

Rebirth

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Boston, December 1977

It was a snowy afternoon in downtown Boston as I walked up and down Washington Street looking for the newspaper office where I was to have a job interview for a reporter position. I knew my chances for landing the job were slim. I'd already been rejected at several other places. Main reasons: no education, no training, and no experience in journalism. After all, my major at Princeton had been economics. A couple of months earlier I had the naïve idea that would get me in the door no matter what the major. No more. I was coming up against the real world. Two months of job hunting and my wallet was getting lighter and lighter. If I didn't land a job soon... Well, the thought of having to move back in with my parents (and six younger siblings) at the age of 25 was not at all appealing.

You're probably wondering what I was doing looking for a job as a journalist after spending four years and \$16,000 (whoa! only? remember, this is 1977) on an economics degree. To make a long story short, after graduating and facing the prospect of working at a real job for the first time in my life, I found that employment opportunities for economic philosophers/historians were not easy to come by. I settled on a job at a firm that conducted economic research (read statistical analysis and computer programming) for the government. It wasn't my cup of tea. Meanwhile, I found myself starting to read classical literature for the first time in my life (outside of a high school or college course, that is) and getting ideas into my head that I could be a writer, too. So, I saved up a couple thousand dollars, quit my job, and moved into a hovel of an apartment in Boston.

While looking for a paying job, I began writing the Great American Novel. It began with an introverted lonely young man (guess who?) up on top of the John Hancock building looking through one of those high-powered binoculars out at the city. It was about nine in the evening (would the roof even be open then?). As he scans through the Common, he suddenly witnesses a murder taking place under a lamppost. Through the binoculars he gets a good look at the murderer. His dilemma becomes whether to go to the police with the information and come out of his insulated world or do nothing and remain in his cocoon.

He chooses to come forward, which will forever change his life. To protect the young man from the killer, the police chief invites him to live with his family secretly in his suburban home. There he becomes good friends with the chief's young son. He is moved by the child's innocence and idealism, rekindling hope in his own life. This is as far as I got. I had written perhaps 70 pages until this fateful day.

I was lost. I knew the place I was looking for was somewhere on Washington Street, but I just couldn't seem to locate the building. The address didn't seem to exist. And it was snowing a lot.

"Excuse me" A little Japanese girl with two gold teeth was standing in front of me.

"What?" I said, more than a little disoriented.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked, smiling at me, her gold teeth gleaming.

"God?" I repeated, trying to collect my thoughts. "Well, I guess I do sometimes. Not right now, though"

"Are you concerned about the world situation—poverty, drugs, the possibility of nuclear war?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. Isn't everybody?" Where was this leading to? I wondered.

"Please come to our center. We have a lecture that talks about these problems"

"Well, I'm kind of busy right now... What kind of center? Are you some kind of Christian group?"
Memories of my time with the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship popped into my head.

"Something like that. Why don't you come?" she repeated insistently. This girl, so sweet and innocent on the outside, was like steel on the inside. She wasn't about to let me off her hook. Well, what harm would it do? I could go, argue with them for a while about the Bible, perhaps get something to eat there (my wallet was real light by now) and go home no worse for the wear. But I had to get to this appointment first.

Five hours later I was standing in front of the center on Beacon Street. I don't remember anymore whether I made it to that appointment for the job interview or not. In any case, I know I was never offered a position at that newspaper. Little did I know I was about to take a step that would irrevocably change the

course of my life.

The memory of that first visit to the Unification Church center is mostly a blur now. What I do recall is being met by a sea of faces, many of them Asian. I was impressed by the international flavor of the people there. They seemed to be generally in their twenties and very bright and smiling. They seemed to be happy.

How was this visit different from my experience with the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship? Here again I was being witnessed to. Here again I was facing a situation where people were out to convert me to their religious beliefs. Well, for one thing, this was a much more international group than I had been with at Princeton, who were mostly white Americans. As I mentioned, that impressed me.

