

theology

I met God one snowy Saturday morning on the upper floor of the electrical supply house where I worked during my senior year of high school. His name was Herb. He worked alone.

It was my first weekend on the job and the boss ordered me up to the third floor to ask God when he planned to have the order for 500 florescent light bulbs ready for the General Electric plant in town. I was a lazy kid, and there being no elevator in the building to carry me up, I asked Gordon why he didn't just call the guy on the house phone. "Because he's God," said Gordon, "and he doesn't take phone calls."

As I turned to leave his little cubicle of an office, Gordon stopped me and said, "God doesn't like empty hands. Take him this gift." He handed me a jar of orange marmalade. "Tell him," he said, "it's from Huey, Dewey and Louie." These were the names Gordon used for his crew, who filled orders as they ran through the building from one bin of electrical devices to another.

So I trudged up three flights of stairs, which was a lot easier for me to do back then compared to now. Arriving only slightly out of breath, I walked in from the stairwell to find God seated at a very large and magnificent mahogany desk. He was slouched on a commodious swivel chair, smoking his pipe and reading the morning newspaper. Surrounding him was an enormous sea of light bulbs ... boxes and boxes of incandescents and fluorescents of every size and description that took up the entire top floor of the old building.

"Are you Herb?" I asked. He raised his eyes to give me a stern look.

"I'm God," he said. I held out the jar. He looked at it and smiled, rising up from behind his beautiful desk, an old executive's model probably saved from the dump in recent years.

Herb was sixty-something years old with gray hair and a paunch littered with pipe ashes. He was well over six and a half feet tall. He just kept going when he stood up, and I followed him until my neck clicked. Resembling a heavy-set Moses, Herb would have passed for a Charlton Heston, but with less hair.

Looking down from his lofty height and regarding me with condescension, Herb stalked around to the front of his desk and motioned for me to follow him to the florescent light cartons. Here he allowed me the honor of dragging 500 light bulbs in their boxes over to the conveyor belt to prepare them for their trip to the shipping area below. The belt ran at a steep angle down between floors and had to be loaded carefully.

"Cock the boxes a little, like this," he said, "so they don't all slide off and crash when you get the belt moving."

While I worked, he bestowed upon me some of his encyclopedic knowledge of light bulbs, and droned on through their entire history since Edison. Herb loved light bulbs and everything about them. As he talked away, I was getting impatient.

And I was in a hurry, to tell the truth. I wanted to get back down to the office floor to watch blonde and blousy Belinda, the girl who answered the warehouse telephone. She had a way of picking up the phone that just set my heart all a-titter. When it rang, she would set her body's poetry to motion. As she raised the instrument to her ear, shiny bracelets and bangles would slide and clang as one lovely arm brushed across her bosom. I liked that part. She flipped her head and pulled her hair back to swing a four inch long earring out of the way. And just before she said "Hello," ... I swear I didn't imagine it, even if I was seventeen ... a tiny shrug would begin in her shoulders and flow down over her chest. With clinks and jingles, she greeted the no doubt surprised caller. To me, her ritual was frankly erotic and might have been outlawed in an earlier time.

Anyway I was still stuck upstairs and God or Herb was beginning to bore me with his prodigious

knowledge of lighting technology and his sermon on lumens and filament tensile strengths. He paced around the floor, stooping to look out the various windows as though awaiting the return of a lost squad of angels. He lectured about power ratings and glass safety and Underwriters Laboratories. He said his biggest vexation was when stuff was left on the belt down on the dock. It backed up his system. "God can't deliver if the world isn't ready to receive," he said. I hurried through my task without much attention to how I placed the cartons on the belt.

When I could no longer stand his oration, I pronounced the loading task complete and interrupted his monologue.

"So," I said, "you're the God of light bulbs?"

Turning hard eyes my way, Herb reared up to his full height and looked down on me.

"I am," he said, "the most senior employee in this company. Mr. Lewis (the owner) was in diapers when his father hired me."

"Well, that's very interesting," I said, as only a disinterested teenager can say it.

"And this entire business," he said, "all the people in it, and now yourself included, appear to have no other purpose in life than to entirely piss me off."

"Well..." I began, in defense.

"Except for Belinda," he interrupted. "She's a lovely girl."

"Yes, she's very...."

"I've seen you mooning at her. Make one move toward that girl and I'll break both your legs and send you back down the conveyor belt where you came from."

Oddly, I was more impressed with his concern for Belinda than his bullying of me. I simply nodded and left his presence.

It seemed strange to me this crew of men would continue their farce all through the work day by speaking to each other as you might imagine the Apostles did, always with a biblical or religious overtone or subtext. But at 17, I was not used to questioning the motives of adults.

"Behold, His only begotten son," Huey said of Gordon one afternoon. And Louie would ask, "If I'm a worker in the vineyard, where is the wine cellar?" But I more often heard biblical references to forgiveness. "Stop swearing so God damned much," Gordon told Dewey, who replied, "all blasphemy will be forgiven, except that against God."

