



Snowfall & the Religion of Grief

This year it came on me, like clockwork, with the first snow. It was only a dusting, not even an inch, but I still thought of Dad. His pleasure in loading the snow plow onto the front of our car. The delight of an evening spent pacing the vehicle up and down the treacherous road to our house, clearing the path even as the snow still fell. “Not going to get trapped this year,” he’d say, pulling on his hat and gloves. And he was right to worry. One year we’d been too late, and the snow fell too thick and wet for the plow to budge.

But that outward practicality only barely masked his impatience to get out into the weather. I felt it too, on those few times I accompanied him—the perfect, warm isolation from behind the car windows, the wet-dog aroma as snow melted off our boots, our woolen coats and gloved hands. Most of all, the ritualistic rise and fall of the plow. Like a monk pacing out rosary beads, his hands orchestrated each pass over the snow with the deliberate detachment of muscle memory.



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He was always teaching me about ritual, and about solitude. Each year, winter brought both to our isolated home in the forest. Mom and Dad brought in wood from the pile outside, to keep ready by the stove. We located the lamp oil and candles, and gathered them where they would be easily found in case of a power outage. With the coming of Advent, our weekly Mass took on an expectant solemnity, which impressed me even as a small child. The Advent readings hovered on the subject of preparation and readiness for the coming of God. We were in darkness, the Priest intoned from the altar, but soon there would be light.

I could say we weren’t a very religious family, but that wouldn’t be quite right. My parents, and especially my mother, were troubled by the Church—the incessant harping on abortion and homosexuality, the contempt for the role of women. But they were also faithful.

“Why are we Catholic?” I asked my father, as soon as I was old enough to have grasped that such a thing was a choice.

“Because,” he replied, “It was the only religion as sinful as me.” This wasn’t the whole truth, I knew even then, but it was certainly a part of the grueling intellectual process he had undertaken, before I was born, to leave behind the Southern Baptist teachings of his youth. He was never quick to forget his own mistakes, and so I imagine the rigid dichotomy of Sinful vs. Saved, which underpins so much of Southern Baptist life, bothered him. Because to be “Saved” meant to be righteous, (and often self-righteous,) and to be born again as a new person. Dad wouldn’t have accepted that a person can ever be wholly righteous, or that a person’s life of sins—which need remembering in order to inform your future actions—could be forgotten. To believe yourself free of sinfulness was self-delusion. And he would never allow himself to be deluded.

He was a therapist, which almost certainly informed his philosophy. He spent a lot of time talking to me about seeing myself honestly, and about being alone. He came to Catholicism by way of the monks and believed in the power of the lonely pilgrimage. When I was in the Third grade, and feeling rejected after an argument had cost me the company of my best friends, my father counseled me to accept the loneliness. “It’s important to know how to be alone,” he said. “You need to enjoy your own company. That way you won’t make all your decisions in life based on needing someone around.” It was some pretty serious advice for an 8 year-old, but he knew I was listening--that I would remember his words, even if I didn’t yet understand them.

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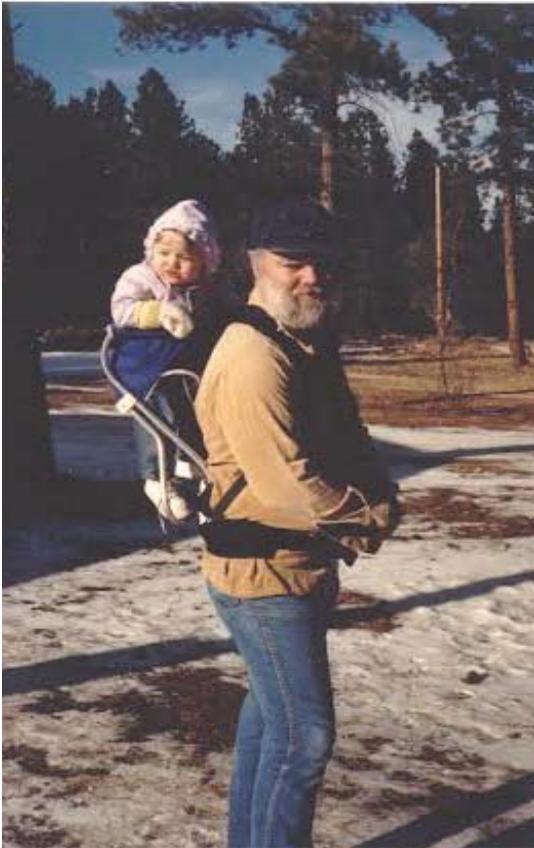
To a child, family rituals are gravely necessary—with the enchantment and yearly renewal of sacrificial rites. Christmas, in my memory, reached its ritualistic apex in the Midnight Mass. The day before Christmas was pleasantly busy with final present-wrapping and food-preparing. Then, come late afternoon, we retired to bed. Mom or Dad would pull the curtains tight against the daylight, and settle me under the covers with a book, which would keep me company until I grew sleepy. When I awoke, it was nighttime. And we began a third mystical day, between the Eve and the Holiday. These special hours had their own wardrobe—my Christmas dress emerged from its garment bag in the back of the closet. Mom wore her long gray woolen dress coat; and Dad, his black coat and hat. We left our warm house and made the cold pilgrimage to the car, and into town, under cover of night. Turning back in my seat, I would usually steal a glance through the back window at our house, lit from within by the glistening tree and from without by garlands of multicolored lights.

