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—Publishers Weekly

donald miller

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NONRELIGIOUS THOUGHTS ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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Problems

What I Learned on Television

SOME PEOPLE SKIP THROUGH LIFE; SOME PEOPLE are dragged through it. I sometimes wonder whether we are moving through time or time is moving through us. My brilliant friend Mitch says that light, unlike anything else in the universe, is not affected by time. Light, he says, exists outside of time. He tells me it has something to do with how fast it travels and that it is eternal, but it is still a mystery to physicists.

I say this only because time kept traveling through me. When I was young I thought I had forever to figure things out. I am talking about feeling like Hitler. But I didn't. I didn't have long to figure things out. I believe that the greatest trick of the devil is not to get us into some sort of evil but rather have us wasting time. This is why the devil tries so hard to get Christians to be religious. If he can sink a man's mind into habit, he will prevent his heart from engaging God. I was into habit. I grew up going to church, so I got used to hearing about God. He was like Uncle Harry or Aunt Sally except we didn't have pictures.

God never sent presents either. We had this dumpy house and

dumpy car, and I had zits. Looking back, I suppose God sent sunsets and forests and flowers, but what is that to a kid? The only thing I heard from God was what I heard on Christmas Eve, that story I told you, when God made me feel so guilty, and I didn't like that at all. I didn't feel like I knew God, and yet He was making me experience this conviction. I felt that the least He could have done was to come down and introduce Himself and explain these feelings of conviction in person.

If you don't love somebody, it gets annoying when they tell you what to do or what to feel. When you love them you get pleasure from their pleasure, and it makes it easy to serve. I didn't love God because I didn't know God.

Still, I knew, because of my own feelings, there was something wrong with me, and I knew it wasn't only me. I knew it was everybody. It was like a bacteria or a cancer or a trance. It wasn't on the skin; it was in the soul. It showed itself in loneliness, lust, anger, jealousy, and depression. It had people screwed up bad everywhere you went—at the store, at home, at church; it was ugly and deep. Lots of singers on the radio were singing about it, and cops had jobs because of it. It was as if we were broken, I thought, as if we were never supposed to feel these sticky emotions. It was as if we were cracked, couldn't love right, couldn't feel good things for very long without screwing it all up. We were like gasoline engines running on diesel. I was just a kid so I couldn't put words to it, but every kid feels it. (I am talking about the broken quality of life.) A kid will think there are monsters under his bed, or he will close himself in his room when his parents fight. From a very early age our souls are taught there is a comfort and a discomfort in the world, a good and bad if you will, a lovely and a frightening. There seemed to me to be too much frightening, and I didn't know why it existed.

I was recently reminded about all of this.

It started while I was watching television. I live with four other guys, pretty cool guys in a pretty cool house in Laurelhurst. I have this killer room upstairs. It is tucked away from everybody, sort of hidden through a door in the back of the upstairs den. The walls in my room are cedar, like something you'd find in a wood cabin. There is a birch tree so big and dignified outside my window that I often feel I am in its limbs. In the evening when it rains, the birch sounds like an audience giving a standing ovation. Sometimes when the tree is clapping I stand at the window and say thank you, thank you, as if I am Napoleon.

Along my wood-paneled walls are small, wood-paneled doors that open into attic space. I struck a television inside one of these doors, and in the evenings I lie in bed and watch television. When you are a writer and a speaker, you aren't supposed to watch television. It's shallow. I feel guilty because for a long time I didn't allow myself a television, and I used to drop that fact in conversation to impress people. I thought it made me sound dignified. A couple of years ago, however, I visited a church in the suburbs, and there was this blowhard preacher talking about how television rots your brain. He said that when we are watching television our minds are working no harder than when we are sleeping. I thought that sounded heavenly. I bought one that afternoon.

So I've been watching *Nightline* with Ted Koppel lately. He isn't as smart as Ray Suarez but he tries, and that counts. He's been in the Congo, in Africa, and it has been terrible. I mean the show is fine, but the Congo isn't doing so well. More than 2.5 million people have been killed in the last three years. Each of eight tribes is at war with the other seven. Genocide. As the images moved across the screen I would lie in bed feeling so American and safe, as if the Congo were something in a book or

a movie. It is nearly impossible for me to process the idea that such a place exists in the same world as Portland. I met with Tony the Beat Poet the other day at Horse Brass and told him about the stuff on *Nighttime*.

"I knew that was taking place over there," Tony said. "But I didn't know it was that bad." I call Tony a beat poet because he is always wearing loose European shirts, the ones that lace up the chest with shoestring. His head is shaved, and he has a long soul patch that stretches a good inch beneath his chin. He isn't actually a poet.

"It's terrible," I told him. "Two and a half million people, dead. In one village they interviewed about fifty or so women. All of them had been raped, most of them numerous times."

Tony shook his head. "That is amazing. It is so difficult to even process how things like that can happen."

"I know. I can't get my mind around it. I keep wondering how people could do things like that."

