

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

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### Letter to My Catholic Children

Because your mother and I agreed to raise you in the Church, I understand it as my duty as your father to ensure a rigorous Catholic education, even if I myself decline to convert. You may wonder how I can hold these two seemingly contradictory positions. I write now as the eldest of you approaches his twelfth birthday—near enough the milestone of manhood in the Judaism of my childhood that I feel it is best to hurry up and put my thoughts in order. My conscience weighs on me.

This simple exercise has proved difficult. Many wiser than I have avoided it. It is a test my ancestors were subjected to under pain of death. This is my confession—one I offer freely, under no special stress besides an urgent desire to make myself understood.



The last thing I want you to think regarding my faith is that it's complicated. I do not believe in God. The term atheist best describes me, because I lack belief. Agnostic is insufficient. It's not the lack of knowledge that's at issue—religion teems with attestation—but the absence of credible information necessary to sustain faith. I know atheism has a bad reputation. But mine is not an activist position. It's a private matter of my conscience. I have learned faith involves legitimate, deep emotions that go to the core of who we are, and repressing these feelings is only likely to cause harm.

Anthropologists have described everything from baseball to movies to the Apple brand as contemporary religions, whether their adherents admit it or not. While it was Aristotle who detailed the emotional release afforded by theater, this concept of catharsis was seized upon with unusual vigor by the man who first proclaimed God's death, Friedrich Nietzsche.

I myself love comic books and Marvel movies, and while there are certainly more hardcore fans out there, I boast a solid collection of classic Avengers and X-Men titles I can't bear to part with. Might I feel a lick of cognitive dissonance following my gods in tights with such ceremoniousness? I do not literally believe the Hulk is real. But if it quacks, it's probably a duck. I, like everyone else, live in two worlds at once, or as St. Augustine observed in his *City of God*, in two cities—the earthly and the otherworldly. I, too, yearn for a created order. It is impossible to find a person so completely contented, moment by moment, by the immediate circumstances of their existence that they never yearn for any distraction from it. In any event, such a person wouldn't be a saint, but a Buddha.

*You may conclude I am a hypocrite for raising you in a religious tradition I don't believe myself. The dark thought may even cross your mind that I have cynically endorsed Catholicism because it was convenient to me--that I capitalize on its patriarchal mores. Such rebellious sentiments are rightly felt by the young, so it does not bother me if you entertain them. The ruling class has preached one set of ideas and observed another, in the stern manner of fathers to children. The Buddhists coin this the doctrine of expedient means, and use the analogy of the burning house. The father, seeing the house catching on fire, goes into the children's room and tells them that if they follow him outside, he'll give them a new toy. Eagerly, they do so, only to find there is no toy.*

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*Or to return once again to Nietzsche; he wrote his philosophy for the superman--and not the one with a cape. I find this aspect of his writing dangerous, but he is also often misread. Nietzsche sees how a degraded 19th-century nobility uses Christianity's ideology of docility and the next life to oppress the masses. To him, Christianity is another idea that the superman must overcome.*

*I have made my skepticism of Christianity, and religion in general, clear. Perhaps I protest too much. You are right to demand that I do more than stand against it, in the posture of an adolescent. You've come to see the Wizard of Oz, only to find he's nothing but smoke and mirrors--I disagreed with your mother, but I respected her decision, and I went along with it with few complaints in the name of marital harmony. Which is no doubt true. But it's also not a complete truth.*

*This is the moment in my confession when I begin to feel the heat of the iron kiss my skin, when I would beg for time once again. You, too, should be skeptical. Yes, my motive is to clear my conscience. But you must by now suspect I have other motives as well. No human soul can completely avoid impurity, and our brains are electro-chemical cocktails bursting with conflicting impulses. I admit that in my mix is some desire to appease you, to be liked by you, and to be forgiven. But that is natural, as is my love for you.*



My father grew up outside Stockholm, where his sister was killed by a motorcycle by the son of the local minister. My father's grandfather was an iconoclast who after arguing with his town's minister, tore all the pews out of the church one night and burned them. My father's family history disposed him to his agnosticism, and his profession of Jungian psychologist likely affirmed it.

