

PASCAL'S WAGER

Robert Markland Smith
©April 17, 2018

To my mother Isabelle Smith

PREFACE

“What hand hath framed thy fearful symmetry?” The other day, I asked my atheist daughter if she knew who runs the universe. Tonight, I am asking myself why this Power allowed Hiroshima to happen. Why genocide? Why atrocities? Why are the oceans dying?

The same species that produced Saint Francis of Assisi also came up with Hitler. These are corny questions today, but I still don't have the answer. Christians believe that God is so good that he (sic) provides for your every need. And I have seen miracles happen in everyday life.

Go to a natural history museum and contemplate the skeletons of dinosaurs, with their eight inch teeth. It makes you wonder about baby Jesus. “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”

“For God so loved the world...” Is God in charge? Why the crucifixion? Why the holocaust?

I remember seeing a twelve year old child on a leash, being marched through the tunnels of Douglas Hospital, a child with a head the size of a ripe watermelon. I also remember seeing an old *clochard* in Paris, in the entrance of the metro, with rats feeding bloodily off his bare ankles.

But then again, the nuns told us in grade eight that Jesus had no penis. A few years later, I happened to watch a documentary movie called *Meinkampf* in which German housewives had lampshades made of Jews' skin.

My mother didn't make any stupid children. So why do I still believe in God? I can't deny what I have seen and heard. If God loved me, he/she/it can love anybody.

April 17, 2018

In ancient Troy, there lived a prophetess called Cassandra. While Cassandra had been given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, she was also cursed by the sun god never to be believed. So when Cassandra started running down the streets of Troy warning the Trojans of impending doom, nobody believed her. People said she was mad, insane, crazy, because she saw things nobody else did. In the end, the Trojans were all massacred, because Cassandra had been right all along.

Robert Smith sees things that nobody else does. He writes about these. They might call him mad, insane, crazy, but some of us fear he may be right and read his words with care and awe.

Robert Paquin, Ph.D.

ROME

*“And I saw the woman drunken
with the blood of the saints...”*
(Revelations 17:6)

“Yeah, I can dig it brother, the Church killed a lot of people: witches, heretics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and murdered a lot of innocent children’s spirits with their poison about hellfire and brimstone and the bloody Apocalypse...”

The light of the little candle burning between us was flickering with the words of my friend Daniel, and the whole darkness of the night around us on the balcony shuddered at the words he had just uttered. My dark mind didn’t understand quite what he was saying, although it resonated with my experience growing up in the night of Catholicism. I knew somehow the mindset of the Great Inquisitors and the executioners of old still prevailed in Rome, I knew it because I had been through a divorce and annulment; I knew it because of the way they treated human minds in monasteries and seminary schools. Although I had never been molested by a priest or a Christian brother, I had met several people to whom this had happened, when they were very young and vulnerable. And I had heard of the holy cover-up operation that ensued, I had heard of burning people at the stake in the public square, to instill fear and awful respect in the hearts of the populace. Finally, I had tried to discuss these matters with priests, and was always silenced.

I answered Daniel, “Yup, it is a fact. They waged war on the Muslims and called these adventures of plunder Crusades; today, a thousand years later, it is in the name of democracy that the Yankees are coveting and stealing the oil in Iraq. Nothing has changed. And the Church has used the pretext of holiness and evangelization to steal America’s land and resources from the aboriginal peoples. We know this, and we tolerate it, therefore we are all accomplices of this robbery.”

And Daniel pondered my words, as the candle burned ever so slightly, its long orange and blue flame rising half an inch high, but burning up to the stars.

Then he spoke: “In one of Nietzsche’s books, he is amazed, on a Sunday morning, to hear the church bells ringing in the local steeple, and he can’t get over the fact that this hoax is still going on, -- and the people believe it.”

Daniel paused.

Then he continued, saying, “You know, it is not so much that the Church has told lies. Some of the things they claim are true. But you find the same truth and wisdom in any ancient Scriptures. But they have chopped off heads for every one of their articles of faith. To come to a universal consensus on the doctrine of grace, a lot of blood had to be shed. And today, it is not that democracy is a bad idea on paper, -- or communism -- or anarchy. But people get tortured because they don’t believe right, and the ultimate sin is to be a freethinker, unbound by any doctrine or philosophical affiliation, and to recognize truth by any name.”

I wondered. “Even anarchy?”

Daniel answered my query. “Yes, the minute people are willing to fight and shed blood for an idea, it gets corrupted.”

I corroborated what he had just said. “I guess law and order is a bloody concept, the minute the police are bashing in the skulls of demonstrators in the name of law and order. This distinguished society which we see all around us is upheld by prisons and psych wards. Yes, goddamn it, psych wards! All our heretics and freethinkers spend time in there...”

The flame of the little candle grew large for a second, and a gentle breeze blew near it and almost extinguished it. But it recovered. And my friend Daniel added: “Well, maybe not all wise men are mad...” And a cloud passed before the moon, and suddenly, it was night, and the only light we

knew was that little candle on the table on the balcony, and it was midnight, and then some...

“Look, Daniel,” I said to him, “Shall we call it a night? You know, this has been enlightening, because it seems for the first time, I can see the different shades in the dark.”

And we went in. I blew out the flame of the candle, cradling it gently with the palm of my left hand. We stepped indoors and I shut out the darkness by closing the door to the balcony.

However, I turned on the light in the kitchen and Daniel sat down for a minute to add to our conversation outdoors. He paused. I sat at the kitchen table also, and said, “Nevertheless, with all this darkness surrounding the Church, there is still light at the heart of it.”

“What do you mean?” inquired Daniel.

‘In the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, there is light and power, if you can feel it. I remember standing at the altar and looking at the relics in the center, and there was a bright light there, the size of a thumbnail mind you, and you probably had to be psychic to see it. But it was there!’

“You’re putting me on!” exclaimed Daniel.

“And another time, I was in a Catholic bookstore, and I wanted to look at a book of Catholic doctrine and add it to my collection of magic books, and I tried to seize the book, and I swear there was a forcefield of light around that big book, and I couldn’t touch it...”

Daniel retorted, “You are imagining things!”

“If you don’t believe that, take what happened to me a year ago. I had a bad case of sciatica, and was in howling pain. At one point, I was alone in my wife’s car, the windows were rolled up, and I was screaming, it hurt so much. Bonnie said, ‘Let’s go to St. Joseph’s Oratory for a healing.’ I was

ready for anything. So we went. And when we got there, I lay hands on Brother André's tomb, and I felt a gentle power come up from the tomb, into my hands, up my arms, down my torso and into my legs – and I was healed! I could easily walk back to our car. I have also felt that same vibe standing at my parents' grave, except it came up from the ground, directly into my legs.”

Daniel was getting impatient. He blurted out, “I would believe you, but thousands wouldn't!!”

I smiled at him and replied, “Yes, it all sounds mad, but what I am saying is that there is miraculous power in the Church. Why do you think thousands and millions of believers keep coming back for more??”

Daniel was not a believer. He said, categorically, “Well, I left when I was a teenager, and never came back for more!”

“No one is forcing you to believe, tonight, Danny. It is your choice. I am just telling you about my own experience...”

He got up to leave. “I have to work tomorrow afternoon, and it is getting late. Thanks for the conversation. I will see you soon...”

I escorted him to the door, and he walked out into that great night. “Take care,” I said to him, from a distance, as he got into his car.

June 10 and 11, 2012

LAMENTATIONS OF THE SON OF RASPUTIN THE MONK

*“Sometimes the universe plays the same joke
on you over and over again, until you finally get it.”*

(Brentley Frazer)

My higher power has gone crazy. No. My guardian angel is crazy. No, that's not it either. Maybe God treats me this way, because I am crazy and he likes doing mischief. Well, conventional theologians would disagree, but they haven't walked a mile in my moccasins.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, the editor of a magazine that had published me told me he needed a girlfriend. So, my natural impulse was to pray for him to find one. I began praying and praying – and praying some more, until I was blue in the face. I let the editor know what I was doing. Two days later, he wrote me an email (I have never met him in person). He said, “Keep it up! I don't know what is going on, but I feel a whirlwind of power around me! And I have met a girlfriend. Keep doing what you are doing!! Something miraculous is going on...” So I got intoxicated on praying for him to get blessing upon blessing. And then... and then, one night a couple of days later, he wrote me an email at a quarter to midnight. It simply said, “My father died today in a car accident.” Shit, the timing was perfect – what do you think? I had never intended any harm to happen to this guy, and now he blamed me for his

father's death. He kept the girlfriend. He doesn't talk to me anymore. He thinks I am evil, somehow.