"Do you think you could do something like that, Don?" Tony looked at me pretty seriously. I honestly couldn't believe he was asking the question.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Are you capable of murder or rape or any of the stuff that is taking place over there?"

"No."

"So you are not capable of any of those things?" he asked again. He packed his pipe and looked at me to confirm my answer.

"No, I couldn't," I told him. "What are you getting at?"

"I just want to know what makes those guys over there any different from you and me. They are human. We are human. Why are we any better than them, you know?"

Tony had me on this one. If I answered his question by saying yes, I could commit those atrocities, that would make me evil, but

if I answered no, it would suggest I believed I am better evolved than some of the men in the Congo. And then I would have some explaining to do.

"You believe we are capable of those things, don't you, Tony?"

He lit his pipe and breathed in until the tobacco glowed orange and let out a cloud of smoke. "I think so, Don. I don't know how else to answer the question."

"What you are really saying is that we have a sin nature, like the fundamentalist Christians say?"

Tony took the pipe from his lips. "Pretty much, Don. It just explains a lot, you know."

"Actually," I told him reluctantly, "I have always agreed with the idea that we have a sin nature. I don't think it looks exactly like the fundamentalists say it does, 'cause I know so many people who do great things, but I do buy the idea we are flawed, that there is something in us that is broken. I think it is easier to do bad things than good things. And there is something in that basic fact, some little clue to the meaning of the universe."

"It's funny how little we think about it, isn't it?" Tony shook his head.

"It really is everywhere, isn't it?" By this we were talking about the flawed nature of our existence.

"Yeah," Tony started in. "Some friends were over at the house, and they have a kid, about four or five years old or something, and they were telling me all about child training. They said their kid had this slight problem telling them the truth about whether or not he had broken something or whether or not he had put away his toys, you know, things like that. So later I started wondering why we have to train kids at all. I wondered, you know, if I ever had a couple of kids and I trained one of them, taught him right from wrong, and the other I didn't train at all, I wonder which would be the better kid."

"The kid you teach right from wrong, of course," I told him. "Of course, but that really should tell us something about the human condition. We have to be taught to be good. It doesn't come completely natural. In my mind, that's a flaw in the human condition."

"Here's one," I said, agreeing with him. "Why do we need cops?"

"We would have chaos without cops," Tony said matter of factly.

"Just look at the countries with corrupt police. It's anarchy."

"Anarchy," I repeated.

"Anarchy!" Tony confirmed in sort of a laugh.

"Sometimes I think, you know, if there were not cops, I would be fine, and I probably would. I was taught right from wrong when I was a kid. But the truth is, I drive completely different when there is a cop behind me than when there isn't."

And what Tony and I were talking about is true. It is hard for us to admit we have a sin nature because we live in this system of checks and balances. If we get caught, we will be punished. But that doesn't make us good people; it only makes us subdued. Just think about the Congress and Senate and even the president. The genius of the American system is not freedom; the genius of the American system is checks and balances. Nobody gets all the power. Everybody is watching everybody else. It is as if the founding fathers knew, intrinsically, that the soul of man, unwatched, is perverse.

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Earlier that afternoon, the afternoon I got together with Tony, my friend Andrew the Protester and I went downtown to protest a visit by the president. I felt that Bush was blindly supporting the World Bank and, to some degree, felt the administration was

responsible for what was happening in Argentina. Andrew and I made signs and showed up a few hours early. Thousands of people had already gathered, most of them protesting our policy toward Iraq. Andrew and I took pictures of ourselves in front of the cops, loads of cops, all in riot gear like storm troopers from *Star Wars*. Andrew's sign said "Stop America's Terrorism"—he spelled *terrorism* wrong. I felt empowered in the sea of people, most of whom were also carrying signs and chanting against corporations who were making slaves of Third World labor; and the Republican Party, who gives those corporations so much power and freedom. I felt so far from my upbringing, from my narrow former self, the me who was taught the Republicans give a crap about the cause of Christ. I felt a long way from the pre-me, the pawn-Christian who was a Republican because my family was Republican, not because I had prayed and asked God to enlighten me about issues concerning the entire world rather than just America.

When the president finally showed, things got heated. The police mounted horses and charged them into the crowd to push us back. We shouted, in unison, that a horse is not a weapon, but they didn't listen. The president's limo turned the corner so quickly I thought he might come tumbling out, and his car was followed by a caravan of shiny black vans and Suburbans. They shuttled him around to a back door where we watched through a chain-link fence as he stepped out of his limousine, shook hands with dignitaries, and entered the building amid a swarm of secret service agents. I was holding my sign very high in case he looked our way.

The president gave his speech inside the hotel and left through a side door, and they whisked him away before we could shake hands and explain our concerns. When we were done, I started wondering if we had accomplished anything. I started wondering whether we could actually change the world. I mean, of course we

could—we could change our buying habits, elect socially conscious representatives and that sort of thing, but I honestly don't believe we will be solving the greater human conflict with our efforts. The problem is not a certain type of legislation or even a certain politician; the problem is the same that it has always been.