My mother was raised in an affluent suburb of Chicago in a nonpracticing Jewish household. At first, that puzzled me. If my mother's parents didn't practice Judaism, how were they Jewish? I did not then know the term "culturally Jewish"—as if Jewishness were a lifestyle choice—nor did I appreciate the complexity of their heritage in America.

My older brother studied the Torah dutifully and took his bar-mitzvah, which I attended. I looked up to him; he read Hebrew well. By contrast, I found my time in Hebrew school humiliating. Separated from my friends and surrounded by strangers, it was agonizing to learn a backwards language. The teachers evinced no interest in me or my personality beyond my willingness to do the work.

Around this time, age 12 I suppose, I had a dream that I was outside my maternal grandparents' large house on Lake Michigan. I strolled through their garden down its slope toward the beach. As I wound my way past my grandfather's dahlias, I saw that the garden had been decorated with sculptures, engravings, and religious icons. Celtic crosses. Stars of David. Reliefs of Hindu gods. African carvings. Egyptian sarcophagi. I walked past them all to that edge of the lawn where the vast lake opened up and poured into my eyes, like an ocean. I remember even now how it glistened. When I awoke, I confidently told my parents the dream meant I could not have a bar-mitzvah, because I was a Buddhist.

I was sincere—or as sincere as a 12-year-old can be. Certainly the

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dream could be read in any variety of ways, featuring, as it did, all the things I had encountered in my father's office, within the coffee-table tomes that lent him their air of occult legitimacy. But the trick worked, and I was excused from further fuss and study.

My dalliances with Buddhism have gone on more or less ever since, with each successive sally achieving less depth—or at least less conviction—than the time before it. When I meet other Americans who practice Buddhism, especially those who didn't grow up with it, I tend to assume their involvement is more style than substance. Is it envy? Perhaps. I judge them harshly because I assume they must be dilettantes like me. I have never managed anything but a shallow practice—sitting a few days in a row, and then missing many more. I never committed myself to joining a regular sitting group, the seeking of a dharma teacher, or even attending a retreat. Now I concede Zen, like Nietzsche, isn't for ordinary folk. It's for the madly dedicated, the monks who want to shave their heads and live like prisoners on rations and cots. I don't buy the idea of secular Buddhism. Go for a jog instead. Get that heart rate up and breathe a little. Too vigorous? Try a walk in the woods. Take a class in painting. Write a poem. Masturbate.

I've tried other approaches, too. In my twenties, living in Brooklyn, I was drawn in by a young rabbi and his upstart community that celebrated a Friday-night beginning of sabbath, or kabbalat shabbot, in the basement of a Park Slope Methodist church. I remember these as prayer and song-filled affairs that seemed to take up most of the night—you'd finally be breaking bread at 9. I worked in the Twin Towers at a job I hated and I had started dabbling in poetry again, another on-and-off thing of mine.

Soon my office would be destroyed. Shortly after that, my company laid off the majority of us and I was unemployed. This moment in my life was the peak of my faith. God was real. I had more time to write, more time to attend services, if I remembered to. I spent a lot of time wandering around Manhattan with my notebook, feeling like a ghost. I was seeing a Jungian analyst, who encouraged me to consider I was up against forces larger than I could oppose, like a man standing before an oceanic wave. Meanwhile, the rabbi wanted me to go to Israel. I felt the dream of my childhood—of walking down to the water—had finally become realized. I swam through a daze of grief and wonder, sure I had finally found purpose in life. I would become a poet.



My faith, as muddled as it was, informed my decision to attend graduate school in Boston, where I hardly had time or interest in much except school, writing, and part-time work. My professors effectively supplanted both rabbi and shrink, and in a continued delirium, for the first time in my life, I fully devoted myself to something. When I met your mother at a party in Cambridge in 2003, she was working toward her Doctorate in Classics. She quoted Catullus and was impressed I was a poet. I admired her intelligence and found her gorgeous, with her long legs, wavy blond hair, and strong, defiant features. On our first date we discussed our religious compatibility—her Catholicism, my Jewishness, and how we'd like to raise our children. We both knew what we were getting into.