OK. One random answer to prayer. But that wasn't the only time. AND I AM NOT MAKING THIS UP! Last year, for instance, I received an email from England, saying my close friend John Max was dying of cancer. Hadn't talked to John in a few months. The year before, in 2010, I had appeared in a movie called John Max, a Portrait. So when I heard my friend was sick, I immediately phoned him up. His voice was raspy and faint, but I think he told me not to visit him. I didn't listen. I wired him a bouquet of flowers and bought a card, which my girlfriend signed. And then I took the metro to John's house, on Saint-Denis Street. It was a half an hour ride. And I noticed that on the metro, there was a stain on the floor, like someone had spilled oil there or something, and there was a loose piece of curled wire by the car door. So I got off at the Mont-Royal metro station and walked three blocks to John's house. I had a lot of baggage with him, things that went back forty years, karma to balance before John passed away... I was anxious to discuss these things and make my peace with him.

When I got to his house, the place where he was staying, the Sri Aurobindo Center, Madeleine, his roommate, let me in. She was elderly and hard of hearing. She took me to the back of the apartment, where John was sleeping, on a couch, with a baseball cap over his eyes. I paused for a second, and then tipped back his cap. I said, "Hi, John!" But immediately, he started to yell at me, "No! Go away! I told you I didn't want to see anybody! Get out of here now!"

I couldn't believe it. My friend! I asked him, insulted, "You're telling me to get out of your house??" And he wouldn't stop screaming at me. He was emaciated because of the cancer, and as Madeleine escorted me to the front door, she explained that John was on morphine and wasn't himself.

I walked back up the street to the metro station. I was flabberghasted. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't even talk to me. Here was a guy I had known since 1969. Over forty years of camaraderie.

So I got aboard the metro and wow, I looked at the subway car, and sure enough, there was an oil stain on the floor by the door and a piece of loose wire on the ground. I was sitting in exactly the same seat! In the same metro car! What was the probability of THIS happening??? (I had just watched the movie *The Exterminating Angel*, by Bunuel, once again a few days prior...)

Well, John passed away a couple of days later, on May 8, a year ago yesterday. And we never did come to terms with the conflict between us. Everything was left in suspense, unresolved and puzzling. I prayed for John, but I needed to talk to him about stuff. That never happened.

What else can I tell you? Many coincidences like this happened. Sometimes it was positive. In 2003, I had written up an application for a Quebec government grant to write a book about the homeless. It turned out that I got a ride from our friend Melba's sister to go downtown on the day I wanted to drop off the application at Place d'Armes. So as we drove downtown, she tried to convert me to the Baptist Church, and we had a

spiritual discussion for half an hour. And when we got downtown, she asked me where I was going. I said, "Place d'Armes." Well, that is exactly where she was going! And I dropped off the application and got the grant three months later, for \$ 15, 000. Everything happened smoothly this time.

Tell me if I am wrong, but I have always found spirituality in the timing of events. Is this mere coincidence? Then who is it that stirs up the soup when it boils over? How come, sometimes, nasty things happen and other times, everything is copasetic?

I have read that to the perverse, God reveals himself as being perverse. I am not saying I am perverse. But why does life throw random magic my way, especially when I least expect it?

Is life nothing but rational madness? I don't understand...

May 9, 2012

INTERVIEW

Robert Smith of Montreal, Quebec,
conducted by Claudio Parentela in Catanzara, Italy.
© Parentela/Smith/Retort Magazine 2007

Tuesday 17-Apr-2007 13:19 RETORT MAGAZINE ISSN 1445-7164

Q)Name?

My full name is Robert Markland Smith. Ironically, I am an alcoholic, and I am named after Markland Molson, who was the founder of Molson Breweries, in Montreal. They still make Molson beer, after over a hundred years of brewing.

Q) Location?

I live in Montreal, but I am originally from Ottawa, the capital of Canada. Montreal is a much larger city, about three million people. It is cosmopolitan. I remember hearing on TV about twenty years ago that at that time, over one person out of three in Montreal was born in another country.

Q) Your artistic background....?

My parents were artistic. My mother sang opera and could play Bach on the piano. My father was a playwright for CBC radio in the forties. He became a translator later on. My parents introduced me to the arts very young in life. I was given excellent drawing and painting lessons from the time I was about four or five years old. I took art lessons and attended workshops until I was about 40. My mother used to take me to visit museums when I was four or five.

I completed a bachelor's degree in French literature at Loyola College in Montreal in 1969. I kept taking creative writing classes at night and eventually returned to university when I was 31 to do an MA in linguistics and translation. I would say these last courses influenced my writing, especially the course in rhetoric and senior composition.

Q) How and when did you get started to write?

I was a jock (i.e. an athlete) until I was in first year of university. I had a green belt in judo by the time I was 13. However, when I was 16, I broke my knee skiing and began to read. I began to enjoy reading so much that I devoured about three novels a week. And one day, I told myself, "I enjoy reading so much that I want to give this pleasure to other people. I am going to become a writer." I remember that day I was reading *To Have and Have Not* by Ernest Hemingway.

Q) How would you describe your writing?

Although I have experimented with many different voices, I would say my style is very conservative. It is rare that I write a sentence that is not grammatical or logical. This is partly because of the way I think, partly because I do translation of business documents for a living. I

studied classical forms of poetry. I used to write sonnets and so forth, until a friend of mine said to me, "Why don't you get a bit closer to the people?" So now when I am writing a story or something, I write in slang, but it remains grammatical.

Q) Where do you get the inspiration?

I suppose I am a religious man. I often pray to modern day saints like Salvador Dali, e.e. cummings, Franz Kafka or Thelonious Monk for inspiration. I tried praying to Frank Zappa, but what came out was very angry writing.

I used to do a lot of psychedelic drugs like LSD and pot and haschich for inspiration. The style of my drawings under the influence of mind-altering drugs was different. On LSD, I would create very original concepts. On pot I would draw very loosely and freehand.

In 1968, I made a conscious decision to go crazy, in order to find inspiration to write.

If someone gives me encouragement as a writer or an artist, it motivates me also.

Q)Books published?

I have only self-published about six or seven books. My first chapbook, in 1976, was called Whether We Be Bond or Free. I submitted a copy of it to poet Allan Ginsberg, and he said it was very biblical in style.

Then in 1983, there was I've Been So Happy Since I Got My Lobotomy. This is a small book of poems and illustrations in English and French. It is meant to be a reconciliation between Christianity and Marxism. I meant to create a clash that would be a surrealist image, in the sense described in Le manifeste du surréalisme, the surrealist manifesto of André Breton, around 1915 or 1920.

The drawings in this book were surrealist caricatures done under the influence of psychedelics.

There were a couple of other poetry books, like Intimate Raps with the Morning Star. These poems were sometimes original English creations influenced by Ted Hughes, other times they were translated from French.

In 1990 there was True Confessions of a Bunny Rabbit from Hell, which was, in retrospect, a pretty angry book of prose and poetry, because I was going through a divorce.

In 1994, there was sort of a Smitty's greatest hits, under the title of Lands of Exile. It contains pictures also.

In 1998, Teichtner Editions published Poems and Tales from the River Styx and in 2004, Rumplesoreskin Meets the Abomination of Desolation. By then I was writing only short stories and novellas. There are no pictures in these last two books.

Let me just mention that when I was a kid, under ten years old, I was a big fan of Tintin, the Belgian adventure comics. When I was nine years old, my dad broke my heart when he told me I was no longer allowed to read picture books. He wanted me to read books without pictures. So as an adult, I got revenge by publishing picture books and drawing caricatures.

Q) What other artists inspire you?

Let me say I am moved by a lot of artists. However, I don't like Poussin, Watteau, I am not crazy about Rubens or baroque art. I like pretty well every other kind of art.

I get moved when I see El Greco and his characters with elongated fingers and dark, stormy clouds over Toledo.

I get high reading Hemingway or Kafka. When I read Hemingway, I wish I still drank. When I read Kafka, it puts me into a dream state.

I read the Bible at times, and I get moved by the rhetoric of Saint Paul, although I don't agree with a lot of his ideas. I used to like the psalms of David, but I guess they are old hat to me now. I find this might be due to translation. The images sound hackneyed if you have been overexposed to them.

Dali drives me wild. His combination of classical realism with surrealist madness is very exciting.

One of the writers who influenced me a lot was Dos Passos. I read *Manhattan Transfer* when I was a teenager, and it gave me a sense of social justice.

And not to mention Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Steinbeck, Dostoevsky, and of course, Claudio Parentela.

Q) What are you working on now?

I wouldn't say I am blocked right now, but I have chosen not to write for the time being. I haven't landed a grant from the government in about three years now, and I am raising my two teenage daughters, Isabelle and Cordelia. I find I can hardly be writing "poesy" while I have to pay the bills. So for the past two years or so I have only been translating. I am trying to be a responsible parent. There is a big market for translation in Canada, from English to French and vice versa.

Q) What advice could you give to someone who wants to be an artist?

There is a saying in French Canada that goes something like: the life of an artist is extremely difficult, especially when you are not a celebrity.

Q) What does music, in its entirety, mean to you?

