other; then at Margaret and Snark. Almost in unison they said, "Join us!"

Advocatus pulled up a chair and lowered himself into it, propping his crosier against a nearby table.

Billy and Jen each responded true to type. Jen turned to Advocatus and said, "Nice walking stick . . . and, hey . . . I really like your hair color! I bet we use the same dye!"

Then Billy asked, "So do we call you 'Rev. Advocatus,' 'Pastor Advocatus,' or 'Mr. A.?'"

It was Advocatus who now responded in a quite uncharacteristic way. "People call me all sorts of names," he responded, casting a raised-eyebrow-glance at Snark. "Just call me 'Advocatus.' That's what my friends call me!"

"Looks like there are six of us now!" said Snark. "I think Higgs Boson just pulled up a chair for herself along with Advocatus!"

## Dialogue 24 - Sacrifice and Violence RSV

"Let's get a bigger table, now that Advocatus has joined us," suggested Snark, and after finding a more suitable one, he continued. "We don't need to pull up a chair for Higgs Boson. She seems quite happy just zooming around between us, blinking in and out in a way we can't predict . . . at least not with any certainty."

Jen shot Margaret a look of confused astonishment and said, "I don't understand. Did you say 'Higgs something-or-other', Mr. T.?" Margaret and Advocatus laughed knowingly, and Billy quickly joined them.

"Do you all want to tell Jen about Higgs, or should I?" inquired Snark.

"Don't let Snark do it . . . we'll be here all night!" Advocatus laughed as Margaret and Billy added their own knowing hoots.

"I'll give it a whirl," offered Billy. "Jen, Mr. T. likes to tease . . . at least I think he's teasing . . . when he talks about this thing called Higgs Boson. He uses it like most preachers do when they talk about the Holy Spirit . . . you know, as a name for God's mysterious activity in our lives all the time. Higgs Boson is actually the name of some sort of sub-atomic particle that physicists just recently proved the existence of. I think Mr. T. likes to talk about Higgs Boson because, he says, the quantum physics view of the universe shows that it is mysterious and not at all like the machine Sir Isaac Newton's laws describe. He says that means that theology, physics and cosmology can finally have a more interesting conversation. In fact, he says there's something called Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle that says that even though they have discovered Higgs Boson, they can never predict exactly where it will be and what it will do . . . just like the Holy Spirit. Did I get all that right, Mr. T.?"

"Yep . . . you did, Billy! I would have said it differently, of course, but . . ."

"But we'd be here all night!" interrupted Margaret and Advocatus together, sounding very much like a truth-telling Greek chorus that had spoken on cue.

It was a fun moment for everyone. Jen and Billy fairly dissolved in laughter, thus creating a different sort of intimacy between them than they had experienced prior to Advocatus' arrival.

After their laughter had subsided, Margaret spoke to Billy and Jen, saying, "Before Advocatus joined us, we were discussing one of the sayings of Gandhi. Should we continue with that or speak of other things?"

"I'm okay with continuing," said Billy. Jen concurred with a "Me, too."

"Okay!" Margaret smiled. "Let's just say that for perfectly good reasons that are unique to both of you, you both have a problem with Gandhi saying that one of the seven social

sins is 'worship without sacrifice.' That sounds very off-putting to each of you. How shall we unpack this one and try to make sense of why he included it in his list?"

"Well," began Jen, "I can tell you what I don't like about sacrifice: it means that someone or something has to die. I suppose you could say that we sacrifice plants and animals so we can eat. We kill them and eat them so we can live. But didn't people sacrifice animals in the Bible stories? How come God wanted that? I mean, what kind of God is God if He or She or It wants innocent animals killed? What's the deal with that?"

"Yeah," interjected Billy, "and then there's all that talk about Jesus being sacrificed, when even that Roman dude . . . what was his name, Pilates or something . . . even when he thought Jesus was innocent. Like Jen says, 'what's the deal with that?'"

"Good questions!" replied Margaret. "They'll be a great guide for trying to sort out why Gandhi thought worship and sacrifice had to go together. Snark? Advocatus? Do either of you want to begin? They've posed some tough questions!"

Snark and Advocatus looked at each other and did a little non-verbal dance about who would speak first. Snark broke the brief silence. "Age before beauty!" he said, grinning and gesturing broadly for Advocatus to take the lead.

"Pearls before swine!" replied Advocatus, feigning indignation . . . or so it seemed, at least. Turning toward Billy and flashing a smile, Advocatus began. "Billy, I'm glad you said what you did about the death of Jesus. He willingly sacrificed his life so that we could live a new life with God. His sacrifice is central to the faith. That's why, back in 2004, our church took its youth group to see the movie that Mel Gibson made of Jesus' death. It was called *The Passion of the Christ* and it was very realistic. In fact its dialogue was done entirely in Latin, the language of the Romans . . . and Aramaic, Jesus' language. Fortunately for us, there were English subtitles. At the time, it was the highest grossing film in history."

"You didn't! *Really*, Advocatus? You took your youth to see that movie?" exclaimed Margaret.

"Why . . . yes, Margaret, we did. But you seem upset. How so?"

"Other than it being a more than two-hour long, anti-Semitic snuff film that so focuses on the torture Jesus suffered to the near exclusion of his teachings, I have no problem at all with the movie or taking *youth* to see it, Advocatus!"

"Yes," she continued, now in a voice that was more modulated. "I *am* upset to hear you took *youth* to see it . . . but I know not everyone regards the film as I do. As I recall, out of several hundred reviews, about 50% of the reviewers liked it. There were even some United Methodist and other mainstream churches that took their youth groups to see it. Some parents even took their older elementary children to see it. Yuck! *Those* parents could have been reported to Child Protective Services! But, in fairness, you've got

company, Advocatus . . . and some of them would be *good* company. But I could never do what you did."

"I couldn't have, either, Margaret," replied Advocatus with an earnest, conciliatory tone. "Not if I had regarded the film as you do."

"Talk about a cultural divide!" exclaimed Snark. "A 50-50 split on that film about Jesus and the 50-50 split in Congress . . . it's no wonder our times are as contentious as they are! Billy and Jen, the three of us were talking earlier today about the difficult times we live in. Some people even think it means the world is coming to an end and get all lathered up about that. Others read the headlines, fall into cynicism, depression or despair, and kind of drop out . . . as though they're on an extended coffee break."

"I think I know what you mean, Mr. T. That's how I felt when my dad got killed in Iraq." Jen paused for a moment, cleared her throat, and continued. "A huge part of my world really did come to an end. And it didn't have to, 'cause the war in Iraq didn't have to be fought at all. I sort of dropped out for a couple of years. I couldn't concentrate on school work . . . I didn't even *want* to concentrate on it. Some of my friends drifted away. They said I wasn't fun anymore . . . and they were right. I told myself that didn't matter . . . that I wanted to be alone. But, more than that, I just wanted my dad back. I felt really lonely . . . I still do, but I'm glad I found Elsewhere and you guys . . . it helps."

"I'm glad you found Elsewhere, too, Jen," rejoined Margaret, "because, among other things, you really add a lot to my life too! I think St. Paul would have regarded our times differently. If he were here I think he'd say: 'I've seen times as bad . . . no, make that even worse . . . than yours. You know what these times are? They're like the time that a woman goes through when she turns to her husband in bed and says, "Wake up, dear! My water just broke . . . the baby's on the way!'"

"You mean, he'd say that all the arguing of the shouting heads, all the stupid wars, and all the other crap in our world represents *labor pains*?"

"That's right, Jen! We do indeed live in 'end times' of a sort. Like that time just before giving birth, something . . . life as we've known it . . . is definitely coming to an end. But at the same time something utterly unique and new is coming!" continued Margaret. "So it's no time for a coffee break! That can come later. Now it's time to rouse ourselves from slumber, lend our assistance, and see to it that the new birth goes well! Your generation gets to play that essential role . . . if it wants!"

"Jen," said Advocatus, "I feel honored that you've spoken so plainly about the pain you've gone through and that you've let me, a stranger, in on it. I agree with Margaret's take on what Paul would have said, and I think of something else that points in the same direction.

Jen, at my church, there's a poster hanging on the wall in one of the classrooms. Visually, it shows a bunch of buds on a dogwood tree that are encased in ice from an

early-spring storm. On it are the words from a play by the British playwright, Christopher Fry. The play is called *A Sleep of Prisoners* and, while I've never seen the play, I like the words so much I've memorized them.

Dark and cold we may be, but this  
 Is no winter now. The frozen misery  
 Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;  
 The thunder is the thunder of the floes,  
 The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.  
 Thank God our time is now when wrong  
 Comes up to face us everywhere,  
 Never to leave us till we take  
 The longest stride of soul we ever took.  
 Affairs are now soul size.  
 The enterprise  
 Is exploration into God.  
 Where are you making for? It takes  
 So many thousand years to wake,  
 But will you wake for pity's sake!<sup>35</sup>

It was Billy's turn to speak. "That's a neat quote, Advocatus, and I think I'd like to see the poster. I especially like the 'exploration into God' line. In fact, that's where we were heading, but I think we've gotten a bit off track. You know . . . the worship and sacrifice thing. Can we get back to that?"

"We're good at getting off track, aren't we?" Snark allowed. "Sometimes the best way to get from point A to point B is to take a detour. But I agree with you, Billy. Let's return to what Gandhi said.

"Advocatus and I often disagree and have a different take on things. I think I'd prefer to respond to your comments by saying that both of you are in good company in being shocked at the notion that God wants the sort of sacrifices we've been talking about . . . whether it's the sacrifice of animals . . . or even people.

"Some of the people in the Bible, as far back as the 8th century B.C., were also saying that God wasn't interested in animal sacrifice. Notably among them were the Prophets."

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<sup>35</sup> "A Sleep of Prisoners" in *Three Plays by Christopher Fry: The First Born/Thor, With Angels/A Sleep of Prisoners* (Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1965), p. 209. Included in the pages of the anonymous author's manuscript was the poster on the next page. It appears to be the poster that Advocatus had at his church and is reproduced on the next page. In its obituary of July 6, 2005, *The New York Times* reviewer Benedict Nightingale wrote of Fry: "His plays radiated an optimistic faith in God and humanity, evoking, in his words, 'a world in which we are poised on the edge of eternity, a world which has deeps and shadows of mystery, and God is anything but a sleeping partner.'" The quotation is widely available on the internet.  
 ~ The Editors

"Oh, yeah, like those guys in long robes with signs saying 'Repent for the end is near!'" put in Billy. "They were like fortune tellers, right?"



Dark and cold we may be, but this  
 Is no winter now. The frozen misery  
 Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;  
 The thunder is the thunder of the floes,  
 The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.  
 Thank God our time is now when wrong  
 Comes up to face us everywhere,  
 Never to leave us till we take  
 The longest stride of soul we ever took.  
 Affairs are now soul size.  
 The enterprise  
 Is exploration into God.  
 Where are you making for? It takes  
 So many thousand years to wake,  
 But will you wake for pity's sake!

"Not quite," Snark responded. "The word 'prophet' means 'one who speaks for another, especially God.' The prophets were more like social critics who, in the name of God, challenged the rulers and powerful classes of their day. A modern example would be

Martin Luther King, Jr. He was killed because his message rocked the boat of some of the guardians of the status quo. It was the same with Mahatma Gandhi himself. He was also assassinated. Biblical prophets sometimes met a similar fate. Jesus himself stood in the prophetic tradition. That's why Rome executed him."

"Oh! Then they'd be more like the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators?" asked Billy.

"Perhaps!" laughed Snark. "We'll have to see how all that sorts out. Fortunately, some leaders in the church have shown solidarity with the Occupiers' calling attention to the huge disparities of wealth in our country. They're certainly challenging the rich and powerful 1% and, in that respect at least, they're in the prophetic tradition."

"I wouldn't be so quick to assume that!" snapped Advocatus. They've also hurled eggs and rocks at the police and created a public health hazard. Cities are beginning to close down their encampments. Prophet-schmophet, Snark, they look like a bunch of unwashed hippies to me!"

"Granted, but don't forget, Advocatus, that Isaiah ran naked through the streets of Jerusalem to make his point!"

"Cool!" exclaimed Billy.

"Yuck! Guys." Jen shook her head, presumably in response both to what Isaiah did and Billy's response to it.

"Everyone! Truce! Let's get back to sacrifice and worship! Geez, I feel like I'm the traffic cop around here!" Margaret blurted out with a somewhat weary giggle.

"You're right, Margaret. Sorry. Amos was a prophet who challenged both the common understanding of God and the whole notion of slaughtering animals and burning them as a sacrifice to God. I've got a Bible here and I'll read you part of what he said. Amos began with a screed against the lack of caring on the part of the wealthy, and directed his remarks to the indulgent women of Israel in words that were anything but polite:

'Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!' The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.'

"Then Amos addressed the people's custom of making burnt animal sacrifices to this God of justice:

'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your

harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

"And a little later on, Amos says this about the extravagantly wealthy folks in Israel:

'Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria . . . Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of (the rest of the nation that mourns its own condition). Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away."

"Wow!" said an excited Billy. "That's in the Bible? That *rocks!* Sounds like Amos could have been an Occupier!"

"Or an Egyptian protesting the regime of Hosni Mubarak . . . or a Libyan saying the same to Gaddafi," added the ever-perceptive Jen. "But, back to 'worship and sacrifice.' The kind of God Amos believed in didn't want a barbecue in his honor . . . but for people to do right by one another. Is that what he's saying?" she asked, mercifully keeping the group on task.

"You got it, Jen!" said Margaret, smiling appreciatively at her. *What we sacrifice has everything to do with what we mean by 'God.'* At their best, the Hebrews and Jews believed God to be a God of justice and mercy . . . a God of compassion. Therefore, what pleases God has nothing to do with killing and burning animals . . . and nothing whatsoever, Billy, with throwing a virgin down a volcano! That's not the sort of sacrifice desired by the God that the prophets and Jesus believed in and talked about."

"So what *is* the sacrifice that God wants, then," asked Jen. "And does it involve killing anything?"

"Clearly we're not going to get to that today, guys," said Margaret. "Your families will be wondering where you are. Can we pick this up tomorrow?" After Margaret got assent from everyone, she added as a coda: "Good! But for now, let's just say that worshipping the God Jesus knew *does* require a sacrifice. Something has to die . . . but no violence is involved at all. At the beginning of our conversation, Advocatus spoke of Jesus' death on the cross as a sacrifice to God for the sake of humanity. He was giving voice to a widely held, very orthodox belief. And I'm glad he said that. But I'm not thinking of Jesus' death. I don't think for a minute that God required the violence that cost Jesus his life. No, I believe that the sacrifice required by our God involves something else entirely. See you guys tomorrow!"

After the two teens left, Margaret poured a cup of tea for the three of them and turned toward the old man. "You know, Advocatus, that was a wonderful quotation from Christopher Fry you shared with Jen and Billy . . . and I was delighted that you thanked

Jen for being open with you. But when you responded to my tirade about Gibson's movie in the way you did, well, I was really moved. All of that revealed your heart . . . and it's a good heart, *Advocatus* . . . maybe even a warm heart."

*Advocatus* smiled while a pink blush filled his lined cheeks. After taking a longish moment to find his words, he cleared his throat. In a soft voice he said, "Thank you, Margaret. I don't hear that sort of thing very often. Most experience me, I think, as a bit severe and rigid. And I know I can be that way. Yes . . . often. It moves me that you see . . . I don't know, maybe the word is 'past' . . . past that more prominent part of me. I think maybe my outer rigidity sometimes tries to protect my warmer, more vulnerable heart. It's been broken many times. I confess, I feel a bit anxious telling you that; but I think I'm in good hands with you."

It was Margaret's turn to ponder while her own emotions had a chance to identify themselves and take a seat. Realizing that he was already quite vulnerable, she decided simply to offer a handshake to the old man. As he grasped her hand in response, she smiled at him and said, "Thank you, *Advocatus*. Yes, you're in good hands, and so am I."

*Snark* had been taking in the *pas de deux* between them and felt moved as well. Indeed, Margaret had given voice to a growing sense *Snark* also had of *Advocatus*: that . . . to refer again to Fry's words . . . something in him was thawing . . . that there was an 'upstart spring' occurring in him as well.

*Snark* wanted to race into that hope, but something inside held him back. Was it his own resistance to change . . . a refusal to celebrate something new in his old adversary? If *Advocatus* was indeed changing, that would mean he'd have to construct a new 'map' of their relationship. But would it be safe to navigate by an untried map? *Snark* thought he knew how Columbus' crew must have felt as they sailed further and further west toward what they believed to be the edge of the earth and the certain destruction that awaited them when they sailed over it.

Or was it his sense that spring usually comes in fits and starts? If so, would it not be prudent to be mindful of its process? Spring could be like one of Heisenberg's electrons: you could never predict with certainty both where it would be and when. A gardener who rushes the season often subjects tender young plants to a deadly, late frost . . . and maybe catches pneumonia in the process. Yet, at some point, protecting and nurturing that new growth into full bloom defines the gardener's task.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Another-Fine-Mess has recently received a copy of a very interesting and useful book called: *A Guide for Caregivers: Keeping Your Spirit Healthy When Your Caregiver Duties and Responsibilities Are Dragging You Down*, W. Benjamin Pratt (David Crumm Media, LLC, 2011). A poem called *Nuts* appears in that volume. It speaks to the metaphor the anonymous author is developing. The author is the same W. Benjamin Pratt who wrote the previously mentioned book on Bond.

St. Paul once wrote that sometimes, when we do not know even what to pray for, the Spirit does our praying for us "with sighs too deep for words." Snark remembered that comment and, whatever the meanings of his own internal experience were, decided to practice the "eloquence of silence." He said nothing with his voice, letting his gaze . . . and perhaps Higgs Boson? . . . communicate his heart.

## Dialogue 25 - Magic Carpet Ride RSV

"Hey, Snark!" exclaimed Margaret, looking up from her morning paper at breakfast the next day. "Your horoscope is right on target for once! Listen to what it says:

*'You usually want to make something beautiful out of what was once quite ordinary. However, now you'll be inspired by the challenge of creating something beautiful out of what was downright despicable.'\**

"You're right!" Snark allowed with a snort. "Like I told you last night, finding a way to make sense of worship and sacrifice for Jen and Billy is a real challenge. Maybe if I start with contradicting the church's usual, nonsensical view of Jesus' death it'll be easier."

"Contradicting it? Nonsensical?" Advocatus fairly shouted from his nearby chair. "Surely you're not going to tug on that keystone of the faith again, Snark! Billy and Jen are impressionable, less-than-well-churched adolescents, Snark. If you trot out your half-baked theories on them, you'll just poison their minds . . . and you'll irritate my own!"

"Wow . . . somebody didn't get a good night's sleep! People said Socrates was poisoning young peoples' minds, too."

"That doesn't mean you won't be leading them astray, Snark," snapped the old man. "Worship and sacrifice go together. For two thousand years, the church has taught that Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross was the only thing that could make it possible for sinful human beings to be put right with God. Jesus died for our sins, Snark. That's what you were taught in seminary. That's the settled conviction of the church. That's the sacrifice you should be talking to Billy and Jen about."

"I hope you two can hear past each other's words to the truths you're both trying to express," Margaret said. Her characteristic tone of concern was infused with a rare instance of her impatience. "When I listen to you both go at it, you frequently remind me of philosopher George Santayana's definition of fanaticism . . . 'redoubling your efforts when you've lost sight of your aim.'

"After all, Jesus' death has been called the 'atonement' . . . the 'at-one-ment.' It would be more than ironic if you two had another falling out over this issue: it would be a shame."

Advocatus and Snark had been looking at Margaret as she spoke. For a couple of minutes, in the silence following her comment, they simply studied the patterns of the red oriental carpet beneath them. The rug's pattern of repeating elephant-foot gul is commonly called "Bukhara" after the capital city of Uzbekistan from which they were

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\* This is the actual horoscope by *The Washington Post's* Holliday Mathis on the morning Q sat down to write this Dialogue. But don't ask us how we know this. ~ *The Editors*

once exported.<sup>37</sup> However, it was probably woven in the mid-19th century by Turkmen women of the Ersari tribe, and likely in a region near Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan. Although neither man was conscious of it at the time, the meaning of Ashgabat is "City of Love." \* That their chairs were connected by a carpet with this lovely association added further irony to their situation . . . and hope as well.

As they sat quietly, each was aware of two themes: the sizeable differences in how they thought about their shared faith . . . and the good and decent heart that each possessed. Why was it that the heart so often got carelessly trampled over by words so passionately voiced? It was as though their hearts were the oriental carpet . . . which, of course, *it is!*

Advocatus was the first to break the silence. "Margaret, thank you for your words and good heart. I too hope Snark and I can hear what animates the other's words."

\* An even further irony is that Albuquerque, New Mexico is simultaneously the sister city of Ashgabat and the location of Father Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation. Rohr espouses a unitive spirituality that overcomes the dualistic, either/or, black and white mindset that is so much a part of contemporary culture and its religious institutions. ~ *The Editors*

<sup>37</sup> Antique Bukhara rugs like the one in Snark and Margaret's home are created with threads colored with natural dyes. Modern versions usually are a deeper red than the orange hues of the antiques such as the one in the image below.



Then, turning to the latter, with a gentle smile now on his face, he continued. "I recall another remark of Santayana: 'Before you contradict an old man, my fair friend, you should endeavor to understand him.' I think the horoscope Margaret read will help you to understand me!"

"The challenge of creating something beautiful out of what was downright despicable" is exactly the challenge the church faced when, unique among all the world's faith traditions, its founder was executed by those in positions of authority. If the Jesus movement was to survive, Snark, a different narrative had to be told by his followers.

"Since the earliest Christians were Jews and understood life in terms of Jewish metaphors, it was only natural that they would employ the familiar metaphors of sacrifice in the Temple in order to make sense out of Jesus being executed as a criminal of the empire. If Jesus' death was part of a divine plan to reconcile humanity to God, then what looked like an ignominious defeat at the hands of the Romans could be seen as really being the work of God on behalf of saving humanity from its sin."

"Paul's writings are the earliest we have in the New Testament. He himself said that he had been taught that 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures'. Paul made that proclamation his own. That's how the church came to its teaching about Jesus' death on the cross. And that's what I think you should teach those two young people."

Before making his response, Snark took in not only what Advocatus had just said, but also the tone with which he spoke his words. "Advocatus, you have presented the matter with a deep understanding, and I have great respect for what you said. Oh sure, there are one or two details: like the fact that the meaning of Jesus' death *wasn't* a matter of 'settled Christian doctrine' until 900 years ago;<sup>38</sup> and that the New Testament witness doesn't always use the metaphor of sacrifice when it talks of how humanity is to be saved. In fact, it doesn't just use the language of 'salvation,' but other terms as well . . . such as 'being in Christ', or experiencing a 'new creation'.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, I don't want to challenge what you've said.

"If anything, I want to take what you've said just as seriously! Further, I agree with your clever use of my horoscope that Margaret read. It is precisely because we Christians today again face 'the challenge of creating something beautiful out of what was downright despicable' that I come to different conclusions about how Jesus' death should be understood, and especially in the context of Christian worship!"

"One of the reasons Christianity often falls on deaf ears in our time is that we are not first century Jews accustomed to the practice of animal sacrifice. It's not in our cultural DNA

<sup>38</sup> It was Anselm of Canterbury who formulated the "satisfaction theory" of the atonement. The Reformers created a related theory called the "substitution theory." Each "theory" maintains that humanity was inadequate at restoring a right relationship with God and that only God could do that. Therefore, the necessary sacrifice is paid by the God-Man Jesus. Numerous articles on the web describe it and other theories that followed.

