

Jump Jackson and the Second Easter Mystery

by Mathew Paust

Going back to Easter Eve 2014 and looking ahead to the next morning, I know now I would without hesitation choose what was about to happen. Were the choice mine, I would take what happened over winning a billion dollars in lottery gold.

One reason for this is I've always been a tad superstitious. Often joked that the same infinitesimally small odds of Fate smiling upon me in a way that would bring unimaginable riches could as easily bestow a frown carrying proportionally hideous fortune.

I would not turn the gold away. Yet along with the delirium of my life-changing bank deposit likely would arrive a vague unease. The possibility of an abrupt turnabout in Fate's fickle nature, now that she had plucked me out of the muddling crowd, would attend as a Damoclean sword at the end of an invisible thread suspended above my head indefinitely from somewhere in the cosmic haze.

But this is not why I stopped buying lotto tickets. My "lucky" number, now forgotten, might well since have brought material wealth to another mortal who I pray enjoys the windfall in good health.

My fingers hesitated a beat before typing the word "pray" in the above sentence just now, as they routinely did before the event of Easter 2014. My prior hesitations had to do with trying to stay true to my beliefs, or my lack thereof, by making sure my usage of "pray" could be taken in its secular sense, much as "love" is used at the end of a letter to a friend implying nothing more compelling than simple affection. Yet, just as there are special times when "love" is intended with the full, unambiguous extent of its power so can "pray" at its maximum carry an appeal beyond the tepid wish for simple good luck with no mystery strings implied.

My intention with “pray” in the previous paragraph was to imply the strings. I've been learning to use it this way since Easter, as a child learns to walk or to speak.

Until this Easter the only consistency in my spiritual progression had been a vague, uncomfortably childish superstitious nature regarding circumstances beyond my immediate control. A sort of low-grade neurotic sense that someone “up there” might have his eye on me and could make pleasant things happen for me if I did right, and could mess me up if I didn't. In the middle grades I had a friend whose father was a pastor. Russell was bright and fun, but he had one odd trait: whenever he cussed he'd immediately say, “Excuse me.” He wasn't saying it to me or to anyone else in our group, but quietly, to himself. It was a semi-private little ritual, the way a Catholic makes the sign of the cross. I don't recall ever mentioning it to him, and I grew accustomed to it.

I remember my father as an avowed atheist who fancied himself something of a psychic. I don't believe his atheism was as firmly established in his mind as the feeling that he possessed extra-sensory powers. He was a lawyer, and as such loved to argue. He would boast that he could take either side of an argument and win. I never heard him discuss religion with a believer unless it was to mock my mother's quiet Lutheran faith or to threaten her pastor with stopping our dues when he dared come by the house to protest my membership in the Boy Scouts. I admired my father for the latter, his standing up for me, but even at this tender age I recognized the cruelty to my mother and I shared some of her pain.

Despite my father's attitude we attended church as a family, but only on special occasions such as funerals, Easter and Christmas. My father behaved then, but perhaps only because in our small town he had to consider his reputation among potential clients and, being active in local politics, the voters. Only one such occasion sticks in my mind—a Christmas, I suspect—and this is because of something my parents discovered early in the service. I like to think my father noticed it first, but it might have been my mother. They both enjoyed it immensely, and shared their delight with my sister and me

afterward. They were too discreet to point it out during the service, assuming correctly that we kids would be unable to contain our mirth. What struck my parents at first was the odd shape of the shoulders of a man sitting in the pew directly in front of us. He was wearing his overcoat. Eventually the silver metal hook of a wooden hanger revealed itself peeking above his coat collar to solve the mystery.

This was around the time, or perhaps I was a little older when I threw myself into faith. I thought I believed in a Lutheran God, went to church, prayed, kept a journal, looked for signs. I tried summer Bible school, which met on Sundays after church or between the early and late services. I didn't last long. I liked the teacher, at first. He was pleasant and low key, not preachy.

I was innocent of the term "fundamentalism" and had no concept of its strict approach to Bible interpretation. Despite my reliance on emotional reaction in most instances I had begun to feel an incipient curiosity urging me to question things despite the apparent authority behind them. My father's habit of skepticism likely had infected me, and it might have been my teacher's suspicion of this that colored his response to my two questions, each of which he abruptly dismissed, leaving me disenchanted more by his irritated tone than by the answers he gave. My father in fact had contributed nothing directly to either question.