Also, I had come there out of my own free will, rather than being dragged there by someone. I guess I had reached a stage in my life when I was ready to hear a new message. Finally, their teachings, rather than giving rise to many unanswered questions, seemed instead to answer the questions I had been asking about God, Jesus, the Bible, history, etc.

After a sumptuous meal of water, soup, bread, and weak lemonade, I heard with what seemed to be about ten other guests a lecture on the parallels of history. For the first time in my life, I heard an explanation of how God had been working throughout history up to the present day. I saw that God was a living God who spoke to people not just in biblical times but had been working behind the scenes of history right into the twentieth century. The creation of Israel, the Roman Empire, America, the world wars, and many other events, all played a role in the development of God's Providence.

Perhaps it was my imagination but, all throughout the lecture, the speaker, an Irishman by the name of Aidan Barry, seemed to be looking right at me. When he finished, he immediately came right over to me. Although all the elements of the pressure to join their group were there, rather than feeling uneasy about the situation, I was intrigued by their ideas. I wanted to hear more. And I would. Over the next few weeks I would attend a weekend workshop and several weeklong workshops before finally joining as a full-time member. My life would never be the same.

Providence, Rhode Island, October 1978

It was my sixth month on MFT (Mobile Fundraising Team) and I was challenging for a "green pin," a coveted award for achieving a \$120-a-day average over a three-month period. It was the final day of the first month. I had to make a certain forgotten amount in order to attain that average for the month of October. Of course, the last day of October is Halloween.

Our team found itself in Providence, RI - a place well-known in our region for its red-necked Italian-American variety of anti-Moonie negativity. That morning I was taken out early (apparently I had to make a sizable amount that day) and dropped off at the downtown fish market. I was selling so-called silk roses (which weren't really silk at all). Luck (or providence?) would have it that the owner of the first place I went to was extremely negative. It seems that he had just gotten his daughter out of the Unification Movement. He loudly proclaimed that he was going to call the police on me. I took it as an idle threat but quickly made myself scarce before starting again a few shops down the road.

Not two minutes later a police van (i.e., paddy wagon) pulled up next to me. Three officers jumped out, handcuffed me behind my back and tossed me into the van, all the while sharing with me their views on the Unification Church in the Providence vernacular. I was taken down to police headquarters and put into a jail cell until they could figure out what to do with me.

A couple of hours later I found myself being escorted into a large room with many people. I was brought up onto a stage where I could see I was the last in a line of shady characters. I was in a police line-up! One-by-one the officer in charge went down the line asking the men what they had been charged with, I guess in order to determine what to do with them next - trial, fine, etc. So it went: burglary, arson, rape, vandalism. When he came to me, I said, of course, "selling flowers." With that, the whole room broke into laughter and the head officer shouted, "Get that guy outta here!" A few minutes later I was back out on the streets with my full bucket of flowers. So my day began.

I don't remember much about the rest of the day until that evening when I was put out in some kind of college bar area near the center of the city. Remember, it was Halloween. There were about four bars, some more like discos, around a small central square area along which ran a road. All night I just had to stay in that central square catching people coming out of the various establishments.

Being Halloween night, people were dressed up in all kinds of costumes and, being Halloween night, as time wore on, the atmosphere was getting more and more crazy. Around 10pm my team captain came by to check on me. I still had a way to go to make my goal. He could see how the atmosphere was becoming

and suggested taking me somewhere else. However, I was doing quite well and thought this was probably the place where I stood the best chance to make the result I needed. He told me okay but to be careful and that he would be back around 1am for the final pick-up.

Not long after he left, one guy came up to me showing a strong interest in my artificial flowers. So strong, in fact, that he said he wanted to buy them all. Immediately, dollar signs crowded my field of vision. Only thing was, he said, the money was in his wallet which was in his car around the corner. "Come with me," he said.

Normally I would have been cautious about this kind of thing, but he had a girl with him (a taming influence, I thought) and, in any case, the thought of making my goal there and then was just too much to resist. I followed him as In a trance.