<sup>39</sup> For an interesting discussion of these various terms, see Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (Harper One, 2004), Chapter 9.)

for us to think that way. The metaphorical meanings of such sacrifices do not come naturally to us. Yet, 2000 years later, we insist on continuing to promote the view that Jesus was the innocent, 'perfect', sacrificial human being . . . that he was sent by God to die and, like the original animal scapegoats before him, took the rap for us as the only way that God could forgive and restore humanity to fellowship with God.

"I maintain that this not only fails to be persuasive in our time . . . it portrays, quite unintentionally, an outrageous, insulting view of God. From the viewpoint of the church's 'settled doctrine', it is as though God's compassion can be 'purchased' . . . as though God requires violence as a part of this purchase . . . as though this 'loving' God requires the slaughter of an innocent victim! And not just any innocent victim . . . his son, no less! It is a doctrine that has lent credence to the notion of 'holy war,' something that Jesus repudiated.

"No matter how 'traditional' and 'orthodox' it may be . . . and even though its creation was rooted in overcoming a despicable situation, as you have just indicated, yet it is a downright despicable doctrine of 'redemptive violence!' The challenge for us is to create something beautiful out of it. Fortunately, we can. And the New Testament itself will help us."

"This I've got to hear, Snark. You're a clever one: I'll give you that. And I'll try to keep my mind open; but with you it's often difficult," said Advocatus with a smile still on his face . . . yet a smile that also was considering the wisdom of remaining there. "You might be somewhat comforted, Snark, by something else that Santayana said: 'It takes a wonderful brain and exquisite senses to produce a few stupid ideas.' Let me hear what will undoubtedly be your latest insane idea."

"I know that I try your patience, Advocatus, even when I'm not trying to. And what I am going to say will, at first, no doubt offend you. But if you will continue to keep your mind open, I think its appeal will grow on you. If you have trouble keeping your mind open to what you regard as the insane things I'm going to say, at least remember this: 'Sanity is madness put to good use.' Santayana said that, too!"

"First of all, Advocatus, let's remember that Jesus never asked anyone to worship him! Follow him, yes . . . worship him, no! Secondly, because Jesus stood in the tradition of the prophets and not the priests, as I told Jen and Billy yesterday, he scathingly quoted the prophet Hosea to the Pharisees when they were plotting against him. He said, 'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."' So I think we have to stand Jesus on his head to make him a proponent of sacrifice in worship.

"In fact, I think Jesus would be both puzzled and furious that we have made his death on the cross into a sacrifice . . . and one without which humankind could not be set right with God! I think he would tell *us* that the church now, like the Temple in his own day, has the *chutzpah* to claim a monopoly on people being forgiven and thus having access to God. The moneychangers in the Temple were part of this system: they sold to people the unblemished animals they could sacrifice . . . a sacrifice without which forgiveness and

access to God was deemed impossible.

"Advocatus, we in the church have done that with Jesus' death! We've stood his teachings on their head! We've made belief in our doctrines about his death the essential thing for 'getting into heaven!' Jesus would say to the church what he said when he drove the moneychangers from the Temple: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of robbers!'"

"Snark!" hissed Advocatus, the grin now utterly gone from his face. "The only thing that's going to save Billy and Jen from your twisting things around so, is that they'll never understand your point because of your tortuous verbosity! Jesus himself said, 'No one comes to the father, except through me.' That's pithy . . . memorable. You ought to remember that! Thank God for your prattling on and on! There's hope for them yet."

"Thank you, Advocatus! The thing of beauty I'm trying to construct *does* need something pithy. Let me give it a try:

"The 'passion' of Jesus was not his suffering on the cross. His *passion* was for justice and mercy being extended to those who were unjustly marginalized and suffering. He was willing to die proclaiming that as God's passionate agenda as well as his own. He did not die *for* our sins, but *because* of our sins. His first followers adopted Jesus' agenda as their own, and, like him, called that agenda 'The Kingdom of God.' Their worship was inextricably linked to their practice of compassion. They worshipped in their houses. When they were hassled by the traditional religious leaders for having abandoned the practice of offering animals as a sacrifice in the Temple, their response was a familiar one . . . but it was not voiced in a pious tone, as it is today. Rather, they retorted with what amounted to a gigantic 'Up yours!' to the Temple system's monopolistic hubris and said, 'Jesus died for our sins! We don't have to make any further sacrifices at the Temple!' \*

"Was that 'pithy' enough, Advocatus?"

"Ummm. Quite enough to pith me off, Snark. Give me a few minutes."

Advocatus lowered his head and again studied the carpet. The old man seemed to be deliberately attempting to slow his breathing. In about a minute, Snark and Margaret could see that his belly began to move in and out with his respirations . . . which were now becoming slower and deeper. Advocatus certainly regarded Snark's view as offensive. But as he sat there, breathing slowly and losing himself again in the intricate patterns of the carpet, he wondered if there were not a basic truth that each of them was affirming, yet in such very different ways.

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\* We take this opportunity to observe that, although the anonymous author is silent on the matter, he seems to have been influenced in this Dialogue by the writings of many 'progressive' Christians, including especially those of Marcus Borg and Robin Meyers. ~ *The Editors*

Advocatus had advanced a story based on Jewish metaphor; Snark had rooted his story in the historical Jesus. The story early Christians told themselves made eminent good sense to them . . . and to many who followed. But to minds raised in a more modern, scientific tradition . . . ? Could it be that a new story . . . a different "earthen vessel" . . . was needed to contain the "treasure" of the good news about Jesus, the Christ?

Advocatus noted how each of the elephant-foot patterns in the carpet was connected by dark blue lines woven into the very warp and weft of the carpet. Although there were differences in the patterns, they were all connected into an organic whole by those lines. In the same way, he mused, wasn't there was an indissoluble connection between him and Snark . . . and, for that matter, between all people . . . a connection more fundamental than the disconnections that ideas often tended to create?

Did not St. Paul say that all are "one in Christ", which is how he himself would most comfortably phrase it? Or that we are all "entangled" with each other, words which Snark would have used when he was off on his Higgs Boson thing? And did not Jesus' last prayer for his disciples include the desire that they might all be one? Did not each of them sit on that same carpet, with its patterns and meanings connecting them to one another? And, finally, might it be that the very repetitiveness of that ubiquitous pattern blinded them to its reality?

To understand Advocatus' and Snark's evolving *rapprochement*, it will be helpful . . . if perhaps a bit frustrating . . . to appreciate some facts about the human brain. Over the eons, the human brain has evolved into a tripartite structure. If you wish, think of it as being somewhat like a pearl with layer upon layer laid down around a central core. The most primitive part, its core, is buried deep in the brain's interior, where the spinal cord enters the cranium. The tissues atop this brain stem are concerned solely with safety. This innermost part of our brain assesses danger and signals us to fight, to take flight, or even to freeze. It evolved as a protection from *physical* dangers, and it is on guard in all our lives . . . even though our perceived threats are often not physical at all. Reptiles have only this sort of a brain which runs on instinct . . . so call it the alligator brain.

The next layer is the mammalian brain, sometimes called the emotional brain. It remembers important learnings from early experiences that are suffused with deep emotion . . . both fear and pleasure. It is the third, outer layer of the brain . . . the part that looks like the convoluted surface of a walnut . . . that is the uniquely human part of our brains. This is where our self-awareness lies . . . it is the part of the brain that creates culture . . . it is the part that conceives of values and plans behavior in accordance with internal values and external realities.

When the first two parts of our brain have gotten behind the wheel, so to speak, this latter part . . . the cerebral cortex . . . goes off-line. There can be only one "driver" at a time! Thus, the new brain is often unavailable to us in the presence of either perceived danger or engulfing addiction. This feature of our brains is the neurological cause of much human misery.

Advocatus had been silent for some while. The "fight or take flight" reactivity of his more primitive brain had been soothed by his deliberate attempts to slow his breathing. This, in turn, allowed the more measured, nuanced thinking of his cerebral cortex to reflect upon their conversation, and to formulate not a knee-jerk reaction, but a thought-full response.

"Snark, I'm sure you know the experience of being a little child and getting a new pair of shoes. They're pristine and unscuffed. Almost all children plead with their parents to let them wear the new ones home, so excited are they at what's shiny and new. But when we get older, we often find that the new shoes are uncomfortably stiff and, in spite of their being the correct size, they bind and chafe the feet. It takes awhile for them to get 'broken in'. And, on occasion, we have a blister as a result.

"At my age, I treasure my *old* shoes. They're comfortable, familiar, and have seen me across many years and many miles. When I have new terrain to cross, and in all kinds of questionable weather, I know I have to get some new shoes. So I gradually break them in and then start off on my new walkabout. I have a closet full of old shoes, Snark. Even though I seldom wear them, it's hard to part with them. Oh, yes, I know: there are plenty who need them . . . and eventually I do let them go. \* But not before I hold them in my hands . . . or maybe slip my feet into them . . . one last time. And I remember where they've taken me. I need to do that before I pass them along to someone else. Of course, I'll just have to throw out these shoes that absorbed rather too much wine recently!

"The story you tell about Jesus' death is a very strange new shoe. It will take a lot of getting used to. It will feel as though I'm walking around in 5-inch stilettos, and I'll be fearful of twisting my ankle getting them broken in! While I myself am happy with my old shoes, I grant you that others will take a look at them and be repelled. Their pet dogs would like nothing better than to give them a good shake and bury them in the backyard. But the church, though filled with elders like me, needs to share its treasure with the young. So, I guess 'if the shoe fits' . . . ."

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\* The writer Phyllis Tickle suggests in her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, that every 500 years or so, the Church goes through "a rummage sale," and cleans out the old forms of spirituality and replaces it with new ones. This does *not* mean that previous forms become obsolete or invalid. It simply means they lose *pride of place* as the dominant form of Christianity. Constantine in the late 4th century, early 5th, the Great Schism of the 11th century, the Reformation in the 16th century, and now the Postmodern era in the 21st century have all been points of reference for these changes.

What is giving way right now is Protestantism, in the form that we know it, and what is emerging is a new form of Christianity, what she is calling "The Great Emergence." One can only guess whether or not it is tribal form, an individualistic form, a social form, or a combination of all of them. But, what we can say is that Protestantism in all its denominational forms is losing influence and is giving way to alternative forms of Christian expression. (From Kevin Neuner's "Vialogue", [www.vialogue.wordpress.com/2008/04/27](http://www.vialogue.wordpress.com/2008/04/27))

~ The Editors

As Advocatus' voice trailed off, something caught in his throat, which he cleared immediately. Snark got up from his chair and knelt beside Advocatus, putting his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Thank you, Advocatus," he said in a warm but serious tone. "You move me with your candor, your openness, and your vulnerability. I promise you that I will do everything I can to make sure you don't twist that ankle. And, of course, taking pictures of you breaking them in will be forbidden!" he added with a chuckle, returning to his chair.

"Of course," smiled Advocatus in reply.

"It appears to me," said Margaret, breaking her observational silence, "that both of you have created something of beauty and it is there between you. Congratulations are in order! Santayana would also be pleased for, as he once observed, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' I'm so very glad you two didn't repeat your earlier falling out with each other!"

"I don't know what the three of us will be telling Jen and Billy about 'worship and sacrifice' when they get here. But after we take a nap, and if you're willing, I'll volunteer to take a crack at it. I believe I might begin with a saying of Jesus that watching you both has brought to my mind: 'Wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there I am in your midst!'"

## Dialogue 26 - Occupy a New Perspective

Although they often expressed their faith in differing ways, Snark, Advocatus, and Margaret were in agreement on at least some matters. Two instances of this are relevant for this part of our story. First, each believed that everything and everyone in the world is inter-connected. One logical corollary of this belief is that it's always naptime somewhere: clearly an instance of God's grace so generously given to *all!* This corollary was a happy fact for them since, in the second instance, they were all staunch believers in the usefulness of an afternoon nap. And so, following a simple lunch, they repaired to their respective quarters to practice the latter of these tenets of their shared faith.

Alas, many in the world . . . in spite of much scientific evidence supporting it . . . do not share either of their beliefs. As an example, consider Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel. She was recently told by a confederation of German trade unions that studies by the Harvard School of Public Health and their counterparts at the University of Athens Medical School in Greece, had discovered that Greek workers who took regular afternoon naps had 37% lower mortality rates from coronary illnesses than did those who did not take naps. As a result, the unions wanted siestas built into their own workdays.

Although the verbatim of her reaction has not yet made it into the press, we can imagine her saying: "*Geh raus, rollmops!*" \* I was with you when you cited the *Harvard* people . . . but their data is corrupted by those so-called 'researchers' down in Greece! Clearly, their research is biased by the Greek's lazy, profligate habits. They're just trying to justify their continued freeloading on us hard-working Germans! Either they work harder or they can leave the EEU! If the Greeks continue with their naps, there will be no more Euro!" We further imagine that she then added, in a fit of spaetzle-spitting pique, "The average Greek worker is nothing but a '*roué*!'"

In threatening a European dis-connection with the Greeks using these particular words, Chancellor Merkel was no doubt unaware that she was giving evidence of that very interconnectedness the slumbering trio believed in. How so? The evidence is subtle but significant. Here's how.

Did you notice that "*roué*" is an anagram of "Euro"? This interconnection of the two words is reason enough to warrant our following it. "*Roue*" is the root word, which in French means "wheel." "*Roué*" is also a pejorative which has, as its more polite meaning, "a dissolute (freeloading) man in fashionable society." (Stripped of such politesse, it refers to a debauched or lecherous person.) Its verbal form is "*rouer*", which means "to break upon a wheel" which, in the past, was apparently the punishment deemed fitting for those individuals defined by the word "*roué*." Brrrr! That Protestant work ethic has sharp teeth!

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\* Literally, "Get out, you rolled, pickled herring fillets!" ~ Editors

Are you beginning to see the emerging interconnections? No? Then let's go "round the bend" of this wheelie a bit more. It is almost always the case that such a "going 'round the bend" is the path to wisdom. The interconnections will then become quite clear.

Consider the huge *roue* or wheel created by the French. In 2000, they erected a 200 foot tall Ferris wheel on the Place de la Concorde to mark the new millennium. By contrast, the British had, in 1999, erected the London Eye: a Ferris wheel that towers some 443 feet above the River Thames: still the tallest cantilevered Ferris wheel in the world.

In a departure from what is sometimes alleged to be France's unofficial motto, "*La Taille Importe*," \* the French wheel, while not taller, is *transportable*! It has been installed in various locations from Birmingham, England to Bangkok, Thailand. This is made possible by it's having *no fixed foundations*, being secured instead by, one supposes, "bladders" containing 11,000 gallons of water. (This latter fact, should it ever come to her attention, will doubtless further alarm Chancellor Merkel as she seeks a renewed alliance with France's government in order to stabilize the Euro.)

To round out this necessarily discursive, "going-'round-the-bend" meditation upon the two aforementioned shared beliefs of the three who napped at Elsewhere; and in order to fully circumambulate this metaphorical mandala to where we began . . . perhaps, thereby, even knowing ourselves for the first time <sup>40</sup> . . . we conclude by referring you to a delightful and informative 2007 article about the London Eye. Called "Love At First Sight." Its author, Steve Rose, observed with typical British humor that the London Eye's "brilliantly inessential function" was simply to lift people up . . . where they could have a look around . . . and return them to earth where they started.

(Go to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2007/aug/30/uk.london> for the complete article, which is worth a read if you like such wheels. © Guardian News & Media Ltd.)

Just as from atop the London Eye one can see and appreciate the incredible interconnected diversity of London and its environs . . . and you should really pause to observe it right now <sup>41</sup> . . . that is also precisely the function of an afternoon nap. Indispensably, a good nap lifts up our energies and raises our perspectives . . . so that we might have a more comprehensive view of reality . . . and, therefore, a greater understanding and appreciation of the wonderful, inter-connected diversity all about us.

\* "Size Does Matter!" ~ *The Editors*

<sup>40</sup> The anonymous author frequently stands on the shoulders of others and quotes them without indicating that he is doing so. The preceding phrase, we believe, is a fragment from a poem by T. S. Eliot called "Little Gidding." It is embedded in the following verse: "We shall never cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time." In the context of what the author is developing, this is a fitting, if unacknowledged, use of Eliot's poem.

<sup>41</sup> For a panoramic view from atop the London Eye, go to this internet link:  
[http://tools.wmflabs.org/zoomviewer/index.php?f=London\\_360%C2%B0\\_Panorama\\_from\\_the\\_London\\_Eye.jpg](http://tools.wmflabs.org/zoomviewer/index.php?f=London_360%C2%B0_Panorama_from_the_London_Eye.jpg)

We hope, therefore, that Chancellor Merkel . . . even if she doesn't avail herself of the "brilliantly inessential function" of a Ferris wheel . . . might consider taking a daily nap, if only on an experimental basis! Europe's future may hang in the balance.

After we have engaged in this brilliantly *essential* function of taking a 360 degree detour, let us now return to Elsewhere. After they had separately-but-together concluded their sacred ritual of surrendering to the gift of sleep, the well-rested trio joined one another down in Elsewhere's main room. Margaret checked her email and busied herself in the kitchen while Snark and Advocatus brewed up a large pot of Earl Grey tea. After pouring themselves a cup, they sat around the same table where they had met with Billy and Jen the day before.

"How on earth are we going to help those two wonderful young people with their concerns about worship and sacrifice going together?" asked Advocatus, simultaneously stretching and yawning. After a moment, in which Snark and Margaret joined him, thus creating what can most accurately, if not best, be described as a postprandial pandiculatory *ménage à trois*, Margaret replied. \*

"As I said earlier, I'd like to take note of where you two wound up earlier today. That can set the stage for both of you to give a condensed version of your respective views on the subject. After that, I'd like to share my view of worship and sacrifice, since it builds on *both* of yours."

Snark and Advocatus looked at each other . . . then at Margaret . . . and back again at each other. "I'm good with that, Margaret," replied the old man. "How about you, Snark?"

"I've learned to trust my wife's sensibilities over the years, Advocatus." Looking affectionately at Margaret, Snark added, "That's a splendid idea, Margaret. I think Advocatus and I might learn as much as Billy and Jen!"

No sooner had he said their names than the front door opened. Billy held the door open for Jen and bowed in a theatrical way to usher her in before him. Jen gave an almost inaudible giggle, blushed slightly, and entered the room followed by Billy, who had, it appeared, taken extra time trying to make his hair go in the same, correct, direction . . . and with admirable results.

After greetings had been exchanged, each secured their drink of choice and sat around a large bowl of chips, carrots, and celery. As they began plunging those items into some bowls of tasty dip that Snark had placed on the table, Margaret began.

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\* In order to preserve our PG-13 or PG-17 rating, we note that, *in contemporary usage*, the meaning of this French term has actually been extended to mean 'any living relationship between three people.' A sexual component to that relationship is not necessary for the term to be used. ~ *The Editors*

"You both seem energized today!"

"Yeah, Margaret, the cold front is a quick-moving one. It feels warmer and the sun's coming out. That always makes me feel better," affirmed Jen.

"Ditto for me. And I always feel more energy when Jen is happy," Billy added without first giving his words some thought. As a result, within a second or two Billy began to blush a bit and fidget in his seat, for a moment averting his glance away from Jen.

Hoping to divert attention from the awkwardness Billy and Jen were feeling, Margaret said, "Well, whatever the cause, I'm glad you've both got some energy so we can get into this rather large issue of why Gandhi said that worship and sacrifice belong together."

Addressing the two youth directly, Margaret continued. "The three of us had an animated conversation about this issue earlier today. No matter what their religion, people often don't agree on lots of things when it comes to their beliefs and worship practices. For example, there's an old Jewish saying, Jen and Billy: 'Two Jews, three opinions!' Although they're Christians, Advocatus and Mr. T. are two good examples of that! In the past, they've even gotten so passionate about their different ways of seeing things that they've found it hard to talk to each other any further at all . . . and for many months they didn't!"

"Fortunately, they've been discovering ways of disagreeing and yet appreciating the other's point of view. This has required, believe it or not, a certain 'sacrifice' on the part of each of them . . . and I'll want to say more about that later.

"For now, the important thing, I suppose, is to realize that we *all* have to work out understandings that make sense to us . . . and that's a project often best done, not in isolation, but with others who are also seeking clarity and understanding. That's the sort of thing we're doing right now."

Margaret continued while shooting a mirth-filled-but-pointed look at her husband. "In a moment, they'll give you a *very* condensed version of their thoughts. But before they do, I'm curious if you've had some additional ideas about why on earth sacrifice and worship should go together."

"Yeah," Billy ventured, "I do . . . I think. Last spring I was on our school's baseball team. There was a runner on second and the coach signaled for me to bunt the ball. I sent the ball rolling down the first base line just fast enough that the catcher and pitcher didn't have time to get it and make the throw to third. But I got tagged out before I got to first base. It's called a 'sacrifice bunt' because I sacrificed my chance to get credited with a hit and I figured I'd be thrown or tagged out. But my teammate was able to advance to third base. Eventually he came home and we won the game."

"Yeah, I saw you do that, Billy. It was cool. Everyone cheered!" said Jen.

Billy felt his awkwardness return, but smiled it away and continued: "It was a 'sacrifice' and nothing got killed . . . except the chance of my being credited with a hit and maybe boosting my batting average. I'm not sure how to apply that to worship . . . except that I made that sacrifice for the sake of my team . . . and if I get what the prophets were saying, Mr. T. . . . God might like a sacrifice that tried to help others somehow. I guess that's kinda lame, but it's what I was thinking."

"That's not lame at all, Billy!" said Margaret. "In fact it's an idea we'll come back to later . . . you've really put your finger on something. Jen, do you have any thoughts to add?"

"Well, I know you all have a winery, so I got to thinking about how you make it and looked it up. Don't you all use yeast of some sort to ferment the grapes . . . and doesn't the yeast die when the alcohol gets to a certain point? If I've got that right, the yeast 'sacrifices' itself in order to make wine which, at least for some folks, is better than grape juice. My mom says the same thing happens to the yeast when you use it to bake bread. That's the only thing I could think of."

"Well done, Jen! That's exactly right about the yeast, and we can use that example also," said Margaret. "Now," she continued, looking at Advocatus and Snark, "who wants to share first their point of view on sacrifice and worship?"

Advocatus volunteered and, after setting his remarks in the same historical context as before, gave a recap of his understanding. He called it a 'substitutionary' understanding of Jesus' sacrifice: that the greater the sin, the larger the sacrifice . . . that since humanity's sin was so huge, only God's own son would do as a fitting sacrifice. Jesus, in effect, 'substituted' himself for humanity and offered himself up to God as a sacrifice. He went on to say that meant that both God and Jesus sacrificed a lot in order to restore humankind to a relationship with God. Worship, said Advocatus, calls attention to this sacrifice and encourages the worshippers to make sacrifices of their time, energy, and treasure in behalf of others in grateful response.

While Advocatus spoke, Snark observed Jen's and Billy's attentiveness. Clearly they were interested and tried to digest what Advocatus was explaining. But he also saw their quizzical looks . . . and an occasional arched eyebrow as they looked quickly in the other's direction.

When it was his turn, Snark said: "What Advocatus has explained to you is perhaps the most commonly held perspective of Christians on sacrifice and worship. My understanding, though it sort of stands Advocatus' understanding on its head, leads to the same outcome. In worship, we also encourage those who have come to worship God to make the same sacrifices in behalf of others."

Then, dropping all of the bluster and "pithiness" that had characterized his part of the morning's conversation, Snark proceeded to advance his understanding of how, if anything, Jesus' death had put an end to sacrifice in the early Christians' worship.

