

Getting killed by God in Manila

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August 21, 2013



Anyone who is one in heart with God is one in heart with everyone else who is one in heart with God.

I was in Manila fighting sin. (Anyone who fights sin, by the way, spends most of the time fighting their own. That's just the way we're built.) But that's not what this is about. My external reason for going to the Philippines was to look after some details related to an upcoming international conference – piddling stuff really – catering, buses, hotel.

The thing is, God is pretty much everywhere and most people are quite fond of Him... Her... Them.

That's why God is easy to think and converse about. Many of the people who would be at this conference were spiritually oriented, coming from a wide variety of faiths. Lots of Catholics, this being the Philippines, but everything else too. So I ended up speaking with people about God all day long, and over dinner at night. I was having the time of my life.

Like you, I'm a seeker. Or at least I hope you are, and that you remain so all your life, even after you've found "THE GREAT BIG ANSWER." There is still a lot of seeking and improving most of us can do within our great big answers, so don't get comfy.

My back was bothering me one morning, so an associate suggested we go to a spa and get ourselves worked over by someone reputed to be a highly skilled massage therapist. Roughly my age, named Lucille, her fingers were knotted and twisted like gnarled tree branches brought to life by a wizard.

I'm lying on the table on my stomach. She walks in, lays her palm in the middle of my back and says, "Ah... okay... yes." It was as if I was hearing her end of a phone call with my spine. She moved her hand. "Yes... uh-huh... okaay... yes." And then she hung up. She asked me, "Are you a writer?"

"Yeah, I do some of that," I said, "but today I'm an organizer."

"A meeting for religious people," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Have we met before?"

She ignored me. "Those who do not live in trust with God are foolish people. I have no time for them," she said, digging into my back with fingers forged from the Fires of Mordor. Not sure what else she said because my ability to form coherent thought suffered a power outage as every corpuscle of my soul, rushed over to my back to see what was going on with Lucille's mahogany thumbs. My stress points were being hunted down like dogs and mangled in her bare hands.

After a certain amount of moaning in dire agony, I gasped, "Lucille, can I ask you a question?"

Apparently not, because she ignored that one too, while quickly heating the air inside glass cups and placing each one upside down on my back. About a dozen in all. I couldn't see how she did it, but I

smelled the fire and felt minor heat. As the air cooled in the cups, a strong partial vacuum was created inside each glass.

"I'm taking out the bad blood," she said, adding inexplicably, "never fight with God." "Okay, I won't."

"I know you don't."

The glass hickey-makers sat on my back for 30 minutes, rearranging my blood. I had lots of bad blood still in me from my car accident the year before, and plenty of new bad blood from the stress of arguing with a caterer about throwing in flower center pieces as a freebie. Instead of being at home writing, like I should have been.

But soon my bad blood was good blood and I had 12 large red circles on my back that, in the event of a strip search going through customs, would identify me as a guy who had been in a fight with a giant squid.

After her hands made another brief phone call to my right shoulder, Lucille announced, "This is where you were injured."

She meant in the car accident (which I hadn't mentioned). She was batting a thousand. The thinking of normal people is that injuries are left alone, or touched only tenderly at most. Lucille leaned on my injury with the pointy part of her elbow.

My shoulder was screaming silent, shoulderly obscenities.

"Ahhhh, you're killing me!" I told her. Loudly.

"I'm not killing you. I'm loving you," she said softly, applying even more pressure to my triceratops ob-la-di ob-la-da. If she had been a professional wrestler, we could call her The Manila Folder. Hahahaha. I really crack me up sometimes.

Most of us have experienced situations when life looks like certain death. When what seems counter-intuitive is actually the correct course. Like when you're disarming a bomb and your brain is shouting, "Whoa, don't cut the red wire!" But you cut it anyway, and everybody is saved. I love it when that happens.

This was like that. As soon as she stopped leaning on my shoulder, the being-on-fire feeling stopped and went away... utterly and completely, leaving behind only the deafening silence of no pain. And anyway, isn't it one of life's ongoing literary archetypal scenarios that you do something difficult, but it's like a heroic quest and it's for your own good?

Help, I'm being held prisoner in a Bible story! Just kidding. But if there is any group of people who already know the many different kinds of life and death offered by our existence, on any given day, it is surely those who have wandered over here and are reading this little blogito right now. You and me.

Did I tell you I love the Philippines? I do. The people, the culture, the mangoes, the geckos – my peaceful God is in the middle of all of it. I don't know where Lucille came from, but God bless her. She would be a magical saint in any culture.