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This apprenticeship phase shifted my stance away from the cowed superstition of a survivor into a stance more befitting the young bohemian. Like James Joyce, I felt artists and writers had a better chance at tackling the divinity problem than priests and rabbis. Contemporary poetry, with its focus on the spare, lyric instant—the effect of a few words to set a scene and set off a mood—has a kind of cult of authenticity to it. The poet's voice, ever since Rilke, needed first and foremost to be authentic. Never mind that authenticity is itself an aesthetic, a created order, a belief.

And just like the Buddhism I toyed with before it, my delirium of discovery slowly wore off. It was quite a coming down when it did. By the time I graduated, there was no doubt in my mind I had thoroughly exhausted whatever reservoir of talent I had brought with me into the game, and I was lucky enough to have tap-danced my way through the entire program, thesis included. Heck, they'd even tossed one of my poems an award at the end-of-year shindig. I knew I'd be starting over. It's hard to publish poetry. And as a corollary to that, it's also pretty darn hard to write a good poem.

I found myself at sea. Without the structure of the workshop, I was confronted with the new task of self-evaluation. I conflated faith in God with faith in my writing, developing superstitions every step of the way to avoid the pain of coming up short of my expectations. The poet's process of composition, revision, and submission invites second-guessing—when I had success, I couldn't repeat it. Long strings of tough luck followed rare moments of triumph.

Poetry took a back-burner while I focused on my day job, got married, and put all my energy into you guys. But I'm also grateful I started a family, because without you, I'm not sure I would have soldiered on. As I've entered middle age, I've started to find it more painful to give up on a draft. Inspiration for a new piece is important, but insight and perspective are hard-won commodities. Eventually, given time, patience, and wiles, I believe I can lay siege to any incomplete poem and starve its meaning out.

Most of the things that got me fired up 20 years ago have burned down to coals, and some have gone completely cold. But I don't need fire to go on. I still simmer with some grief and anger at 9/11, and I will never again be comfortable above twenty stories. But the guilt of being spared—of being singled out for life when others had to die—that's gone. I'm still a bad Buddhist, though I'm happy to meditate if the fancy strikes me, or employ it more narrowly as a tool to advance my writing. I hope to share more of our Jewish tradition together. I love observing Passover, and I'd like to be able to have more seders together as a family. But really, I just try to be a mensch, a man, someone you can look up to. I tell myself it's not supposed to be hard. Be a good husband, a good father, and a good son.

And what of the dream of the lake I had when I was a kid? Maybe the dream meant I was always on some basic level inclined to reject superstition, that I would learn that symbols are just symbols, and that it's our job on earth to make meaning for ourselves. Maybe the dream pointed to the difficulty of bearing witness to my Jewish experience. The 9/11 terrorists attacked America but they didn't attack Kansas. They attacked the American epicenter of Jewish life in New York. I would need the strength of that dream to face the lake head-on.

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Maybe dreams are just what happens if you eat a Twinkie before going to bed, and you ought not to make too much of them. In my experience, disillusion always follows inspiration, and the greater the dream, the more brilliantly painful is the eventual arrival of morning. But it, too, has a kind of beauty, like the blinding sun dancing over Lake Michigan.



*I'm a better person with a deeper understanding of what it means to be a husband, a father, and a poet not despite my religious experiences, but because of them. The end result—atheism--does not leave me bitter, but invigorated. Atheists have often been hostile to Catholicism, but my marriage stands as a gesture of reconciliation. I cherish your faith for its spirit of endurance and its defense of the written word. Catholics are interested in time frames longer than the shelf-life of an iPhone. Progress, too, can become a false idol. We live in a world increasingly run by billionaire supermen, who believe in nothing but themselves. I hope your generation can do better.*

I know I can't protect you from the inevitable hurt and confusion of your own spiritual journey. *There is no fortress strong enough to withstand an ocean. Nietzsche's father was a pastor (as was Jung's).* Faith is hard, and in my own experience, it can't last. But I hope you have taken what you can from your own struggle with belief, whetting your spirit against the faith of your childhood. *I leave it to you now to create meaning in your life. But if you wish, come home and share that meaning with me. I'm always willing to once again suspend my disbelief.*