When Snark had finished, Margaret turned to Billy and Jen. "As Advocatus and Mr. T. spoke, I noticed you all seemed to be having a lot of reactions, if I read your faces correctly. If you're willing, I'd like to hear your thoughts and responses to what they've said about worship and sacrifice. I think it might help all of us!"

"Well," Billy began, "no offense, Advocatus, but I find what you said to be a bit strange. I think I understood with my head what you were saying . . . and it all kinda went together . . . but in my gut, it just seems . . . I don't know . . . 'unnatural' maybe. I mean, it's sort of like going around your elbow to get to your nose. Also, it just seems kind of unnecessarily violent. I get it that the Romans were violent. But, like Jen asked yesterday, 'What's up with *God* needing that kind of violent death in the first place?' Since what you've said is what speaks to most Christians . . . maybe there's something wrong with me. If there is, I'm . . . I'm not sure I even want to be cured or corrected!"

"Billy," Advocatus responded, "I take no offense whatsoever in your saying what you just did. You disagreed, but did it respectfully." Advocatus looked at Snark for a long moment, his initial expression of confrontational upbraiding slowly melted into the sort of facial expression one makes when saying "We're all of us in the same leaky boat anyway!" Advocatus continued, "There's nothing wrong with you for not buying my point of view, Billy. Years ago I might have thought so. But not now. Just keep on puzzling about it. You'll find your way. And, if you want to talk more about it, I'll be around!"

Billy smiled when Advocatus addressed him in this way, and he was joined by Margaret and Snark. Next, Jen offered her reactions.

"You already know that I don't much like the 'sacrifice' thing and why. I guess that's why I liked what Mr. T. said a whole lot more. But I'm confused. If Jesus said that God wanted mercy and not sacrifice, then how can worship and sacrifice still go together?"

Snark smiled and said, "Jen, that's the right question, because it does sound as though there maybe isn't a place for it. But remember, the early Christians were just saying that they didn't need the institutional monopoly the Temple had on gaining access to God through purchasing animals for sacrifice. But even though they didn't offer such sacrifices anymore in their own worship, *they did* practice a form of sacrifice and so, I believe, must we."

"There's a *different* sort of sacrifice that is absolutely essential to our worship . . . and without it, worship is just an empty piece of play-acting. Margaret," he said, "would you tell us all what you were saying the other night when we were talking about it? I really like how you expressed it."

"Sure. The kind of sacrifice I'm thinking of doesn't involve violence or killing of any kind, so at least in that way, Jen, it won't turn you off. It doesn't have anything to do with burning animals . . . or anything going down a volcano either! Furthermore, the sacrifice

I'm thinking of fits very well both with what the prophets taught about what God wanted, and what Jesus taught about God. And it's a *sacrifice* because it *does* cost us something.

"While public worship can assist us in making this sacrifice, it's really something that requires something else and something more than that. Rather than it being a sacrifice that's made just on Sunday mornings, it's made all day long every day. And finally, those folks involved in the Occupy Movement would find it very meaningful, I think. Should I go on?"

"You've got *my* attention, Mrs. T.," said Billy. Jen nodded and gave an enthusiastic, "Mine too!" And then she added, "So what is it that has to be sacrificed, Margaret? You've ruled out so much, I can't imagine what's left!"

"*Ourselves*. That's what's left, Jen: *ourselves*," replied Margaret, smiling gently. "Actually, that's the one-word answer to your question. It gets a little more complicated than that, because it's not really *ourselves* that we sacrifice, so much as it is what we do with *ourselves*. And, to go just a bit further than that, it's what we do with the part of *ourselves* that we're most familiar with. Have I confused you sufficiently so far?" she asked with a giggle.

"No, but you're working on it!" said Billy making a riposte to an adult that didn't fit with his parental programming and was thereby, for him, a breakthrough into new behavior. Sensing the positive nature of the adults' non-verbal reactions, Billy took courage and quickly continued: "I'd say you haven't yet confused me, but you *have* brought a certain amount of *osfubcation* to the subject."

There are defeats . . . and then there are magnificent defeats.<sup>42</sup> It is from the latter that new growth often occurs and a new light shines forth. As Advocatus, Snark, Margaret and Jen erupted into guffaws of laughter at his mangling the word 'obfuscation', Billy felt in his stomach that he must be experiencing a defeat of this latter kind . . . though he did not yet have an inkling of the benefits that would follow.

The guffaws did not last long as measured by seconds on the clock. But it felt like an eternity to Billy, who was by now beet-red and remembering how, earlier in the day in his English class, Ms. Stevens was drilling the class on the use of some unfamiliar words. "Obfuscation" was one of them.

One of Billy's classmates, Jim, was called upon by the teacher to use "obfuscation" in a sentence. Jim knew this one, he thought. He knew it cold. His father had helped him to create his clever answer, should he be called upon. He'd get kudos from the teacher for it, Jim thought. So Jim began with what he'd rehearsed the night before:

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<sup>42</sup> See *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner (Harper One, 1985). It is a treatment of a number of themes from the Bible. The title comes from the defeat of Jacob as he wrestled with a stranger all night long, as well as Jesus' death on the cross. See also the previously-mentioned book by Richard Rohr: *Falling Upward* (Jossey-Bass, 2011)

"So there was this college professor who was always using words with too many syllables when shorter and simpler words would have made his points more clearly. The students, as a group, asked the professor to please refrain from using such long words. 'Very well,' the professor responded, 'herein afterward I shall endeavor to elucidate monosyllabically.'" The class and the teacher chuckled at his clever story. Jim then concluded his response by using the word in a sentence. "In responding that way, the professor was guilty of *obfuscation*."

*"Obfuscation"* were the word to exist, certainly would not mean anything nearly resembling "making communication confusing, willfully ambiguous, and harder to interpret." Intuitively, upon hearing the malapropism, the students instantly gave it an "X" rating and convulsed into five minutes of hooting, desk-pounding, and eye-watering laughter. Each time the laughter started to die down, another student would say "*obfuscation!*" and the class, along with the teacher, would dissolve again.

Now Billy, in his first attempt at using the same stupid word in a sentence, had similarly stepped in it. And Jen had witnessed him doing it! He had left in him all the starch of Wile E. Coyote after falling thousands of feet to the canyon floor, a victim of his own failed attempt at catching the road runner now peering down at him from the rim above.

Even as Billy was frantically searching for a wormhole exit into some other dimension, the other four moved as a single laughing huddle, put their arms around him, and continued to hug him until his laughter joined theirs.

"That calls for another round of drinks!" exclaimed Advocatus, after their healing laughter had started to subside. "Anyone?" Advocatus went to the kitchen to get the soft drinks Billy and Jen had asked for. After pouring more tea for the three adults, he noted to himself that Jen had pulled her chair to the right of Billy's, where she was gently pressing her arm into his.

After she took another sip of her tea, Margaret continued: "That was refreshing! And so is this tea, for that matter. Thanks, Advocatus. Well, this can be a difficult subject, so herein afterwards I shall endeavor to elucidate monosyllabically!"

Billy interrupted whatever Margaret was going to say next by nearly spewing his Coke all over Advocatus, saving the aging prelate by quickly intercepting the atomized, sticky foam with his left forearm. "How . . . how . . . I mean Jim had that word in Ms. Steven's English class today! He told the story that . . . you just said the same thing! How . . . What . . . ?"

"Billy, Ms. Stevens and I are good friends!" Margaret responded, laughing some more. "In fact, she regularly comes to Elsewhere on Sunday mornings to worship with us. She emailed me today about the laughter you all had over that word! She believes, as I do, that there's something mysterious and holy about laughter and that the world needs more of it. I suppose that's why she told me about it."

"What did she tell you, Margaret?" asked Jen, who was by now totally lost. "What happened in English that was so funny?" she asked, looking at both Margaret and Billy. It was Billy who spoke next and he explained to everyone all the details that had so convulsed the class.

"That's just too weird!" observed Jen. "I mean, what are the odds of Jim and you both . . . and of Margaret knowing that story and using it in our conversation . . . and . . ."

"Higgs Boson works in mysterious ways, guys," Snark interjected. "Remember, the whole world's interconnected . . . very intimately so. It's just that we aren't usually aware of it. When we do become aware of it, we often say it's a 'miracle.'<sup>43</sup>

"I'm glad you said that, Snark," Margaret said, returning to her subject. "I think that's a good place for me to jump in and finish what I was going to say about sacrifice; because, if we can get this sacrifice thing right, we'll be more attuned to those interconnections . . . and become much more in love with all the diversity in this immense, mysterious and wonder-full world."

"Good idea, Margaret!" agreed Advocatus. After some more head nods in agreement Margaret continued.

"There's an indispensable part of who we are that's important for us to understand. This part is concerned with our being safe from harm, with getting our basic needs met, and with having the life we decide we want to have. So it watches out for dangers, keeps track of our resources: our energy, our time, our money, and our connections with other people. Its sole concern is to be concerned with our own selves. It's heavily into 'me and mine.' And generally it's quite satisfied when it can sit back, relax, and be happy while it says, 'I've got mine!' *We simply cannot live without this part of us!*

"The problem is that we often assume that this is *all* there is to us . . . and that as long as *we're* doing okay then . . . well . . . we're doing okay! The truth, however, is otherwise. For this is just *a part* of who we are. In fact, there is another, much larger aspect to who we are . . . and for us to be truly and authentically the creatures God created us to be, we must allow this other part to be in control of our lives far more than we usually do."

"Do those two parts of us have names, Mrs. T.?" Billy asked.

"Sure, Billy . . . lots of different names. Some folks call that first part I talked about the 'ego'; and they call the other part the 'Self' with a capital 'S' or, perhaps, the Soul. For clarity's sake, I like to call it The Real Self.<sup>44</sup> The problem is that many people . . .

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<sup>43</sup> Willa Cather made the same point more eloquently in her novel, *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (Vintage, 1990). "The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always."

<sup>44</sup> See Richard Rohr's book on the real self, which is a follow-up to *Falling Upward. Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (Jossey-Bass, 2013). For variety, you can also give your attention to an earlier book of his: *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (Crossroad, 2009).

perhaps most . . . equate the ego and the ego alone with who they are. They call the ego their 'self'.

"So they go through life making their choices based on what's good for *themselves*. Very often they have a very short-sighted idea of what that 'good' entails. When the part of us called the ego is behind the wheel of who we are, we become blind to the wonders of the world, its interconnections, and its diversity. When the ego is in charge, the very uncontrollable nature of this mysterious world's wondrousness is seen as a potential threat. Interconnectedness might interfere with the ego's mandate to bring security just to its own self. Since a world of diversity is also a world of strangers . . . and since the default setting of the ego is to fear . . . we consequently find it easy to fear and hate the stranger. And, of course, when that happens, all manner of trouble ensues."

"Gee, Margaret," Jen said with some agitation, "it sounds like when only the ego is in charge, that's when we get into those stupid and unnecessary wars!"

"Yeah!" Billy joined in. "The 1% that control so much of the wealth . . . they sound like their egos are running the show! They're looking out just for their own selves!"

"You're both making good points," Margaret observed. "But remember, there's nothing wrong with having a good, strong ego . . . or a vast amount of money!"

Before Margaret could say, "It all depends on what we do with it," Billy nearly erupted with excitement. Raising his fist and waving it about, he shouted, "Occupy the Real Self! Occupy the Real Self!"

Margaret gave a giggle and beamed at Billy. "Billy, don't ever let anybody ever tell you you're not perceptive! That's it! You've just said what it is we need to do!

"What needs to be sacrificed is not the ego! We need it, but, but as important as it is, it's really a rather small part of who we are. But it's as though it has gotten cocky and usurped the role and function of the Real Self. When this happens . . . and it happens to *all* of us much of the time . . . the ego ceases to be our servant and becomes our master.

*"So what needs to be sacrificed is the dominant position that the ego has in our lives. We do, indeed, need to occupy what is, even neurologically, that part of the 'ninety-nine percent' of the brain which makes us capable of transcending our own narrow concerns . . . our own dyed-in-the-wool opinions . . . our own prejudices and agendas; and that enables us to reach out in caring and compassion to others.*

"Another way of saying this is that the examples of sacrifice you each mentioned when we began are spot on! Both the yeast used in making the bread and wine, and Billy's sacrifice bunt are examples of going beyond what's good just for the individual . . . and looking out for the greater good in some way. Although I've never spoken to the yeast, I suspect they'd agree!

"So I think Gandhi was right to say that worship and sacrifice belong together. For, if God's name and nature is Love or Compassion . . . and if part of the intent of worship is to be connected with God in a kind of communion . . . then we ourselves must become like God . . . full of love and compassion. And the only way for that to happen is to sacrifice the position in our lives that we have allowed our ego wrongly to usurp and occupy. Only in that way can we, in coming home to God, also come home to who we truly are . . . for who we truly are is who Jesus truly was! So you're absolutely right, Billy. It's time we occupied The Real Self!"

"And helping ourselves and others do that is what we at Elsewhere are all about," said Snark.

"Come to think of it," said Advocatus, "that's what my congregation is about as well. It's such a shame that purpose so often gets lost in the shuffle of endless meetings, program planning, and all the other necessary busy-ness of life in a large church."

"You know, Margaret," Advocatus continued, "Snark and I still may wish to talk about sacrifice in different ways . . . and I doubt we'll ever see eye-to-eye. But your comments just now provide, I think, a bridge of sorts . . . or, better yet, a different perspective."

Advocatus paused and took another sip of his tea. A slight tremor in his hands made his nearly empty cup rattle a bit on the saucer as he held it. Some tears began to manifest in his eyes. After quickly wiping his eyes as one might if they were but tired, he continued.

"I remember that, once upon a time, when I was younger and had more energy, I liked to climb up the steps inside the tallest spire on my church and look out the window as the sun was starting to set. I'd do it at least several times each week. From the perspective up there, my parish looked remarkably different."

Advocatus' eyes now seemed to focus, not on Margaret anymore, but on the memory he was describing.

"As the sky's colors changed with the setting sun, the view below changed as well. The patterns of light and shadow became clearer. It looked more orderly, more peaceful. I could see for miles and miles . . . how the roads and rivers and hedge rows connected everyone and everything. In the distance I could see the patchwork quilt of farm fields looking like a fresh, checkered tablecloth spread out before me by one of those attentive waiters in one of the town's bistros.

"And there was this wonderful stillness to it all . . . it was so quiet up there. More often than not, I'd softly sing the Doxology . . . 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow!' Those were magical times for me. They reached way down inside me . . . they calmed my jitters and . . . good grief! . . . *they restored my soul!* I haven't thought about those times in years."

Now, without his usual attempt at concealment, Advocatus wiped away some tears that were starting to move down his cheeks and he added: "I'm glad I'm recalling those times now. They seem terribly important. They *were* terribly important. I don't want to forget them ever again. In fact, I want to have them *now* . . . all over again . . . always."

Snark and Margaret quietly got out of their chairs and, with great care and not a few tears of their own, very gently embraced Advocatus, as earlier they had all done to Billy. Without words, all three of them knew, not so much in their heads as in the experience of their own hearts, that their interconnectedness trumped their disagreements. And the warmth of that knowledge? It was much like the warmth they felt when they sipped on a glass of well-aged *Last Supper Red*.

Billy and Jen took all of this in. After a while they turned toward each other, smiling. It was impossible to tell who initiated it, but, after a few moments, seated in their chairs around the table at Elsewhere, they leaned in and gave each other their first . . . and rather long . . . kiss on the lips. How further to describe it? That would depend on whom you asked. Billy probably would have said it was clearly an instance of '*obsucfation*'.

## Dialogue 27 - Atheists Welcome!

It was nearly seven o'clock the same day when Advocatus sat down to supper with Snark and Margaret in their dining room. Together, the couple had prepared a dish of charcoal-grilled shrimp mixed together with a mélange of sautéed garlic and Roma tomatoes. This was then spooned over linguine pasta. Toasted pine nuts were added. Slices of ripe avocado were arranged on top and lime juice was sprinkled liberally over the entire dish just before serving. Some good olive oil suitable for dipping was poured onto bread plates. Shredded parmesan lay waiting in a small bowl. A bottle of Naked Toes' *Bumbulum Antiquus Profundus* was on hand, along with a loaf of bread.

"This is *really* good bread, Margaret!" exclaimed Advocatus, helping himself to another slice. "I think I smelled it baking when I got up. It's homemade, right?"

"That's right, Advocatus," replied Margaret. "I put it in the oven before we took our nap earlier today. Glad you like it. It's our favorite bread for celebrating Communion on Sundays. I'll bake another loaf just like it on Saturday night and we'll use it Sunday. I confess I'll miss your being with us for another Sabbath, Advocatus. That's why I've put it on our table tonight . . . so we could share it together."

"Thanks, Margaret," Advocatus replied with a smile.

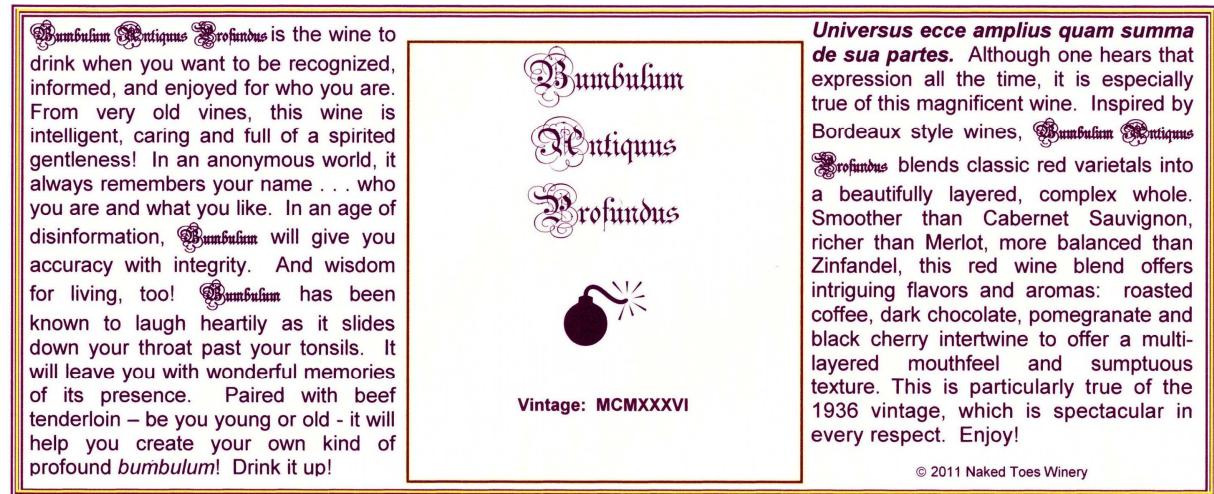
"I'll miss you as well," offered Snark, his face relaxing into a soft, pleasant smile . . . a hint of artesian sadness in his eyes. "This has been quite a week, Advocatus, and I'm . . . I'm both glad and grateful you could spend it with us. I think something new has happened . . . happened between us . . . it's hard for me to put it into words exactly. It's a closeness . . . a kind of new, relaxed quality in our relationship. I suspect you and I will always come at things somewhat differently . . . but perhaps it will be more like friends going toward the same destination, but from different starting points and taking different routes."

"I'm surprised you didn't say that it was Higgs Boson creating the Kin-dom in our midst, Snark!" teased Advocatus. "But if you had . . . well . . . in spite of your choice of words, I would have agreed with you."

"*Touché* again, Advocatus! That strikes me as exactly right. Somehow or other, and without our knowing it, old Higgs has worked her alchemy on our relationship. And I'm glad she did!"

"Did?" asked Margaret. "I don't think she's through with the two of you . . . or me, either. At least, I hope not!" she added with a giggle.

"Quite so, Margaret," said Advocatus taking another sip of wine. "You know, Snark, the label on this bottle of otherwise excellent red wine is nearly as offensive as the one that provoked our falling out. *Bumbulum Antiquus Profundus* . . . "Profound Old Fart" . . . unless my Latin is slipping. What on earth possessed you to create this label, Snark, and why are you serving it with our meal tonight?"



"I created it in celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of a dear friend of ours in the ministry, Advocatus. He enjoys a good laugh as much as anybody I know . . . including at himself. And he certainly got a chuckle out of this label. Actually, the label describes him as an 'old *profound gas*.' In jazz circles, to say that someone is a 'profound gas' means that they really know what they're doing . . . that they've got the chops. The description on the label's left-hand panel, while purporting to describe the wine, actually describes the man himself. As for why we're using it tonight . . . as far as I know, there's nothing specific about the label, Advocatus . . . it's just a wine that pairs well with what we're eating."

"Ahh, I see now. You know," he continued, looking at the label. "Perhaps there's a further reason for it being on our table tonight: one that neither of you consciously recognized when you selected it. I particularly like the Latin phrase here on the right-hand panel: '*Universus ecce amplius quam summa de sua partes*.' 'The whole is more than the sum of the parts.' That well-describes the work of the Spirit . . . or Higgs Boson, Snark, as you prefer.

"In my experience, the Spirit often takes disparate things and melds them together into something new, and it becomes better than the sum of the individual parts. That's what the Spirit did with the twelve disciples of Jesus. I think that's what's been happening with us. And it's just like what's happened with the ingredients in this wonderful dish you both have prepared! I know I'll miss being with you both as well . . . and not *just* because of the excellent food!"

"Well said, Advocatus!" Snark responded. "I take heart for the church, hearing you say that. I *like* your finding the sacred in the profane!"

"Umm," replied Advocatus in a neutral tone, but with a hint of a smile on his lips. "You know, I take hope for the church's future having met Jen and Billy. They're smart, open, have a good sense of humor and are delightfully guileless in their enthusiasm. I wish my church could attract more youth like them. Don't get me wrong: we've got some really fine young people . . . but I get the impression they come around because their parents are leaning on them to do so. In that way they're very different from Billy and Jen . . . I think they'd be here even if their parents *objected*! Most of our youth don't seem to have their energy and interest. I'm afraid that, once they graduate from high school, they'll just sort of drop out from the church altogether . . . maybe reject the faith along with the institution. It's so sad when that happens . . . and it happens a lot. I wish I knew what to do about it."

Snark put down his glass of wine and eyed Advocatus. With a puckish grin on his face he said, "Welcome the atheists."

"Huh?" asked the startled Advocatus. "Did you say 'atheists'? Welcome the *atheists*? What the heck are you talking about, Snark!"

Margaret gave Snark a cautionary glance. Under the table, he put his foot gently next to hers in reassurance.

"Advocatus, I'm just responding to your perplexity about how to prevent so many youth and young adults from leaving the church and the faith itself. There are a lot of reasons young people 'kick over the traces' and leave. One reason, of course, is our hypocrisy. All of us . . . individuals and institutions alike . . . you and I . . . have a yawning gap between our beliefs and our actions.

"Too often, though, we deny our hypocrisy exists. Thus we compound our hypocrisy with self-righteousness. It was probably this gap that prompted Friedrich Nietzsche to say, "I will believe in your redeemer when I see him in your redeemed." It's an apt, if painful, challenge from that 19th century preacher's kid, Advocatus. And remember, according to that James Bond scholar we were talking about earlier, hypocrisy and self-righteousness are 'the twins of duplicity' that Ian Fleming considered to be among the modern seven *deadlier sins*."<sup>45</sup>

"Yes, yes, I know all that, Snark," replied Advocatus with considerable impatience in his voice. "Hypocrisy is something every child easily spots in its parents. It's an easy target . . . particularly for those who have not yet discovered that they suffer from it themselves. In spite of my telling them to "stick around because there's always room for one more hypocrite," some nonetheless leave the church and even the faith because of it. I get that.

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<sup>45</sup> See the book on James Bond by W. Benjamin Pratt cited earlier.