One had to do with the age of humankind. The teacher said it was around six thousand years. I mentioned an article I'd read in *Life* about radiocarbon dating that indicated the age of prehistoric hominids to be in the millions of years. I suspect I called them "cave men", because my teacher responded in kind, pronouncing "cave men" with a sneer and denigrating my source as virtually evil next to the Holy Bible. I trusted my source, yet I knew better than to argue. The teacher's response shocked me, but it left me confused rather than angry.

The other question was equally innocent, sprung unplanned during a discussion of the Devil appearing before and speaking to biblical characters. I asked why the Devil did not appear to us in this

way. The answer was a good one. Perhaps the evil one appeared to us more subtly, say, in the form of money, my teacher answered. Yet, his voice carried the same condescension as it had with the other, making it clear such questions were inconvenient and unwelcome. No one else participated. I wonder today what might have come to pass had just a single classmate joined me in these queries.

I believe my exchanges with the teacher came during two separate sessions. It was the second that disillusioned me so completely I dropped out, for the summer and for good.

For the bulk of my life thereafter I drifted spiritually, although a pilot light of hope for finding some redeeming entity continued to flicker throughout my rambling journey. The term "pilgrimage" may seem apt, but I was no pilgrim. I traveled without compass or plan. "Vagabond" might be more appropriate, but Walker Percy's "wayfarer" plays gentler on my palate.

Yet neither is this precise. Not for then. It fits today, as I find myself on a steadier course. Then, my progression was less directed, more like a pinball bumping among various notions and pausing to ring up the lights at whichever idea struck my fancy in the moment. My wayfaring took place mostly in books.

Some of it stuck. From my flirtation with Buddhism I keep catching jars in strategic locations in my apartment. Most every creature with which I choose not to share my abode, from flies to wolf and brown recluse spiders, get a free ride to the glorious outdoors. That is if I can catch them. The only recluse I've seen thus far, scuttling confidently across my bedroom carpet, scuttled happily into the former yogurt-making jar, moments later to dance away into the welcoming arms of the boxwood bush under my kitchen window. The wolfies are quicker and wiler. The three I've engaged most recently—two in the kitchen and one in my bedroom closet—have eluded eviction. I'm guessing their lone encounters with me have reinforced their instinct to stay hidden in my presence, as I have not seen them since. I understand they will bite, but I keep a careful eye out to avoid any surprise close encounters. Even the occasional mosquito gets safe passage provided she cooperates. If she makes it

clear her blood appetite overrides her good sense my patience in a flash can give way to ruthless action.

In sum I have benefited significantly from the lowered levels of irritation and hostility these creatures once engendered in me. I've moved incrementally toward the clearer mindset from a moment of acceptance I no longer remember in particular. The credit might go to the Buddha, or to a whim from within. No matter. It's become part of my ethic.

My readings have neither been extensive nor methodical. They've been limited mostly to fiction, but to a fairly eclectic sampling. Notions that impress me enough to hold for reflection come from diverse sources. Norman Mailer, for example, caught my attention with his theory of an existential God. This God, he said, is as uncertain about the cosmic mysteries as are we. Mailer's God may feel in some sort of competition with other potential gods in the realm of ethos. Moral courage, he said, could be the fuel his God needs to sustain itself and to prevail should such a competition be realized. The courage comes from our actions as mortals. I do not recall if Mailer addressed what might become of us after death, other than that the courage with which we lived would live on within the God it fed. The author, acknowledging human limitations, accepted in his writings that one need exert with courage no more than fifty-one percent of his energy at any given moment in order to be of value.

I was serving in the military when I started reading Mailer, and his theory so intrigued me I kept it with me for years. Around the same time for social purposes I considered myself a Unitarian.

Love is the essence that shines in Scott Turow's novels. Turow puts his theory forth without Mailer's declarative thunder or his godhead linkage. Put most succinctly, love between human beings is the essential antidote to feeling utterly alone in an apparently indifferent universe. While this as a concept could fit easily with more defined spiritual theories and provide a comfortable foundation for agnostic or atheistic outlooks, Turow is not so specific. His heritage is Jewish, but Judaism does not appear defined

as a theme in his fiction. Not that I would recognize it without its ecclesiastical trappings if it did. I am largely ignorant of Judaic doctrine, although a cousin having made some genealogical inquiries believes our paternal grandmother might have been of Jewish heritage.

