

Bribing God

(re-read 7/4/13: Way too long! For the punchline story. How do I fix?) Two storie...Religon according to dad and Burnning Kitchen?

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(13 Mins)

2 MAKE 2-PIECES

DAD'S PASSING
I REALIZED
THEY DAD
PASSING

Bribing God

Part I: Knock Knock

Except for the occasional "God damnit!" muttered by Dad when something truly irritating happens, like when he finds too many long distance calls on the phone bill, God is pretty much a stranger in our home.

But just because Dad is not a religious guy doesn't mean he's short on virtue. To the contrary, his moral and ethical standards are of the highest caliber. His most relentless and longstanding advice is, "Always do the right thing." It's just that Dad is not going to be signing up for any longer list of personal commandments. In fact, for God to be warmly welcomed into our house, He would do better to be selling vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias door-to-door.

In 1948, when a door-to-door salesman bangs the big iron knocker on our front door, I expect that Mom will politely send him packing. Moms in our neighborhood generally shoo salespeople away, telling the kids that it's dangerous to let strangers into the house. But today, when the well-dressed Electrolux vacuum salesman tips his hat at our door, Mom's face lights up.

"How timely!" she declares. "I hate that pile of junk in my closet. It's falling apart."

She flings the door open and invites him in for what turns out to be a two-hour demonstration leading to our family's conversion from manual push-pull carpet sweeper to a new Electrolux Model XX with a foot-operated on/off switch.

Another door-knocking stranger welcomed into our house is the Encyclopedia Britannica salesman. It's Saturday when the book-carrying gentleman rings our bell, and Dad is immediately brought to meet him because this merchandise, like the prints of paintings on our walls, is a whole-family product and Dad makes the decisions in that category. After listening to a half-hour presentation involving the passing around of impressive samples of gold-accented maroon leatherette books, Dad agrees that we need this item and he ceremoniously signs on the dotted line. I'm not sure if he looks so pleased because the books are educational for us kids or because they will look prestigious in the bookcase. How things look heavily ^{influences} ~~affects~~ Dad's judgments. As soon as the salesman, order in hand, packs up and leaves, Dad organizes us into a shelf-cleaning brigade for the anticipated arrival of the volumes. We are told to box our substantial collection of National Geographic magazines and carry them into the cellar. This is a disturbing development as these magazines are my only connection with pictures of naked humans.

Part II: Burying Bacon

To many of his friends, Dad is an underground Jew. Among the Jewish community in the suburbs of the 1940s, this is a slightly disparaging thing to be called. The term suggests that Dad's Jewishness is so pale that he's hardly recognizable as a member of the faith. My guess is that Dad cultivates this transparency in an effort to more easily become a member of the advertising profession, which in New York City in the late '30s and early '40s, is closed to non-Christians. Dad is "passing."

One summer, when I am 15, instead of camp, I am shipped off 1,800 miles to stay with my Grandfather in Denver for the month of July. For the first five days, Granddad cooks me a pretty boring breakfast of Cream of Wheat and sliced apples. Back home, my mother's remarkable lack of talent for food preparation has encouraged me, in self-defense, to become an acceptable chef. On the sixth day, armed with the confidence that I know how to cook stuff, I decide to make breakfast for myself.

I rise early, walk to the corner market, and purchase a half-pound of my favorite breakfast food, smoked bacon. Fifteen minutes later I'm shaking the hot fry pan around, shifting the sizzling strips, when Granddad walks into the kitchen and explodes in a red-faced rage, screaming, "My pan, my pan! What are you doing?" Both hands waving wildly above his head, he demands that I take his fry pan out into the backyard and scrub it with dirt to purge the bacon.

What SHOULD I USE TO
"How should I clean the pan?" I ask timidly.

"Where should I get the dirt?"

"I don't care!" he yells. "Take the dirty fork and dig with it! This is a kosher pan!"

EXPLANATION
How DAD
Tempt out - GUILTY

Apparently, Dad's father is seriously Orthodox.

I run into the backyard and start digging up dirt. I scrape a shallow trench with the fork and scrub the pan with the loose dirt. I lay the perfectly cooked bacon in the trench and bury it. I learn for the first time that we do have some serious religion in our family, but given my passion for bacon, it's an agonizing experience.

REWRITE

Back home in the early autumn, Dad enrolls me in the local reform temple's Sunday school program. I think he's suffering guilt over my shocking lack of understanding of what a kosher kitchen is all about, but for a young teen, this is an eye-rolling punishment because I am losing a precious weekend sleep-late day. After a few miserable months of silent suffering, we both call it quits — I because I'm whining about getting dressed up on a weekend, and he because driving me to and from my classes conflicts with the better tee-off times at the golf club.

THINKS

The chilly October day we decide to call it quits, he picks me up in the family Pontiac, smoking his favorite Cuban cigar. Dad cherishes these "Cubans" and after repeated drags and slow swirling dispersal of the blue smoke, he will periodically open the window to clear the air and with a loud "hock-toowee," discharge a mouthful of cigar saliva.

WIFE
AS GOOD AS
NEED AS THE
EVER
ROAD

This morning, though, he is content to remain at the curb enjoying his cigar. "How did it go today?" he asks.

I say, "I hate this stuff. It's so boring."

Dad nods with a faint look of understanding and releases a long blossom of blue smoke and, with a gurgled gathering of cigar saliva, turns his head and spits out the window. Unfortunately, the window is closed. A decidedly unglamorous glob of viscous stuff starts sliding down the glass. Impeccable in every social grace and gesture, Dad produces a handkerchief and wipes the mess. I chuckle and say, "Gee, Dad, do you think God heard us and closed the window?" He snorts a big grin, rests the wadded up hanky in the ashtray and pats me on the knee. We drive away and I know some silent agreement has passed between us and that I will not be back at religious school and Dad will be teeing off earlier on Sundays.