"But you said, 'Welcome the atheists.' What's with that, Snark? Assuming, just for a moment, that I would even want to welcome them, who are these atheists and where can I find them?"

"A fair number of them are sitting in your pews, Advocatus. Some of them are young . . . in junior or senior high. A huge percentage of these atheists started out in church, went away to college, and have not been back since . . . except on rare occasions. On the inside, they are often hungering for a faith community that is hospitable to them: one that is committed to relational and intellectual honesty, and serious about the practice of compassion. They often keep silent about their hungers, erroneously concluding that they must be 'different' . . . or worse, 'flawed' . . . because they just don't get this 'God thing.'

"And they begin not to get it very early on. Think about it.

"More than forty percent of retail sales in the United States have to be made during the Christmas season. That provides an enormous incentive to stop at nothing in order for business to survive. The American Christmas Machine is huge; everything and anything that can be pressed into the service of the bottom line is sucked into it and committed to that purpose.

"Now, Advocatus, watch as Santa Claus enters this story, stage right. His story begins with St. Nicholas. Even you probably never met him, since he died back in 343 A.D."

"Wrong again, Snark!" interrupted Advocatus. "I knew him. And a peach of a man, he was! His parents were wealthy and died early in his life during an epidemic . . . but not before they had introduced him to the faith. Nick took seriously Jesus' teaching about selling what one had and giving the money to the poor. His close friends told me he went through his whole inheritance helping the suffering, the sick, and the poor. When Diocletian was the Roman Emperor, Nick was thrown in prison for many years. He didn't get out until some years after Diocletian retired to his villa to raise vegetables in 305 A.D. I even remember sitting next to him during some sessions at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Yep, I knew him, Snark."

Advocatus smiled with self-satisfaction, leaned back in his chair, and relaxed into the knowledge that he had surprised Snark, and interrupted what would no doubt have been another of the man's passionate harangues.

"You must have been quite young then, Advocatus! I could have sworn you weren't a year over 1200 . . . 1250 tops!" Snark teased in reply. And then, picking up where he had left off, he incorporated what Advocatus had said into what he would have much preferred to call his "redemptive rant."

"Nicholas was an exemplary Christian. The gifts he gave were to those in true need . . . they were calculated to do some 'lasting good.' His ego was strong but appropriately positioned in his life: so he became quite compassionate. Although he was Greek, he

was from a part of Greece that is now actually a part of Turkey . . . so that's another reason I have a special fondness for him."

"Nicholas was made a saint by the church because of his compassion. Through the years, however, his story has morphed into a character who is completely and obscenely unlike Nicholas! His story made its way to Holland after the Protestant Reformation, where he was known as 'Sinter Klaas.' When his story was brought to the United States by Dutch settlers, his name was corrupted here as 'Sancte Claus.'

"The 19th century cartoonist, Thomas Nast, added to the story and drew 'Santa Claus' in his North Pole workshop, where he made toys for children whose names appeared in a book indicating those who were naughty and those who were nice. An Episcopal seminary professor further expanded the story when he wrote a poem we know as 'The Night Before Christmas' for his children. Newspapers picked it up and it became a favorite. By the beginning of the 20th century, his red clothes with white trimming had become well-established."

"Snark!" said Advocatus in an elevated voice. "You are the most pleonastic, round Robin Hood's barn, person I know! Sheesh! I asked you who these atheists are and where I could find them. What do I get? I get a rambling, logorrheic monologue that commences with you telling me that they're sitting in my pews; and now you're mumbling on and on forever about the Turkish origins of Santa Claus! Margaret, is Snark off his medicines?"

Margaret nearly fell out of her chair laughing at Advocatus' question. "Oh my, Advocatus! I wish I'd thought to say that to my husband! You're right about Snark's prolix circumlocutions. But hang in there, because I've heard this bloviation of his before and it actually makes some sense . . . as hard as that is to believe right now."

Advocatus had experienced Margaret as the more sensible, centered, and balanced of his two hosts. He liked her and she had given him no reason to believe otherwise. So he took in what she said, relaxed back into his chair once more, and looked toward Snark saying, "Go on, then Snark. I trust Margaret, even though I'm not too sure about you!"

Snark smiled affectionately at Margaret and continued on the long, winding . . . not to mention long-winded . . . road of his argument.

"Thanks, Margaret. Hang in here a bit longer, Advocatus, and you'll see the relevance of this story to your question.

"In order to keep the retail economy going, the American Christmas Machine has co-opted an altruistic saint, turned him into a score-keeping, conditionally 'loving', operant-conditioning, intrusively omniscient figure who only blesses righteous little ones . . . often with gifts they don't need . . . while the hungry, outcast, and not-so-righteous go unnoticed. Santa has become a means of 'social control.'

"This grotesque figure becomes, in practice, the first notion of God for many children. It's not that parents and others intend for this to happen. They don't have to. Remember how in *Peanuts*, Linus gets Halloween and Easter confused? Linus sits in the pumpkin patch on Halloween, waiting for the Great Pumpkin to rise out of the pumpkin patch. Quite without their knowing it, little children conflate Santa Claus with the God they usually meet in Sunday School.

"The latter is, of course, described as a Supreme Being in heaven who knows everything about us: what we do, what we think, our motives, our secrets. He is the God 'from whom no secrets are hid,' as one of our prayers says. And even though that beautiful prayer might be understood differently by a more sophisticated mind capable of abstract thinking, *to a child who thinks quite concretely, this theistic version of God is indistinguishable from Santa Claus.*

"It gets worse. Parents encourage their little ones to write letters to Santa, telling him what they want. Later, on the Sabbath, they go to church and, among other things, are taught to ask God for what they want. At church they also hear that the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic tradition is an ethical deity who is concerned with righteousness. 'He knows when you've been sleeping; he knows when you're awake; he knows if you've been bad or good . . . so be good, for goodness sake!' It all gets jumbled up together in their young minds.

"An example of this is *The Elf on the Shelf*. For a mere \$28.00 a parent can own it. It consists of a toy elf that can be posed in various positions, plus an accompanying storybook explaining the story of The Elf on the Shelf. The gist of the story is that the elf watches the children during the day. At night, when the children are sleeping, it flies to the North Pole and reports to Santa about the behavior of the children in the elf's house. It then flies back to the house where, thanks to the secret intervention of the parents, the children next morning find the elf in a different spot in the house . . . 'proof' that the elf has indeed been to the North Pole and back! Parents are told this will help their children behave better in the days before Christmas. I have absolutely no doubt that this works.

"I see you both smiling and shaking your heads! It's bizarre, isn't it? How delightfully gullible the dear little children are! It's all so very cute, though . . . so innocent. Surely it's just harmless fun and it helps the economy to boot. What's not to like?"

"I'm shaking my head less over that elf and more over you, Snark!" responded Advocatus. "Good grief! Where is all this going and why are you on such a roll . . . on such an *interminably long* roll?"

"Well, for some children, Advocatus," Snark resumed, unfazed, "it sows the seeds of distrust in parents when they inevitably realize the truth about the Santa story: that it has all been a fun ruse played on them by their parents. If that were the only consequence, it would be okay. Everyone, including eventually the children, could share a laugh together. Most children aren't bothered by this blip in their parents' veracity.

"But it quite unwittingly teaches a view of God that cannot be sustained with integrity once the children reach their teens and are capable of more rational, abstract thinking. When these adolescents go to church, they are most often *still* taught a similar, theistic notion of God. If they are lucky to belong to a church that emphasizes it, they at least learn that this theistic God is *gracious*.

"But it is still a theistic God like Santa: a Remote-if-Gracious-Being beyond the universe. In all their schooling, and through the ever-present electronic media, they understand the cosmos to be the way that it is described by modern physics. They understand there is no more room for such a Supreme Being in the sky than there is for a cholesterol-besotted, morbidly obese, ancient elf cobbling together generally unnecessary gifts for billions of people in a workshop at the North Pole, all of which are to be delivered only to selected children in a reindeer-drawn sled in the space of a single night! So they begin to roll their eyes in disbelief that their adult teachers in the church are *again* trying out what sounds like a similar ruse in their attempts to teach Christian theology!

"Already quite naturally predisposed as adolescents to rebel against parental authority and perspectives, as they seek to become their own, more independent persons, they begin to drift away. Since the church has not mined its own Biblical and theological tradition . . . since it has not presented other descriptions of God . . . since the church has lazily stuck with the theistic God-As-A-Supreme-Being-Beyond-The-Universe . . . these adolescents are left with nothing more helpful in its place.

"By our laziness, and quite unintentionally, *we have helped to plunge them into a materialistic world that is devoid of wonder, mystery, and transcendence*. Long before they have to memorize his soliloquy in senior high English class, some of them are deeply and personally aware of the despair behind Macbeth's opining:

'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.'

"Then, when tragedies large or small come their way, they have little to cling to that will help pull them through it safely to the other side. Alarmingly, a few experience such a dark night that they act upon those other words of Macbeth: 'Out, out, brief candle!' And they are gone."

Advocatus squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "Snark, I'm asking you again . . . in fact I'm *begging* you . . . where is all this going? My backside's getting tired just trying to sit through your harangue. Now you've even brought in Shakespeare!"

"My apologies to your aching butt, Advocatus, but *here's* where this is going:

*"Unknowingly and tragically we have, by our laziness, committed the deep offense of robbing them of their birthright: a robust sense of transcendence, mystery and wonder that can responsibly coexist with the very best science has to teach us.* They should not be asked by us to choose one or the other!<sup>46</sup> Putting them in a position to do so is very nearly a form of child neglect, *Advocatus*. We should be ashamed of ourselves.

"By not moving beyond the Santa Claus construction of such a theistic God to a very different . . . yet very traditional . . . understanding, the best and the brightest of our youth often leave. Unwilling to put on a churchy face, mouth words that make no sense, affirm beliefs that cause them to choke, these wonderful young people prefer to keep their integrity . . . even if that means leaving altogether.

"Sunday after Sunday, for those who have come back with their own young children . . . perhaps bringing their children back in a lemming-like way since, after all, their parents brought *them* to church . . . they sit through sermons that speak of a Supreme Being who lives 'in heaven,' which they take to mean as existing 'outside of the universe' and into which the Supreme Being 'intervenes' to heal, or punish, or rescue people. The very language of our worship often 'invokes' this Supreme Being to pay attention, to come close, to learn of our woes and wants and needs.

"Not many preachers would say that if people are very good; if they are active in the church; if they tithe their income; if they affirm a certain creed . . . or mouth a formulaic phrase about what they believe . . . or speak in a confused babble of words . . . then they will be members of the 'in' group . . . and on account of that God will hear their prayer and go out of God's way to grant their petitions. Preachers don't have to *say* that: those raised on the Santa Claus notion of God will often simply *assume* it.

"Then, when real, adult tragedy strikes them and those they love, they ask how this Supreme Being could allow that to happen. There is no emotionally or intellectually satisfying response to that question as long as God is understood as this theistic Supreme Being. It is at such times that many adults find that their faith is in ruins along with those other aspects of their lives that have crashed and burned. Their pain is intense. And they, too, fall away.

"So, *Advocatus*, if our churches are not to die, these people must be welcomed back in. Their 'a-theism' must be affirmed! The heart-hungers of the atheists who remain, as well as those who have left, must be addressed with real food: with relationships that truly value them here, now, in this world, *just as they are*, for their own sakes; and with a theology that fits with the universe as they understand it to be . . . a theology that can excite, guide, and lead them into a more expansive experience of wonder and

<sup>46</sup> We do not know if the anonymous author drew upon it in writing this sentence, but Michael Gerson elaborates on this point in an exquisite article "The Search For The God Particle Goes Beyond Mere Physics" which you can read by clicking on the link below:

<http://www.another-fine-mess.com/Michael%20Gerson%20on%20Higgs%20Boson%20Particle.html>  
Although we sometimes disagree with his opinions, Gerson is an intelligent and respectful writer, and he's welcome to drop by Elsewhere for a free cup of coffee and some further conversation! ~ *The Editors*

transcendence . . . a theology that helps them to embrace and have compassion for all the world's people in all their diversity . . . in short, a theology they can affirm without having to cross their fingers. That's what I mean, when I say 'Welcome the atheists!'"

"Snark, you never quit, do you? Well, I guess you did *finally* reach the end of your long lecture . . . I'll give you credit for that! But you're at it again! You begin with pulling important keystone beliefs out of the arch supporting the church's teachings; you then have the temerity to pull out the most essential keystone of all; and now you're calling the good people of the church scurrilous names like 'atheists!'

"Listen to you! You're a clergyman, yet you act like you are yourself a part of the secular world's 'war on Christmas' that some of our fellow Christians complain about. What makes you so angry at the church, Snark? What has happened to you that fills you with all this bile and bitterness . . . for that is what your words sound like to me. And *the way* you voice your remarks is . . . well . . . you're beginning to remind me of some of the fundamentalists you rightly accuse of being so narcissistically cock-sure of their own point of view that they reject those who think differently!"

Advocatus paused, looked at Snark fixedly . . . yet with a certain gentleness coupled with urgency around his eyes . . . and then added in a tone that was almost pleading: "For the love of God, Snark . . . find your center . . . get a grip!"

Advocatus' demeanor now was as complex as a fine Shiraz-Cabernet with all its spicy, smoky undertones and hints of plum and cherry. His face wasn't nearly as red as when he had been upset in the past. Instead, the old lines of worry and fear seemed to have deepened . . . as in an old woodcut print. His ancient voice spoke in a tone which, though one of challenge, also had within it prominent notes of a genuine concern for his host that lingered long after he had finished speaking.

Complex wines . . . as with anything and anyone in all creation, really . . . are meant to be approached mindfully: slowly, carefully . . . reverently even. The custom of removing ones shoes as a sign of respect before entering a Japanese home is a good metaphor . . . and it echoes Moses' revealing his own naked toes before the burning bush that was not consumed. But, in our "drive-thru" world, we are filled with such self-importance and blind insensitivity that we hurry along, multi-tasking and texting ourselves into an early grave, missing the miracle of life itself. So manic are we in our compulsive pursuit of the next big thing and the next and the next, that we will not even slow ourselves long enough to at least exercise the courtesy of printing that ubiquitous sign in proper English: "Drive-Through." No, that would take too long.

So Snark took his time responding to Advocatus. He allowed himself to really hear the tone of the old man's voice . . . to follow the fault lines on the topographic map of his face . . . to note the fearful vulnerability just underneath his parchment-like skin. As one might reach slowly for a glass of wine . . . quietly raising it to the light while swirling it to appreciate its color and density, noting the aromas on the nose, finally allowing some wine to coat the tongue, and only then letting it gently slide down the throat, pausing for

a moment to consider its taste, its heat, its complexity . . . so now Snark reached for Advocatus.

Snark extended his arm toward Advocatus, turned his palm upwards, and rested it on the table near the old man's hand. He said nothing, but waited, looking softly into Advocatus eyes. Advocatus returned the gaze while he, perhaps, looked within himself, searching for the courage of connection. After a few moments, he slowly put his hand in Snark's.

"Advocatus," Snark began . . . speaking now quite slowly, appreciatively, gently . . . "your name is lovely, strong, and admirable. I know that for a substantial part of your long life, your job was to argue against elevating certain Christians to the status of 'saints.' You were officially called the Promoter of the Faith, and you promoted it by deliberately taking a skeptical position with regard to a candidate's having the necessary virtues and capacities appropriate for one about to be canonized as a saint. Yours was an important, *conservative* role. You sought to promote the faith as a steady beacon of light; and to protect its life-saving beam from being diffused by the misguided elevation of persons to a position of powerful influence and status who were not capable of being entrusted with such a role.

"In fact, when you just now challenged me about the manner in which I was so fervently speaking . . . how my narcissism was showing . . . in saying that you were doing that same important task with me. And you are right: I do indeed need to watch that."

Still holding the old man's hand and looking into his eyes, Snark continued: "*Thank you!* Not only do I now, but the entire church through the centuries owes you a tremendous debt for carrying out that task. It was just one of the many things you did to make sure that the church continued to be leaven in the lump of culture . . . salt that was salty and thereby effective at both seasoning and preserving life-giving food.

"Advocatus, in that position, you were attempting to promote the faith by securing it against that which might distort it, sap it of its strength, muddle its message, and seduce it from its essential role.

Snark now placed his other hand atop Advocatus' hand and gently tightened his grip, curving his lips into a slight smile. "Advocatus," he continued while looking into the old man's eyes, "you are not my friend . . . I was mistaken earlier when I called you that. No, that is not who you are. You *more* than that . . . closer than that. *You are my brother.* Although you are more comfortable with the phrase 'mother church' than I, nevertheless it is apt; for in that sense, we indeed do have the same 'mother.'

"More than that, Advocatus, my intent is identical to yours. I, too, would promote the faith by protecting it from distraction, seduction, vitiation, and the dimming of its light. I, too, would bring skepticism where I think it is needed in order to fulfill that intent.

"Perhaps that is why we often see things differently, sometimes argue, even have a falling out. That is more characteristic of siblings than of friends, Advocatus. Siblings, if they

find a safe way to do so, dare to be honest with each other more than friends frequently do, and . . . on the other side of the resulting discomfort . . . find that it is to the betterment of each.

"I think, my brother, we argue because we are so much alike!" Snark gave a pulsing squeeze to Advocatus' hands and withdrew his own, slowly lowering his eyes, focusing them instead on the bread and wine laying on the table between the three of them.

Margaret had taken all of this in, silently pondering its meanings in her heart. What happened next, though, was beyond even Margaret's most imaginative predictions.

Slowly, Advocatus reached for the uncut part of the loaf of bread and held it in his hands, turning it slowly. As he looked at the bread, he spoke: "There was a supper once, a very long time ago, and it took place not here but in another elsewhere . . . and it was held in an upstairs room above the busy streets . . . much like this room we're in tonight. One of the people at the table that night grasped the loaf of bread as I am doing now. He looked at the others around the table and marveled at their variety, their differences, their strengths and their weaknesses. In that looking, he took them all into himself . . . even as he hoped they would each take him into themselves.

"Their variety became his own complexity. To the one who was impetuous, to the one who was timorous, to the two who were always vying with each other for his approval, to the one who would fall so tragically short, and to the one who always needed concrete proof of what most of the time cannot be proven . . . to all of these he said, 'Take some of this bread and eat it with me. This bread will be our nourishment as we grow into a new understanding and a new commitment between each of us with each other, and all of us with God . . . however it is that you understand God. Even if you think you see God in each other . . . as I do . . . or in me . . . it will be a commitment to love one another as each of you has been loved by me . . . equally, though differently . . . just as children in a good family are, in their uniqueness, loved in different ways appropriate to their nature. Margaret, Snark, eat this now, with me.'"

With that, Advocatus, tore three pieces of the bread Margaret had baked and passed a piece to her and to Snark, taking the last for himself. Each ate the bread, slowly . . . in a shoes-off, careful, reverent sort of way.

When they had finished, Advocatus continued, now holding the bottle of wine in his hands, turning it around slowly as he spoke. "That same person then took the wine that was on the table and said to each of them: 'Do you see this wine? Do you know whose hands have picked the grapes and whose feet have squashed them in the vat? Do you know what vineyard the grapes come from, and whether the workers in the vineyard received fair wages for their labor? Do you know that some have gotten drunk and fallen down, down, and away from drinking too much wine? Do you know the essential profanity of this wine . . . moldy grapes trodden under unwashed feet . . . an object of commerce and a temptation to destruction? Do you understand the truth in packaging

represented by its jocular but profane label? Do you see the sacred in the midst of its profanity?

"Do you understand that by drinking a glass of *Bumbulum Antiquus Profundus*, we agree to take into ourselves the profound, ancient Spirit that once hovered over the face of the deep, that caused the light to shine, that inflated our lungs so we might live and dance and love? And do you understand what it means to have that Spirit in you for the living of your days? If so, then join me in drinking it . . . slowly, reverently, in a shoes-off, naked toes sort of way."

And with that, Advocatus poured a couple ounces of *Bumbulum Antiquus Profundus* into three glasses. "To life in the Profound, Old Spirit!" Advocatus said, raising his glass. "To life in the Profound, Old Spirit!" Margaret and Snark replied.

When they had finished their wine, the three sat around the table enjoying a prolonged silence, savoring a warmth in their chests that was not wholly of the wine's making. It was Advocatus who eventually broke the silence.

"Tomorrow is, regrettably, the last full day of my visit with you two good people. If it's possible, I wonder if we could return to the winery at some point tomorrow. It's such a beautiful spot . . . and I think I'll appreciate its beauty even more if we take *just one or two* bottles of wine for the four of us! I'd like to watch the sun go down with you both, if that is also your wish. It would be an ideal place, I imagine, to talk some more about God and feeding those hungry 'atheists!' Would that work for both of you?"

Together, Margaret and Snark raised their glasses toward Advocatus and said "Amen!"

### **Dialogue 28 - Somewhere Over the Rainbow?**

"Oh, my! Excuse my yawning in your faces!" apologized Margaret as the three sat down to breakfast the next morning. I guess I stayed up too late last night watching *The Wizard of Oz* on the TCM channel."

Snark and Advocatus each yawned an unconscious response. "Ah, yes, I remember now," replied Snark, picking up his coffee cup. "I know you never miss an opportunity to see it. I think I fell asleep shortly after Dorothy's house lifted off the ground and the movie turned from black and white to Technicolor."

"I know, Snark," giggled Margaret in response. "I had to poke you with an elbow three times to interrupt your snoring!"

Advocatus entered the conversation. "Some things never change, Margaret: Snark used to doze off in seminary chapel services too! Snored then, too. I remember seeing the movie once, Margaret. You must really love it to see it again and again. What's the appeal for you? Is it Dorothy's song 'Over the Rainbow'?" \*

Softly, almost to herself, Margaret began to sing:

"Somewhere over the rainbow  
Way up high,  
There's a land that I heard of  
Once in a lullaby.'

"Sure, Advocatus: that's an iconic moment in the movie, isn't it? I was about Dorothy's age when I first saw it. And, in fact, my parents sang me lullabies and read me stories when I was a young child . . . I think that's one of the sources of my faith. So, of course, were the stories I learned in Sunday School. My parents each had good imaginations and could be playful. That land 'way up high' was very real to me as a child . . . quite literally. Heaven was somewhere over the rainbow. I'd lie on my back on a summer day, watch the clouds and try to envision that land 'where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops.'"

Margaret paused for a moment and then added, "Those were delicious times . . . until, one very cold winter day, life dropped a load of frozen lemons on me that nothing was able to melt . . . not here, far beneath the rainbow."

Margaret took a bite of fried potatoes and a sip of her coffee. "It still makes me feel a bit sad remembering those days. It was 1965 and my dad was in the Army. I was in 7th

\* Listen to "Somewhere Over The Rainbow", Harold Arlen (music) and E.Y. Harburg (lyrics) here:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XulvnXo6BJk&feature=related>

grade. A military car drove into our driveway and a couple of soldiers told us that dad had died the day before while fighting in Vietnam.

"My simple, over-the-rainbow-sometime-in-the-far-future faith didn't help me much making it through the months and years following. The world seemed pretty hollow then. Actually *I* felt pretty hollow. I couldn't understand how God could have let that happen. I'd been 'good' . . . prayed for Dad all the time . . . punched the ticket, so to speak . . . and then he didn't come home alive. I felt gyped."

"Thank goodness for my mom and my friends . . . many of whom were in the church's youth group. I could open up some with them . . . and with some of our adult counselors . . . and even though none of us could ever figure out all that much about why my dad didn't make it home alive . . . somehow it was a good place to be; and having those relationships helped me not to feel so lonely."