On a cold afternoon as Christmas neared, the pace got very hectic. I am still clueless as to why an electrical supply house got so terribly busy around the holidays ... I never found any circuit breakers under *my* tree on Christmas morning. God was thundering around up on the top floor and bellowing down the conveyer belt shaft, damning everyone to hell for all eternity. Huey, Dewey and Louie were spittin' and spattin' and getting in each others' way. Gordon called the three into his tiny cubicle. Opening a desk drawer, he brought out a Roy Rogers thermos jug, intended for milk in some kid's lunch box. Then four shot glasses appeared and he poured a finger into each from the thermos that had Trigger's picture on it. They all took a deep breath and let their shoulders sag. As they lifted the tumblers, Gordon pronounced, "There is a spirit here that commands forgiveness. We're lucky to have it. It is our covenant." As scripture citations go, that was close enough. Huey said, "Thank you, Jesus." Louie said, "Thank you, Roy."

I grew accustomed to the men's chatter and after a while I began to discern a shape to their banter.

They were certainly trying to get along with each other for eight hours a day, yes, but there was more to it than social grease.

Later in the morning on that fateful day, after having loaded the belt upstairs to the best of my lackadaisical ability, I descended from light bulb heaven back to the first floor, where I stationed myself at the foot of the conveyor belt on the indoor part of the dock. Crossing my fingers ... an intemperate act for a Catholic ... I pressed the button to start the conveyor belt. As I stood waiting for the first box of bulbs to come down, I heard a thump above me, followed by a couple more thumps and then a lot of thumps in rapid succession. Just as I heard the first crunch of breaking glass above me, an avalanche of boxes came down the belt out of the ceiling, breaking open and bursting out into millions of pieces of glass. It happened so fast! I stood there in shock as a Niagara Falls of florescent bulbs showered me from on high.

Gordon ran out of his little cubicle and stood with me among the destruction and debris. Mr. Lewis came running, too, slipping on the tiny particles of glass strewn across the floor.

"My fault," Gordon said to Mr. Lewis. "I guess I didn't load the cartons as well as I thought I had. We'll clean this up. There aren't as many broken bulbs as it appears." Mr. Lewis harrumphed and

turned to regard me. I was trying to look like the most innocent of bystanders. He spun around and stomped back to his office.

“Geez, I’m *sorry*, Gordon, “I said.

Gordon looked at me. “Just think of me as the son of God, sent down to save your sorry ass.”

“Herb’s your father?” I asked.

“Let’s hope so,” he said. “He’s the biggest guy here.”

I didn’t fully realize it at the time, but these young men, who were not especially religious, were working out their personal beliefs as they improvised an on-going religious skit, performed as a rather serious joke. They had only a few years before seen their young lives through the lens of the Korean War, with often harrowing combat experiences, Gordon and his crew ... sometimes with the mature leading from “God” on the third floor, when he was behaving himself ... wanted answers and sought a prescription for living. Not always consciously, the men hammered out a theology ... spelled with a small “t” ... that made sense to them and helped to answer their questions and to ease their fears. They somehow sensed their behavior could be a sacrament ... an outward sign of their regard for each other. As well, they felt the human need for the mystical. In the hurly burley of everyday work, even at home in the stressful affairs of heart and family, they yearned for peace and purpose amid the numerous klaxons demanding their attention. In one way or another, they prayed their lives would not end in desperation.

The son of God and I were down on our knees behind the conveyor belt cleaning up the debris and were unseen by Belinda, when she entered the dock area, hiked up her skirt and tugged her stocking tops up where they belonged. The most beautiful girl in the world within sight shimmied her skirt back down and then quickly returned to the telephone and desk inside, jingle-jangling all the way. We had evidently discovered her secret dressing room, and I wondered what else she fiddled with during the course of her work day.

As our eyes followed her back through the door to the office I whispered, “Does God ever grant wishes?”

“Tomorrow,” Gordon said, “take him *two* jars of marmalade.”

I heard a lot of scripture from the men on that job, but I never trusted quoting them. My Catholic schooling had concentrated more on the lives of the

Saints and Holy Land Geography. I could tell you the quickest route from Nazareth to Capernaum, but I couldn’t narrate very many bible stories, aside from a few parables.

The Biblical bits and bites the men used no doubt came from Sunday mornings, when their wives dragged them off to church. They may have been unable or unwilling to accept the proclaimed precepts heard there, because these were often molded into a feminized Christianity by 19th century sensitivities, especially the music. A real man didn’t “lay his head tenderly on Jesus’ breast,” in the words of the hymn. So the men cobbled together their own theology to suit the world as they knew it, a process not entirely different from that used by better known theologians.

It turns out that Herb had a lot of good advice and we spoke often. He was a wise person. I always enjoyed his stories, when he was in a good mood. Belinda became a nun, believe it or not. Ran an orphanage in South America. Her allure may have existed only in my 17 year old head. But maybe not. And there were others I didn’t mention. Phil, an old Irishman and the shop’s order checker, was a mucky-muck in the Knights of Columbus and knew my father. He took me aside, just as my father would have, and reminded me that he and I were Catholics and the crew were all Protestants, with the possible exception of Magda, the cleaning woman who wore a rosary around her neck and claimed to be a gypsy. She carried a number of other lucky charms, including relics of saints no one ever heard of. Even Magda joined in the continuing performance. She pulled her blue gypsy shawl over her head one afternoon and asked if this was the road to Lourdes. “You’re too late,” I told her, “Mary already did that.” She eyed me up and down in a manner I was unaccustomed to and said, “A gypsy wooman is nevrer doo late, deer david.” She was sort of cute, I thought, for an older woman nearing forty.

I would like to report that when I later reached manhood, lessons learned from the crew gave me a head start on making some sense of my life. But it was only after I reached the men’s age that I gave any serious thought to what they were trying to do.

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