I have friends who are avowed atheists, with some more avowing than others. At a certain point any avowing begins to resemble proselytizing, taking on an arrogant, bullying aspect. Ordinarily I flee folks who seem bent on getting me to see things their way, especially with religion and politics. I see little value in challenging or merely questioning “true believers” on their beliefs. At its worst challenging them is counterproductive, leading to fights to “win” rather than to persuade. I will stand against someone's actions when I find them unjust. My response could include attacking their motivating premises, be they religious, political or simply ignorant. Otherwise my position is to believe and let believe.

My pilot light of hope came near flickering out at times during this odyssey of pinballing around the galaxy of theological notions. I suffered brief episodes of despair so debilitating I had to remind myself to breathe. The reasons rarely were unique--the usual ego torments that can feel like death but make good fodder for merriment in retrospect.

What remains with me from those times are two graces that hark back to my Lutheran days. One is the Lord's Prayer, which I would recite silently to get me through dark patches in the day. I did tinker with the wording at one point, switching “lead me not into temptation” to “protect me from temptation”, as it occurred to me no god worthy of trust would lead anyone away from righteousness. These recitations could calm me, give me the strength to move or to stay afloat. The other was the image of Christ kneeling in prayer on Mount Olive. An image from a famous painting, it was featured prominently in one of our church's stained glass windows. Bringing the image into mind when nothing else worked helped me sleep.

Half-assed religiosity. Verbal and visual remnants of impressions embedded in childhood, carried forward as iconic security blankets

and sustained by hope but unable to withstand the cool breeze of intellect. The questioning nature I discovered in that summer Bible class stayed with me too. Nourished by my vocation as a newspaper reporter, this skeptical outlook matured into a stern adversary of unqualified faith. The prayer and image continued to work, but it carried an undertone of uncertainty. I was a secret thumb sucker, my faith closeted behind a door of doubt.

As usual, I sought answers in books. Wait, "seek" is not quite the right word. I felt no strong desire to explore these questions, hesitant maybe to face what I might find. As a writer I'm attracted to works by accomplished practitioners of the craft. Three who happened to tackle religion head-on were unable to provide satisfying answers. The ferociously articulate Christopher Hitchens argued for atheism, while novelists Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy spoke as avowed Roman Catholics. The problem with all three is that they based their thoughts on the one book whose authority I find most questionable: the Bible.

I shall not rehash disputes over whether the words in this book are those of God or of men to whom God might have spoken. My dispute is with Hitchens, O'Connor and Percy for starting with the biblical assumptions that the God in question was the universal grand designer and continues to reign as the grand manipulator. I agree with Hitchens this most likely is hooey. What I do like about his approach is an admission that he sometimes wished he could believe in a deity.

Drawn to the novelists' formidable narrative skills I came upon their Christian faith incidentally and found compelling the outspoken strength of their beliefs. O'Connor was raised a Catholic, and claimed never to have doubted what she'd been taught. She was comfortable with the "mysteries" of Christ's incarnation and the concepts of Heaven and Hell. Irrespective of this the magic she spun with words has not the power to reconcile for me the disparity between the Church's intramural logic and the observable realities outside it.

Percy was Catholic by conversion, and this after some dedicated reading of the likes of Kierkegaard, Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. He cites Kierkegaard's *On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle* as tipping the scales for him. Percy saw the genius as the theorist, who bases belief on the provable. The theorist as scientist reports observations that are accessible to anyone. The apostle brings "news". In this context news comes from an unknown realm and must be accepted on faith. Percy opted for the Church-embodied apostle's report over the theoretical, which he blamed for such atrocities as the Holocaust and what he saw as a general malaise in the prevailing modern consumption-obsessed consciousness.

Thus when it came to choosing the Church, he wrote, "What else is there?"

I'm not convinced. While I respect verbal gymnastics, and can be awed to a stupor by brilliant argument, I cannot agree with its conclusion unless I find it irrefutable. I think slowly, the kind of student who is not insulted when an exasperated teacher asks, "Must I draw you a picture?" I'm not ashamed to nod my head. A spiritual descendant of Doubting Thomas.

An event on April 20, 2014 brought about a disruptive *see* change in my perspective. Looking back now it is obvious to me that a series of seemingly unrelated circumstances laid the foundation for what was to happen early Easter morning. Perhaps not surprisingly all of these circumstances involved books.

The previous winter I read an autobiographical account of the communist revolution in China. The book was written by a woman who had lived in China then and whose father, a Communist Party leader, had endured abject humiliation and torture under the regime of Chairman Mao, arguably the most evil human being in all of history. A friend who had lived in China as a missionary recommended the book, and in gratitude I gave her another book written by the same author. She reciprocated on Easter Eve with the gift of a book by Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian who converted to Christianity from atheism, became an evangelical minister and

eventually suffered more than a decade of torture in a communist prison for his faith. His faith never wavered. It was so strong that his example helped convert some of his captors to become followers of Christ.