Music makes me think abstractly. Just like mathematics. When I used to drink and do drugs, I was always in jazz clubs and I knew most of the jazz musicians in Montreal. I also like classical music, including Romantic music, like Richard Strauss, Rachmanninoff or Beethoven. Bach is so mathematical and precise and harmonious that it calms me down and helps me meditate. I have a collection of about 400 vinyl records and a record player. Mind you, I also really enjoy groups like Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, the Fugs, Captain Beefheart, The Last Poets, and even musicians like Hank Williams Junior. At times I listen to James Brown or Mahalia Jackson. I remember reading a book called *The Blues People*, by Leroi Jones. It provides a good explanation of the evolution of black music out of Gospel, African worksongs and slavery. I find that in America, the artists who possessed the real genius were Afro-Americans. There are so many rock n' roll songs that were originally composed by Little Richard or Chuck Berry or Fats Domino. People like Elvis mainly imitated black music.

Q) What is your personal definition of life and art and everything else in between?

I tried for the past forty years to have a take on the Big Picture. For instance, my mother just died yesterday, and I have buried about 25 people, friends of mine, intimate friends of mine, neighbours, distant acquaintances – all during the past year. You can't carry that much grief without having some kind of metaphysics.

I wish I knew where my mother is right at this very minute. James Brown died a week ago, so maybe my mom is doing the boogaloo with James Brown. Maybe she is having tea with Saddam Hussein, because after all he was the leader of a country.

My mother said some very funny things, like "the problem with democracy is that it puts everyone on an equal footing." She should have been a stand-up comedian.

I don't believe in war. Unfortunately, the governments of the world are spending more on war and weapons than on grants to writers. This is very sad.

We all know who Shakespeare was or what he supposedly wrote. How many of us are aware of who was the king of England at the time of the Bard? What wars was he waging? What will be remembered about our age five hundred years from now will be the artists, not the politicians like George W. Bush.

Let me close this section by mentioning that I got published in communist China this year. I had written something the Chinese government didn't find politically correct, so the editors censored me. They simply deleted what I said and replaced it with a watered-down statement in gobbledygook.

Q) How do you dream up your wacky ideas? What is your creation process?

Sometimes I copy down my dreams, literally. Sometimes I write when I am half-awake. Other times, most of the time, I start with a first line, as it says in the surrealist manifesto I mentioned above, and I develop my concept. As I keep writing, my imagination kicks in, and I shift my focus to the other side of my brain, and ideas come to me as I write. One thing leads to another,

and you have to practice what Keats called “suspension of judgment.” You have to let go and trust as you move down the page, creating images, bouncing images off each other, making unusual connections. It all involves syntactical relationships between lines and shapes and colours, and when I am writing, connecting ideas together in unusual ways. It helps to listen to a lot of jazz by Charlie Parker or Eric Dolphy to understand what I mean here.

Q) Do you value feedback, either positive or negative?

Negative feedback can destroy a writer. There was a guy I met about four years ago, who criticized me, he said my poetry was crap, he didn't think I should be allowed to receive grants, he said I should strictly write for money. He used to be a playwright and now he writes advertising. Well he screwed me up for a few years.

There were other people who appreciate my writing, and I am very sensitive to sensitive readers. Most people probably don't grasp the subtleties or literary allusions involved in my writing, but a sensitive reader can really motivate me to produce.

Since my daughters have been in high school, their friends have read some of my books. They call me “the cool dad.” My daughter Isabelle hasn't read my books however, and she was shocked when HER friends told her things like, “Do you realize your father did blah blah and he used to steal blah blah and used to shoot blah blah?” It was hard to face my daughters for instance once they realized I am bi-sexual. But they accept it now, I think.

Q) How are the reactions to your work in general?

One or two people have been extremely critical of my work. A few writers have been very, very supportive. Most people, who are neither philistines or artists, read 50 or 100 pages out of my latest book, and say they generally liked it but never finished the book. My writing is not everyone's cup of tea. I also got a lot of rejection slips from editors and reading committees. What I write is not conventional wisdom, so it doesn't suit everyone.

Q) Tell us about a recent dream you had.

A week ago, I went to visit my 96-year old mother in Ottawa. As I said she died a week later. But during the evening after the visit, I took a nap and dreamed I was on the bus, to or from Ottawa, and we are going down the highway, and suddenly I exclaim, in my dream, “Oh my god, we are going to get hit by...” And sure enough, the bus gets struck by lightning. There is a giant flash of white light, and electricity and power, and I get fried to a crisp. When I woke up, my heart was pounding.

Q) Ultimate Goal?

Ultimate is a big word. I have short-term goals, like making both ends meet. I would like to put my daughters through university. This involves money, unfortunately.

I have a heart condition and have already had a heart attack. I live one day at a time.

I no longer strive for recognition, as an artist or otherwise. That was a big demon I had to overcome. The way I overcame it was by making other choices and setting other priorities for myself. For instance, a year ago, I was asked to go read my poetry in Australia. I heard there was a lot of drinking during the poetry festival and didn't want to come back home to Canada with my tail between my legs, so I cancelled the trip. If I start drinking again, it is game over. Within weeks, I would lose my wife and the custody of my kids. So that is just not an option.

I do intend to be sober for today.

DE PROFUNDIS CLAMAVI

‘No matter how far down the scale we had gone,
our experience could benefit others.’

Forty years later, I still have nightmares about doing drugs with lowlife people in dingy, grimy boarding houses painted sickly green, with a shared kitchen and bathroom. There was one fellow I hung out with for a couple of days, who told me he had blinded someone in a fight; about five years later, in a psych ward, I met a man with a glass eye – he was the guy who had been blinded. Anyway, these memories still haunt my dreams at night, as I lie in bed with my beautiful wife next to me, and my children in the adjoining rooms.

I have come out of hell. That is where God found me, surrounded by monsters and creatures from the depths, when I was rebellious against him and wanted to rival him. He struck me down, and I ended up a second later, on the floor of my room. However, God didn't destroy me.

Along the way, I met several people who pointed the way. In those days, I worked in factories, and would talk to strangers in metro stations and along the dirty sidewalks of the big city. People who told me to go home and humble myself before God – and he would reveal himself to me.

There are many lonely people, and you meet them in jail, covered in tattoos, with missing teeth; you meet them in manual labour jobs, in foreign countries, and they confide in you, man to man. Heart to heart, I have loved these people, and I would share with them what I knew – how we are all alive, and it is wonderful, how we are connected.

Sometimes, hookers and you start sharing your loneliness, and they are deep pools of suffering, and you show them your poetry. Other times, during coffee breaks, waitresses tell you what they know about divinity. Finally, my dad shared his brokenness with me, and how he didn't know whether or not he was worthy to be loved.

You wander up and down the lonely streets of the heart, the human heart, which has witnessed atrocities, which cries out for desperate love. And you end up with children, raising kids and you watch them make the same mistakes, and you can't tell them nothing. And you love your kids like you love the apple of your eye. You don't want them to suffer, and suffer they must, because they are condemned to be human.

Finally, I have been in the emergency ward of the hospital so often that I know the nurses on a first-name basis. I lie there, with tubes coming out of my nose, tubes coming out of my hands, hooked up to a computer monitor, and I watch my pulse run from 60 to 150 and back. And I silently say the rosary, and wish there was a member by my side, but you can't expect people to visit you at two in the morning. The lights are turned down low, as the nurses go from bed to bed, to administer health care, and I owe my life to these nurses and ambulance drivers.

Now, I am an old man, and I feel powerless, I know I am powerless – I can huff and puff and threaten to blow the house down, but everyone around me knows I am a bunny rabbit from hell. I have been through hell. I know the way out of this hole. Take my hand, and we will help each other out of this pit.

Jan. 18, 2012

LE FRÈRE ANDRÉ

My father told me he used to know Brother André. After my dad left the Franciscan monastery, he would go visit the miracle worker to inquire about his vocation. The man on Mount Royal would give him advice.

I've seen a movie about Brother André, in which the holy man spoke in *joual*, like I do, whereas the superiors of his order articulated everything they said as in international French, which sounds like breaking a church window.

One day recently, I had a bad case of sciatica. Have you ever had sciatica? It is a bitch. From your spine down into one of your legs, there is a debilitating pain that is excruciating.

One afternoon, I was sitting in my wife Bonnie's car with the windows closed, and I was literally screaming and howling because of the intense pain in my left thigh. No one could hear me, but it hurt.

Bonnie came up to the parked vehicle and opened the door. She said to me, "We are going to Saint Joseph's Oratory." I agreed, and we left.

Once we arrived there, we walked in through the chapel and past the room where the crutches are hung. We went around the back of Saint Joseph's altar and up to Brother André's tomb. I laid both hands on the black marble tomb and prayed to God I would be healed of the awful pain in my left thigh.

Right away, I felt the subtle power coming from the tomb into my hands, up my left arm, down my torso and into my left thigh where the pain was. It was a spiritual power and invisible to the eye, but I definitely felt it – and the pain was gone.

I was still a bit wobbly but I walked away from the Shrine with full strength in both legs. The next day, the sciatica was all gone.

A few weeks later, I went to the clinic and told a doctor about this healing. He replied, “Yes, he still is the great healer.”

And yet, the Quebec government is still trying to wipe out any trace of religion in this city. So sad.