"That must have been horrendous for you, Margaret," said Advocatus as he now, for the first time, gently and briefly placed his hand on hers. "It was a double-loss for you: you lost your early faith as well as your dad. No wonder Jen and you connect so well: you both struggle with the same losses."

Margaret looked at Advocatus with an expression of surprise and gratitude. "Why, thank you, Advocatus! You *do* understand correctly. Yes, I see a lot of myself in Jen . . . minus the piercings, of course!" she added with a grin. "Connecting with her is, I suppose, another way to connect with the young girl I used to be. Caring for Jen is also caring for me. Funny how that works, isn't it? I'm just glad I can help her find a faith that works a bit better for her than my 'over the rainbow' one did for me."

"So, Margaret," said Snark, who'd been taking all this in with appreciation and wonder, "what's the appeal of *The Wizard of Oz* for you? Her red shoes? Her triumphing over the Wicked Witch?"

"Hmmm. All of that and more, dear . . . the whole movie, really. But I think one of my favorite scenes . . . one I really connect with . . . is when Dorothy discovers the Wizard behind the curtain pulling on levers and creating a bunch of special effects. The dialogue goes something like this:

Wizard:	'Pay no attention to that little man behind the curtain!'
Dorothy:	'You're a bad man!'
Wizard:	'No, I'm not a bad man, Dorothy. I'm a good man. I'm just not that much of a wizard!'

Snark . . . who, of course, knew Margaret's story very well . . . had never heard Margaret talk about the movie in this way. "Why that particular scene, Margaret? How come that one appeals to you?"

Margaret gave a slight chuckle and replied, "Well, after my dad was killed, I don't think I ever watched the movie again until, as a junior in high school, I got into some therapy about that loss. My therapist and I paid a lot of attention to all the different emotions I was feeling: the sadness and loss, the hurt and anger, the feelings of guilt . . . the whole nine yards. It was the safest place for me to freely feel what I felt, and to say what I thought. My therapist listened and cared. And that helped.

"Eventually, we began to explore the faith stories I was telling myself about my dad's death. My notion of God was pretty much like the one you were talking about last night, Snark. God was this all-powerful Supreme Being who was also completely loving . . . and yet God had let my dad die. That was a story that made no sense. Other fathers came home. Mine didn't. When I'd tell myself that faith story, it just made me more and more angry. 'God' ceased to make sense. The same, also, with 'prayer,' of course.

"My therapist . . . she was a pastoral counselor too . . . suggested that I had the freedom . . . the responsibility even . . . to create faith stories that made better sense to me. So I began reworking the stories I was going to tell myself. I remember one day in particular when I was feeling very stuck in the middle of that project. I just couldn't seem to break out of the narrative box I'd been in. God was still a Santa in the sky. I was thrashing around about all that and was quite upset . . . again.

"That's when my therapist did something that seemed quite irrelevant. 'Margaret,' she said, 'help me feed my fish.' She had a sizeable tank of tropical fish in her office and I used to just watch them swimming slowly around as a kind of focus . . . a way of stilling myself . . . of allowing enough space for something to emerge into my awareness. This was the first time she had invited me to feed them."

Perhaps deliberately, Margaret interrupted her story at this point to take a bite of toast and jam, washing it down with some coffee. Advocatus and Snark did the same. "I'm afraid my story is turning out to be as long as some of yours, Snark!" she said playfully and with a gentle knock on Snark's arm. After getting reassurances from Snark and Advocatus that she had their attention and interest, she continued.

"'Margaret,' my therapist asked me as we sprinkled the food into the tank, 'do you suppose these fish ever have debates about the existence of water?' I hardly knew what to say! What kind of a question was that? She grew a big smile on her face when she saw the look of perplexity on my own. 'No, really,' she said. 'Do you think they ever do?'

"I knew that my therapist was playful. I also knew . . . or at least I suspected . . . that her playfulness was not only part of her own personality, but also a part of how she did her work as a therapist. So I replied, 'Well, I don't think so. I mean . . . fish just swim in the water . . . to them the water just *is* . . . so I don't think it would ever occur to them to raise the question whether the water existed or not, much less debate it.'

"I left her office and went home, still feeling stuck and wondering why she'd asked me such an absurd question.

"The following Sunday morning, I went with my mom to church. Partly, I went because she found it meaningful and important, and I wanted to help her . . . after all, she was hurting too. Another part of me just wanted to sleep in and avoid the whole God thing. I guess I also went because I hoped there might be *something* there that would help me tell myself some different stories.

"The Bible texts that morning were ones I had probably heard before . . . but you know how it is . . . 'sometimes things go in one ear, pick up speed, and quickly go out through the other!'<sup>\*</sup> Whole sermons can do that! At other times they stick . . . it's like they get caught on something inside us . . . perhaps on the protective ramparts we erect around our hurting hearts . . . or maybe they get bogged down in the quagmire of our own despair . . . *something* slows them down and they stick with us for awhile.

"On that particular Sunday morning, the reading from the Jewish Bible was from Psalm 139. Some of the verses that got caught within me were the ones that say that no matter where we are and where we might go, God's Spirit will hold us fast. There was even a verse that said God's Spirit sees us growing in our mother's womb! I don't know why, but on that particular morning, these verses didn't conjure up a Santa Claus god in the sky intruding into my life to see if I was good enough. Rather, they described *a loving, caring Presence that surrounded me*. That felt comforting then . . . and now.

"But the Epistle reading is what really blew me away. It was that story in the book of the Acts of the Apostles where Paul was addressing some of the men of Athens. He told them he'd walked around town and had seen altars erected to a number of different deities, and that he eventually came to an altar with an inscription saying it had been erected 'To An Unknown God.' Paul told them *that* was the God he wanted to proclaim to them: a God '*in whom we live, and move, and have our being*.'

"'In' is a skinny word! Just two letters. But they helped me to change utterly the faith story I would soon begin to tell myself. If we lived *in* this inescapable Presence that cared deeply about us, then life itself was meaningful because it was caring! Even when terrible things happened. Something shifted within me. It was no longer a matter of trying to figure out why some God outside the universe didn't intervene to save my dad from getting killed . . . and it was no longer an angry puzzlement about why my prayers hadn't been answered. Rather, my journey became one of trying to find a way to open myself to this God whose love surrounded me . . . and whose love might even find expression through me. Sure . . . I still had, and have, a lot of questions. But a huge tectonic plate in my soul had shifted significantly.

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\* Research reveals that this quote should be attributed to Rev. Gary L. Hulme, D.Min. ~ *The Editors*

"At my next session, I told my therapist what I've just told you about that Sunday morning. Afterwards, she smiled at me and said, 'So, Margaret, you were right! The fish don't debate the existence of the water they live in; they just open themselves to it, letting it flow over their gills; they allow it to provide them with the oxygen they need to live.'

"I'm surprised you two are still with me after this long story; and though it's nearly done, let me pour us all another round of coffee and I'll finish it up!" After she had done so, Margaret continued.

"Snark, I think the reason I like that scene in which the Wizard is unmasked is that it recalls that similar unmasking of my Santa Claus god of over-the-rainbow-in-the-sweet-bye-and-bye. Very much like Dorothy, I came to realize that my childhood understanding of God . . . while maybe just fine for me as a very young child . . . really needed updating. I discovered that God wasn't that much of a divine wizard after all!

"These days, I don't any longer need to have a God who is a 'wizard' somewhere over the rainbow who intervenes to do things for me. What I came to realize is that the God within whose Presence I live can connect me with a wonderful, powerful side of me . . . a side of me which is also that same divine Presence! Just as within their own selves the Scarecrow found his brains, the Cowardly Lion his courage, and the Tin Man his heart, so this new understanding of God helped me to come further into my own as someone made in God's image.

"My new narrative became one about how things *are* . . . what one writer calls '*the is-ness of what is*'.<sup>47</sup> The truest thing for me was . . . and remains . . . that we live and move and have our being within a Presence that is intelligent, caring, and working to bring all things to birth, to wholeness, to justice, to joy. This Presence is also 'in' all things and all people. That's the 'is-ness of what is' for me. That is what I now mean by 'God.' In this conviction, I feel like I'm 'home' . . . no matter where I am under the rainbow. There may well be some place over the rainbow, and it'll be fun to find out . . . much, much later, please! . . . but right here, right now, I'm content to live *under* the rainbow of this life at Elsewhere and any other elsewhere I happen to be."

Turning to Advocatus, Margaret said, "Advocatus, I know you remember the prayer you read for us last Sunday at worship. That prayer says it all for me, I think. I'm perfectly content to 'tune my mind like a radio until (God) is there, spreading my life out before me

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<sup>47</sup> Margaret may be referring to the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, or the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. [Almost 50 years ago, John A. T. Robinson, the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich, wrote *Honest to God* (Westminster John Knox Press; Anniversary edition January 31, 2003) presented some of the ideas of Tillich, Bultmann and others, saving the faith of more than one seminarian back then.] But Margaret seems to have a contemplative spirit, so she may be referring to some Christian mystics who describe God in essentially the same manner, though typically more poetically so. The writings of Richard Rohr also offer this perspective in compelling language. Of course, for all we know she's referring to Irenaeus, one of the early "church fathers" who lived around 200 A.D. We suspect even Advocatus, for all his years, knows of Irenaeus only through books! More probably, Margaret might know of *Speaking Christian*, Marcus Borg (HarperOne, 2011). See especially chapters 5 and 6.

like a Sunday tablecloth' . . . for now God's secret *is* out! God is home, here, with us. More accurately, like Dorothy finally going back to Kansas and her home, I am at home when I relax into the Presence of this God who holds us all . . . like the water holds the fish . . . and in whose holding we can become transformed to be, in our own lives, a bit like God . . . adopting God's agenda as our own each day."

After Margaret had finished her lengthy response, the three sat in another relaxed silence. Then Advocatus, smiling toward Snark and Margaret, observed, "Margaret, your story is a beautiful gift you've given us, and I'm so grateful you shared it just now. Snark, I hope you let Margaret 'preach' at Elsewhere! She's really got something to say that needs hearing!"

Snark smiled, leaned over to Margaret and gave her a brief hug. "You're right, Advocatus. The truth is, sometimes *Margaret* lets *me* 'do the preaching!' You're right: Margaret's really got something important to say . . . and she says it very, very well, indeed!"

## Dialogue 29 - Imagine That!

After they had packed food and other essentials for the day, the three climbed into Snark's vehicle and set out for an afternoon at Naked Toes Winery. Advocatus sat in the back seat.

"Margaret, I've been thinking about what you said over breakfast about your faith journey and the many meanings you got out of The Wizard of Oz. I confess I never thought of the movie in those terms . . . though it certainly works beautifully . . . and I'm especially glad for you that it does! You seem to have a gift for bringing your own imagination to that imaginative story."

"Why, thank you, Advocatus," Margaret replied. "I guess I've always had a rich imagination."

Advocatus continued: "Whether it's literature or the Bible, I'm afraid it's often difficult for me to move much beyond what the story is just plainly saying. Partly, I think I'm just naturally that way. It helped to learn an interpretive approach that tried to go beyond that so that we could better understand what the words meant to the person who wrote it. But I didn't get much help with using my imagination. For example, I doubt if Frank Baum, the author, ever thought of your more theological interpretation. Maybe he just intended to write an entertaining story for children. I guess we'd have to know more about him, his times, his motivations and his other interests to make a good guess. That's the sort of thing I was taught to do when approaching a text of the Bible. That's what I do when I preach. And while there's merit in that, I sometimes find it hard to go beyond it. Sometimes get bored with my own sermons!"

"I confess to a bit of envy, Margaret. Snark has challenged me about my taking things too literally and, though it pains me to say so, he has a point."

Snark looked in the rear-view mirror and smiled at Advocatus who, he realized, was already grinning back at him.

"Advocatus," snark began, "I'm really struck by your openness. I like meeting this side of you. It puts me at ease. Truth be told, I sometimes struggle with the same thing. You and I were taught in seminary an historical/critical way of approaching a text so that we wouldn't succumb to the sort of fanciful, allegorical readings of scripture that preachers regularly and excessively used prior to the 20th century. Those readings weren't always wrong or without merit . . . not by a long shot. It's just that there was little to stop the interpreter from reading his or her own meaning *into* the text while believing that is what the text itself meant!"

"Sometimes, of course, blindly reading one's own meaning into the text produced genuine evil. After all, slavery was both defended and attacked with an appeal to scripture. But any faithful reading of the texts' original meanings and in the context of

the times in which they were written, would have revealed slavery to be a great evil that was contrary to the will of God.

"In order to prevent such abuses . . . and as a matter of being faithful interpreters and intellectually honest at the very least . . . we need to know when we're reading a meaning *out of* a text and when the meaning we ascribe to it is our own. What you and I learned is essential to that task."

Snark slowed their vehicle to keep pace with the traffic that was slowing to a crawl. On an uphill grade they came to a complete stop. Ahead, they could make out several familiar orange tree service trucks. Their crews were trimming trees overhanging the power lines, as well as removing one that had fallen across the road. Since the three were not pressed by an agenda, they simply enjoyed the opportunity to continue their conversation.

Margaret took the lead. "When you two were at the winery on Monday, I interviewed a fellow who'll be joining us at Elsewhere. Among other things, he's a poet. He refers to his first volume of published poetry as his 'incomplete poems.' He said that what a poem means is incomplete until someone reads it . . . that its meaning for the reader depends not only on the reader trying to understand the poet's meaning, but also on what the individual reader's imagination brings to the poem. You know . . . sort of like those verses from Psalm 139 getting caught on something in my heart.

"So I think you're right, Advocatus. *The Wizard of Oz* had some specific meanings for Frank Baum. Whatever they were, his book generated in me some powerful meanings of my own. They were unique to me and my situation . . . things he could never have guessed.

"In some ways, I think most of what Snark and I do is to help others in their work of interpretation. Like with Jen and Billy: they brought their own meanings to 'sacrifice and worship.' Then the three of us helped them bring some new, imaginative interpretations to it. Snark makes interpretations to his clients sometimes, in order to help them consider alternative meanings and strategies for living. And I've tried to help Jen find meaning in her loss.

"We human beings crave meaning, Advocatus. We can't live without it. Interpretation is so important, in fact, that none of us can refrain from imaginative interpreting. And though you claim not to be imaginative, that includes you as well!"

"How's that, Margaret?" asked Advocatus, raising his voice above the sound of the power saws in the distance.

"Let's try a brief experiment, Advocatus. I think it will demonstrate what I mean. Advocatus, did you ever have the experience where someone began a sentence and . . . ?"

Margaret let her incomplete sentence hang in mid-air. Snark bit his lower lip to suppress

some laughter, for she was using one of the ploys he sometimes used with his clients in couples' therapy. Couples are forever misunderstanding each other's intentions, meanings, and behaviors. Finding ways to identify and clarify these interpretive misunderstandings before the conversation heads too far south is an essential part of most couples' growth and healing. In the rear-view mirror, Snark could see Advocatus' face contort in puzzlement and confusion as he tried to make sense out of what Margaret had said. After five or ten seconds had elapsed, Advocatus responded.

"Did I ever have the experience where someone began a sentence and then what, Margaret? What do you mean? 'And . . . ?' And what?"

Margaret repeated her incomplete sentence. After a moment, Advocatus responded.

"Ah! Margaret, you're playing a 'Snark' on me! Yes. I have indeed . . . just now in fact . . . I'm having the experience of you beginning a sentence and then refusing to complete it. You know, the effect is quite uncomfortable. Snark, I think you'd call it 'cognitive dissonance.' I found myself just now trying to fill in the blanks . . . to complete the sentence . . . to give meaning to what was otherwise meaningless!"

"It was uncomfortable until I figured out your meaning . . . or at least a meaning that satisfied me. Am I getting the point of your experiment, Margaret?"

Margaret turned back to look at Advocatus with a wide grin on her face and chuckled.

"Yes, Advocatus! You got it! We're imaginative, meaning-creating apes, Advocatus. It's part of the divine image we share with the Creator. Being made in God's image, we're co-creators with God, and what we human beings everywhere and through all time create are meanings. I think that's part of what God had in mind when he asked Adam and Eve to name the beasts. Names confer meanings. We simply *have* to give meaning to experience. Whether we are interpreting the meaning which is inherent *in* life . . . or assigning some interpretive meaning of our own *onto* something that is otherwise meaningless is a debate I'll leave to philosophers and theologians. Actually, it may be that it's both."

Advocatus thought about that for a moment and responded thoughtfully, "You know, Margaret, I think I'll use what you just said in my next Bible study. The texts certainly contain the meanings of those who wrote them . . . and we make a tremendous error when we don't pay attention to trying to figure out those meanings as accurately as we can. That's where good scholarship comes in."

"But then there are the meanings the texts stir up in us. Those meanings may be similar to or quite different from the author's, but . . . as you say . . . they're also important. I guess that's where our own life experiences come in . . . those parts of our lives that the texts might get caught on. Perhaps that's where we can bring whatever imagination we may have to the texts."

"Well said, Advocatus," agreed Margaret. "As long as we are clear and open about what was likely the meaning of the texts for those who wrote them, we can freely bring our own life experience, our imaginations, and our critical reasoning to the texts.

"Snark," she asked, turning toward her husband, "what was that highly imaginative story you told me some years ago about how Moses couldn't find God after they had crossed through the Red Sea?"

"Sure, Margaret, it's in Exodus 15, I think. After the Hebrew people go through the Red Sea and reach dry land they sing a song of celebration. It's a victory song of praise to God for parting the waters and allowing them to escape the Egyptians who, pursuing the Hebrews in their horse-drawn chariots, got bogged down in the mud and drowned as the waters closed back around them. With tambourines in hand they danced and sang:

'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea!'

"Of course, in our day, such a celebration might look and sound a bit different. It might be like the bump and grind celebration in the end zone by the team that's just scored a touchdown, while fans in the stadium are waving their foam fingers in the air, screaming 'We're number one! We're number one!' Or perhaps we'd just sneeringly chuckle saying 'We brought 'em to justice!' It's really all pretty much the same sort of gloating by the victors over the vanquished."

"Don't ever let anyone accuse you of not being imaginative!" snarked Advocatus from the backseat.

"Anywaaay," Snark continued, "after that song, God is not mentioned in the narrative for a great many verses. The ancient rabbis wondered why God was not mentioned. So they used their imaginations and came up with a story.

"I suppose It's important to realize that they knew they were not trying to read meaning *out* of the story. They were just trying to satisfy their curiosity . . . and yet to do so in a way that added something to the Biblical narrative that deepened it and made it even more wonderful. And they did that by coming up with a story that was consistent with the best in their tradition. The story they told is a *Midrash*: a story that comments on the gaps in the texts as much as on the words themselves. So the story, or Midrash, they told goes something like this:

"While Miriam and the other Hebrew people were dancing and celebrating, Moses looked around for Yahweh, but couldn't find him. Moses searched and searched. He finally found Yahweh sitting on a cliff looking out westward over the Red Sea. 'Lord! There you are! Why are you not celebrating with us?' When God turned his head toward Moses, he noticed a tear in the Lord's eye. 'Moses, Moses,' God said, gesturing toward the water, 'how can I dance and sing when these, my children, are drowning?'"

"Wow, Snark!" said Advocatus, "That's profoundly moving!" After a few moments, he added, "I'm glad the rabbis brought their imaginations to the text like that. What a powerful story. You know, it is important to bring a critical mind to the reading of the scriptures: to focus on the cultural context of when it was written, by whom, for whom, and all the rest. But if that's as far as we go . . . I think we miss something . . . we miss what the Spirit might be stirring up within our own hearts. I think I'll need to do some more reflecting on the place of imagination when I next interpret the Bible."

They continued to sit in traffic as the tree crews had not quite finished their work. Suddenly, Snark tapped his horn to give a gentle warning to the car ahead which was slowly drifting back toward them. The driver, a cell phone to his ear, apparently did not hear the warning, so Snark honked loudly this time. Still the car was drifting back toward them. Snark laid on his horn and SMACK! the car ahead collided with their front bumper. It was not a violent collision. Probably not enough to even scratch the paint.

The driver of the car ahead of them put his phone down, checked his rear-view mirror, opened his door and approached Snark. The fellow was about 6' 2", nattily dressed in an expensive cashmere suit, his hair professionally coifed. His car was a late model, high-end luxury import sedan. Silver . . . to match his hair.

"You hit my car!" the driver complained to Snark.

"No," replied Snark, "I didn't hit your car. Your car hit mine."

"No! Your car hit mine!" said the driver, warming to his righteous complaint.

"Sir! We are on an uphill grade. You were 20 feet ahead of me and talking on your cell phone. My engine was at idle with the handbrake set. Your car drifted back and, in spite of my honking my horn in an attempt to warn you, your car hit mine!"

"The driver in back is always to blame!" replied the driver. He now left Snark's window, got back into his car, pulled it ahead about six feet and stopped. He got out and very, very carefully examined only his own bumper. Finding no damage at all, he returned to Snark.

"There's no damage. We can go on." And with that, he got back into his vehicle.

The noise of the saws had stopped, and traffic was beginning to move again. They soon passed the orange tree service trucks when, suddenly, the car that had backed into Snark's swerved to avoid a piece of a limb left behind by the tree crews. But in doing so, the driver over-steered slightly off the pavement, snagging an even larger limb in his car's undercarriage.

Once the driver had gotten his car under control, he was again on his cell phone, quite unaware of the ungainly brush unceremoniously trailing in the wake of his otherwise pristine, classy car. It was a delicious sight for the three: the driver resembled nothing so

much as a gentleman in a tuxedo who, upon emerging from the men's room with a very long tail of toilet paper hanging from his waistband, hurries onto the dais in the ballroom where he is immediately introduced as the after-dinner speaker.

Snark, Margaret and Advocatus . . . almost as one . . . gave the man a new name . . . shouting it out together . . . a common name rarely voiced in polite company . . . an anatomical name of great proctologic significance.

"What are the odds of that!" exclaimed Advocatus. Here we were talking about interpretations and we had a run-in with *that guy!*"

"I've said it once and I'll say it again, Advocatus," Snark responded with a grin and a snort. "Higgs Boson works in mysterious ways!"

With this, the three were so convulsed in laughter and conversation about what had happened that none of them noticed the yellow school bus parked by a pump at an Exxon station. A woman, dressed head-to-toe in a black uniform, cleaned the windshield with a squeegee.

## Dialogue 30 - Wake Me Before It's Over!

Snark made sure their route through the city again avoided Advocatus' parish and pointed the car toward Naked Toes Winery. As they were approaching the monadnocks, Advocatus said, "I hate to say it, but for some reason I've got that silly song I taught the children running through my mind and I can't seem to get rid of it. Maybe I associate it with Naked Toes Winery!"

"You mean the one with the refrain, "*Vividi, vividi, vividi, vividi, vitae est insomnio?*" asked Margaret with a lilting laugh. "It's been going through my mind too . . . ever since we left the city!"

"That makes three of us!" put in Snark. "Methinks Higgs Boson probably has something up her sleeve! For some reason, your song has caught on something inside of all three of us . . . to use Margaret's apt phrase. That kind of coincidence is often a sign that Higgs is about."

"Oh, good grief, Snark," replied Advocatus. "I think it's just that, well, after what happened on my first visit . . . and, I mean, both of you know about that . . . I think we all just have it associated with Naked Toes."

"You may be right, Advocatus, but just in case, I think it would be useful to put our heads together and try our hand at interpreting the song. It can be our "text" and it could be fun. Anyhow, we'll soon be at the winery." Margaret had turned in her seat to address Advocatus, and he responded to her.

