

6 - The Age of Reason



Categories in the Age of Reason: Mother, father, nun, me and siblings. Lower right: Me, age seven, standing above the line dividing reason from unreason. (Notice the ages of my younger siblings). My brother Greg drew this.

Because my father could only draw stick figures, Mom said the Arth kids got their art talent from the Benton and Gupton side of the family. Later, my grandmother, born Evelyn Clyde Benton, said we were related to artist Thomas Hart Benton, whose father was from Tennessee. This made sense to me, because, as adults, both my artist brother Greg and I sometimes felt like we were channeling Thomas Hart Benton when we were drawing or painting. Dad must have seen what was coming, so when I was six he asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. "An artist," I said.

"Artists don't make any money," he said. "You need to do something practical."

He impressed upon me that if I ever wanted to go to college, or amount to anything in life, I would have to do what he did, and pay my own way, starting

immediately. Consequently, I opened a business consisting of selling sugar and cinnamon toast on a card table that I had set up at the bottom of our driveway. I did not sell any, even at two cents each, but the flies had a nice meal.

I had more luck selling Kool-Aid. I was able to save up five dollars and open my first bank account. After a while, my father arranged for me to buy one share of Texaco stock. Dad was as dogmatic about my religious training as he was about my future livelihood. Mrs Toal, my first grade teacher, did my father and the Church proud by drilling us in the Baltimore Catechism. Our first lesson contained the official answers to such questions as “Why did God make me?” and “What is my purpose?” The answer was to love, serve and obey Him, with emphasis on the obeying part. If we behaved, we would get to be with Him forever in Heaven.

God was invisible, yet portrayed as an all-powerful, easily riled grandpa who looked like a bearded Charles Atlas. We were told that if God’s divine form was revealed to us while we were still in mortal form, His radiance would blind and kill us. Our parents and teachers made no secret of their mission to “put the fear of God” into us. This fearsome God was attended by His much nicer messianic son Jesus, and the mysterious Holy Ghost, whose name was later changed to “Holy Spirit,” so as not to invite comparisons with Casper the Friendly Ghost. Then there was the Mother of God, who became the primary intercessor to the Three-in-One Holy Trinity. To this was added a large contingent of saints, all of whom were apparently created to subsume the numerous earlier gods and goddesses and simultaneously spin the narrative that this proliferating divine conglomerate was monotheism—not the polytheism practiced by the primitive heathens.

The nuns at St. Ann’s Catholic School in Midland taught us that God the Father had explicit punishments for not obeying his laws. If we died with a minor or “venial” sin on our soul, our trip to the Pearly Gates would require a stopover in Purgatory. In Heaven’s waiting room, our minor infractions would be burned off our souls with the devil’s blowtorch. Mrs. Toal hinted that it might take years to remove even the smallest blemish. Someone not baptized in the Catholic Church was a heathen. When these fallen souls—either believing in a form of God other than the Catholic one, or being utterly without faith—died in an unbaptized state, their souls went straight to Limbo, where I would imagined they would join other heathens cavorting and dancing naked under the limbo stick. Lest that sounded like too much fun, we were constantly

reminded that if we died in sin we would be tortured forever with fire and brimstone. It was never clear what part the brimstone played or exactly what it was, but I assumed that it was hurled at barbecued sinners to add insult to injury—perhaps to pop their blistering flesh.

Occasionally, Father Moore, one of the resident priests, would come by the classroom to answer the questions that befuddled Mrs. Toal. Because he was Irish, he always started with a joke like this:

A little Irish boy named Mickey was saying his prayers and trying to understand the nature of God, so he asked the Almighty: “God, how long is a million years to you?”

God thundered: “FOR ME, A MILLION YEARS IS LIKE A MINUTE.”

So Mickey asked: “God, how much is a million dollars to you?”

God replied: “A MILLION DOLLARS IS LIKE A PENNY.”

Mickey thought about this long and hard. Finally he asked, “God, would you give me a penny?”

“IN A MINUTE,” God said.

It seemed unfair to punish people who had not been given the opportunity of converting to Catholicism, so I asked Father Moore, “What if a baby dies before it’s baptized. Where does it go?”

The priest clarified the issue for us with an all-knowing smile, “The baby’s soul goes to Limbo, which really isn’t all that bad. It is just like Heaven, but without God.”