2016-08-21

BLOWING AWAY THE BOOGIE MAN

... And it occurred to me that the Catholic Church and all its accolytes, the entire Western establishment was just another hallucination, another bardo we had to go through on our journey towards the light.

I was riding on a train after death, and looking out the passenger window: I could see huge cathedrals and monasteries and convents and basilicas standing hundreds of feet tall in the middle of the City, getting blown away by a blustery cold gust of wind and snow, and their remains were strewn all over the horizon of my mind, as I journeyed onwards. I could see altar boys running with their hair on fire, followed by pedophile priests who were catching up with them, everyone screaming like someone drowning and gurgling moans of despair. There were bishops absolving sins and atrocities of their accomplices. The pope was sinking into sinking sand, waving his cross and trying to hold on his mitre. Nuns were slapping each other in the face and trying to prevent the altar boys from denouncing the pedophile priests.

After this there was a horde of First Nation children running wild, screaming blue murder after being molested in residential schools, galloping on horseback and in automobiles, and this entire hallucination in the windows of the train started swirling around in fantastic high-speed circles round & round, on either side of the train, the entire Church screaming with the faces of monsters appearing glued to the windows of the train to nowhere.

I was off, away from this planet and its plagues and empires and wars and more plagues, towards the happy hunting grounds – I hoped – and whatever Mr Death would bring as my reward. Then I doubted and imagined retribution awaiting me, for my stealing and lying and whoring around, and suddenly I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel...

I got out of my seat and looked around for the conductor of this deathly vehicle, and as soon as I stepped out into the aisle, a powerful wind blew through my fingertips and toes, and dishevelled my hair.

I tried in vain to stand up. The wind was too strong, so I resigned myself to sit down in my passenger seat and just go along for the ride, through one bardo after another, century upon century of conversations of my ancestors rushing through my brain, and I heard a chatter of voices in different languages, some early medieval tongues, some in post-modern slang, and they were all saying the same thing: relax and let go, the train knows where it is going, so there is nothing for you to do but go along with the ride.

And now, in the windows of the train I could see ancient Viking warriors riding fantastic wooden ships alongside the train, and these soldiers of fortune aimed to plunder and kill and rape, and then they too became swirling around like a mere vision, a psychedelic dream of yore.

I saw women carrying babies on their backs and in snugglies, hundreds and thousands of women, struggling to reach a mountaintop, and their faces were wrinkled and lined as they visibly got older by the minute, and all flesh is as grass, and the babies were crying for milk, and the women climbed and stones fell from the top of the mountains, and this vision too disappeared in a swirl of hallucinations, spinning around madly, alongside the train's windows.

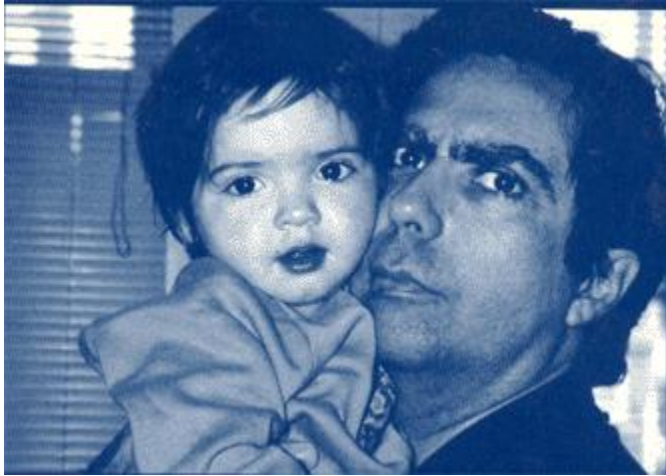
Entire cities began appearing in the mirage in the passenger seat windows, giant skyscrapers and towers of business melting in the rain, crumbling from the weight of their own corruption, and all the kingdoms of this world appeared to me in a flash, in lurid gold and glittering glass, everything shattering and falling apart after centuries of war imploded and the edifices of trade collapsed into dust.

The train got darker and darker as we approached the Light.

January 16, 2015

An Interview with the poet Robert M Smith Interviewed by Claudio Parentela

© Retort Magazine/respective Authors/Artists 2003



1) You in your own words...

- First of all, my name is Robert Smith, a very common name among English-speaking people in North America; but that is not who I am, that is just my name. But my name has influenced me. My own people, French Canadians, do not accept me as one of their own, because I do not have a French name. English-speaking people in Canada do not know my first language is French, but the minute they hear that I am French, I don't belong with them either. And there are people on both sides who are ignorant

enough to ask me where I "come from," because I look Arabic. So when I look in the mirror, the person I see is a misfit, just on the basis of language and skin colour.

- Being raised in a French Canadian environment, I was automatically drafted into the Church. Any boy who had good marks in school was considered material for the priesthood. So I spent two of my most formative years – puberty – in a Catholic seminary studying for the priesthood. However, I discovered sex and was told I was not suitable material for the priesthood.

- I guess it is a bit like growing up in Italy or Spain. Around the 1950s and 1960s the Church was very powerful here. As a result, I have always had a spiritual obsession. I guess my writing is like a vocation.

- It turns out that I slept with a lot of women (and men), took street drugs for many, many years and drank a lot. I hitchhiked around through Western Europe and North America when I was younger and worked at odd jobs doing manual labour until I was around 30. I have spent two years of my life in psychiatric wards and have seen the inside of a jail. I rebelled against all authority. As a result, I was abused by the police and by many other people who had power over me.

- Today, I am older, I will be 55 this summer. I still don't like the government. I still went to demonstrate against the war in Iraq this winter. However, I found a niche for myself in the labour force: I do translation contracts out of my home, from French to English and vice versa. I also have two daughters who are ten and eight, Isabelle and Cordelia.

- So that is whom I see in the mirror.

2) How did you get started in art?

- My parents were very bourgeois, but I do appreciate the fact that they encouraged me to take art lessons when I was growing up. However, what they told me once I was an adult was that art was a hobby you do in your spare time. The last thing they wanted me to do was to be a bohemian. So I was a bohemian.

- As far as literature goes, I have a little story to tell you. I was mainly interested in sports until I was 16 years old. I liked fast cars and girls and beer. I was your average North American imbecile. But I broke my knee skiing, and I couldn't do sports anymore. So I began to read and read and read some more. One day, in 1964 or 65, I was reading *To Have and Have Not* by Ernest Hemingway on the bus, and I realized that I enjoyed reading so much that I wanted to give this pleasure to other people. I decided then and there I was going to be a writer.

- So first of all, I read a lot. I majored in French literature when I did my bachelor's degree. I was a very fast reader. I signed a contract to publish my first novel by the time I was 18.

3)Where have you published your works?

- I have published in Montreal, in a variety of magazines, like *Vice Versa*, *The Montreal Mirror*, *Voir*, *Cité Calonne*, and in Toronto in *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly*. I published in *Dream International Quarterly* in California. I published in newsletters, newspapers, community newspapers, such as *The Poor People's Press*. I won a poetry contest in 1995. There were 1,240 applicants and I got a cheque for \$ 250. The winning poem was published in *The Mirror and Voir* as I said, which have circulation of 80,000 readers and 100,000 readers respectively. I published on the Internet, but I will get back to that later. I also published in some fringe magazines like *Beatniks from Space*, out of Ann Arbor Michigan.

4)What artists influence or have influenced you?

- At different periods of my life, different artists influenced me. I would say that when I was 17 or 18, I read a lot of Romantic poets, such as Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, Blake, and Goethe. I was inspired by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, who came later. I read basically anything that fed my own rebellion. I guess I was pretty indiscriminate in what I read. I wouldn't read Lautréamont today, because it is too cynical. I also read moderns like Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Gide. Once again, today I don't like Gide because he was a pedophile. At the time I didn't realize that. A couple of American authors influenced me a lot like Hemingway, Dos Passos, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac. The novel I published in *Retort*, *A Slice of Madness Divine*, has traces of the American picaresque novel. I also like the travelogues of Blaise Cendrars. I also read Dostoevsky and almost all of Nietzsche. I wish I could write a book of depth psychology, like *Crime and Punishment* or something, but I am not that deep. I just know that. I also tried to memorize long passages from the King James Bible, but that is another story. For a period of about ten years, I read a lot about physics. I tried to understand the theory of relativity, but I am not smart enough.

5)Have you published your own books?

- I have self-published about six books of poetry and prose. I also illustrated a couple of them. I do surrealist cartoons. As a matter of fact, the way I find inspiration to write is based on surrealism. Well, my own twist on it. I have also published in about fifty print magazines since 1966. I published in French and English. Lately, in the past two years I have decided that "no man is a prophet in his own country" and have published quite a bit abroad in *Retortmag.com* out of Brisbane Australia and *Perforations Magazine* online out of Smyrna Georgia, as well as in *getunderground.com* out of Los Angeles. Last summer, I got translated into Chinese and published a poem in the *Chinese Poetry International Quarterly* out of main land China. That issue was distributed in English and Chinese in 40 countries worldwide.

