

Hometown News: Newsprint Jesus (part 1)

by Matt Lubich

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I've never been baptized. Never read the whole Bible for that matter, either through desire of faith or literary lust. The handful of times I went to church with my friends as a kid it was more about being given a reason to dress up in our teenage leisure suits and buy a pack of cigarettes to smoke on the walk home. So complete was my lack of religious knowledge as a kid that once, on one of those trips to Holy Family with my buddies, I actually went up and took Communion.

My parents broke away from the Catholic Church just before I was born. My mother found out she was pregnant with me and freaked. Scared and confused, she went to church.

The priest told her abortion was a sin. If she had one, he said, not only would she burn in Hell, but so would the baby. Distraught, feeling trapped, she went home and took a fistful of aspirin -- probably hoping to induce a miscarriage. When my father found out what she had done -- and why -- he went and raged at the priest. They never again went to church, and eventually, I was born.

I grew up thinking I was raised basically areligious. Nobody told me I had to go to church, but nobody told me I couldn't. It was neither a good nor a bad thing. Just something that was simply and apparently unnecessary for respiratory function in my world. The sun still rose, I still got to watch "Dragnet," and life as I knew it went on. I grew up with the attitude that I didn't need religion.

Probably now, in adult retrospect however, I see I grew up believing that at the moment when my mom was so desperate for comfort, a man of God had nothing but rebukes and threats for her. And for me, pronouncements of damnation for an act I had no control over.

I had enough judgment, anger and vengefulness from the people around me in the steel town of Pueblo, Colorado, where I was growing up. I didn't need more from my God.

My wife, Lesli Bangert, grew up in the United Church of Christ. For a time while we were in college she was a practicing Buddhist. Any religious training or knowledge I have comes from Lesli. I joke that "I married her for a social conscience," but I notice nobody ever laughs when I say it; leading me to think they believe it's probably true. Lesli is the first person I could ever discuss religion with. Or more likely, the first person I ever decided to listen to. I don't think I ever talked to God before I met her.

Probably out of respect to me, Lesli has never really pushed the issue of any sort of religious training for our daughters, Riley and Harper Lee. As they've grown, they've begun to poke and prod around the concept of belonging to a church themselves. Lesli -- and to my credit I believe I -- have supported but tried not to guide it. Faith is an intensely personal thing.

But this personal thing is a pronounced public part of a newspaper, especially in small town weeklies. The husband and wife who Lesli and I bought *The Johnstown Breeze* from are devout Christians. So devout, in fact, that they were able to look beyond my Black Madonna-less heart and see that even if I didn't love their God, I loved their paper. As a legacy nod toward their faith, both religious and in us, Lesli and I decided to continue to honor the half-price advertising deal they had with the local churches.

But along with money, when it comes to churches, there is also moral authority. In a small town, there's a certain religious cachet to being able to say you have the editor of the local paper in your congregation. Maybe not as much as the banker, but somewhere above the guy that runs the auto body shop. And yet, after nearly two decades in these communities, we as a family belong to no local church.

I've often imagined people might assume we're Christian Scientists, because we run national stories from *The Christian Science Monitor* to broaden our coverage as the population of the communities continues to grow and change, with more and more people moving here from larger cities. The reality is we subscribe to The Christian Science Monitor News Service because they have good and interesting reporting and writing, and more importantly, because it's cheaper than AP or Reuters.

In a weird way, an amicable common ground has been found between the religious community and the paper over the past decade we've owned and run the publication. A world somewhere between theirs and mine. We support them through a cut in the cost of ads, and coverage of their news, and they support us by advertising. I get the occasional e-mail or letter when I capitalize God, or don't capitalize it, but on most Sunday mornings, I'm reasonably sure no congregation in Johnstown or Milliken is praying for the destruction of *The Breeze*.

But that doesn't mean there haven't been moments when their perceptions and mine haven't collided.