Part III: Burning Anxiety

As a result of this arrangement, I am pretty much on my own as far as developing a relationship with God. Like the childhood boogeyman still living under my bed, I sense God is there, quietly leaving me alone.

Months later, on a sunny Saturday morning, I'm sitting in the breakfast nook, half-listening to The Buster Brown Show on the radio. It's not too interesting today and my friends are all busy.

I haven't got enough allowance remaining to take myself to the double feature and I'm bored and marooned at my house. Marching the bullet-shaped Bakelite salt and pepper shakers, I play "soldiers" on the white enamel-topped dinette table. Fanny Mae Mickens, our occasional housekeeper and babysitter is cleaning dishes in the sink around the corner and humming church music to herself. Done with the shakers, I march my fingers over to a small brass Hanukkah menorah with nine unlit candles sitting under the window. For me it's a curiosity, not a religious item. I ask Fanny (as she lets me call her) if I can light the candles. She won't let me use the matches but lights each one for me and goes back to the sink, rinsing and humming softly.

I slowly move the menorah around the table imagining it is a giant fiery army flame-thrower. The flames wave from side to side as I push the candelabra from one end of the table to the other. Under the window, the rising heat from nine candles makes the lacy white café curtains wiggle. This is fascinating. It's a form of remote control. Intrigued by my discovery, I move the flames closer to tease the curtains into a dance. Left curtain, then right, and left again as they wiggle from the candles' heat. This is great fun. Pausing the menorah under the right curtain, I move the flames even closer to see if they will make the gauzy curtain dance faster.

Fire erupts on the curtain's corner. A small but expanding flame leaps up the edge of the fabric. Horrified, I yank the menorah away and, stupidly, blow at the burning corner.

The fire shoots upward on the lace. I whack the edges, sending sparks cascading onto my forearm and against the wall. Flames race up the curtain, igniting the ruffled valance at the top. My face is hot from the growing blaze and my heart pounds as tongues of fire lick at the dinette ceiling, where brown blisters bulge and then burst into crackling flames. The walls are not burning but the ceiling fire spreads in all directions until the whole thing has burned black and is smoking. The sizzling edge of the fire rounds the dinette corner into the kitchen. Pop-eyed, I scream, "Fanny! A fire, a fire started!"

Bribing God

Fanny races around the corner, looks at the ceiling and shouts, "Oh, Lord, help me get some pots and fill them with water." Thankful that Fanny has any kind of solution, I grab our turkey roasting pan and shove it under the sink faucet. Fanny finds bath towels and soaks them with running water. I hoist the now heavy roasting pan and heave its water at the slowly spreading flames. I am losing my battle but Fanny is winning hers. Fanny has a deadly good aim with the wet towels, whacking out burning paint at the edges of the fire. I grab a towel and join her, slapping at the fire's outskirts. Water and burnt black paint flakes drip everywhere. We are two wild warriors defending the house.

The fire is stopped. Breathless and panting, we stop and stare at the blackened ceilings of the kitchen and breakfast nook. We are both soaked and covered with greasy black chips. I smile but Fanny, usually my pal, scowls and stares the sheepish grin right off my face.

She says, "Boy... your parents gonna be pretty mad when they see this... And yes, I am gonna tell 'em it was you. You on your own with this one!"

Fanny and I really do like each other and have an unusually warm relationship. She almost always covers for me for most minor rule breaking. So, when she says she's turning me over to the parents when they come home, I realize the depth of trouble I'm in. My mind searches my collection of stock excuses and white lies. Today, the box is empty. I'm in real trouble. Weak with fear, I trudge up to my bedroom to try to develop a plan to ward off the certain punishments to which I'm about to be sentenced.

Walking into my room, I conjure an impromptu prayer, pleading for a miraculous intervention. Since God and I are practically strangers, I start adding incentives to my part of the deal. I will forever be good. I will never steal hidden candy from Mom's underwear drawer. I will try harder to always do my homework. I will stop peeing on the Hemlock tree next to the front door. I will even stop annoying my sister when she has friends over and, come to think of it, I will stop annoying her most of the time. Deep down I know these pledges are not enough. In desperation, I sweeten the deal by emptying my pockets of three nickels, representing my total cash worth, and placing them on the windowsill so that they are illuminated by a splash of sun. Then, feeling like a prisoner on death row, I say out loud, "I'm opening the window, God, so you don't have to break the glass to take the money."

Feigning a deeper knowledge of the Almighty, I add, "I know you don't like people watching you when you do things, God, so I'm going to walk up to Barbara Ferguson's house and I won't be back for a while. OK?" I suppress the urge to wink at the sky.

Walking past Barbara's house, to give God plenty of time, I suffer a sudden desperate need to see the proof of my pardon and turn around. With hope and salvation blossoming in my chest, I trot back to my house, up the front steps and upstairs into my bedroom. God's nickels haven't moved an inch. I'm crushed. All hope for a miraculous intervention is snuffed out.

When my parents return in the evening, they are clearly shocked at the sight of the alarming damage to our home, and seem shaken and thankful that things didn't get worse. Instead of punishment, they talk softly to me about the dangers of playing with fire and ask, almost reverently, if I have learned a lesson. I vigorously assert that I have indeed learned a frightening lesson.

To escape the lingering smell of burnt enamel paint, I walk outside thinking about the things that went so wrong. I resolve that if I'm going to make God or anybody else an accomplice, it's best to first have a solid relationship. ###