6)What do you want to express more of yourself?

- All I need is more time to myself. Right this minute as I am answering these questions, my children and two of their friends are yelling and acting silly and teasing the cat. Also, some money would make it possible for me to write and not worry about paying the bills. I was given a grant for \$ 10,700 Canadian from the Quebec government a year and a half ago, and that enabled me to produce art and write for several months. Right now, I am doing a lot of translation, which is equivalent to a "club date" for a jazz musician. You know, some times jazz musicians have to perform at a wedding or a bar mitzvah or something, and they can't blow free, but the money is good. They get very discouraged and do heroin etc.

7)What are your principal sources of inspiration...?

- Once again, at different times different things have inspired me. In the late sixties and early seventies, I did a lot of LSD 25 and smoked a lot of grass. Most of my drawings were influenced by weed. Then around 1975, I got caught and converted by the Jesus freaks in California, and my art had a religious flavour all through the eighties. Since 1989, I have been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, and I hear a lot of talks about drinking and drunken adventures. That has also influenced my writing since about 1990. I am looking for a new voice. I wrote a couple of pieces of fiction in this genre around January, but now I am just translating to pay the bills and support my family.

8)What do you think about artists using the Internet as a forum for sharing their work?

- It is a shame that there is no money and no royalties paid for our work. There are several class action suits in court right now all over North America to protect the rights of artists. One solution might be pay-as-you-view magazines online. If the porno magazines can do it, why can't underground magazines? I think it is still a limited market. I am not sure what percentage of the world population has access to the web. I remember reading an article in the French magazine Le Monde diplomatique, and they reminded us that many people don't have access to medicine, washing machines or education, let alone the web. I mean in the third world. So the web is very elitist if you look at it that way.

9)Favourite books/authors?

- My all-time favourite book is Ulysses by James Joyce. I don't think you can get any further out than that. I read The Trial by Kafka four times. I carried Les Fleurs du mal by Baudelaire in my pocket every day for a year. My favourite poet is e.e. cummings. My all-time favourite movie is Brazil, and then Doctor Strangelove. My favourite artist is Salvador Dali, and then Claudio Parentela...

10)Does your environment influence your art,either in style/format or interference?

- As I said above, I was a product of the Catholic Church for many years, but all that is left of that is that I say the rosary. I would never set foot in a church. So being a good Catholic

boy, I pray to the saints. I ask dead artists to inspire me to write. I mean dead artists like Frank Zappa, Thelonious Monk, e.e. cummings or Franz Kafka. I have produced interesting work about ten minutes after praying to these characters. I also use the methods of Julia Cameron to break through writer's block. I guess also the fact that I live in Montreal in the new millennium means everything I do is post-modern. The culture was a lot more repressive fifty years ago. And the government here tolerates art – this means I don't have to worry about the police too much. They don't bust you for criticizing the government here.

11) Now you're working on...
- I am working on finding a real publisher who would pay me royalties for my current manuscript, *Rumpleforeskin Meets the Abomination of Desolation*. It is partly about cults in the United States, about hitchhiking around in the late sixties, about stealing cars and trucks. There is one story called *Battlescars and Stigmata* in which the narrator is a beach in Ottawa, Canada. There is another story about psychosis written in legal/biblical English. There are altogether 32 stories in this manuscript. Are there any takers out there?

12) Your future and future artistic projects...?

- I guess I am in family mode for the next while. I am not out of the woods yet. My daughters are only 8 and 10. However, I keep applying for more grants to take time off from the translation business so I can concentrate on my writing.

13) A message from your heart for the readers...

You only go through this planet once so live life to the fullest. This doesn't mean you necessarily have to go out and destroy yourself. It means something like "I have come that they might have life and that more abundantly." Some people are walking, talking dead.

A QUESTION MARK SEARCHING FOR A SENTENCE

*“We will know intuitively how to handle
situations which used to baffle us.”*
(The 12 Promises)

My friend Brentley used to say that the universe plays the same joke on you over and over again until you finally get the joke. I wasn't sure. It sure seemed that the endless repetitious cycles served a purpose – but what? That was the question.

I kept getting into the same childhood situation over and over again, except that my usual way of responding, that is humour, became less and less socially acceptable as I grew older. I am told that when I was a baby in my high chair sitting at a family dinner, if there was a lull in the conversation, I would take my soup bowl and pour the soup over my head, to make everyone laugh. This was cute when I was less than a year old, but didn't go over very big when I was a grown-up.

The problem in my eyes was the lull in the conversation. I picked up on the fact that sometimes family communications could be awkward and difficult. There were family members who said things that embarrassed the others.

Later on in school, I was an outcast, a scapegoat – or at least I thought so. So I identified with the naturals, the poor and the unsophisticated. A cousin of mine told me a few years ago that he could never understand why I would take my bicycle and ride to Cyrville to hang out at a garage and talk to the mechanics. Also, I remember identifying with the motorcycle guys we used to call “hard rocks.” What I liked about them was that they didn't talk down to me when I was eight or ten and they were practically adults.

Sometimes my relationship with adults was jinxed, I felt they were manipulating me and I didn't know how they did this. My parents

convinced me to go to seminary school, under the pretext that I had a vocation, when all they really wanted was for the priests to straighten me out. Here I was, a juvenile delinquent and I was fooled into thinking God was calling me to become a priest!

This type of deception and absurdity kept reoccurring throughout my life. And when the people around me behaved in ways that didn't make sense to me, I would rebel or flee or act irrationally.

I guess my solution will have to be to learn how to play the hand I am dealt, to the best of my ability. Maybe I can even create something beautiful for God as a result of my ability. Also, I have to learn to accept others unconditionally, even if they don't understand me.

April 13/14

THE LIGHT

This is what happened in 1983: I was living in a highrise in Ottawa and went for a swim. I was thirty-four and there was a woman about my age swimming in the pool as well. I looked at her and frankly, she wasn't good-looking, but we started playing together. I would stand with my legs apart in the water, and she would dive and swim between my legs.

It was a moment of total joy.

We went to her apartment. She told me she had experienced the light. She didn't put a name on it. I told her I had experienced the light and the people in the born-again Christian church called it the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Whatever.

Tonight I realize my soul is sick even though I am created in God's image. And I want to get better. Nothing I have tried in this life has made me better, not religion, not psychiatry, not AA.

I need some love – and I don't mean romance.

I want to thank whoever is out there for loving me and giving me a second chance.

LEAPING INTO THE FIFTH DIMENSION

Our great great granddaddy Ouspensky posited a fifth dimension, which is as real as this one, except there is no one who can disprove its existence. According to this mathematician, the here and now are but a slice in a pinwheel, through which we see a thin part of the cosmos. But to God, who sees things in entirety, the fifth dimension is mere common sense. Through his eyes he sees all of history and space at once.

I had a dream when I was around thirty in this life, in which I turned backwards and saw myself as a baby struggling to walk, holding the hands of both my parents on either side, and the baby looked ahead and posited me at thirty. Then I turned around and looked ahead of me, and saw an eighty-some old man likewise supported by two psychiatric nurses, looking back over his shoulder at me at thirty – and this was my future.

And all events disappeared, swallowed up in this vision of my past, present and future. I am the Universal Soldier, Everyman, the human race incarnate, Man in general. All my individual characteristics had faded in this dream, and I could see in the abstract, beyond the vicissitudes of the pinhole of here and now.

What do you call this vision? Man's fate? The way of all flesh? The Buddha hit the nail on the head: birth, old age, disease and death, that's all folks...

But what is the weight of a dream? Why do I feel so sluggish after waking up, as though I had carried the burden of Morpheus, struggling with eternity, emptiness, pith and energy all at once? The images that flash through my psyche fly through the air like flocks of birds, madly going around and around, what a crazy sound. And I land back on earth after each near-death experience, disappointed that the villain is not slain once and for all, that the hero and his lover are still virgins, that the mountains I have climbed have vanished in air.

Oh that matter could dissolve! That this too too solid flesh would melt!

Like on John Keats' grecian urn, the lovers wake up in time and out of myth and have still not kissed...

2018-02-13

THE DIAMOND RING

Here is a story my dad told me before he passed away.

In September 1975, his cousin Phoebe had died of breast cancer and my parents were the executors of her will. She had died in Montreal, and they lived in Ottawa. Now everything went well, all was according to the will, except for one thing. A ring. There was a valuable heirloom, a diamond ring mentioned in the will – but my parents couldn't find it among her belongings. They searched and searched, but there was no trace of it.

So after several weeks of sorting out her estate, one afternoon, my dad said he was sitting in his favourite armchair, thinking, of course, about the missing ring. And lo, he was brooding, and suddenly there was a ray of sunshine coming in from the picture window. The sun was shining on a row of books in a bookshelf within arm's reach from my dad's chair. And the sun was shining on one particular book in the row.

My dad wasn't thinking of anything, but he casually reached over and grabbed the book on the shelf and opened it. He opened it at random – and there was the diamond ring!!