"Well, lots of strange things have happened during my visit with you two . . . so sure, Margaret, let's all have at it. What's the 'boat'? Why row it 'gently'? And is 'down the stream' important? For that matter, what's the 'stream' anyway? And 'merrily' . . . why be merry if life is only 'a dream'? And if it is only 'a dream', then what's there for us when we wake up?"

"Wow, Advocatus! Your mind is really clicking today!" Snark said with a large grin on his face. Those are great questions and we probably won't finish this one before we get where we're going. But let's start. When I help folks interpret their dreams, I pay attention to the setting of the dream. It may be in a house, or a building of some other sort; it may be on a road or in a jungle. Whatever. The setting of the dream is often . . . nothing is 'always' in a dream . . . the dreamer's own self or soul space. So I'm going to guess that the boat might be our own life-space . . . our own selves . . . like we are the boat."

Margaret and Advocatus looked at one another and concurred that that was a good guess. "I think the stream might be the stream of our life. It's maybe the arc of our own life's story. It could be some sort of narrative . . . ours or someone else's . . . that we sort of take our place in . . . like an actor inhabiting a part in a play. The script moves it along. So maybe the stream is something like that?" Advocatus ended his comments with a

question because, well, he was new at this and . . . perhaps because it was *fun* to do . . . he experienced himself as being a bit awkward at it.

"I think that's a great idea, Advocatus!" enthused Margaret. "Now look who's being imaginative! Kudos!"

Advocatus smiled shyly and relaxed into his seat a bit more while Margaret continued. "So if the song is about our journey through life, it seems to be encouraging us to do several things: to take the initiative and pull on our oars, for one. That could give us some more momentum . . . but, hey . . . pulling on the oars . . . rowing . . . is also how you *steer* a rowboat! So maybe we're to contribute to the direction we're going.

"Let's see," she continued, "maybe our contribution to the momentum and direction should be gentle . . . you know trying to be active players in our lives . . . but not harsh, or overbearing, or controlling . . ."

"Right, Margaret!" Advocatus interrupted with enthusiasm of his own. "That might be what 'down the stream is about' . . . you know . . . like Billy and Jen might say, 'go with the flow!' The three of them shared some laughter at Advocatus' insight and his reference to the two teens' idiom.

Snark rejoined the conversation. "So let's see where we are so far: as we float down the stream of our lives, a certain amount of striving and direction-setting is important . . . but at the same time we should avoid overdoing that. Gee, if I could manage to live in that sweet spot, I think I would be merry, indeed!"

"So what about life being a dream . . . what happens when we wake up?" asked Margaret.

"Maybe we'll wake up and we'll be at Naked Toes Winery! Perhaps we'll discover an answer to that question later today, but for now, good friends, we're here!" Snark announced, as their vehicle crested the rise and they saw the Naked Toes Winery sign advising them to take off their shoes.

"The view from the base of the wind turbine on top of the ridge is wonderful, Advocatus; it doesn't matter which direction you're facing. Did you and Snark go up there on your visit?" Margaret asked after they had gotten out of the car.

"No, we didn't, Margaret. But I'm game for a bit of a hike . . . it'll get my kinks out from being in the back seat."

"Then we'll do it, Advocatus!" said Snark. "Sorry about that backseat. I forgot that you'd have to nearly jackknife yourself to fit back there! You okay?"

"Nothing a hike and perhaps some Pino Grigio won't fix, Snark. Margaret, did you by any chance bring some of that good white wine of yours?"

"Chance had nothing to do with it," Margaret giggled. "I brought several bottles, your Pinot Grigio among them. I've got a Shiraz and a Cabernet Sauvignon as well. One or the other of the reds will go well with the sunset you wanted to see. I've also got plenty of food and we can take something to snack when we're up on the ridge."

"Splendid, Margaret! You know, when I think of that central virtue called 'hospitality,' you're the person that first comes to my mind. You've been unfailingly kind and welcoming to me ever since I arrived at Elsewhere. Here," Advocatus said, stretching out his hands toward the wine and the food, "let me carry that for you."

It was Margaret's turn to blush slightly as she thanked Advocatus, handing him the sack of wine and snacks. When they had made their preparations, they set off up a steep path that led to the ridge above the vineyards. The path was usually wide enough for the three of them to walk side-by-side, although in places it narrowed so that one would need to walk ahead or behind.

"Some years ago," Snark began, "a friend and I hopped in his 4-wheel drive Jeep and, with a good deal of effort and copious use of his chainsaw, worked our way up to where we're going. Later that summer, we helped with the installation of the wind turbine. I generally come up here once a year with the folks who do the maintenance on the turbine. It's good to come here again . . . and especially with the two of you! What Margaret said about the view is true. The ridge isn't long and it runs southwest to northeast. So you really can see all around from up there."

After awhile, the three paused to rest and catch their breath. "How're you doing, Advocatus? Want me to spell you and carry the food for awhile?" asked Margaret.

"Thanks, Margaret. But I'm doing pretty well for an old man! Looks like we're more than half-way there and I think I'm good for the duration."

The breeze that had accompanied them, now took a breather itself. It was good to be still . . . to just be . . . in the silence . . . nature all around. After a couple of minutes, Advocatus spoke.

"I'm trying to discern if I'm hearing something in the distance . . . maybe like rushing water . . . or if it's just my tinnitus kicking up. Do you hear anything?"

Snark and Margaret exchanged grins and Snark spoke. "It's not your ears, Advocatus! It's the same stream where we had our encounter with the ruffled grouse. Its source is up here. A number of springs feed it. What you're hearing are a couple of its larger cascades. It's a small stream . . . so the cascades aren't but about three or four feet high . . . but when it's quiet, like it is now, it's a treat to the ears. When Margaret and I were looking for land, this stream is what convinced us this had to be the place!"

"Well, I should think so, Snark," teased Advocatus. "After all, if it's a good enough place for a ruffled grouse to court his missus, it has to be good enough for you two love birds!" And with that, Advocatus gave a loud, exaggerated growl, again imitating the former Vice President. Snark and Margaret both broke into unrestrained laughter . . . and were joined a few seconds later by Advocatus himself who, like God at the dawn of creation, was laughing at his own joke.

After they had rested, they again set out toward the summit and reached it after another ten minutes. The warm sun of late May felt wonderful and it had coaxed some wildflowers into bloom. The breeze, though gentle, was sufficient to keep the blades of the wind turbine rotating at a goodly clip.

Slowly, the three took in the spectacular views. Looking back toward where they had come from, they saw the monadnocks and, here and there, the two-lane road that twisted through them. They followed the path of the stream and guessed where it entered the lake on the valley floor below Naked Toes. Far to the east, there was just the faintest hint of what might be "civilization." Civilized or not, it was indeed the city where Advocatus had his church . . . and where the church had him.

They turned around and looked toward the northwest. The terrain fell off sharply not far from where they stood. It made its steep descent to a fertile flood plain. Farms were clearly identifiable by their rectilinear boundaries and the patchwork appearance of the fields. Some had been recently turned under, while others still sported winter rye and orchard grass. An enormous lake shimmered in the distance, its furthest shore invisible to them.

A lone picnic table was located in a clearing under some conifers where the sunlight dappled the ground. Wild strawberries, and in the shadier parts hostas, covered the ground. Here and there, chipmunks ran along some downed wood, trusting in their natural camouflage to allow a quick glance at the three intruders who, it seemed, were not only harmless . . . but might also be a potential source of discarded food.

Margaret and Snark spread a tablecloth over the table and opened up some of the food. Advocatus expertly uncorked a bottle of Naked Toes Pinot Grigio and poured several glasses. The three ate slowly and mindfully, taking in the beauty of place. Over the course of their lunch, all three managed to toss the chipmunks some morsels. Savoring this unexpected bounty, the chippers grew more trusting and ventured less than a dozen feet from their benefactors.

"This is a wondrous moment," Advocatus observed, breaking a prolonged silence. "The words of Maltbie Babcock come to my mind right now."

"Who?" asked Snark, roused out of his reverie by Advocatus' observation.

"Maltbie Davenport Babcock, Snark. He was a Presbyterian preacher of some renown back in the second half of the 19th century. He often delighted in going for a walk along

the Niagara escarpment near where he lived. He'd tell his wife, Katherine, that he was 'going out to see the Father's world!' Shortly after Maltbie died, she published a poem of his that was no doubt inspired by his walks. The words of his poem are what came to my mind just now."

"Katherine?" Margaret now asked. "It sounds like you knew them, *Advocatus*. Did you?"

"Oh, sure! Katherine . . . poor woman . . . she was widowed when, after just 18 years of marriage, Maltbie died at age 42 of a sudden illness. They both knew heartache . . . they had just one child and she died in infancy. But their faith was deep and helpful to them both. They were a hospitable, upbeat, remarkable couple . . . good people.

"You would have liked Maltbie, Snark. Like you, he was fond of colorful metaphors and they found their way into his sermons. He was such an effective preacher that he was called as pastor of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland when he was just 29. That's a prominent church and it was unusual for them to call such a young man to be its pastor. He was a popular preacher not only at Brown Memorial, but also with the students at nearby John's Hopkins University. They came to hear him regularly. And he had a broad-gauge love for all classes and races. You'd be especially interested, I think, in his having raised money to assist in the settlement of Jewish refugees who had escaped one of the numerous pogroms in Russia back then.

"I was quite sad when I learned of his death. It was a sudden illness . . . I think he may have simply pushed himself too hard and worked himself to death. Nonetheless, he represented the best of what we all hope for in Christian leaders. I sat with Katherine and some of her family at his memorial service. I met her again, several years later, when a huge window by Louis Comfort Tiffany was installed at Brown Memorial in his memory. It's a lovely window for a lovely man."

Snark and Margaret had sat in rapt attention while *Advocatus* reminisced and hardly sipped at their wine.

"It sounds like Margaret and I would have indeed appreciated Maltbie and Katherine. I'm glad you told us about them," said Snark, quietly.

"So am I, *Advocatus*," put in Margaret. "But you began by saying that here, in this beautiful place . . . complete with good food and wine and . . . chipmunks! . . . you said that you were reminded of some words of Maltbie's. What words were those, *Advocatus*?"

"Words that I think you know by heart, Margaret. They were set to a traditional English melody and you both know it. Here, in the sunlight on this summit, with this fine company, surrounded by the critters, the stream, the flowers . . . the beauty all around us, I think it would be appropriate to sing it. And I hope you'll join me."

And with that, Advocatus began singing. Almost instantly, he was joined by Margaret and Snark. And here is what they sang: \*

"This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and 'round me rings the music of the spheres.

This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; his hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise, the morning light, the lily white, declare their maker's praise.

This is my Father's world, he shines in all that's fair; in the rustling grass I hear him pass; he speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

This is my Father's world: why should my heart be sad? The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!"

When they had reached the end of the last verse, they remained silent for awhile, letting the words and the moment, in all its fullness, sink into their souls.

Advocatus cleared his throat and softly said, "Well, my good friends, we've just had one of those moments, haven't we! It's 'a mountain-top experience' I suppose. But Snark," he said, giving him a playful glance, "I don't mean that as a pun! I think we've just become aware of the Presence of God up here. We didn't have to do anything to experience it . . . it's always around us, isn't it? I think that's what you were saying over breakfast, Margaret. God isn't ever absent . . . but sometimes our awareness is. I think we're maybe like sleepwalkers who have just awakened to our surroundings and found God's Presence there, in the midst of us and surrounding us!"

"Oh, I like what you just said, Advocatus!" Margaret exclaimed. "When we got here I was wondering what it would mean for us to wake up from the dream that life is. Surely one answer is what you've just said! I mean . . . what if we woke up from our dream to find ourselves firmly rooted in *what is* . . . what if, we're like those characters in your poster, Advocatus . . . what if we woke up to find ourselves *in God!* How cool would that be?"

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\* "This Is My Father's World", Maltbie D. Babcock (Public Domain)

"A fit subject for contemplation," said Snark, without a trace of snarkiness. "But the sun's gone behind some clouds and it's getting a bit cool up here already. How about we go back down to the winery?"

The other two concurred and they set about packing up their belongings, being sure to toss some left-over scraps to the chipmunks who had joined them in what turned out to be an unexpected celebration of their own.

As they began their descent, and before they reached the overhanging trees, Advocatus looked south and thought he saw a familiar yellow vehicle winding its way along the road. Squinting into the sun, he couldn't see it clearly no matter how hard he strained.

"Must have been the sun glinting off water or something," he thought. Nevertheless, he felt his hair to make sure it was acceptably in place . . . and tucked his shirt tail a bit further into his trousers and smoothed it out . . . just in case.

## **Dialogue 31 – Where Everybody Knows Your Name \***

The downhill path is almost always faster and easier than the same path when it leads to the summit. This commonplace wisdom is routinely observed and celebrated by hikers . . . and just as often forgotten by some of the rest of us when, flying high in our inflated balloons of self-importance and grandiosity, we forget that we are governed by the same laws of nature as everyone else, climb out of our balloon's basket and try to stroll among the clouds in thin air. That's when . . . like the hapless Wile E. Coyote in the Road Runner cartoons . . . we are forcefully reminded of those laws.

Perhaps the most famous Biblical example of this "rapid descent" is King David . . . who looked out of his palace window, observed the delicious Bathsheba bathing *al fresco*, sexted her a picture of his royal "package", and arranged for a hook-up. When she became pregnant, he hatched a plan that would give him plausible deniability as the father. Unfortunately this plan involved arranging for the death of her husband, Uriah . . . but, hey, bigamy is a crime and, as the king he had to observe the laws! (Besides, he wanted to make sure he didn't lose out to Uriah in case Bathsheba chose him over the King.) David's plan went well until the prophet Nathan got wind of what had happened and confronted David with, as it were, Bathsheba's stained blue dress as evidence of his transgression.

Of course, if we were being fair to King David, we would need to note that, first, it is to King David's eternal credit that he didn't have Nathan killed on the spot, as no doubt many of his contemporaries would have done; and secondly, that he genuinely repented and turned from his evil, scheming ways, leaving us, not insignificantly, his penitential Psalm 51. In it, he says:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
 According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.  
 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.  
 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
 + + + +

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.  
 + + + +

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God,  
 you will not despise."

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\* When the Editors considered a title for Dialogue 32, the theme song of *Cheers*, the 1982 - 1993 TV sitcom, naturally came to mind as apt. "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" was written and performed by Gary Portnoy. Judy Hart Angelo was the co-writer. The music and lyrics can be found at:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYcX534JqG4> ~ The Editors

Yes, we *could* note all of this and exercise the virtues of fairness and grace . . . but we were exploring an example of a rapid descent from the ego's over-inflation that ends with a loud BANG! . . . and *much* whimpering.

Besides, such rapid descents almost never, ever happen anymore . . . and if they did, consultants would be hired to spin the story, thus rehabilitating the image of the one who had fallen. This person would then publish a memoir not likely to resemble in any way the authenticity of David's psalm, and subsequently would become an even-more-sought-after personality for the lecture circuit and late night talk shows. Such a person might even score a prime time spot as a newscaster. Additional fame and wealth would then follow.

Therefore, we will not make a digression into the otherwise graceful, mitigating details, but keep ourselves firmly and resolutely focused. Accordingly, we shall simply conclude with our example of King David and his absolutely splendid impersonation of Wile E. Coyote's rapid descent.

Mercifully, the descent of Margaret, Advocatus and Snark was not as hurried as all that, nor as painfully dramatic. This is because it was not their egos that had been inflated up on the ridge. Rather, the Real Self of each had been pumped up by their becoming aware of the Holy Presence. When *that* happens, paradoxically, there is a marked lack of the ego's frequent, self-important puffery and . . . to render loosely some words of St. Paul . . . a kind of "emptying" of the ego's "hustle for worthiness" takes place. One is then left centered in one's own, God-given authenticity and power.<sup>48, 49</sup> When one is thus centered, the descent into the daily round of activities is not characterized by a concluding painful thump so much as a gradual awakening to the Mystery which is always hidden in the depths of the ordinary.

The elapsed time of their descent was shorter by a third than their ascent to the top of the ridge, and when they arrived back at the pergola, they sat around its table to rest a bit. Shortly, their attention was drawn toward the entrance to Naked Toes. They heard the familiar sound of a large engine pulling hard up the steep road. A small yellow school bus marked "St. Apassionata's Academy" stopped and parked next to the winery's sign.

Advocatus squirmed in his seat as Snark exclaimed, "Look! It's Sister Mary Agatha's bus! And there's Sister Mary Agatha herself!" Sister Mary Agatha stepped out of the bus and waved a greeting. "C'mon, Margaret, I'll introduce you to her."

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<sup>48</sup> See St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*, Chapter 2, Verses 1-12 and especially verse 7. This is a central New Testament text that purports to show Jesus' self-understanding of his relationship to God and his use of personal power. It provides, therefore, a template for our own.

<sup>49</sup> *The Hustle for Worthiness: Exploring the Power of Love, Belonging, and Being Enough*, Brené Brown, PhD, LMSW. An excellent DVD on shame: a condition in which we are alienated from the Real Self and go about trying to pump our egos up instead. That is our "hustle for worthiness," and it never winds up satisfying our deeper needs. Also see a book by the same author for a similar treatment: *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*.

Snark and Margaret got up and started walking toward the advancing nun. Advocatus was still sitting at the table, beet red and more flummoxed than ever. "You coming, Advocatus? You okay?"

"I . . . uh . . . yes, Snark . . . I'm . . . I'm coming. Not quite sure if I'm okay . . . never quite felt this way . . . kind of overheated . . . it could be the hike . . . no, I don't think it was that . . . not a heart attack either . . . I . . . I guess I'm okay. Yeah . . . I must be . . . here I come." And with that he raised himself up from the table, made sure he was presentable, and fell in a few paces behind Margaret and Snark.

"Sister Mary Agatha!" said Snark, extending his hand in greeting. She grasped it enthusiastically in response.

"Gregory! How nice to see you again as well! I didn't know if I'd find you here today. I hope I'm not intruding."

"You're not intruding at all! Sister Mary Agatha, this is my wife Margaret."

Margaret grinned widely, and while shaking her hand said, "Welcome, Sister Mary Agatha! Gregory told me of your earlier visit here."

"Just call me 'Mary,' Margaret," she said in reply.

"Mary Margaret?" asked Advocatus, who had stopped about ten feet short of the threesome and was, in his present state of agitation, having a particularly hard time hearing the conversation. "I thought it was Mary Agatha. What did you say?"

"She asked me when I'd married Margaret," Snark said, looking over his shoulder and stepping aside while motioning for Advocatus to join them.

"Snark! Behave!" hissed Margaret at her husband. "Advocatus, Sister Mary Agatha quite graciously said for us to simply call her 'Mary.' Mary, I hope you'll forgive Gregory. He has a wicked sense of humor, but sometimes it gets the better of him . . . at least it gets the better of me . . . and now Mark!"

Sister Mary Agatha was now giggling herself. "There's nothing to forgive, Margaret! Only something to celebrate! I love a good laugh . . . in fact I make it an essential part of my religious observance . . . it's an imitation of God . . . it ought to be a sacrament!"

Then, facing Advocatus, she said, "Mark, my only concern is that his humor may have not been so funny for you. How are you, my friend?" And with that, she held out her hand in greeting to Advocatus. Advocatus grasped it with an enthusiasm that surprised him, whereupon Sister Mary Agatha added her other hand in greeting as well.

"I'm fine! Welcome, Sis . . . ah . . . Mary. Sorry, I'm used to being more formal . . . but I'm working on it. And, I must say, 'Mary' is a beautiful name . . . it suits you well!"

Just as Billy had done earlier in the week after he had revealed rather more of his true feelings for Jen than he had consciously intended, Advocatus now blushed a most becoming, gentle shade of scarlet.

"Margaret," Sister Mary Agatha continued, "did I hear you address Gregory as 'Snark'?"

"Yes, you did, Mary," replied Margaret with a giggle that would only intensify as her response continued. "He's gone by 'Snark' for so long that even I forget that his given name is Gregory. That name comes from a Greek word that means 'Watchful' or 'Vigilant.' Snark thinks his parents named him after Pope Gregory I, better known to us as Gregory the Great. On the other hand, Advocatus tells me that, judging by Snark's attitudes and theology, he thinks it's more likely he was named after Anti-Pope Gregory VI or Anti-Pope Gregory VIII. As for me, I know and love him mainly as 'Snark' . . . a name given to him by his parents and named after an early incident involving his inflamed sinuses!"

Sister Mary Agatha couldn't contain herself and gave a loud hoot of laughter that bounced off the ridge and echoed in their ears. Her laughter was every bit as infectious as it would have been had she . . . in full nun regalia, no less . . . pandiculated right then and there. Soon, all four of them were wiping tears out of their eyes and making snarkish nasal sounds . . . only to be followed by one or the other exclaiming "*Anti-Pope!*" and setting off another round of guffawing.

When their laughter had died down a bit and they got back into some semblance of control, Margaret invited Sister Mary Agatha to join them at the pergola. Once they had taken refuge in its welcoming shade, Sister Mary Agatha said, "Actually, I came up here today to see if I could purchase several cases of wine suitable for the Eucharist. We're on our way back home from our extended field trip. The children and the mothers are back in the city touring the zoo and the museum. I excused myself and told them I'd be back in time for dinner."

"Well, I'm glad you came back, Mary," Snark avowed. "And, yes, we have a number of cases of a very fine Pinot Noir that would be more than suitable. In fact it's called 'Last Supper Red.' We advertise it as possibly being 'The Official Wine of the Last Supper.'"

"Oh, Snark! How could you?" exclaimed Advocatus. "Not *that* wine! Have some courtesy for Sist . . . er . . . Mary, here! I realize now that you intended well by that outrageous label . . . but, really Snark . . . try to show a little decorum!"

"Wow! This wine sounds interesting . . . and controversial. I think I might like that . . . although I gather, Mark, that this wine is one of the things that makes you think Snark is likely named after one of the Anti-Popes! Would that be right?"

"Well, Mary, once you see the label Snark slapped on what otherwise is a very good wine, I think you can draw your own conclusions."

Snark went to the nearby tasting room of the winery and returned with three cases of Last Supper Red on a fork truck, plus a bottle he carried in his hand. He set that bottle on their table and opened it. Margaret provided some glasses and invited all to have a taste. Saying that she had brought plenty of food and for them not to be bashful, she uncovered some plates of finger food and pita bread. Sister Mary Agatha took a sip, read the label and viewed the pictures. Then, with a wide grin and much mirth she said, "This is perfect! It's delightful, in fact . . . and a perfect conversation-starter for my community. I particularly like the art work with Bugs Bunny . . . let's see . . . yep, that's 'Utterly 'Round The Bend' all right! I'll take them all, Snark!" Snark nodded and said he'd wheel them to the bus later. Sister Mary Agatha continued.

"I'm not sure that any of the popes . . . or even Anti-Popes . . . would approve of this wine, Snark. Frankly that's part of its appeal for me. Although, now that I think of it, if good Pope John XXIII were here, I'm pretty certain *he'd* order a case himself!" After a pause, she added in a more wistful tone, "I surely miss that good man!"

The clouds that had dotted the sky earlier were now preoccupied with shading the monadnocks. At the pergola, the full sun beat down upon them. Snark rolled up his sleeves and Advocatus followed suit. "It is getting warm, isn't it?" Sister Mary Agatha observed. "I hope you won't mind if I join you in making myself more comfortable." And with that, she loosened and removed both her coif and wimple, revealing shoulder-length red tresses, softly streaked with some emerging gray . . . sort of like the hair of Bonnie Raitt. "Ahh, that's much better!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad I don't wear this old habit more often than I do."