Heaven without God sounded better than Heaven *with* God, especially since Our-Father-who-art-in-Heaven was pictured as being even more autocratic and capricious than my father-who-art-in-Midland. In our house, Dad was the ultimate authority and he measured out justice with a special, double-thick yard stick he kept especially for that purpose. If he was angry he would sometimes dispense with the stick and thump us on the head with his college ring. This was often accompanied by the Lord’s name coupled with various epithets. The Bible proved that God not only approved of beatings, but commanded them: “Though shalt beat him with the rod, and deliver his soul from hell.” (Proverbs 23:13-14). But using the Lord’s name in vain was also forbidden, so I drew some comfort knowing that the old man would at least be spending some time in Purgatory with the devil’s blowtorch.

Whatever affection my dad had felt for me when I was a young lad in jolly old

England seemed to have disappeared. My admiration for his qualities had been continually beaten down by his physical and emotional abuse, and if he had died, I would have felt relieved. If God the Father was like my father, the pagans in Limbo had the best deal of all. If we died with a *mortal* sin on our soul, our fate was sealed. We would be treated to an eternity of writhing on the end of the devil's pitchfork, while being roasted over an open flame. The finality of the word "eternity," coupled with the idea of constant torture was the scariest thing I could conceive of. I resolved to do whatever I was told just to slink through life without committing a mortal sin.

I wish I could report that years later I was to discover that there had been additional clarification by the Church in a way that deepened my understanding of the simplistic Catechism, but that never happened. Things were true because God told the Pope it was true and ours was not to reason why but to follow orders until we die. The Bible and the Church represented God's will and one could not question Scripture or dogma without committing blasphemy. As I got older I realized, to my growing consternation, that the preposterous tales and metaphorical flights of fancy necessary to float these assumptions were only elaborations of this basic premise, and that billions of otherwise intelligent adults took this sort of nonsense literally.

As first grade wore on, the revelations got worse. As it turned out, Limbo existed because of Original Sin. We were *born* sinful. Because Eve had seduced Adam into being curious about good and evil, all their descendants would be forever barred from the Garden of Eden. It seemed hopeless. Fortunately, Mrs. Toal came through with the same device that saved us from Limbo: Baptism. By virtue of a few symbolic words, coupled with a splash of water blessed by a priest, the Original Sin was washed away, and one could start with a clean slate. The prospect of never committing any sins after that must have been daunting to the founders of the One True Church, so they came up with the Sacrament of Confession. You share your shameful secrets to the priest, and he absolves the sins by assigning some homework consisting of Hail Marys, an Act of Contrition and two Lord's Prayers. You also had to be truly sorry and intend to never sin again. Otherwise, the sins remained firmly attached to your soul, and if the clock ran out before you made another sincere confession, you were cooked.

Two weeks before I turned seven, Mrs. Toal, being a lay teacher and therefore not as thoroughly indoctrinated with the proper order of things, unwittingly said something she was not supposed to say to six-year olds. She let it slip out that,

excepting Original Sin, which is affixed to our soul even before we are born, until we reach the “age of reason,” which is seven, we were incapable of sin. To the kids in my class, who had already attained age seven, this made perfect sense. After all, they were now capable of reason, and even seemed to be puffing up with pride over their newfound reasonableness. Others looked quite perplexed, so I wondered if my fellow six-year-olds understood what she had just said. They had not yet reached the age of reason, so probably they did not. I sincerely tried to detect in my own brain an undeveloped faculty of reason. Would I suddenly be different in two weeks? I seemed to already be somewhat logical, so I was confused for a minute. Then I remembered it was the rules that counted, and whether they were reasonable or comprehensible was irrelevant. The point was that life is a test by the Ultimate Scorekeeper.

I decided this was an opportunity not to be missed, even while being somewhat miffed about not finding out about this loophole sooner. The next day I roamed the neighborhood looking for something mischievous to do before becoming reasonable. Two streets over from ours were several houses under construction on the edge of the desert. The ugly, single-pane, anodized aluminum windows, which by 1960 had become ubiquitous, had just been installed, and it being Saturday, no one was around to make sure they did not get broken. I hefted Dad’s hammer from its holder on the garage wall and hurried back.

