

Postscripts

Jack-of-All-Trades
Decatur & Milledgeville, Illinois

TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

A year ago
Margaret went off to first grade
Mom went off to work
and Nathan & Dad began a partnership

Like two escaped convicts
Free
except for the shackles that linked them together
We tugged back and forth for a year
Picking up a third when school let out for summer
Picking up a fourth when Mom had vacation
But even then
much was still defined by the year's partnership of father
and son

Today is the first day of school

Old hat for Margaret
Mom's turf in our scheme of things
But as the time came
for one nervous tummy to begin all-day kindergarten
Nathan looked me in the eye and said
"I want *you* to walk me to school today"

"Sure, I'll come along, *too*." I equivocated
Not eager to invade my spouse's liturgy
Nor able to turn down my partner's last request

On the back step
Mom took departure photos
and we walked the two short blocks
to Dennis School
Nathan & Dad leading the way
hand in hand

Then
Just as the imposing brick building loomed into view
Nathan wordlessly drove a stake through the heart
of whatever detachment I had left

Stopping abruptly
He turned to me and shoved his face at me
Straining
as if maybe he could overcome
by sheer effort
our vast difference in altitude

It took me by surprise
and a second to understand the beaming face which
suddenly
tethered me to that spot on the sidewalk

But then I lowered my face to his
and kissed it
and hugged him
and though we joined hands again
to finish our walk to school
that was the moment when everything changed

As we approached the corner door
where the kindergartners went in
Margaret confidently went on to the playground
and it was Mom who delivered Nathan into the halls of
anxiety
(giving pause at the door to pose the necessary picture)

Kathy is good at that
and I was content to hang back
Watching from a distance as she walked him
through the entrance rituals
but in the lull
tears began to well up

I looked away for a moment
blinking my eyes
while examining a wad of paper
someone had left on top of a thermostat
I gave that bit of litter quite an inordinant degree of
consideration

until my composure returned

When she finally had Nathan settled
and we had walked out the kindergartners' door
Kathy wanted to look up Margaret in her new room
but I begged off and headed home

As I walked back home
the tears came again
breaking through in a trickle
and in the privacy of our living room
turning into ambiguous sobs
of grief and joy and loss and pride

It was hard to put a finger on any
clearly defining emotion
but what did come to mind was a wonderful memory

Some months back
In this neighborhood where no other kids
stayed home during school
and father and son constantly bargained
over conflicting agendas
We were doing Dad's thing

Some toys had been left out in the front yard
and on the front porch
and Dad had led the way to straighten things up
with Nathan resignedly following the leader

Then something fell into place for the boy

"Dad, you're teaching me how to be a man,
aren't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I am. Who told you that?"

"Oh, I just figured it out myself."

"Well, you're a pretty smart boy."

Today is the first day of school
And my feelings about it are certainly mixed

I am relieved of the burden of
trying and failing to be a fit playmate for a preschooler

I am grieved at being a step removed
in the process of teaching him to be a man

And I believe that this is as it should be on this first day of
school

journal

JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES, M.DIV.

The drywall knife spreads true
laying the mud into the void
filling the valley
between the rocksheets

When the mud dries
I sand it smooth

Almost

Having tried a little too hard
Having sanded a little too long
I have reminded the wall
of where the valley was
and so must bring on the mud and the knife
yet one more time

I am a jack-of-all-trades
don't pay me by the hour
A jack-of-all-trades
Master of none

The wheel grinds well
and water cools the steel
So the cutlery does not lose its temper
While I try not to lose mine

This is skilled work

Not rocket science
Not brain surgery
But it matters how much
Discipline bears upon the hand
That bears upon the knife

The wheel makes keen
The wheel makes dull
And it is the hand that makes the difference

So it takes a long time
for an unruly hand
to make a well honed edge
and but a moment of touching up
to undo what has been done

I am a jack-of-all-trades
In a constant state of education
A jack-of-all-trades
Master of none

This is my fame and my shame
my strength and my weakness
my wisdom and my folly

I am a jack-of-all-trades
don't bind me with blinders
A jack-of-all-trades
Master of none

Then
there is this writing
Yes, I know
If only I would wed myself
to the writ
I could make something of myself

But I have a life
I am a life
And though I may never
"be"
a writer
I do seem to hide a book or three
So bear with me

For getting published
That is something new
but give me a little time
and a little help
and allow me false start

make up Christmas to kill off the solstice

Then we are free to
Make up whatever holy days we require
To restore our souls

Think of it
So many sacred stories uncelebrated
So many holy days unconsecrated

We need only
stay one step ahead
of the merchandisers

Christmas letter

ROOM

It is a drizzly evening
Kids in bed
Kathy at church
Me in the living room
Basking in the light of the newly wired Christmas tree
While Joseph looks for lodging
among the motels out by the interstate

As I sit reading
a regular, percussive noise
from the direction of the tree
catches my attention

Homing in on the source of the noise
I locate a parade of water droplets
following the path of least resistance
from sky to ground
via a detour through my living room ceiling