No sooner had we gotten around the corner when he suddenly tried to grab the flowers out of my bucket. I was quick to catch the other end of the stems and there we were each tugging at either end of the bunch. Not being real flowers, they stood up quite well to the abusive treatment. The would-be thief was finding it not so easy to tear them away from me. Then, suddenly there appeared the sole of a shoe in front of my face. The next thing I knew my glasses were flying, I was falling, and most of the flowers were out of my hand (I still held on to a few). From the pavement I watched him climb triumphantly into his car with his untaming girlfriend and drive off.

It didn't take long for the whole left side of my face to swell up until I must have begun to take on the appearance of one of the Halloween goons. My face became my costume. So, people didn't seem to be too surprised at the way I looked as I approached them to try to sell my remaining flowers. Eventually I sold them and waited for the van, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

Fortunately, my captain arrived with an empty van - although an hour late. He had already brought everyone else back to the center. Of course, I still had not made my goal, having lost more than half my product. After overcoming his shock at seeing my face and hearing my story, he decided that, under the circumstances, I deserved a special time extension to try to make the goal. I would be given until noon the next day (now actually that day). First, we would go to an all-night Denny's for some soup, which was about all I could get into my mouth.

After some recuperation at Denny's and a short nap in the van, I was put out at a stoplight at six in the morning. "See you at twelve," said my captain. "Mansei!" For a long time the traffic was rather slow and people didn't seem too interested in flowers, especially artificial ones, so early in the morning. ("Some fake flowers to go with your breakfast?") Maybe they were put off by my appearance as well. The left side of my face had hardened into a mass of numbness. In any case, I persevered and, yes, my story has a happy ending: I made my goal and a few months later I had earned my green pin (see following story).

Indiana/Kentucky, 1979

On God's Day 1979 I was transferred to the MFT region in Indiana. I still remember meeting my new region's members in the lobby of the New Yorker Hotel as we prepared to load into various vans to hit the road west. That was the day I would see my future wife for the first time although, of course, I would not know it at the time. But that's a story for another day.

Soon after, it was the last day of the month (again), and the last day of the third month of my attempt to make a \$120 average in order to qualify for a green pin. I was on a fundraising team somewhere in either Indiana or Kentucky (the background setting has become a little hazy over the years - sometimes it seems to me it all happened in the spirit world, such is my feeling about it now).

Out on a "blitz" I had fundraised all the bars in the area with no result. Not one sale. Then, I came to the last bar with ten minutes to go until pick-up time. I stood outside and looked in through the window. It did not look very promising. The place was a dark and dingy place, the kind of place frequented by factory workers and the like. That night there weren't many people inside. Trying to keep faith, I drew a deep breath and opened the door.

Inside were just the bartender and several people at the bar - one man who looked to be about sixty with white hair and dressed in a three-piece suit, and three ladies all dressed in evening gowns and expensive jewelry. Weird. As soon as I stepped inside, the man looked over at me and called me over: "Come on over here, young man. Let me see what you've got."

I walked over and rather sheepishly opened my box of cheap jewelry, waiting to be laughed out of the tavern. Instead, the three ladies were suddenly "oohing" and "aahing" over my box and wanting to try on the necklaces, earrings, bracelets, rings, everything.

"Okay, girls," the man said. "Pick out whatever you like and I'll buy it for you."



Photo credit: Robert Beebe

When they had finally settled on what they wanted and the bill was totaled, it came out to be exactly what I needed to make my goal. Somewhat stunned, I thanked them profusely and closed up my box. I was on my way out when I suddenly stopped and came back. There was a question I just had to ask this strange man.



MFT Sing Along - Photo credit: Robert Beebe

"Uh, excuse me," I said curiously, looking over his three-piece suit. "You don't look like the kind of person who usually comes to this kind of place. If you don't mind my asking, where are you from anyway?"

The man looked around at me and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Maybe I'm an angel from heaven."

To this day I am convinced that God's help came to me that day in the form of an angel so I could gain that green pin. It was the only pin I would ever earn in my three and a half years on MFT.