For a delicious moment I paused before one of the windows to bask in the glory of impending mischief and gazed at the reflected image of my almost seven-year-old-self, gripping the wooden handle of the hammer. Like a tiny, angry Thor, I heaved the projectile through the first window. The sound of breaking glass echoed throughout the neighborhood, just as it had when I first learned the word TIME. My adrenaline-charged memory-maker was at work, so I remember it well. Then I dashed inside and threw it out another window. I proceeded in this fashion until I stood before the last unbroken window inside the unfinished house. I surveyed the bare studs, backed only with black sheathing. The last pane of glass framed the stark, late-afternoon view of another house, also under construction. Somehow I reasoned in my pre-rational mind that the longer I continued to do this, the more likely there would be terrestrial consequences, regardless of the free pass I was getting from God. This would be my last act of vandalism ever, I told myself as I let the hammer fly. The glass in the window exploded with an exhilarating crash. Thrilled to the bone, I rushed through

the house, my leather shoes crunching on the broken glass. Outside, just after picking up the hammer, and getting ready to exit the scene of the divinely sanctioned innocence, a huge adult was illuminated by the setting sun. His long, dark shadow pointed east toward our houses like the dark arm of retribution, for Bill Pachelo was the next door neighbor. He was all aglow, looming in front of me, with muscled arms akimbo in righteous indignation, looking like Mr. Clean with his crew cut and white T-shirt. He was not only our next door neighbor but also husband to the beautiful and smooth-complexioned Patsy Pachelo. These attributes, combined with her dazzling smile and honeyed Southern accent made her, despite her being some twenty years older, the object of the only other commandment I would have been breaking if I had been thirteen days older.

Mr. Pachelo, simply by the fact of his presence and the inevitability of my punishment, stopped me dead in my tracks. “Are *you* going to tell *your* father, or am *I*,” he thundered.

“I-I-I-I guess I am,” I stammered, as I trembled.

He marched me home and around to the back screen door. He crossed his arms again and watched as I stepped through the portal on my way to the gallows. From the kitchen I called out in the smallest voice I could make that would still be heard by Mr. Pachelo, “Dad?”

There was no answer, so I cautiously entered the living room. There lay the source of much of my childhood angst, sleeping on the couch of his lair. I went back to the kitchen and blurted out what I had done within earshot of the back door. After a short pause, I commanded myself, in the deepest voice I could muster, while half-covering my mouth: “Ok then, bend over!”

I slapped my knee as hard as I could until I could muster up a good cry.

The crying was not entirely faked because I was sure that this stunt would only dig me deeper into my pit of despair. But, just in case the ploy was successful, I put some spit on my cheeks, and rubbed my eyes before forlornly pushing open the back screen door. I stared at the ground while Pachelo asked, “So did you tell him?”

“Uh huh,” I sniffed, rubbing my eyes again.

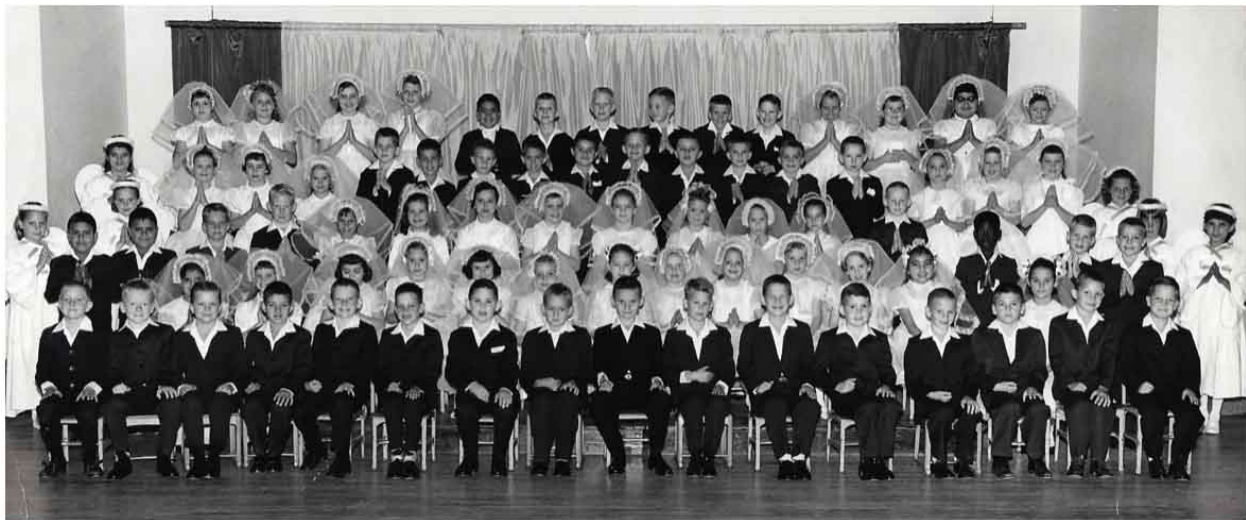
“Ok, then,” he said, “let that be a lesson to you.”