I am the problem.

I think every conscious person, every person who is awake to the functioning principles within his reality, has a moment where he stops blaming the problems in the world on group think, on humanity and authority, and starts to face himself. I hate this more than anything. This is the hardest principle within Christian spirituality for me to deal with. The problem is not out there; the problem is the needy beast of a thing that lives in my chest.

The thing I realized on the day we protested, on the day I had beers with Tony, was that it did me no good to protest America's responsibility in global poverty when I wasn't even giving money to my church, which has a terrific homeless ministry. I started feeling very much like a hypocrite.

More than my questions about the efficacy of social action were my questions about my own motives. Do I want social justice for the oppressed, or do I just want to be known as a socially active person? I spend 95 percent of my time thinking about myself anyway. I don't have to watch the evening news to see that the world is bad, I only have to look at myself. I am not browbeating myself here; I am only saying that true change, true life-giving, God-honoring change would have to start with the individual. I was the very problem I had been protesting. I wanted to make a sign that read "I AM THE PROBLEM!"

That night, after Tony and I talked, I rode my motorcycle up to Mount Tabor, this dormant volcano just east of the Hawthorne District. There is a place near the top where you can sit and look

at the city at night, smoldering like coals and ashes beneath the evergreens, laid out like jewels under the moon. It is really something beautiful. I went there to try to get my head around this idea, this idea that the problem in the universe lives within me. I can't think of anything more progressive than the embrace of this fundamental idea.

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There is a poem by the literary critic C. S. Lewis that is more or less a confession. The first time I read it I identified so strongly with his sentiments, I felt as though somebody were calling my name. I always come back to this poem when I think soberly about my faith, about the general precepts of Christian spirituality, the beautiful precepts that indicate we are flawed, all of us are flawed, the corrupt politician and the pious Sunday school teacher. In the poem C. S. Lewis faces himself. He addresses his own depravity with a soulful sort of bravery:

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you.

I never had a selfless thought since I was born.

I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through;

I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.

Peace, reassurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek,

I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin;

I talk of love—a scholar's parrot may talk Greek—

But, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.

I sat there above the city wondering if I was like the parrot in Lewis's poem, swinging in my cage, reciting Homer, all the while having no idea what I was saying. I talk about love, forgiveness,

social justice; I rage against American materialism in the name of altruism, but have I even controlled my own heart? The overwhelming majority of time I spend thinking about myself, pleasing myself, reassuring myself, and when I am done there is nothing to spare for the needy. Six billion people live in this world, and I can only muster thoughts for one. Me.

I know someone who has twice cheated on his wife, whom I don't know. He told me this over coffee because I was telling him how I thought, perhaps, man was broken; how for man, doing good and moral things was like swimming upstream. He wondered if God had mysteriously told me about his infidelity. He squirmed a bit and then spoke to me as if I were a priest. He confessed everything. I told him I was sorry, that it sounded terrible. And it did sound terrible. His body was convulsed in guilt and self-hatred. He said he would lie down next to his wife at night feeling walls of concrete between their hearts. He had secrets. She tries to love him, but he knows he doesn't deserve it. He cannot accept her affection because she is loving a man who doesn't exist. He plays a role. He says he is an actor in his own home.

Designed for good, my friend was sputtering and throwing smoke. The soul was not designed for this, I thought. We were supposed to be good, all of us. We were supposed to be good.

For a moment, sitting there above the city, I imagined life outside narcissism. I wondered how beautiful it might be to think of others as more important than myself. I wondered at how peaceful it might be not to be pestered by that childish voice that wants for pleasure and attention. I wondered what it would be like not to live in a house of mirrors, everywhere I go being reminded of myself.

It began to rain that night on Mount Tabor. I rode my motorcycle home in the weather, which I hate doing because the streets are so slick. I got home white-knuckled and wet. My room

was warm and inviting, as it always is with its wood panels and dignified birch outside the window.

I sat on my bed and looked out at my tree, which by this time was gathering rain in applause. I didn't feel much like Napoleon that night. I didn't like being reminded about how self-absorbed I was. I wanted to be over this, done with this. I didn't want to live in a broken world or a broken me. I wasn't trying to weasel out of anything, I just wasn't in the mood to be on earth that night. I get like that sometimes when it rains, or when I see certain sad movies. I put on the new Wilco album, turned it up and went into the bathroom to wash my hands and face.

I know now, from experience, that the path to joy winds through this dark valley. I think every well-adjusted human being has dealt squarely with his or her own depravity. I realize this sounds very Christian, very fundamentalist and browbeating, but I want to tell you this part of what the Christians are saying is true. I think Jesus feels strongly about communicating the idea of our brokenness, and I think it is worth reflection. Nothing is going to change in the Congo until you and I figure out what is wrong with the person in the mirror.