The reason my father told me this story was to give me an example of the way God dealt with him all his life. After he had his first heart attack, he began opening up to me and telling me about his life. I am glad he did.

2017-10-04

REMISSION

It all took place in my parents' living room at 4500 Patricia in NDG. One day in 1965, I was seventeen years old and my mother commented on the fact that I never smiled. She asked me to smile for her, and I wouldn't. I just scowled. I couldn't think of anything stupider than smiling. You have seen pictures of Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe – they had dark circles under their eyes and lips as barren as a cliff under a sea storm. They had tasted the bitter gall of despair. Their auras were black.

At that time, I decided to hoist anchor and leave behind traditional ways. I was going out to sea. I soon began lying down on my back on the grass in the backyard and staring at the full moon. I began wandering through cemeteries, hoping for a ghoulish apparition. I began hanging around the Black Bottom coffee shop on Saint Antoine Street in downtown Montreal and listening to Nelson Symonds playing jazz until five o'clock in the morning. There was rebellion in paradise and it wasn't nice, as the song goes.

Things got worse. I became possessed, and driven by a horde of fallen angels across Europe, through Soho and the Latin Quarter, across the States and in Greenwich Village in the sixties and Berkeley, California in the seventies. There were fire trucks following me around and all I had to do was to walk the streets and the police would pick me up for suspicion. Demonstrations. Cell meetings. Drug parties. Shooting galleries. Police stations. Straightjackets. Locked up in padded cells.

Meanwhile, my parents were covering up my behaviour to the family and neighbours. They were asking priests and nuns for help. They were having kittens. They had broken hearts when I would attempt suicide.

But the miracle happened in my parents' living room at 4500 Patricia, one afternoon in 1978. I was playing a vinyl record on the record player. It was

Thelonious Monk playing solo. My dad came and sat beside me. And we listened to the jazz together. This was the first time he had shown interest in my tastes in a long time. There was Monk, with his straight fingers bouncing around on the keys, when my father just commented, in French, “He is telling a story...”

In my mind, just then, I could see a door hook connecting with a latch. The hook went into the latch, and the door was secured. I connected spiritually with my father. I connected spiritually with the universe. With God, basically.

He was no longer the disciplinarian who wanted me to become a priest. He was another person listening to my type of music. Could he be a friend? Could he actually be a parent?

And my recovery began just there and then. I had been washing dishes in restaurants and bussing tables and working in factories, even though I was an A student in university and had a BA magna cum laude. Within a year, my father started subcontracting out translation work to me, and a couple of years later, he paid for me to complete a year of graduate studies in translation. Next thing you know, I had a career as a translator. It took years and years of struggling and learning and pushing myself. But I had jobs in government, which were more gratifying than getting shoved around doing manual labour. Oh there were relapses and setbacks, but I stayed on my medication, and my psychiatrist one day wrote in my chart, “huge burst of creativity; good remission from schizophrenia.”

October 4, 2017

A COCKEYED ESSAY ABOUT PAUL ROBESON

There is a song by the great Paul Robeson in which he says what America means to him is the people, the common people. He really loved the masses, and for this he was brought before the House on unAmerican Activities. He was of course a member of the Communist Party. But then again Charlie Chaplin was also exiled. Carl Sandburg wrote about the greatness of the people. "I am the people, the mob, the mass..." Bob Dylan sang, "You may be a construction worker working on a home; you may live in a mansion, you may live in a dome, but you gotta serve somebody..." And this is the genius of America, the writers, the painters, the poets, the musicians who were close to the people.

I am not an American and in some ways I am glad, but I have had the honour to work with regular people, in hotels, in restaurants, in factories, doing manual labour, and I found that people all over have the same needs, the same aspirations and the same resentments when the country's situation is rotten, when politicians and businessmen exploit the masses. People in Canada, in Quebec, in the mid-West, in California, trudge the same path, and stick together.

Other times, I was an outcast, and mentally ill. Then the people were not so friendly to me. I was an outsider. I was a round peg in a square hole. Regular people were afraid of me. They thought I was a terrorist. An arsonist. They read the reports in the newspapers about people from outside the community, who come in and pillage and do harm. Unfortunately, people are gullible. They think women who wear hijabs or burkas are dangerous somehow. Sometimes they think people of another colour are less than. That is when you wish you could blend in with the rest.

When you are psychotic, America can seem Kafkaesque, like a police State, a totalitarian wasteland of rednecks and nazis. That is when you are psychotic. And when you are in jail and psychotic, wow! You'll wish this was a television show in your living room.

But today, I am in my right mind. I can't enter the United States of America, because I have two minor criminal records. Once, in 1968, I stole a piece of cheese from a supermarket in Vancouver. And another time, a year later, I was charged with breaking a window at a riot in Montreal. I was innocent on the second charge but the police lied in court. The officer testified that he saw me take a staff and smash the window. I never did. But I went to jail for a week. Mind you, I have a pardon – but I still can't enter the USA.

So, that's it. That is the extent of my criminality. And that is what makes me a monster. An outsider. An outlaw.

One Christmas day, I was in church with my mother, and I told her that Jesus had spent a night in jail. And she snapped back at me, "HE DID NOT!!"

And there you go. My mother would say things like, "Three hundred million Americans can't be wrong."

2017-10-05

MOTHER'S DAY

On Mother's Day, around three years ago, Bonnie and the kids went shopping. Normal thing to do. While they were gone, I was alone in the apartment and had a panic attack. I know now I should have taken a bath or gone back to bed. What I did caused a lot of trouble.

First, I phoned my partner Bonnie on her cell phone and she told me she was busy. Then I phoned four or five of my friends and they were busy doing Mother's Day things too, visiting their moms. Then I phoned the clinic and it was Sunday; so I couldn't speak to a doctor. What was I going to do? I was feeling anxious and afraid.

Finally, I did it. I called Nine One One. 9-1-1. A lady answered. We spoke French. I said, "Hello, my name is Robert Smith. I am known for schizophrenia and am feeling anxious." The dispatcher asked me if I was afraid I was going to do something. I answered that yes, I was afraid I might do something like set the house on fire. I didn't know what to say.

She asked me, "Are you dangerous?"

I answered, "No."

She asked me again, "Do you have any weapons there?"

I answered naively, "No, just kitchen knives."

She told me she would send help. So I went into the bathroom and began shaving with my electric razor. Five minutes later, I heard knocking at the front door. I had left it open so the ambulance drivers could get in. Then I heard hard footsteps. We lived on the second floor of a duplex. There were about ten cops charging up the stairs and into my apartment. On the front lawn there were five police cars parked at random.

I was in the bathroom and wasn't expecting anything. Two male cops stood on either side of the bathroom door. A woman cop (I didn't say a "lady cop") came up to me and said, "Stick out your hands." They were all wearing uniforms and carrying guns. So I stuck out my arms.

A second later, the cop at my right did some jiu-jitsu and threw me on the ground – a second later they handcuffed me from behind – I started to scream blue murder – meanwhile the other eight cops were searching my apartment for the so-called weapons – I am lying on the ground and hollering, "WHAT ARE YOU? CRAZY? I HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING!!" Then they search my pockets for weapons. The only weapons they find in the apartment are the flowers I bought my wife for Mother's Day and of course, if they looked in the kitchen drawers, some knives and forks and spoons. I am still crazy and yelling and I tell them I forgive them and the head cop says he is sorry, there seems to be a misunderstanding but because I "resisted arrest" they are going to leave the handcuffs on, which hurt like a bastard.

A minute later, the ambulance drivers show up and march me down the stairs and into the street – handcuffed – and I am paraded down the street fifty feet in front of my landlord and the entire neighbourhood and they load me into an ambulance and a woman cop is holding me and then they tie me up in a straitjacket and drive me to Saint Mary's Hospital.

To make a short story shorter, at the hospital they phone Bonnie my partner, who shows up half an hour later and explains to them that I am not dangerous and they turn me over to her custody.

SHE IS REALLY PISSED OFF THAT I SPOILED HER MOTHER'S DAY.

A week later, I met my family doctor Nicole Marceau and she explained to me there was a red flag on my file in the computer. Paul Rose from the FLQ had died a couple of weeks before and I had published a short story about the terrorist group and the October crisis a week later in Retort Magazine in Australia. Therefore, the authorities considered me dangerous.

The story is called “Some Day My Prince Will Come” and it is now in the Pandora Archives of the National Library of Australia.

Isn’ t globalization a wonderful thing?

2017-09-22

TRIBULATIONS OF A MISSIONARY

Here is a story my cousin Neil told me. He fancied himself a missionary and would go to any length to make a convert. However his damning sin was his love of laughing.

And this is how the story goes. There was a Jewish lady that the late Neil wanted to convert and he went as far as to attend a service at her synagogue so that she would reciprocate by coming to a mass. This took place in Los Angeles, where my cousin lived.

By the time they went to mass together, Neil was very enthused and wanted everything to go just right.

So here they were sitting in their pews in front of the church and there it was, bell, book and candle.

But just as the priest came out of the sacristy, a nun dressed all in white walked up the aisle and stood in front of the altar. What could this mean?