Advocatus stared incredulously at the now more-attractive-than-ever Sister Mary Agatha, though he tried very much not to do so. Quite clearly, the cat had absconded with the old man's tongue. Not being one to allow a cat to possess such a prize, it was Snark who spoke. "So you don't wear it habitually?" he inquired with a puckish grin on his face.

Sister Mary Agatha chuckled and replied, "No, not anymore, Snark! I was a member of a religious order for about ten years until I decided to leave it for a more generous and expansive form of religious community. But I find it useful to wear the old habit when I'm in charge of a bus full of children on a trip into unfamiliar territory. It usually commands respect and can sometimes open a few doors when necessary . . . as it may have done with you. And, speaking of that, thanks again so much for your wonderful hospitality, and *do* remember me to Cesaro and Juan!"

"But most of the time, the habit routinely closes more doors than it opens. People get all Sunday-schoolish around me when they see me coming in my religious garb. I hate that. They mean well . . . they think it's a sign of respect, and for them it is. But the most respectful way any of us can be with one another, usually, is to simply be our own authentic selves.

"I wonder, Advocatus, if you've ever had the same experience with your clerical garb?"

When Sister Mary Agatha called Advocatus by his real name, revealing she knew him to be clergy, his circulatory system was quickly thrown into intense confusion. First, his blood seemed to drain out of his face, giving his normally pallid skin a momentary, quite ghost-like, appearance. Rapidly, his system reversed course and flooded the capillaries in his face until a ruddy mantling spread evenly across his visage. Still uncertain about what it should do, his circulatory system apparently decided to split the difference, allowing his face to settle upon a discombobulatory shade of puce. While that is the most highly sought after color by antique bottle collectors, those who seek to keep the nature of their emotions hidden are quite put off by its tell-tale arrival.

Although they were not at all distressed, Margaret and Snark each registered intense puzzlement and surprise at this unexpected unmasking. Seeing their reactions, Sister Mary Agatha continued.

"No worries, Advocatus!" she said, smiling gently and sweetly at Advocatus, whose face remained frozen in a slack-jawed expression. "It's quite alright with me! I mean, here I am in my disguise . . . you're pretending to be 'Mark,' and Snark here is actually a namesake of one of the Popes! Margaret, I think you must be the only one here who has come as you are! Am I guessing right?"

"You are, indeed!" laughed Margaret.

"Advocatus, I recognized you after awhile on Monday when I came by here with the children."

Advocatus' face had reanimated itself, and having somehow managed to retrieve his feline purloined tongue, he responded. "Mary," he said, finding some courage in having not begun by calling her "Sister," 'how'd you know who I was? I don't think we've ever met . . . no, surely I would have remembered *you* if we had . . .' Advocatus' face once more was enlivened by some color and the cat burglar could be heard meowing ominously from its hiding place nearby.

"No, Advocatus," Sister Mary Agatha chuckled, "I saw your picture on the internet. It's on your website, you know, as well as in amongst the pictures of various church gatherings in the region . . . although I don't think your pictures there do you justice. You're much more, how should I say it, lively and youthful-looking in the flesh!"

"That's a recent development, Mary . . . it began about a week ago, I think. It's a work in progress," replied Advocatus with a smile.

Margaret, Snark and Sister Mary Agatha chuckled at Advocatus' new-found equanimity and humor. Advocatus found some more of his courage and added, "I must admit, though, I was quite surprised when you let down your hair just now. I wasn't expecting that. Also, Mary, you mentioned you'd left your order for a more generous and expansive

expression of community. I don't want to pry, but I'm curious about that. Would you be willing to share more about that?"

"Actually, Advocatus, I'd be delighted to talk about it . . . as long as I wouldn't be boring you with such talk," she said, looking at Margaret and Snark.

"Not at all, Mary!" replied Margaret. Snark nodded in strong agreement. "Actually, Snark and I left the faith communities of our youth and are creating an alternative one that's based in a coffee house called 'Elsewhere.' Maybe we have something in common!"

"Well! Maybe the Spirit is at work here among us!" said Sister Mary Agatha. "It's a longish story, but I can compress it by saying that after a number of years in the order, I was, indeed, looking for a way to let my hair down . . . and not only physically . . . but spiritually and relationally. I was drawn to the order by its ancient, deep commitments to spiritual growth and service. And, while the order had not lost that, there was so much other stuff that seemed about as useful as barnacles on the hull of an otherwise sleek racing sailboat: a lot of ecclesiastical folderol that just got in the way and slowed down both the spiritual deepening and the service to others.

"And it wasn't just the old black habits . . . there were the patriarchal habits of thought: particularly the notion that priests have to be male and celibate. That's hardly the way it was in the early church. Back then there were house churches where women presided over the Eucharist. At least that's what St. Paul wrote! And most of the apostles were probably married. Certainly, the celibacy of the priesthood is not a New Testament phenomenon . . . nor was it always the case in the Roman church. But even so, the church's logic goes like this: 'No male, celibate priests . . . no Eucharist; no Eucharist . . . no church.'

"You know, there are fewer and fewer men going into the priesthood these days . . . partly as a consequence of that dreadful mess about the sexual abuse of children by some of the priests. The hierarchy tells us this is a crisis that threatens the existence of the church . . . that they may need to close smaller parishes and crowd us into mega-churches."

Sister Mary Agatha's voice now developed a passionate edge and she spoke more rapidly. "But look how incredibly arrogant that is! If it is true that without the Eucharist there can be no church, then how does Rome justify making preservation of the current clerical model more important than the survival of thousands of otherwise viable parishes? Where is the crisis of conscience among individual bishops? How will they give an account of their stewardship of a church in which the baptized were increasingly denied the Eucharist? Many of the faithful die without confession and anointing because there is no priest who could come; and how will they justify why other sacraments were

by appointment only and often unavailable to the flock? Are they even *thinking*?<sup>50</sup>

Sister Mary Agatha caught herself and took a deep breath. "Forgive me. I get passionate and carried away when I get on this topic. Maybe I'd better stop and not impose my story on you further."

Advocatus took the lead, followed by Margaret and Snark, in assuring Sister Mary Agatha that she should, by all means, continue.

"You all are most gracious! Well, when I started paying attention to all of this, and how resistant Rome is to change, I decided to take a cue from some of our Dutch Catholic brothers and sisters who are beginning to organize themselves into communities where *the laity* celebrates the Eucharist. They have their own logic and it is, to reference good Pope John XXIII again, a breath of Spirit-filled fresh air blowing through a window they are opening.

"What they are saying is this: because the Eucharist is the essence of Christian community, that community therefore has a right to it! And if the hierarchy fails to bestow that right from above, then local communities can claim it from below: 'Where two or three gather in my name,' share scripture, break bread, pass the cup, there is Real Presence, holy Communion, and the freedom of the Holy Spirit to give spiritual gifts with or without official permission.<sup>51</sup>

"Here in this country, there are more than a hundred many Vatican II-inspired Catholic communities that are lay led, and mine is one of them! Most of them, but not all, still rely on priests to celebrate the Eucharist. They rely on their 'Padre Cadre' as it were... a group of priests who appreciate what these communities are doing. They offer an alternative to the usual parish . . . they meet in homes or schools . . . design worship liturgies that appeal to the members . . . make decisions by consensus . . . are heavily involved in social action ministries, some of them devoting at least 60% of their budget to such ministries in behalf of others!<sup>52</sup> They often call themselves 'Intentional Eucharist Communities' and it's an exciting development within the church.

"Actually we're not only ecumenical . . . we're interfaith too. People of other religious traditions are welcome to worship, study, and serve alongside of us. Often, they do.

<sup>50</sup> It appears that Sister Mary Agatha is here channeling *The National Catholic Reporter - Online*, Editorial, December 14, 2007. We say that because it is inconceivable that she would quote it without attribution. Such rules do not, however, apply to channeling.

<sup>51</sup> Her channeling continues. For more on what she is saying, see the reflection by Francois Brassard writing in *The Journal*, January – March, 2008. View it here:  
<http://www.corpuscanada.org/pdf%20journal/2008/2008%20No.%201%20Jan-Mar.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> For an example of one such community, go to: <http://www.novacomunity.org>

"And, while I'm sure we'd give the traditional church's bishops a near-fatal case of heartburn . . . if any of them were to show up, we'd offer them Prilosec and tender loving care for as long as it takes for them to feel better! We're not interested in trying to change anyone else's minds about their religious affiliation . . . we just want to follow the urging of the Spirit as it blows through our own hearts and minds.

"In some important ways, in fact, we're sort of a Catholic version of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Wesleyan movement in England. Like its founder John Wesley said, so we would say: 'If your heart is right with God and others, as my heart is, then give me your hand!'

"Did you all ever hear of John Wesley?"

"John Wesley . . . hmmmm," teased Snark. "Yes, Mary, I think maybe we may have!"

## Dialogue 32 – A Circle of Sorts

Margaret poured a little more Last Supper Red into their glasses while Snark . . . much to Sister Mary Agatha's immediate amusement and eventual wonder . . . told her of his Methodist roots, how Advocatus had once been his mentor, and that he and Margaret had started Elsewhere as another sort of intentional community for exploring alternative models of the Christian faith and life.

Advocatus joined in and spoke briefly of the falling out he and Snark had experienced . . . and how they had found what he called "a further, common ground" that permitted each of them to appreciate each other's differentness.

"I like that phrase you just used, Advocatus," Sister Mary Agatha responded, a playful glint beginning to creep into her eyes. "'A further, common ground.' Do you think of 'common ground' as beginning with capital letters, Advocatus?"

Advocatus chortled, "I never gave the first thought about writing the phrase, Mary." Secretly delighting in the informality of calling her by her first name, he continued. "In fact, I think I've only seen it written out once. Margaret and Snark sell some coffee beans by the pound and, as I recall, it's called 'Common Grounds.' So perhaps I unconsciously plagiarized the name just now." Then Advocatus shot a look full of feisty affection toward Snark and said, "If so, my plagiarism would be a bad habit I've no doubt developed from hanging around with Snark this past week!"

As Sister Mary Agatha and Snark joined Advocatus in his laughter, Margaret added an enthusiastic, "No doubt!" and they all laughed some more.

"Well, I'm going to capitalize it in my own mind!" Sister Mary Agatha affirmed. "'Common Ground' is what our world so badly needs to find, isn't it! If old Paul Tillich had opened a coffee house, I bet that's the name he'd have given it . . . either that or 'Grounds of our Being,'" she added with a slight blush at her playful punning.

"That's rich, Mary!" Margaret replied in approval. Her smiling face then relaxed, a slight furrow replacing her grin. Tilting her head slightly, she leaned forward on her elbows. Her reflective voice, tinged with a hint of urgency, secured their attention.

"I think that, deep down, 'God' or the 'Ground of Being', as Tillich preferred, really *is* what all the world has in common, Mary. Like the atmosphere that provides life-giving oxygen to Mother Teresa and Osama bin Laden alike, so God's Presence, or the Ground of Being is simply *there* . . . graciously available to all and for all."

As the others nodded in agreement, she continued, "'The Kingdom' Jesus talked so much about . . . or 'The Commonwealth,' if you prefer. . . is actually communal life lived in such a way as to take that Common Ground very seriously. In fact, Advocatus, it was

*precisely* as you said: you and Snark needed to find that Common Ground so that you could be together productively, while at the same time remaining your own, very different selves."

"As you can tell from what Margaret has said so well, Mary," interjected Advocatus, "we're none of us especially shy when it comes to interpreting the meaning of things! Why, on the trip up here this morning, the three of us were trying to parse the meanings of that song I taught the children."

"The '*vividi, vividi, vividi, vividi*' one, Advocatus?" asked Sister Mary Agatha, teasingly singing the refrain.

"The very one, Mary! When we arrived here today, we were just beginning to puzzle over what happens when we awaken from the dream that, according to the song, life is."

"My goodness! I can't believe my good fortune in finding you all," replied Sister Mary Agatha. "Perhaps it was really *providence* and not just good fortune that connected us. It was Tillich, again, who said that every situation of life, in its depth dimension, reveals God or the Ground of Being. That was his take on providence. The more I get to know you all, the more I feel *led* here. I *love* those sorts of conversations you all were having earlier . . . they're always fun and I learn a lot."

"Ah, Mary" said Snark, "I think you, too, must belong to the "Flower In The Crannied Wall" school of hermeneutics pioneered by Alfred Lord Tennyson. You know:

'Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower - but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.'"

"Hmm . . . well said, Snark. I'll remember that! Hey, I'll tell you what: if you want to, and have the time, I can show you how some in our community like to explore and record those sorts of 'flowers-in-the-crannied-walls' conversations."

Margaret, Advocatus, and Snark looked at each other and nodded. "We have more time than you do, Mary," replied Snark, "since you have to be back with your group in time for dinner. Sure, we'd love to learn what your community does!"

"Wonderful! Let me go to the bus and fetch some supplies and we'll begin." And with that she walked to the bus and returned with a long sheet of blank newsprint, a pair of scissors, some tape, and a several marker pens.

"Now, the first thing to do is for each of you to cut a strip of paper maybe an inch and a half wide, running the entire length of the newsprint." When each of them had done so,

Sister Mary Agatha continued, "Now, near the beginning of your strip of paper, write 'Either' on one side. Then, turn it over and on the other, indented a half-inch or so from the end, write 'Or.' Those words imply at least a contrast and maybe even a polar opposite; in addition, 'either/or' suggests making a choice between them."

After the three had done as she directed, Sister Mary Agatha continued. "Now, let's all go ahead and share with each other the various meanings to the song that come to mind . . . especially what 'life is but a dream' might mean . . . and also the question about what it might mean to awaken from that dream. As you do, write each meaning down on your strip of paper.

"When you come up with a meaning that is in contrast or opposite to the one you already have written down, write it down too, *but on the opposite side* of your strip of paper."

So they recalled the conversation they had been having in the car on the way to Naked Toes. On occasion, Sister Mary Agatha joined in with suggested meanings of her own. When they had finished, there were quite a few possible meanings and among them were these:

- Life is not the "real" Reality, but an illusion . . . like a dream: if so, the dream of life might be regarded as a sort of "dirty trick" played on us by God.
- Alternatively, the illusionary dream might be an opportunity for our souls to learn what is necessary so as to more fully blossom into the fullness of the *Imago Dei* within us;
- Life is a dream and, like any dream, it has much to teach us about what is Real;
- Life is a dream and like any dream it is fragile and leads the dreamer, even though . . . as in lucid dreaming . . . the dreamer can gently steer the dream . . . but just a bit . . . and then must go with the new flow of the dream;
- When we awaken from the dream of the life we ordinarily lead, we awaken to the Unitive Reality that is always around us and in us . . . and in which we live and move and have our being;
- Like a dream, life is very short. (Our dreams at night occur roughly every 90 minutes, the first ones lasting sometimes just a few seconds and growing progressively longer to as much as 45 minutes or more in length for the 'epic' ones we may have just before we awaken for the day.) Therefore treasure life, move through it with gentleness and a certain lightness of being;
- Dreams are the true reality: what we regard as waking reality is actually a collective illusion fostered by the surrounding culture.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This notion may have its roots in Australian Aboriginal mythologies about the Dreamtime, and gives a tip of the hat to the shamanic journeys of those very often "wounded healers" who venture . . . one way or the other . . . to the world of spirit and bring back insights for living in the world of our own wakefulness.

After the three had recorded their various ideas in the manner that Sister Mary Agatha had described, she gave them further instructions. "Now, take your strip of paper and bring the ends together. I'll join the ends with a piece of tape. But before I do, give one of the ends a half twist and then overlap it onto the indented end. Not a full twist . . . just a half of a twist. *That creates a big bend in the shape you're constructing . . . and that's important.*"

One by one the three did as she had asked. "Now, here is where the fun begins!" she said with a broad smile. "Take your marker and press the point down on the strip of paper. Then, gently draw the paper along so that you create a line down the center of the strip. Keep on pulling the strip . . . keep on pulling it . . . more and more until . . . well what do you know . . . you've now connected up again with the beginning of your line! Now, hold the strip up to me where the ends are taped together and I'll cut the ends apart with the scissors."

Each of them did this and when they had finished, Sister Mary Agatha concluded her demonstration this way. "Notice that *a single line now connects both sides of the strip!* You didn't ever lift up your marker, yet you connected the 'Either' and the 'Or' with that *single* line! That single line runs through the middle of contrasting and even opposite statements of what the song's meanings may be.

"What you all have done is to create a 3-dimensional shape called a Mobius strip, after the 19th century German mathematician Augustus Mobius, who discovered it. Your Mobius strip is a representation or symbol of the Unitive Reality that swallows up the illusion of Either/Or meanings and reveals the actual reality of Both/And! This Unitive Reality is, of course, another name for 'God.' It's the Common Ground!<sup>54</sup>

"Further, this notion is backed up by experience and evidence from a variety of sources. For example, that is the nature of reality as experienced by the mystics of our Christian tradition. For that matter, it is a vision of reality that is common to mystics of *whatever* tradition the world around!

"It is also the view of reality described by quantum physicists. In their understanding, there is no such thing, ultimately, as separateness. *No!* For example, there is Bell's Theorem. It says that when two sub-atomic particles come into a relationship with each other such that one imposes some sort of influence on the other, any change in one particle *instantaneously* produces a corresponding change in the other. This happens even faster than the speed of light! And it happens instantaneously no matter how far apart those particles have been separated! This has been demonstrated time and time again by researchers around the world. Quantum physicists believe this phenomenon of 'spooky action at a distance' is because of the *entanglement* that exists between all things.

"So, too with us: we are all of us entangled with one another. All humanity is entangled that way. Each of us impacts and is impacted by the other. We are like the roots of the

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<sup>54</sup> Interested readers might wish to consult *The Naked Now*, the previously mentioned volume by Richard Rohr, for a lengthier discussion of this important spiritual theme.

Aspen trees: according to botanists, what looks like a forest of individual trees may in fact be one plant with a single, entangled root system sending up shoots that only appear to be separate trees!"

Snark was taking all this in and exclaimed, "You're *so* right, Mary! That's why I delight in talking about the Theoretical Trinity: it reveals this same entanglement as being the very heart of *what is!*" Snark paused a beat, pushed the "mute" button on his excitement and then, more quietly, said, "But, of course, we don't always remember that.

Advocatus and I both forgot that when we had our falling out some months ago. Our egos could only think in terms of either/or . . . of my-way-or-the-highway. It was truly awful. Like we had lost not only each other . . . but our selves as well."

Snark now grew very still and silent in his body as well as his speech. Vacantly his stared at the ground . . . as if he was looking for the Ground but could not find it. After a few moments, Sister Mary Agatha broke his silence.

"I know, Snark. I've been there too. I've demonized those with whom I've disagreed. And . . . yes, my new friend . . . I've lost some old ones as a result. But at least we're in good company, you and I. This us-or-them thinking has been the predominant habit of mind of most of humanity. It has characterized its politics, its talking over the backyard fence, its Internet blogs and social media. It is, sadly, all-too-often the habit of thinking in our churches as well. At its worst, it bows down in worship to the god of war, Mars. In its fear-full grip, we forget cooperation and even competition. Only war will do.

"Yet it belongs but to a stage of our evolution, and let us hope that it is not the end of our evolving." Mary Agatha then looked at Advocatus and Snark . "Snark, the fact that you and Advocatus have been finding your way back toward each other gives me great hope that it is not! In fact, it's a sign of the presence of God's Commonwealth right here . . . right now.

"For when we are deeply connected with this Unitive Reality, we know it to be the God of the Resurrection. That's when we can begin to experience how this dualistic thinking of our world . . . habits of thought that so often lead to estrangement, the demonizing of the stranger, and ultimately to destruction and death . . . how all of that deadliness is victoriously swallowed up into this Unitive Reality that alone gives abundant life, peace, healing and wholeness. And if that sounds a bit like I cribbed it from some words of St. Paul . . . guilty as charged!"

Margaret, Snark, and Advocatus had been hanging on Sister Mary Agatha's every word. She spoke with a calm yet passionate conviction from some place of deep centeredness within herself. When she had finished her long oration, she sat silently with a slight, enigmatic smile on her face. After a few moments, she was the one to break the silence.

"Well, I didn't know I was going to deliver such an overly long sermon! But you're still here, so I'm relieved! And I am fortunate indeed, for I think that today I have discovered three new friends! I trust that, somewhere and sometime in the future our paths will cross again. But for now, I must be going. The sun is heading for the horizon and I must be heading off to the city and my children."

Following her accurate intuition, Margaret took it upon herself to speak for the three of them. "Mary, we are equally fortunate . . . for we've found a friend in *you!* You've put into different and wonderful words, what the three of us have ourselves been discovering! In you, I think we have indeed met a soul mate!"

Sister Mary Agatha smiled and tucked her hair back under her coif and adjusted her wimple around it once more. "Well, good friends and soul mates, I've got my travelling clothes back on. It's time for me to go."

As they began to slowly walk back toward her bus, Snark grabbed the fork truck with the wine and addressed the other three. "I've got another song running through my head right now. I guess it's prompted by all the events of this day so far, and particularly by your wonderful metaphor of the Mobius strip, Mary. It's the song that Harry Chapin . . . another singer who died way too soon . . . often used at the end of his concerts. It's called 'Circle.'<sup>55</sup>

"Do you remember it? It's the one that starts out, 'All my life's a circle . . .' In a verse near the end, Harry sang something about how there weren't any straight lines in his life . . . no beginnings nor ends . . . though each and every one of them had bends."

The three smiled and nodded. As they walked toward Sister Mary Agatha's bus, they all started singing it together. When the others faltered at remembering some of the lyrics, Snark stoutly carried the lead. As they reached the bus, they concluded the song. Snark loaded the wine; they gave one another hugs all around; and exchanged their goodbyes.

When Advocatus hugged Sister Mary Agatha, the old man smiled at her and . . . without the slightest trace of a blush . . . said, "Mary, I have this funny feeling that we'll all be together again! At least I sure hope so. It would be wonderful to go 'round one more time . . . at least!"

Sister Mary Agatha gave Advocatus a grin and a hug in response, climbed aboard and started up the bus. In appreciative but wistful silence, the three watched as her bus descended the long grade, disappearing finally into the now more deeply shadowed monadnocks.

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<sup>55</sup> "Circle", Lyrics and Music by Harry Chapin, first appeared on the 1972 Elektra album, *Sniper and Other Love Songs*. The song's lyrics <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/harry-chapin/circle.html> and Chapin singing them are available at both of these links. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yjxWfyxpqY>

### Dialogue 33 – To Tell the Truth

The still-intense late afternoon sun warmed the vineyard and a kind of quiet peacefulness was noticeably present all around them. The gentle breezes of the morning and afternoon had abated, along with the earlier activity of the birds and various small, ground-dwelling animals. When Sister Mary Agatha's bus was no longer visible to them, the three slowly and quietly walked back to the pergola where they sat around one of the tables.

Advocatus ventured an observation: "To tell you all the truth, the entire time here today feels like prayer to me."

"Prayer?" Snark responded. "How so, Advocatus?"

"Yes, I know that may seem odd, Snark. But consider: by most definitions, prayer is some sort of conversation with God, and that's certainly true if one views God as a Supreme Being outside the universe. Both of you . . . and now Mary! . . . have been talking of a different way of imagining God . . . a more mystic vision. I know I will still pray as though I am in a conversation with God, but I'm warming to the notion that prayer is an awareness of God and a participation in God's Presence. Maybe 'a mindful participation' would be an even better phrase."

"It's in this latter way that this day seems like prayer to me. We didn't use any prayer-like words . . . we didn't bow our heads or raise our hands above our heads. But still, it was prayer.