Arriving at the church, we would meet the same friends and parishioners we met each week, but they too were transformed by fancy dress and the strangeness of the midnight hour. We carried out the service in candlelight. Imagining it now, I can only remember the smell of candle wax, and the heady incense which soon lulled a small child to drowsiness. I remember that I would grow emotional during “O Come O Come, Emmanuel,” transported by the solemnity of its Medieval melody. Even though the chorus called Israel to “Rejoice!” it was not a song about happiness. It was a song about the darkness of the world, and the longing for something better. And it was enough to inspire in me, for that night, a fervent belief that I was in the midst of something supernaturally important.

Perhaps it was due to Dad’s influence—his interest in the more contemplative, and less joyful, aspects of religion—that the one false note of Christmas Eve, for me, was the last. When the lights came up and the church sang “Joy to the World!” I could never get into the spirit. I preferred the candlelight, the vigil for deliverance, thinking about what it meant to “mourn in lonely exile here/until the Son of God appear.”

Dad used to say it disappointed him, that I was so much like him—preferring the mournful songs about exile over those proclaiming release and joyfulness—but I could tell he enjoyed the company. “It’s too bad you’re this way,” he said more than once. “You’ll probably always run just a little under. Just a step or two below everyone else’s emotions.” He’d pause. “Just like me.” And he would set out a seat next to him on Christmas Day, or any other busy holiday or family gathering, so that I could sit with him and we could watch the action from the sideline.

In college, I found a quotation from among Emily Dickinson’s correspondence that captured my father’s brand of religion perfectly. I wrote the quotation in a notebook, which I carried around for years:



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When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is “acquainted with Grief,” we listen, for that is also an Acquaintance of our own.

Dad always believed that religion, like art and journalism, should afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted. He told me a story once—which, with time, I may have exaggerated or fictionalized in remembering—about one of the inmates he treated when he was a prison psychologist. That, one day, in the prison yard, this otherwise ordinary inmate surprised everyone by walking away from his fellow prisoners and slowly approaching the fence. The guards immediately came to attention; the whole yard tensed as they waited to see what this prisoner would do; but they loosened their grip on their batons when they saw the man stop at the barrier. Opposite the prisoner, from across the

field, a doe approached. She leaned against the fence, allowing the prisoner to touch her, gently, on the head. Just once. Then she turned and walked away.

Everyone was transfixed, Dad told me. Standing with the guards, he watched as the prisoner stood just a moment longer at the fence before turning to rejoin his group. Reality slid back into focus. The guards relaxed against their post and began talking amongst themselves, but no one said much about the scene they’d just witnessed, except maybe, “Well, huh.” or “Don’t see that everyday.” And life moved on. But Dad never forgot. And he made a lesson of it for me, one afternoon, driving home from school. “Why shouldn’t a prisoner experience a miracle?” he asked. “Jesus preferred the poor and the imprisoned to the rich and comfortable, after all.” Religion doesn’t do much good for the satisfied. Jesus came to help us manage our grief.

And it is grief, after all, that makes me feel so religious, watching the snow fall, waiting for Christmas. It has only been three years, come December 20th, since Dad died. So suddenly and out of the blue that the words “suddenly” and “out of the blue” seem insufficient. And that particular Christmas of 2010, is forever cemented in memory. It was going to be our first Christmas together, Jim’s and mine. I had already bought a ham, which we abandoned, upon receiving that horrible phone call, to fly out to California and my parents’ home. Christmas Day: Jim, Mom, the dog, and me, driving through heavy rain to visit a few of Dad’s favorite places. We didn’t know what else to do. In a daze, I half-expected Dad to walk out from behind every tree in Muir Woods. I expected him behind every rock on the freezing beach. I had his phone number saved in my phone and had already confused myself a couple times with the realization that, calling it, I wouldn’t reach him.

In a quiet place, which was a special spot for him, under a particular tree, we buried a little memento of him. It was a heartbreaking thought, burying it—and, again, burying him, a week later—that I was also mourning the end of that era of my life. The era of intact family rituals. The era of hearing my father’s advice. Each memory of Christmas was also now a memory of this grief.

And so, to keep those memories intact, I let myself grieve—this year, like every year. And I let those religious feelings bubble up, with the coming of each snow. I know that, whatever else I believe, I do believe that faith is meant to bring a relief for pain. Not that religion brings me any answers, or settles those eternal debates, which I puzzle over like every person. But if Faith lessens the sting of my loss, then I welcome it. It brings me some comfort when I’m troubled, and so I accept it. I allow myself to believe in a God which is acquainted with Grief. After all, it’s what my Dad would have wanted.

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