To my utter astonishment, he walked away, having bought the whole banana. My relief was short-lived because the real punishment was that, until the Pachelos got

transferred to Houston some three years later, I lived in mortal terror that Bill might casually mention the dreaded incident to my dad. As for feelings for my neighbor's wife, Patsy, it remained a case of unrequited love. A few weeks later, in answer to my question about one of the most puzzling of the Ten Commandments, I was told, by the clearly uncomfortable Mrs. Toal, "coveting thy neighbor's wife" meant having her as my own to do with as I please. No further clarification was asked, and none was offered. I had guiltily attained the age of reason.

I would be remiss if I did not admit that in 2014, the power of that primordial crush caused me to track down the widowed 80-year-old Patsy Pachelo through her Facebook page. Bill had gone to his grave without knowing that I had deceived him. Patty looked good for her age, with an almost regal bearing, but facing head-on the brutal reality of time's passage released me from any residual curiosity and longing, leaving only nostalgia. Patsy remembered me and our family, but I said nothing about the hammer or about having coveted her as a boy.

7 - The "Body" of Christ



Ch. 7. First Holy Communion. I am at the back, second boy from the left. Notice the flanking angels.

By first grade, I had mastered the Sign of the Cross that acknowledged the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit and concluded with "Amen," and hands folded in prayer. My sister, Michele, did an irritatingly prissy version of it, where she very carefully touched three, slightly-bent fingers (representing the Trinity) to the forehead, the heart, the left

shoulder and finally the right shoulder. I noticed that my dad, like other men in Mass were somewhat less prim and even perfunctory with their Signs of the Cross. The tiniest bit of a rebel crept in, and by second grade I was acknowledging the authority of the Trinity over me, while still leaving a little bit of room for James-Dean-like insouciance. However the Sign of the Cross was executed, it served as a constant reminder that Jesus suffered a brutal and agonizing death on a cross for our sins.

I never quite got entirely used to the concept. Instead, I found the naked Jesus, especially the life-size one hanging over the sacristy, to be embarrassing. A cloth, which seemed to be provocatively frozen on the edge of slipping off, barely clung to His private parts for “the sake of modesty” even though all of the synoptic gospels, read to us countless times, said that the soldiers took Jesus’ garments, presumably leaving Him stark naked on the torture stake.

Despite this ostentatious and sensual display of a bloody corpse, the body was a source of shame and anything related to certain parts of the body were only mentioned in the vaguest possible terms in any other context. I only saw my mother naked once in my entire life, and do not ever remember seeing my father *au naturel*. Just after turning seven, I impetuously opened the bathroom door without knocking, and found myself eye level to a black bush the size of Texas. To my horror, I realized this black, hairy *thing* had somehow attached itself to my mother, which, in turn, explained why she was screaming so hysterically. I felt sorry for her for some time after that, and began to surmise the innocuous, crotch creases of my sisters would eventually be overtaken by the same hairy fate. It was impossible to keep a herd of toddlers and young children properly covered up, especially in a hot desert climate, so we were constantly admonished to cover up and “show some decency!”

My father seemed to nearly throw up when once I walked into the living room in my tighty-whities. “Get your pajamas on!” he said, with an air of revulsion that sent a wave of shame washing over me. Even the very word “body” became naughty and I was certain that the word had a dual meaning. It apparently started when Mom asked “Do you have to go potty?” and I thought she was saying “Do you have to go body?”

My siblings also thought the word “body” was a synonym for the product of what was also referred to quite self-consciously by my mother as a bowl movement. In our world, it was preferable not to talk to children about feces at all, but only the action that moved “body” through the body.

At school, I had to suppress giggles when my second grade teacher, Sister Claire Marie, told us we would have to eat the *body* of Christ during the administering of Holy Communion—a sacrament into which we were being initiated after having finally reaching the age of reason. Soon, it became clear the teacher was referring to the other meaning of the word “body,” which was really just as incredible, yet said with a straight face. The food at our reenactment of the “Lord’s Supper” would consist only of the Lord Himself. I imagined us hauling down Jesus’s dead body from the cross, tossing away the loincloth, and then feasting on his naked body like a swarm of God-intoxicated cannibals.

