

Advice from God's Friend in Manila

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September 2, 2026

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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. My own, of course, as always. But that's not why I went. My purpose in going to the Philippines was to look after some details related to an upcoming international conference - logistics stuff, hotels, catering, ground transportation.

The thing is, God is pretty much everywhere, and most people are quite happy with that thought. That's why God is easy to think and converse

about. Or can be. Many of the people who would be at this conference were themselves 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. Every faith has a home in heaven, and 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 "Life's Great Big Hairy Answer." There is still a lot of seeking and improving most of us can do within our great big answer, so don't get too 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. I was lying on the table, covered by a towel, my head on my arms as I was about to fall asleep. A woman roughly my age walked in and introduced herself as Lucille. Her fingers were knotted and twisted like gnarled branches brought to life by a Disney animator.

She laid her palm in the middle of my back and said, "Ah, okay. Yes." It was as if I was hearing her end of a phone call with my spine. She moved her hand. "Yes. Un-huh. Okay, 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 helping organize a conference."

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

"Have we met before?"

She ignored me, saying only, "Those who do not live in trust with God are foolish people. I have no time for them." She said other things on the same theme, but I'm not sure what, 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 by 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 organizing this conference 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 she made another brief phone call to my right shoulder, Lucille announced, "This is where you were injured."

She meant in the car accident. 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.

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

"I'm not killing you. I'm loving you," she said, applying even more pressure to the ligament muscle thingies, my triceratops ob-la-di ob-lada. If she had been a professional wrestler, we could call her The Manila Folder.

Hahahaha. Really, I 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. It has always worked for me.

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, and it's painful, but it's for your own good? Or that you look down the road toward a fork where the signpost holding the direction arrows pointing toward "Good" and "Evil" has fallen over and you can't tell which road goes to which destination?

Did I tell you I love the Philippines? I do. The people, the culture, the mangoes, the geckos on the ceilings and walls of every room - it all works for me. I don't know where Lucille came from, but God bless her. She was chosen by the merit of her ancestors and would have been a magical saint in any time or culture.