Suddenly, the nun started doing a striptease, taking off her habit and her wig, down to her underwear – and lo, it was a male crossdresser – and Neil and his Jewish convert-to-be pissed themselves laughing!

The congregation was in shock, and the whole effect of Neil's proselitizing came to naught...

Always check for land mines before stepping out on to the battlefield.

January 28, 2018

BARE NAKED IN THE PARK

I got discharged from the funny farm in November 1970 and for a year I dove into a street flooded with water flowing out of manholes and naked bodies running through the park, gushing with erotic emotion and starlit imagination. You could barely make it across the intersections in NDG without getting soaked with vaginas and breasts swirling around like a whirlpool of life source. I got involved in a totally physical relationship with a nymph who cared for nothing but to make love and express affection and stroke and caress and go in and out and undress in the sunlight in the window, the sun caressing her as she smiled – it was not salvation, but rather comic relief from a lifetime of hardship and desperation. We dove into this maelstrom of erotica like two twenty-something kids with beautiful bodies and long hippie hair and total contempt for convention or holiness. Touching and kissing and various kinds of penetration became our religion. Laughing all the way to perdition, we mocked society and its regulations. Walking along the beach of the Mediterranean sea as the sun set, stripping naked several times a day to make sure we were still in love, drinking red wine in southern Spain like it was water, we were delivered from the constraints of psych wards or schools or jails. Life was colourful, wild and sexy. Our lips touched and I touched her and she touched me – while our parents frowned and reminded us of propriety. We kissed all the way through the Alps on a train that went in and out of tunnels past the Black Forest, soaking wet on beaches in Italy and lying in the sunshine of summer in France.

This orgy went on for a year and then we were back home in grimy, grey old Montreal, and we had to pay the bills. The party was over and she was back in university and I had to find a decent job.

First it was a retail store, where I lasted a week after denouncing the boss as a capitalist – then a factory in Ville Saint-Pierre where the foreman took me aside and asked me what was wrong with me – then another factory in Lachine where the workers would not accept my ideas about revolution --

and then another dirty, noisy factory in Saint Leonard. For the life of me, I couldn't keep a job for more than a few weeks. By then my paramour had left and I was back to square one.

I was living in cheap boarding houses where I met junkies, Jamaican fortune tellers, veterans and retired policemen. My life was a dead end street without hope or redemption.

January 28, 2015

A IS NOT NOT-A

The families line up at the cash, and yes, it looks boring: the fathers are holding the little boys' hands, and the mothers are fussing, looking through their purses, and the little girls are running wild, running circles around their parents, and this is what it is all about if you have kids. Your turn arrives, and you come up to the cashier at the Biodome. He asks you how many tickets you want, and you reply: two adults and so many children. The cashier gives you your tickets, and then you go to the cloakroom, to drop off your boots and coats. Of course, the little boy has to go to the bathroom, and the little girls are fighting, and the parents are totally stressed out. But the grown-ups are learning to become patient. They will be mature some day.

I remember asking a lady of the night once, "Why are you working as a call-girl?"

And she replied, dead serious: "Because I didn't want a house in suburbia with a white picket fence, and a husband in a T-shirt, holding a can of beer in his hand."

So you pays your money and you makes your choice.

However, what is not obvious is that family living is not an option for many other people, like the homeless. Some people, like gays or clergy, as well as certain dedicated artists, choose not to reproduce, because their heart is elsewhere, but the homeless are considered not eligible to have kids.

Meanwhile, the family has begun visiting the exhibit, and look, daddy, there is a crocodile!! And where is Johnny? I don't know, he was here a minute ago. He must have run off to go see the monkeys. And mommy, Alyssa won't stop bugging me!

And there are hundreds of families in the municipal exhibit, and it can be at the Old Port, it can be the Nutcracker Suite at Christmas time, it can be the Dow Planetarium – what else can you do with your family on a Sunday afternoon? And the exhibits are crowded, and they are shovelling real money into real trucks with real shovels. And the whole bloody economy runs on this: the Sunday afternoon with the kids.

Perhaps it seems boring to outsiders, perhaps the parents are totally on edge and want to blow up at their kids; perhaps daddy has had to work all week to pay for these outings. Someone had to wash the kids' clothes, feed them, toilet-train them, take them to school, do homework with the children. Kids are not a package deal: they don't come into this world already trained and ready to go.

And there is definitely a dialectic here: the kids just want to watch videos, eat junk food, go to bed at all hours of the night, and they are the proles. Meanwhile, mom and dad want to bring up their kids, and they have an agenda for the young ones, and they are management. And the class struggle goes on. One thing, however, is for sure – having kids means instant morality.

Meanwhile, the homeless people are not part of this. They are sleeping in subway stations, on hard benches, after spending their last sixty dollars on a bag full of coke. Theirs are cheap thrills, and they are not happy. But would they want to fuss over kids, the way you do? Would they want to wake up at six o'clock every morning, to go to work and prepare breakfast for a family of four? Would they want to do homework as though school started all over again, at the age of forty? Is it a choice, a vocation like for Benedict Labre? Do the homeless have a choice?

A is not not-A. The homeless are excluded from the family exhibit. The street people, the hookers, the hustlers and panhandlers have made their choice. You can't have your cake and eat it. And trust me, there are plenty of times when the parents would gladly want to throw in the towel, and go party. Something keeps you committed. Something that looks like an angel when it is sleeping, under the blankets, with its mouth slightly open, dreaming little angel dreams.

Where are the homeless? They are not here. Their absence is conspicuous. Because families sleep at night. You might say raising children means not having adventures. You might say it fills the heart with joy.

Written with the financial assistance of the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.

THE CHURCH OF ROME

“Yeah, I can dig it brother, the Church killed a lot of people...” The light of the little candle burning between us was flickering with the words of my friend Dave, and the whole darkness of the night around us on the balcony shuddered at the words he had just uttered. My dark mind didn’t quite understand what he was saying, but I had been through a divorce and an annulment. I had never been molested by a priest or a Christian brother but I had met several people to whom this had happened.

I answered Dave, “Yup, it is a fact. They waged war on the Muslims and called this Crusades; today, a thousand years later, in the name of democracy the Yankees are stealing the oil in Iraq. And the Church stole America’s land from the aboriginal peoples.”

And Dave pondered my words, as the candle burned ever so slightly, its long orange and blue flame rising half an inch high, but burning up to the stars. Then he spoke: “In one of Nietzsche’s books, he is amazed, on a Sunday morning, to hear church bells ringing in a local steeple, and he can’t get over the fact that this hoax is still going on, -- and the people believe it.”

Dave paused.

Then he continued, saying, “You know, the ultimate sin is to be a freethinker, unbound by any doctrine or philosophical affiliation, and to recognize truth by any name.”

The flame of the little candle grew large for a second, and a gentle breeze blew near it and almost extinguished it. But it recovered. And my friend added: “Well, maybe not all wise men are mad...” And a cloud passed before the moon, and suddenly, it was night, and the only light we knew was that little candle on the table on the balcony, and it was midnight.

“Look, Dave,” I said to him, “Shall we call it a night?”

And we went in. I blew out the flame of the candle, cradling it gently with the palm of my left hand. We stepped indoors and I shut out the darkness by closing the door to the balcony.

However, I turned on the light in the kitchen and Dave sat down for a minute. He paused. I sat at the kitchen table also, and said, “Nevertheless, with all this darkness surrounding the Church, there is still light at the heart of it.”

“What do you mean?” inquired Dave.

“In the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, there is light and power, if you can feel it. I remember standing at the altar and looking at the relics in the center, and there was a bright light there, the size of a thumbnail in your mind, and you probably had to be psychic to see it. But it was there!”

“You’re putting me on!” exclaimed Dave.

“And another time, I was in a Catholic bookstore in Colorado Springs, and wanted to look at a book of Catholic doctrine and add it to my collection of magic books, and I tried to seize the book, and I swear there was a forcefield of light around that big book, and I couldn’t touch it..”

Dave retorted, “You are imagining things!”

“If you don’t believe that, take what happened to me a year ago. I had a bad case of sciatica, and was in howling pain. At one point, I was alone in my wife’s car, the windows were rolled up, and I was screaming, it hurt so much. Bonnie said, ‘Let’s go to St. Joseph’s Oratory for a healing.’ I was ready for anything. So we went. And when we got there, I lay hands on Brother André’s tomb, and felt a gentle power come up from the tomb, into my hands, up my arms, down my torso and into my legs – and I was healed! I could easily walk back to our car. I have also felt that same vibe standing at my parents’ grave, except it came up from the ground, directly into my legs.”

Dave was getting impatient.

I smiled at him and replied, “Yes, it all sounds crazy, but what I am saying is that there is miraculous power in the Church. Why do you think thousands and millions of believers keep coming back for more??”

He said, categorically, “Well, I left when I was a teenager, and never came back for more!”

“No one is forcing you to believe, tonight, Dave. It is your choice. I am just telling you about my own experience...”