Meanwhile
Joseph strikes out
and anxiously explains
that they will have to sleep in the car

Days later
When the car shambles into our neighborhood
I am up on the roof
pounding in shingles

From my vantage point
I see the series of random stops
The walks to the doors
The waits for answers that do not come
Since everybody's out earning their mortgage payments

Gradually the old car works its way closer
and as it verges to stagger by
into someone else's story
the driver glances up

at the sound of my hammer

He stops
Wonders aloud if this is my house
Tells his tale of woe
Makes his plea for charity
I pause for a moment
And meditate on the foul luck
that has run aground before me
How dismal it must be to find that
the last man left to ask for help
is a failed pastor
who has heard far better stories
told as lies

Still
Too spineless to say a clear cut "No"
I motion toward the garage
(The building just below the slope
up which I roll bundles of shingles
only to hear them slide back down
when I turn to nail some in)

Leftover from the early days of the automobile
It is little more than a rickety, rotten stable
albeit with an overhead door
But something is better than nothing
and the young couple moves in

I show him how to light the propane forge
which puts out about enough heat
to offset the drafts
that might be enough to carry off the fumes

(Use up the fuel, I say,
I'm too busy fixing up the house
to do any smithing anyway)

Over the next several days
my perch on the roof

gives me a few stories to tell

The unmistakable sounds of birth
Songs in the night
and a strange sequence of vehicles
parked at the end of the driveway
in the days after Christmas

One is a pickup with farm plates
and as its dungareed driver makes his departure
I pause between shingles and ask if my
tenants have any plans that he knows about
or any place that they could go

The answer back is picturesque
but not encouraging
He says that foxes have holes
and birds have nests
but the child in the garage
will have nowhere to lay his head

I tell him that I couldn't live like that
But he seems to misunderstand me
For after a long pause
and under a great weight of sadness
He tells me
that he doesn't think he can follow either

Christmas letter

CALL PROCESS BLUES

The mind takes a while
To reorganize its files

Lacking a trash can
It makes do by trying
to rewire the connections

But that takes time
So

Driving through St. Louis
While staying at my sister's
I notice a Borders bookstore
And think of stopping to take a look
because there's going to be a new one built
just a block from Bethlehem Lutheran Church

But I don't stop
because I remember
that Bethlehem is no longer on the horizon

The next day
Sitting in my sister's kitchen
I think to ask about how they had the tile painted
Since that black and yellow tile in the parsonage
Just won't do

But I don't ask
because I remember
that we aren't going to be moving into that parsonage

Each time
The music starts for the courtship dance
We try not to let this happen
Especially
We try not to let it happen to the kids

We avoid making assumptions
and try to eradicate any spoor of a plan

that filters through our screens

A year ago
We stopped taking the kids to interviews

Until this time
When the request for a second interview
Got around our defenses
So

The kids have toured their school
and picked their bedrooms
and hoped their hopes
and dreamed their dreams
and now we have to tell them
that it's not going to be

And we'll all try to forget
The people we tried to get to know

And we'll get ready to do it all again
And we'll wonder where and when
it all will end

And wonder what all this will mean
when we get to where we go

journal

WORKING THE ANGLES

A piece of delicate china
Grasped gingerly
Wrapped carefully

In the tissue
In a box
Sealed up
To be sent far off

To myself

The rituals of Christmas
Are skewed this time
By the pending move

Perspective is skewed
Too
So that I see the magi
From a different angle

Their gifts now obscured
By all they left behind
Just to make the trip

These rich ones
By travelling light
Entered the Kingdom

While I ponder
The angle appropriate
To get a moving van
Through the eye of a needle

Christmas letter

SUBVERSION

an interesting fact:
ex-pastors are subject to the draft
especially if their spouses
are not ex-pastors yet
and so I am compelled
to teach adult Sunday School
during Advent 1999

still
though outwardly compliant
I play at passive aggression
and read my class through
the gospel of Mark
and dare them not to listen
to what he does not say

Mark
who cares not to start a religion
who leaves out the stories
from which piety is built
who leaves out the nativity
and walks away from the empty tomb
and takes pains to record
that Jesus found all the audulation
to impede the proclamation

Mark
for whom
the message was less Jesus
than the message of Jesus:
The Kingdom comes
the kingdom breaks in for me
regardless of my worst failings
regardless of my best efforts
whether I "get it"
or not

but we have little patience
with such lack of regard

we want to make a difference
we want to be the difference
and so we read Mark
but hear Matthew and Luke

filling in where Mark is lacking
we insert the navinity
and assert the resurrection
and do so
not appreciating
that we do so
for the sake of closure
that justifies the piety
that turns ongoing mystery
into trademarked history

but Mark did not want us to have closure
Mark wanted us leaning forward
on the edge of our seats
waiting
watching
not loyal to the Jesus brand name
but looking for the kingdom
come

Christmas letter

FALSE START - 2000

It's about time, she says

The Christmas newsletter lacks a poem
but wearied of annually waxing poetic
about the Nativity
my muse thumbs its nose at me

This is going to be work

So I trudge down to the basement
over behind the boiler
back in those dim recesses of my workshop
where everyone leaves me alone
And fire up the beast

Not a piece of this system was bought new
Partly scavenged from auctions
mostly castoff parts from our local newspaper
Its hard drives and cooling fans spring to life
But not the monitor

The green indicator light by the power switch flicks on
But the massive screen lies dead
Nineteen diagonal inches of empty blackness
Its circuitry muttering to me about how many
Issues of the Gazette it has already done
And would I please turn it back off

One minute . . .