I read several chapters that night. The graphic account of his ordeal so disturbed me that it tormented my sleep. I found myself comparing the courage of Rev. Wurmbrand and the Chinese official. Both had endured intense suffering by dint of their faith—Christianity for one, communism for the other. Despite their opposing values each man staked his life on faith alone. I felt bereft. I felt shame that I had no faith that could bear me through anything much beyond moderate deprivation. To speak nothing of torture. In this respect I envied both men. But shame and envy were not enough by themselves to ease my doubts.

Another worry troubled me that night. I was stuck in a novel I was writing. This was not unusual. For me writing almost anything, including this, involves continually coming to the end of a path of thought and not knowing where to step next. These moments can be terribly disconcerting. Dread is a constant companion, and it often leaves me close to panic wondering if even the path I've traversed was the wrong one. I can't recall the particular problem that hung me up Easter Eve, only that its combination with the febrile sense of impotence Rev. Wurmbrand's book had triggered denied me more than an hour or two of broken sleep all night.

I gave up and crawled out of bed about 4:30, an hour earlier than usual. I turned on NPR, as usual, and caught the tail end of a show I'd not heard before: *Blues Before Sunrise*, a Chicago-aired program hosted by Steve Cushing. I was finishing breakfast when Cushing read the list of artists he had featured. I heard the name "Jump Jackson", and nearly choked on my toasted bran muffin. Or maybe I nearly spit coffee on the damned thing. Whatever. "Jump Jackson" meant nothing to me, other than as the name I had made up a month earlier for a symbolic character in the novel that had me stumped.

I had started the novel mid-March, soon as I moved into my apartment after my ex-wife and I finally sold the house we'd put on

the market around the time she decided to divorce me after twenty less-than-blissful years. This is incidental, by the way, to the epiphany I experienced when I heard Steve Cushing pronounce the name of my invented character over the airwaves at about 5 on Easter morning.

Forgive me, if you will, for the mix of voices I find myself using here. Revealing my awakening is awkward, as I've yet to settle this new outlook comfortably among my regular personae. I have used the expression "Jesus freak". I have denied Him countless times. I still slip, daily. I know it will take awhile. I've been touched, gifted from beyond all reason, and I have never accepted compliments or gifts easily.

But it isn't just Jump Jackson. It's a combination, the old one-two. The first punch hit me about thirty years earlier, coming as only a love tap, also on Easter. And it involved another novel. My first attempt. It never really got off the ground, and I do not remember much about it other than that it starred a giant twister. I'd done some research on tornadoes. I knew the plausibilities of size and duration, and I thought I knew the directions they routinely followed. My tornado would originate over St. Joseph, Missouri, coincidentally the point of origin for Pony Express runs. I don't believe this had much if anything to do with the story.

My tornado would cross Lake Michigan before it ran out of steam. I knew it couldn't go much further than the lake's opposite shore, and I studied the Michigan shoreline in an atlas for an appropriate location. I wanted it to have some significance, yet I had no idea what that might be. I was fishing, day after day. I know now this might simply have been an excuse not to write, a hazard I've since found to be common. But then, a novice in the craft, I took my failure to find a significant end point for the tornado's path as a true crisis. Despair loomed, as newspaper headline writers are wont to say.

That Easter morning, with panic hovering over my shoulder, I took a magnifying glass and began to search once more, resolved to stay at it until I found something. And I did, within minutes after

making the commitment. There it was, right at the edge of the lake: St. Joseph, Michigan.

The effect was electric. It washed over me like a warm wind. It wasn't enough to make me pious but it commanded my attention. It gave me a new and intimate appreciation of a holiday I'd never made much more of than candy, bunnies and colored eggs. More importantly, as I see it now, the experience gave me a mystical encouragement for my desire to write.

I've never felt the call to try my hand at spy novels, but I've read a lot of them. One of the spy world's trade-craft maxims these novels taught me was the coincidence rule: one time is probably random. Twice, it's a different story. The second coincidence must be regarded as designed. Jump Jackson was my second. I'm not a spy, but I cannot ignore the odds. Too lazy to try the math, I couldn't tell you what the chances might be for two novel Easter surprises thirty years apart. I think it's a safe bet, though, they would correspond nicely with hitting a hefty lottery jackpot.

Would I rather that had been the case? Not on my life.