"Up on the ridge, we had a view of the lake and the surrounding countryside. But as we also just contemplated what we were looking at, it was as though everything else that might have been distracting our attention dropped away. It was that way for me, at least. There was just that moment. The lake, the beautiful hills and fields, the flowers . . . the chipmunks even. They were still there, but it was as though I wasn't looking at those things so much as it was that they were connecting me with something deeper . . . something that was hidden right out there in the open . . . therefore, something I often miss. It was like your counselor's fish in their tank, Margaret: all of a sudden, I was aware of the water! And it was as though, in that moment, I sensed that the water was aware of me. That sounds weird to my ears even as I say it . . . but it also seems true.

"And then . . . out of the blue . . . here came Sister Mary Agatha! I don't know what it was, but as she spoke to us, and as we made our Möbius strips, I had the same sense of there being a Truth that . . . not only was I inwardly knowing it . . . but a Truth that . . ."

As Advocatus' voice trailed off, he held up a finger signaling that Snark and Margaret should wait silently for him. He wiped some tears from his eyes and cheeks. As he tried to regain his voice, his breath caught several times. Finally, he was able to continue.

"Not only was *I* knowing that Truth deep within myself . . . but *that Truth was knowing me!* Knowing me and . . . knowing me and . . . *loving me!* And with that love, I felt a profound sense of . . . of relief . . . yes, I think that's the word.

"I remember a time when I was just a little child. I had become separated from my parents and older siblings while we were in the market of a big city. Though I searched and searched for my family, I was utterly lost. Just when I thought I might never see them again and terror was rising within me, I spotted them looking frantically for me. We all ran toward each other and I collapsed in their arms, sobbing with relief. Today, I had a sense of relief that Something . . . or Someone . . . had found me! Does any of this make sense of any sort to you? Or have I 'gone utterly round the bend', Snark, like your Last Supper Red label mentions?"

Snark reached out and placed his hand on top of Advocatus'. With tears filling his own eyes and a gentle smile relaxing on his lips, Snark looked directly into the old man's eyes. "Advocatus, my brother and friend, if I understand Sister Mary Agatha's metaphor of the Mobius strip aright, *sometimes we have to 'go utterly round the bend' to discover the truth that we are loved . . . and the Truth that loves us.* You make perfect sense to me . . . in fact, your fine words are likely the most sensible ones I've heard come out of any of our mouths this entire week! What a joy it is to hear *you* saying them!"

"The truth is, Advocatus, someday I'm likely to grow tired of stretching myself . . . weary of the journey that continuously leads 'round the bend' to a further, fuller truth. It happens to all of us. What reformers start in yeasty ferment eventually and necessarily settles down, As it does, I'm afraid it becomes a bit flat and boring . . . like wine that is itself in need of reformulation. When that happens, I will need . . . but probably I will not want . . . someone who will engage me, shake me up a bit, and set me back on the journey once more. I only hope that when that time comes, Advocatus, the person who does that is as full of soul as you!"

Without a word, Margaret reached for a marker pen and with it drew a line that began on top of Snark's hand, went under Advocatus' palm, and emerged again on top of Snark's, the end of the line meeting its beginning. "I've been hoping and praying for this moment," she said. "It appears to me that you both have somehow found your way "around the bend" and are no longer so much Either/Or as you are Both/And!" Then, passing their not-yet-empty wine glasses toward them, she took her own glass in her hand, raised it and exclaimed, "*L'chaim!* To life . . . and the Giver of life!"

The three sat there for a long time, savoring the day's events, only occasionally offering a comment. As the sun's pink disk grew large, turning a dusky rose as it hurried home toward the horizon, Margaret offered some observations they would long remember.

"This day has pressed upon me the truth that nothing is ever quite what it first seems to be. I think we all had that sense while up on the ridge . . . at first there was just that lovely view . . . and then, all of a sudden, God stepped out of hiding. Later, we revealed, or owned, our true but previously hidden identities to Sister Mary Agatha. She came out of hiding, let her hair down with us, and revealed herself to be a most unusual nun indeed.

"None of us today were quite who we first seemed or pretended to be. Institutions and people, including the three of us, are often *less* than we first appear to be. If there are

people around, you can be certain that a kind of subterfuge or inflated disguise will be present. It makes sense that we all put our best foot forward . . . and even when that's all we're doing . . . even when we aren't consciously posturing and padding our résumés . . . the truth is that we're not quite as good or as much as we appear. It's the same with our institutions . . . *all* of them . . . including the church . . . including Elsewhere. We're always less than we appear. Sister Mary Agatha was, at first, perhaps less than we'd thought . . . but she was also delightfully more!

"And that brings me to a second truth to put alongside the first one: all of our institutions and all of us people . . . including the church and the three of us and Sister Mary Agatha . . . are always *more* . . . far, far more. We are . . . as you have so eloquently reminded us, Advocatus . . . so incredibly important that the Truth comes looking for *us*!"

"I think that's what Jesus was saying in that story he told about the jewel merchant. In order to possess a pearl of great price, the merchant went and sold all that he had. People usually misread that parable, I think. They assume Jesus meant that the Kingdom of God is that pearl and that we're supposed to go to great lengths to possess it. But a closer reading might reveal that *we ourselves* are that pearl of inestimable value; and it is *God* who is the jewel merchant. In order to possess *us*, God goes to great lengths . . . even very costly lengths . . . in order to claim us as God's own.<sup>56</sup>

"It's that Mobius kind of both/and truth I've been learning all week . . . and I've learned it again today as we've all gone 'round the bend': we are all of us simultaneously less than we appear . . . *and far, far more than we will ever know.*"

+ + +

I am tempted to tell you that, just seconds after Margaret had finished sharing her observation, a meteor streaked across the sky, its nucleus glowing brilliant, Irish green as it disappeared from their view close to the eastern horizon. But perhaps I should not strain your credulity by telling you that . . . even though it is, most certainly, the truth.

Perhaps you will find it less arduous to believe two further truths.

First, before they left the winery, the three reached an easy agreement that, even though Advocatus would be returning to his church in the morning, they would nonetheless keep in frequent touch with one another and would, without fail, arrange for their getting together some more in the future.

The second truth is this: when the three neared the city on their trip back to Elsewhere, Advocatus asked Snark to stop briefly by a supermarket. Snark and Margaret got out of the car to stretch their legs while they waited for him. Advocatus soon returned, bearing

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<sup>56</sup> Margaret's interpretation may have been influenced by the Episcopal priest and Jungian psychoanalyst, John Sanford. Sanford mentions this take on Jesus' parable in his book *The Kingdom Within: A Study of the Inner Meaning of Jesus' Sayings* (Lippincott, 1970), pp. 39-41. There he credits this interpretation to his mentor, the psychiatrist Fritz Künkel (1889-1956).

in his arms a lovely bouquet of flowers and a box of dark chocolates. "They're for Susan," he said with a smile. "I want to leave these for her along with a note thanking her for the gracious use of her room." With a grin on his face, he looked squarely at Margaret and Snark and added: "Please, you two, *do* reassure her that, *per* her instructions, I didn't cat about in her room . . . and that, with the exception of only one less-than-memorable-night, I did a very passable imitation of being a man of the cloth!"

Immediately, Advocatus added a coda to what he'd just said. Grinning ear-to-ear, and in a voice that would have carried quite well up to the second balcony of a large theater, he performed his own, rather credible send-up of the "Modern Major General" song-and-dance routine from Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance*:<sup>57</sup>

"It's the truth! Of late I've come to see  
 That some of my theology  
 Casts God within a different key;  
 Speaks to a different century.  
 Though both Baptist, and an Anglican --  
 On feast days Antiquarian --  
 I am the very model of  
 A proper Christian clergyman!"

All around them in the parking lot, other shoppers halted in place and looked in startled amazement in their direction . . . wondering what on earth was going on . . . and what the loud hilarity of these three people was all about.

### The End<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Those unfamiliar with this classic Gilbert and Sullivan musical can enjoy a modern rendition of the Major General's [utterly 'round the bend song](#) by clicking the link.

<sup>58</sup> With *Dialogue 34*, we have reached the end of the Anonymous Author's collection of manuscripts. It has been our pleasure . . . well there *have* been a number of headaches along the way . . . but, sure, "our pleasure" . . . to have brought *The Dialogues* to you. We should note, however, that while inspecting the sub-basement where these manuscripts were discovered, we noticed an area measuring about four square feet in one of the walls that has been plastered over more recently. We have the impression that there is a cavity of some sort behind it. As soon as we can arrange to do so, we shall investigate this matter further.

This additional fact leads us to conclude that the "THE END", should be understood . . . at least provisionally . . . in a rather Mobius-like sort of way. After all, there's always another bend to go 'round in this fine mess we call "life!" ~ *The Editors*

Abercrombie Papoofnick,  
 CEO Another-Fine-Mess, Inc.  
 Editor-in-Chief,  
*Dialogues Upon Sundry Occasions (Last Supper Red – Synaptic Edition)*

## APPENDIX

### **THE DIALOGUES: THEIR DISCOVERY, DECIPHERING and INTERPRETATION**

by Abercrombie Papoofnick, CEO  
Another-Fine-Mess, Inc.

More than two decades ago, Another-Fine-Mess was fortunate to have discovered, at the end of a lengthy search, a building located on the edge of some attractive woodlands just outside a moderately-sized town. Many cultural, educational and entertainment opportunities were available in the town's commercially thriving urban center. Its offices had been renovated by the former occupants not long before their own business outgrew the space; and we found it to be an exceptionally attractive, efficiently designed space, perfect for our needs. Since the price was right, we instructed our attorneys to arrange for its purchase. It has been our headquarters ever since.

A few weeks after settling into the routines associated with our own thriving enterprises, we placed a call to our building management firm and reported the presence of an unpleasant, annoying odor infiltrating our offices. They determined the source of the problem was in the building's sub-basement, into which a raccoon from the adjacent woods had entered and become trapped. The foreman theorized that the raccoon entered the building undetected at the time of the move, when the outside doors had been left open for extended periods, having likely been attracted to the enticing scent of the rotting sack of McDonalds French Fries and Quarter-Pounders forgotten by the moving crew, the greasy remains of which he removed along with what was left of the raccoon.

At the conclusion of their successful efforts at returning the building to its former state, the company's foreman congratulated us for our prescience in having stored what he assumed to be our corporate records inside an array of water-tight, heavy-gauge, semi-transparent plastic storage boxes, all neatly arranged on shelving that lined the perimeter of the sub-basement space.

Curious about the foreman's description of the space, we entered it and found it to be just as he had said. Pursuing our curiosity a bit further, we began to explore the contents of its many boxes . . . an exploration that continues to this day.

We discovered that within each storage box, there were numerous sealed manila envelopes, themselves secured within plastic Ziploc® freezer bags. Once we unzipped the plastic bags and carefully opened the manila envelopes, we discovered numerous pages of hand-written texts which, although written in English, were in a cursive script of such near-illegibility as to make the typical physician's handwriting on a prescription look like an easily-marketable form of decorative calligraphy.

Further complicating the issue, within each envelope the author appears to have made numerous revisions of the text, but without indicating the chronological sequence of

those revisions . . . an omission that makes the determination of which revision was most satisfying to the author a matter of substantial conjecture.

Although these recently discovered documents are exceedingly uneven in their literary quality, not to mention their near-illegibility, the staff of Another-Fine-Mess.com was nonetheless impressed by what the documents had to say. We determined to share them with a wider public.

This has required the employment of highly skilled professionals representing various disciplines such as: infrared scanning, forensic handwriting analysis, and crypto-archaeology. Process-wise, once each document has been poured over by these researchers, experts in hermeneutic and exegetical disciplines are brought in to examine the documents so that the texts can be rendered and sequenced . . . as nearly as is possible . . . according to the author's original intentions.

Shortly after the initial *Dialogues* were published, we received a phone call. Judging from the caller's knowledge of what had already been published and what the next dialogues would contain, we determined he was, indeed, the anonymous author! When we asked for his name, he replied, "Q." We immediately thought his name was a reference to the German word *Quelle* or 'Source'. ('Q' is how Biblical scholars refer to a postulated set of source documents that the authors of the New Testament's three synoptic gospels [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] apparently consulted when creating their own narratives.)

"That's a good guess!" said the author. "Indeed it's a *brilliant* one, since most people assume it to be the same 'Q' that appears in the James Bond novels: the genius who invented Bond's various fantastic weapons."

But, even though it is pronounced the same, the author spells it differently . . . and it has an altogether different meaning. When we asked why he chooses to spell it "Queue", his response was: "Because when people ask me for more details about my identity and for some sort of commentary on the *Dialogues*, I always respond by saying, 'Get in line!'"

Yes, we know: that's awful. And we apologize. But please, this is *his* groaner, not ours. Nevertheless, we thought you should know about why the cover of *Last Supper Red – Synaptic Edition* identifies the author of the *Dialogues* as "Q."

We have preserved the *Dialogues'* original appearance as numbered episodes in what are, apparently, the written records of numerous conversations between two main characters: Snark and Advocatus. As a convenience only, we have given each translation a title that, in some way, describes the contents. *Please note that these are our own titles and not those of the anonymous author.*

When the *Dialogues* first appeared one-by-one on the website, we devised a system of appending suffixes to certain of the *Dialogues* whereby returning visitors could determine if further revisions had been made since their last visit, as well as the extent of

those revisions. We have opted to retain this system since the time may yet come when still further revisions will be required. For your reference, we have listed these suffixes below. Please note that, in some cases, more than one type of revision has been necessary. In that case a second notation is suffixed.

**NRSV** No Revisions of Substance Version

**RSV** Revised Significantly Version

**MSG** Not a version, really -- but rather a revision that contains the inclusion of artificial additives in order to render the work in a more tasteful fashion.

A fourth set of initials never appeared on the part of the website to which the public had access, nor do they appear in *Last Supper Red*. They are used solely by our researchers as a suffix by which to indicate that a particular document is currently under analysis and is not yet ready for posting or publishing.

The fourth suffix appears below:

**KJV** Knotted Jumbled Version. This is used for those texts in which the author's scrawl greatly resembles a skein of knitting yarn left in the possession of an unsupervised house cat.

Also, please note that in certain of the *Dialogues* we have inserted footnotes. Following these references will take you to a book or other resource which our staff believes the author may have consulted in crafting the *Dialogues*. *Please be aware that these are our conjectures only.* The anonymous author makes no such references.

Finally, from time to time in the text, we will have occasion to make some explanatory comments. For the sake of clarity, these will follow an asterisk (\*) and appear in smaller type at the bottom of a page, followed by: “~ *The Editors.*”

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford University Press, 2014). An excellent book by this professor of historical theology and based upon in depth interviews with a cross-sampling of those calling themselves “Spiritual But Not Religious.”

<sup>2</sup> *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, David M. Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy (Harper One, 2012). This is the book version of the acclaimed DVD series for adults by the same name. Much of the material in *Last Supper Red* reflects (in its own delightfully twisted way) the Progressive Christian tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Narcissus was the most handsome young man people had ever seen. And he, of course, knew it. This knowledge of how others admired his looks, gave Narcissus the creds . . . if only in his own mind . . . to look down his perfectly-formed Grecian nose with disparagement at everyone else. All others were, by definition, not nearly as attractive as his own glorious self. He was, in his grandeur, above them all!

This overly-pumped-up sense of self-entitlement and grandiosity did not win him any close relationships. Admirers, yes; friends, not so much. Other people didn't really exist for him as real, live, separate persons with their own priorities and agendas; agendas which were often very different from his own.

Narcissus did not handle differences at all well: as the expression goes, he didn't *do "no!"* Should someone assert their differing preferences, Narcissus would fly into a temper tantrum of gargantuan proportions. If any in his retinue disappointed him in the slightest manner, his stock reply, when he was being polite, was simply to “trump” them by yelling, “You're fired!” Again, it wasn't the best way to win friends.

His only companion was a wood nymph. Late 19th century artists render her as a nearly-naked young woman, fetchingly posed near Narcissus, who is enamored of his reflection in a small pond. In an impossibly romantic, sylvan setting, the nymph appears to hang on Narcissus' every word. She is just the sort of creature that middle-aged male hikers, trekking along the tortured path of their mid-life crisis while shouldering backpacks stuffed with unrequited lust, secretly hope to encounter.

Fortunately for everyone concerned, this seldom ever happens.

The back story of this lovely nymph is important. So let us now drop our backpacks upon the ground, feign the need to catch our breath, and continue to slowly and appreciatively focus our attention upon her.

This particular nymph had experienced an unfortunate run-in with Hera, the wife of Zeus. Aware that Zeus chased after anything in a diaphanous gown, Hera kept a sharp eye on him. This nymph very much loved the sound of her own exceptional voice, and the original songs she frequently composed and sang so beguilingly. Although she was not a human, she exhibited a uniquely human tendency: she would sometimes apply her considerable gifts to projects that were less than righteous. The last time she would succumb to this temptation was the day she sang to Hera some particularly beautiful songs for the purpose of distracting Hera's close monitoring of Zeus' lascivious activities.

Sure enough, Zeus was, at that very moment, luridly engaging in dalliances with a number of nymphs behind Hera's back; and in a manner far too interesting and exciting to be further revealed in this narrative which, regrettably, must labor under certain editorial constraints having to do with a PG-13 rating. Upon discovering this deception, Hera exacted her revenge by rendering the nymph unable to speak or sing with her own voice. *This condemned the nymph for all eternity to a life of repeating back to others only those words first spoken to her.*

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This is the nymph who shows up in the Narcissus story. She is identified by her name: "Echo." One can readily see what a brilliant match they were! Echo was turned on by the physical beauty and strength of her lover, while Narcissus wouldn't have to listen to any of her "guff" . . . an interesting slang word no doubt derived from the original Greek meaning "anything at all that remotely resembles a difference of opinion."

All went well for the happy couple until Narcissus, once more ignoring the beautiful Echo by his side, gazed a bit too longingly into the pond at his own lovely reflection. Leaning out a bit too far from the bank in an attempt to possess his own image, he did a header into the pond and drowned. (Ovid might as well have named the pond, "Ego" for, in fact, that is what fatally swallowed Narcissus.)

Echo did not survive this double loss: for she had lost not only her boy toy, but the only chance she would ever again have to experience the beauty of her own voice as with it she responded to his own. Not long after Narcissus drowned, she joined him in the pond, a tragic ending worthy of Shakespeare.

So there you have the myth of Narcissus in the promised nutshell. Okay: a walnut shell, maybe. But, at a mere 730 words, definitely not that of a coconut.

<sup>4</sup> (NOTE: Alert readers may notice the omission of the entirety of Chapter 7 titled **William, Kate, and Higgs** which appeared in the original version of *Last Supper Red*. We have omitted the anonymous author's chapter from The Synaptic Edition in response to our community of readers. But to preserve the author's original text . . . and because in this instance we're not fully in agreement with our community . . . we have preserved it here. ~ *The Editors*)

### **Dialogue 7 – William, Kate and Higgs**

It was not an optional war, but a necessary one. Fully a third of the world's population, representing nearly the entire membership roster of the Cult of Celebrity, was facing starvation. Without the constituent still images and videos of their diet coming to them in a non-stop daily feed, a calamity of unprecedented proportions would surely ensue. "The Coalition" was the name given to the organized efforts of many willing nations on behalf of feeding members of the Cult.

Executing the foreign policy of its endorsing nations, The Coalition dispatched entire battalions of paparazzi, airdropping them into the capital of that "sceptered isle" only to find that England's security forces were equal to the task. For, in spite of the paparazzi's Canon-Length® lenses' ability to shoot rapid-fire with such astonishing accuracy, not a single round landed within Westminster Abbey on the morning of the wedding of Kate Middleton and Prince William. This was a defensive achievement without precedent; save for the domed roof that had prevented any damage to St. Paul's Cathedral when the Luftwaffe laid siege to the city during the Blitz.

The Coalition was, however, not to be denied. Digitized images intended to record the wedding for history were broadcast from official video cameras already positioned within the Abbey. One was mounted on an aerial drone positioned directly above the spot where the Archbishop of Canterbury would lead the couple through their vows. Coalition troops sat before their computer screens a continent away, observing each close-up image relayed to them via satellite link. These special forces of the Coalition, trained in lip-reading, finally landed the shot that none of the more conventional troops standing behind the barricades outside the Abbey could hope to achieve.

With virtually every member of the Cult watching, the lip readers were able to capture the very words the Prince whispered to his father-in-law-to-be, who was standing on the far side of his daughter, Catherine.

Clever beyond description in its tactics, utterly relentless in its intrusiveness, the enormous power of The

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Coalition is such that most despair of its being defeated in any imaginable future.

This Battle of Britain, however, was not lost and there is reason to hope: for another force was at work, the power of which is even greater than that of The Coalition. Far and away more clever, and of a relentless nature so extreme, that the employment for a second time of the adverb "utterly" would be piteously insufficient to describe its magnitude.

As to how this force manages to do its work, the best minds are not in full agreement. However, the speculations of certain high-level theoretical quantum physicists and cosmologists, extrapolating from the best data available to them, suggest that this force generally works via the agency of Dark Energy, Dark Matter, and Higgs Boson. We might refer to these as the Theoretical Trinity, although most of the physicists would probably demur. And they would do so in spite of one of their number having dubbed Higgs Boson "The God Particle."

However unconsciously, these theoretical quantum physicists are some of the unacknowledged heirs to that spiritual tradition explored so well in the writings of certain medieval mystics who insisted on the unity of all things, and saw deeper into the workings of Reality than Isaac Newton ever would. Whether, in time, the "trinitarian hypothesis" of these physicists will explain the workings of this force . . . or whether it will be as widely dismissed and ignored as the mystics themselves typically and tragically have been by the Church to the detriment of everyone, remains to be seen.

Whatever.

Two billion members of the Cult watched every move as Kate, her father, and William stood before the Archbishop of Canterbury. After the processional music ended, the Archbishop would, as an English poet<sup>2</sup> once described a somewhat different situation, pin them wriggling to the wall, and compel them to spit out the butt-ends of their days and ways by making their vows, each to the other. This high-anxiety moment was deeply felt in both mind and body by each member of the trio standing before the Archbishop.

We would have *totally* understood had the groom gloomily quoted to himself other words by that same poet: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Instead, according to intelligence gathered by The Coalition's lip-reading special forces, William put a very different thought into words. Leaning slightly forward, he looked past his lovely bride and caught the eye of her father. "We had wanted a smaller, more intimate wedding," he said. "But we were out-voted!"

In the videos, the three can be seen smiling and sharing together a suppressed chuckle: *their humor thus defending them securely* against the otherwise damaging effects of the Coalition's continuing, intrusive onslaught. Although their appropriately-muted mirth itself gave sufficient evidence of its source, when the cleaning crew swept the chancel of the Abbey the next day, part of what went out with the trash was a very small rectangular card. It had escaped the notice and commentary of both the cleaning crew and the otherwise-preoccupied Coalition which continued feeding its hungry populations by following the happy couple all the way to Buckingham Palace.

On the card were the words, "Congratulations and Best Wishes!" It was signed with three sets of initials: "DE, DM, HB," the latter of which was written in a distinctively feminine hand.

So subtle is the methodology of this other force, its very existence is widely denied; and when it pursues its purposes in the universe, those through whom it works are seldom aware of their employment. It is, however, an employment not without its compensations.

So it was that, as Advocatus pressed the "Send" button on his phone, he had no idea his call would become an instrument of that force's sending its liberating energy . . . energy which would eventually release Snark from solitary confinement in the dark dungeon of his resentment, unbind his levity, and begin restoring each of them to the mutuality of their relationship.