The girls dressed up like angels and the boys put on white shirts and black suits for their initiation into making lamb chops out of the Holy Lamb of God. We were informed that the wine of the Eucharist, which our priest was enthusiastically drinking, much in the manner of Count Dracula, turned into the actual *blood* of Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation.

At first, I was relieved that even though we were expected to be cannibals, we would not also be vampires, but Sister Claire Marie’s precise instructions disabused me of that notion: “First rule: Under the penalty of mortal sin, never touch the communion wafer. Once consecrated, the Eucharist becomes the actual Body *and* Blood of our Lord!”

It was okay for the priest to touch it, however, because he was a blessed and official representative of an unbroken line of authority, which, according to Church dogma, went all the way back to the apostle Simon who was ordained and nicknamed “Peter” by Jesus Himself, thus becoming Jesus’ right hand man. We were also explicitly told that Peter means “rock” (so as to not think peter = penis) and so when they quote Jesus: “I tell that you are Peter, and it on this rock I will be my church,” it will not sound sacrilegious.

Nevertheless, Jesus liked to have fun with Peter. The Lord invited Peter for a stroll on the water. Peter was able to take a few steps before his doubts got the best of him, much like a cartoon character momentarily defying gravity after running off a cliff. Jesus may have laughed his ass off at Peter getting all wet, for all we know, but the Bible has Jesus saying to Peter, “O ye of little faith.” This was exactly the same jokey thing my father made when I doubted his expertise.

Peter doubted Jesus three more times on other occasions, no doubt eliciting a

few more of those “O ye of little faith” comments from Jesus that are found sprinkled through the New Testament, in case you did not get the joke the first time. Even though he was said by the Church to be the first pope, all this doubting and dunking gave Peter an inferiority complex. When Peter was crucified by Nero in 64 AD, he was so meek and humble that he asked to be hung upside down because he was not worthy to die like Jesus. So sayeth the Church.

For being sacrificed, Peter got sainthood, and his doubting is held up as a sign of his human fallibility, even though the Church also claimed that, as promised by Jesus to Peter, its popes are “preserved from the possibility of error” when pontificating officially. As I wondered some years later, if the chief apostle who personally knew a miracle-performing Jesus had reason to doubt, then how could the Church—for Pete’s sake—expect me to believe this stuff with no evidence whatsoever?

Nevertheless, in 1960, at St. Ann’s Catholic School, all of us kids were true believers, not needing any evidence to support what we were told. We just wanted to get everything right so we could get out of our scratchy dress-up clothes and go play. To calm our fears, we got a practice session with each of us being presented with an unconsecrated host to swallow. The round, unleavened wafer, pressed thin and stamped like a coin with a cross, tasted pretty good. Later, after the magical incantations had been uttered and the bread turned into Jesus, it tasted even better. As the actual flesh and blood of Christ melted on my tongue, I realized that the illusion of it stubbornly looking like an ordinary wafer also added a certain *je ne sais quoi*. It can be compared today to the change that suddenly comes over me when I am told the caviar I was offered for free costs \$100 an ounce.

“It’s a miracle how God lets us partake of His flesh while still allowing us to have the sensation that the host still tastes like bread,” Sister Claire Marie explained. “This is a very special moment when you and Jesus are as close as you will ever be. So, take this opportunity to silently speak to God and then listen to what He has to say to you.”

“Thank you Jesus, for my First Holy Communion,” I prayed. “You are great and holy. Also, thank you for not tasting like a body.”

I strained to hear at least a faint, “You’re welcome,” but didn’t hear Him say anything. I thought He might have felt insulted that when I silently said the word “body,” I could not help thinking about ca-ca. Later, while partaking in Holy Communion, I suspected Satan was tempting me to give the Body of Christ a

cannibalistic nibble. I did not give in, though, because we had all been sternly warned that carelessly allowing the host to touch our teeth was a sin, perhaps a Mortal Sin. Instead, we were supposed to let it melt in our mouth while thinking deeply about how much we loved Jesus. Unfortunately, it was difficult to only have one small wafer—like eating only one M & M. Once, during lunch-time Mass, I got back in line again, hoping no one would notice. The Mother Superior immediately leapt from the front pew, grabbed my arm and, while twisting it painfully, launched me back to my seat. Later, Sister Claire Marie explained that, while it was not an official sin, going for the communion wafer a second time was a questionable activity and I might be doing it for the wrong reasons. She's right, I was.