He got up to leave. “I have to work tomorrow afternoon, and it is getting late...”

I escorted him to the door, and he walked out into that great night. “Take care,” I said to him, from a distance, as he got into his car.

June 10 and 11, 2012, edited January 19, 2015

CE DIEU PRÉSENT

Or, ce Dieu présent dans ta vie, t'avait-il abandonné? Toi, t'étais-tu révolté contre lui? Alors que d'autres de ta génération étaient simplement indifférents à lui, à l'Église et à sa justice, toi, étais-tu révolté à outrance contre la souffrance de ce monde? Comme Job, te pensais-tu juste et pur contre le Créateur? As-tu même dressé le poing contre lui afin de le remplacer? Étais-tu ce que la bible appelle un antéchrist?

Au fil des lectures, tu as pataugé dans beaucoup d'écrivains de la période moderne qui ont fait le procès de Dieu, surtout le dieu des chrétiens, tels que Voltaire, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Byron, Shelley, Poe, Hemingway, Kafka, Weisel, sans oublier Michel Tremblay et Jacques Godbout entre autres. Il faut se rappeler que pendant la période moderne, et même pendant l'Illumination, on a vu des antéchrists s'élever et être écrasés – par exemple, Napoléon, Hitler, Mao, Staline et Mussolini. Des millions de victimes massacrées par leurs guerres. Toute la civilisation mise à feu et à sang. Au nom de quoi? La révolte des masses. Les idoles qui érigeaient l'État moderne en image de la Bête contre la miséricorde de Dieu. D'une part, les hommes faisaient la guerre, les fabricants d'armes s'enrichissaient, les victimes s'accumulaient dans la boue des tranchées, la bombe atomique planait sur l'avenir de la planète; d'autre part, les hommes accusaient Dieu d'être indifférent au sort de l'humanité.

Pourtant, ce dieu contre lequel tous se révoltaient, il est toujours amour. Pardon. Miséricorde. Jusqu'à notre dernier souffle, il nous offre le salut.

Je ne parle pas de l'Inquisition, qui brûlait les sorcières et les malades mentaux au bûcher au nom de je ne sais quoi. Je ne parle pas des princes de l'Église qui siègent à Rome. Je parle de Dieu. Celui qui nous a tous et toutes d'abord créés enfants. Qu'on ne le blâme pas pour les malheurs de ce monde.

Quant à moi, je me suis révolté contre son Amour divin et j'y ai préféré la beauté de la haine et courir à l'aventure pour m'éloigner de son emprise et son étreinte amoureuse sur mon âme. Ensuite je me suis pris pour une victime des hommes, comme prétexte pour être un délinquant. J'ai fait la révolution par soif du pouvoir. Et j'ai été exclu du Royaume, banni de la société des êtres humains et j'ai répandu le scandale partout.

Que je me sois enfui de la présence de Dieu n'a rien donné. Je me suis retrouvé vêtu de guénilles et affamé et assis sur un trottoir à cinq cents milles d'ici mais je ne pouvais pas m'empêcher de réciter le Notre Père dans mon coeur. Lui ne m'a jamais abandonné ni renié. Il me suivait et me traquait. Je retrouvais son Amour dans le geste d'un étranger à tous les coins de rue et à tout bout de chemin.

Je me suis trouvé à l'hôpital avec une hépatite sérique et je me suis dit qu'il semblait que tout dernièrement j'avais été un enfant de chœur. Je me suis rendu compte que c'était mon karma, la cause et l'effet. Si je ne m'étais pas planté une seringue dans le bras, je n'aurais pas attrapé la maladie. C'était à moi à cesser de prendre de la drogue. J'ai admis ma responsabilité. C'était mon premier bas-fonds. On va me trouver cave, mais cette admission de ma responsabilité était un premier pas vers Dieu. C'était un moment de clarté. J'entr'ouvrais la porte à la grâce. Ça aurait pu être pire. J'aurais pu y laisser ma peau.

Par la suite, au cours des années suivantes, Dieu s'est révélé à moi et m'a prodigué la richesse de sa faveur et de ses bénédictions.

Le 6 octobre 2016.

BATTLESCARS AND STIGMATA

I am Brantwood Beach, and I remember. I sit in Ottawa East, in the capital of Canada, and it was 1959, the year Fidel took over Cuba. There were radio reports, with static over the airwaves, and this was a new hope. I remember it well.

That spring, a bunch of boys were playing with firecrackers to celebrate the Queen's birthday, in the month of May. There was one boy who grew up to be a doctor, and his brother, who was thirty-eight years later one of the generals involved in the Somalia scandal; another boy became a bus driver, and then there was one Robert Smith. Now, Robert was ten years old, and he had 200 firecrackers in his right hand pocket. Nobody is sure how it happened, but maybe a match touched the firecrackers, maybe it was an accident. But suddenly, as the sun watched, the firecrackers started going off, like machine gun fire, crackling and exploding, one by one, then faster and faster, as the boys watched Robert explode.

There was smoke in the air, and the smell of sulphur, and plenty of weeping and yelling, and the machine gun crepitation of firecrackers going off, as the boys pulled Robert aside and tried to pull down his pants, which were on fire, and everyone was in a panic, and then, and then, good old Jean St-Denis came up to Robert in the middle of this hubbub and hue and cry, and asked Robert, "Smitty, can I have the rest of your firecrackers?" (Now there is a poetic justice, because twenty years later, Jean was trafficking coke in fascist Spain, and got busted and did ten years in jail under Franco's regime.)

I am Brantwood Beach, and I remember. It was the heyday of motorcycle gangs, and there were hardrocks. The cops didn't like them, and the cops used to harass them just for wearing their hair in jelly rolls and riding motorcycles. Robert Smith and his friends used to walk through the bushes and woods down by the beach, and find hardrocks sitting around campfires with their girlfriends and a case of beer or two, and Robert liked the hardrocks; he wanted to grow up to

become one of them. Because all the other grown-ups were phony, they would talk down to Robert and say, with a nasal voice, "Oh hello, little boy, what grade are you in?" And they would pat Robert on the head, whereas the hardrocks, who were seventeen or eighteen years old, would talk to Robert as an equal. They would discuss what was on their minds. It's a bit like what Frank Zappa said, to the effect that if children knew what their parents were up to, they would rise up and kill them in their sleep. And the parents all had short, short hair, and short, short tempers, and they worked for the government plotting fascist plots, or so it seemed. The father of Robert, anyway, would argue against communism, whenever given the chance. And Robert longed for a friend to play ball with him or take him fishing, but dear old dad merely helped Robert memorize his catechism lessons every night, for two hours at a time. And if Robert came home with a report card that gave him a 90 per cent average, but saying Robert came in second of the class, Robert was in deep trouble. For the home was élitist, and the expectations were high.

And I am Brantwood Beach. I remember. I remember the time that Joseph de Bané went down to the beach one night, and left a pile of clothes on the sand and walked down into the water, only to swim a hundred feet upstream, and come back out of the water, thence to hitch-hike to Boston, whence he would phone his grieving father a month later, after the police had dragged the waters for nine days, searching for a drowned corpse. And Robert Smith watched the police dragging the waters, and he pondered all these things in his heart.

Likewise, Robert Smith was in the hospital that summer to get his leg operated on for the firecracker burns, for the scar kept pussing and never healed. It was a kiloid wound, and could have turned into cancer. And one morning, in the hospital, Robert wandered around on his wheelchair, and went to visit one of the boys there, who was about the same age, around twelve. And the boy was weeping, and he asked Robert, "Here, touch my leg, tell me it's still there!!" And the boy was desperate, for a train had run over his leg and his leg had been amputated the night before by the doctors, and Robert didn't know what to

say, so he answered, "Yes, it's still there." And there was no leg there, just crumpled bedsheets on a hospital bed.

And I am Brantwood Beach. The girls in bikinis used to come and neck with their boyfriends on the sand, and Robert Smith would lust a tiny little boy lust and then rush off to confession and tell the priest he found girls pretty. And the priests would sit behind the grate and ask, "How many times, my son?" And Robert found out as an adult that you could tell a priest in a confessional that you had slept with three hookers, robbed a bank, killed an old lady, and as long as you were repentant, the priest would give you the absolution. But if you told the priest something like, "Every time I go to mass, I think of the Spanish Inquisition," the priest would blow a fuse and kick you out of the confessional box.

And at Brantwood Beach, the waters were polluted soon later. In 1959, there was a bit of seaweed, but now the beach is closed down for pollution reasons. I guess if the Cold War wasn't going to destroy the Earth, the pollution would. And Robert Smith said his prayers every night, praying we wouldn't get nuked by the Russians during the night. And it was dark outside, and the nuns warned the students that on May 1st, 1960 it was going to be the end of the world. And they looked pretty silly on the next day and the next day. And the Year 2000 is upon us, and Fidel is still alive and well in Havana, and Robert Smith has a scar on his right thigh. Here, look, can you feel my leg?

January 24, 1999

Published in Perforations Magazine online, out of Smyrna Georgia