Nothing

Two minutes . . .

I can feel the irritation rise within me

Three minutes . . .

Not a flicker

Two hours . . .

The boiler gurgles behind me

Five days . . .

How does one measure

the precise length of that eternity

called "soon"?

Somewhere in my long plunge
into the eons of delay
I bounce off the tumbling husk of an idea:
That this is an opportunity
for me to practice
patience

I take a deep breath
let go of the passage of time
And simply wait
Expectant
but not driven by expectation
And as the world turns
and the glaciers creep
and the mountains erode
my icons ghost onto the face
of this geriatric monitor
And then
With such a spasm of cathode ray sputtering
That I shut my eyes at its strobe-like flashing
My desktop settles into view
and I realize I do have something to write

you see the waiting is the thing
Christmas is just the punchline
of what had seemed an endless joke
a two thousand year long shaggy dog story
about how many messiahs it takes
to make a kingdom

It's a real groaner
The wisemen arrive with gifts in hand
and amidst all the adulation and
Christmas small talk
they find themselves wondering
Is this it?
That's what it is like to have arrived

Like a child on Christmas morning
Ten minutes after the last present is opened
The satisfaction of completion somehow detracts
from the thrill of anticipation

and when the children demand yet more
it is truly
the wonder
the watchfulness
the sense of having all senses heightened
that they are missing
and seek to regain

Maybe the waiting is the thing after all
Maybe Jesus came to deliver the punch line
only to realize
that learning to wait graciously
was more fulfilling
than wrapping up all the loose ends
or unwrapping all the presents

He said
I'll be back in just a minute
leaving us to learn graciousness
and how to walk the precise length of that
eternity
called "soon"

attempted Christmas letter

ACTUALLY SENT - 2000

Odd
how faith
makes people
read the same book
so differently

I am always told
that the Bible portrays
an omnipotent God

But I read
and see a God ever
stymied
never getting his hearts desire
yet persisting
nonetheless

I am always told
that the Bible portrays
an unchanging God

But I read
and see a God ever
changing
his mind
his clothes
his style

I am always told
that the Bible portrays
the metaphysical process
of incarnation

But I read
and see a God ever
jumping out of the last box
we put him in

Out of the Temple
into the manger
onto the cross
unto the least of these

I am always told
that the Bible
is an answer book
ever to look into

But I read
and see a Godly field guide
ever to look up from

Any good God sightings today?

Christmas letter

THE USUAL ENIGMATIC CHRISTMAS POEM

It is the first Saturday after Thanksgiving
Christmas Tree Cutting Day
On her liturgical calendar
But it is blowing rain
So there will not be fir
neither spuce
nor even pine
to festoon
When she gets home

I mutter my disappointment to the wisemen
who sit in the pews
Down at Milledgeville Oil
Where young men ponder sundogs
And old farmers invoke radar screens

“Rain before seven ends by eleven”
the choir intones
And preacher Wayne
admonishes this reprobate
to get down on my knees
and plant potatoes by the signs of the moon

I laugh and mock
the local astrological cult
resign myself to a treeless tree day
and cloister myself in the church office
there to process the more orthodox words
of Lutheranism

Leaving Trinity for lunch
I notice that the clouds have cleared off
And find on my answering machine
a rubric left by the preacher at 10:45
That I should look out my window

Smiling
I graze through lunch
and ponder my options

recalling a druidic sounding voice
(though it could have been a Methodist)
from the morning
recommending a tree farm previously unknown
to me

Opting for adventure over familiarity
I launch the Jeep and paddle up
One of the tributaries of highway 40
back into the empty hinterlands
almost giving up and turning back
when finally I see a patch of spiked green
amidst the burr-cut bean fields
Nothing too impressive

I hesitate
but having come so far
I figure I might as well
look over the scraggly crop before me

I check in with the proprietor
Who tells me that the pines are all \$20
And the firs are \$5 a foot
I tell her that I'm after a fir

Looking at me like I've just said
some kind of secret password
she leads me off to the side a few steps
and points past the barn
"Half way down that row"

It was a short row
It was a perfect tree
One perfectly shaped green cone
A tree that by all rights
should have gone long ago
but waiting for me

So the born-again pagans and subtler syncretists
down at the gas station

seem to have served me well
Which actually fits the season of Christmas
I figure

For if orthodoxy ruled
the Magi would never have found the Messiah
who would never have been born in a stable
to carry the name of a man not his father

But all these things came to pass
Which means that when the kingdom comes
all bets are off
and jokers are wild

Christmas letter