When we moved to Johnstown in the early 1990s, the religious rulers of the roost were no doubt the Methodists. So intimidating and overwhelming was their righteousness that, in defense, I coined a term for them: the Methodist Mafia. I found out about their perceived power when, early-on in our ownership, I was informed by

one of the church ladies that she had taken it upon herself to write a series of three articles promoting the annual pre-Thanksgiving Turkey Dinner, and wanted them run each of the weeks leading up to this year's event.

“I was thinking we'd do a story,” I said, “but maybe not three. And were you planning on doing some advertising?” I asked.

“No, the articles are all the advertising we'll need,” she said.

I chafed. I took the three articles and edited them into one that ran three weeks before the event. The next week, no mention at all. I soon heard from the church lady. Obviously, I had “forgotten” to print the next story. I hadn't forgotten, I replied. And I didn't intend to remember next week either.

The tit-for-tat touched off by that exchange reverberated through years of Turkey Dinners to come. The next year, I recall, they ran a small ad and we ran a small story. That obviously just made the situation worse, when the ad space they paid for didn't translate to enough space in the newshole in their opinion. For several years, they didn't tell us when the dinner was, and we didn't ask, nor did we print a mention. It wasn't until a new pastor came in, and a like-minded, more liberal granola-type named Jennifer, who was a friend of Lesli's and mine, moved into the community and joined the church and took over publicity, that the rift ever-so-slightly mended.

I think that situation, and others, stemmed from my problem with the concept that belief in one religious ideology or another was Right. And by extension, others were Wrong. Even as a child destined to burn in Hell, I remember being troubled at those services at Holy Family when they got around to the, “I will believe there is no other true word” part of the program.

Using religion as a moral cudgel, to make yourself more by making someone else less, always has bothered me and still does. Religious intolerance is the smuggest, the snobbiest, pinched-faced, most offensive kind.

“It's a cult,” the former Wild Child, now Born Again Christian Woman, told me one day. We were talking about her concerns about the new Abundant Life Tabernacle church that had just started in Johnstown.

About a half-dozen families had, in fact, moved *en masse* from back east, following a young, good-looking, charismatic pastor, who bought some land on the edge of town and said he planned to build a home and eventually a church. This was the time of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians.

The buzz around both towns became such that I decided to attend one of the services and write a story. What I found was a group of people who said they fell in love with Colorado while once here on a church retreat. Mostly young families, they said they wanted out of the grime and crime of the cities. The fundamentalist evangelical message and service certainly weren't things that struck my heart, but the pastor and the church members I talked to seemed truly puzzled about what they needed to do to move from cult to congregation in the moral hierarchy of the communities.

Several years back, during the heat of the Federal Marriage Amendment debate, the United Church of Christ came out with a series of television ads under a campaign called “God is Still Speaking.” One of those ads, which showed a male couple holding hands and being turned away from a church by “bouncers,” was refused for broadcast by both NBC and CBS. I assigned a reporter to talk to the leaders of the local churches to get their response.

Most spoke freely and contributed to a good discussion on the issue. All said all were welcome in their church, but around the edges you got the whiff of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. We even asked if they would perform same-sex ceremonies. All said no, a couple drawing a definite line of faith and religious philosophy, and several even willing to publicly say that according to church doctrine, homosexuality is wrong. I was proud after the story ran, that we had had the guts to take it on -- and that the local religious leaders had had the guts to talk with us and answer our questions.

Just last month, during the week of the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, we ran a *Christian Science Monitor* story about a mosque in a small town in Ohio that has been part of that community for 75 years. The story talked about how the mosque and the community dealt with tensions following 9/11, and gave a perspective on these -- many third generation -- American Muslims. Its headline: "A mosque made for America's heartland."

Thinking this was a perfect way to look differently at the 9/11 anniversary, and because the story had a striking accompanying photo of the mosque, we decided to run it on the front page alongside coverage of that Monday night's school board meeting.

We got several calls. Nobody challenged the story outright on religious grounds. Nobody said it was an insult at a time of remembrance of the terrorist attacks. But they wanted explanation why we had chosen to run a story about a mosque in Ohio, on the front page no less.

"These are good Muslims," I said to several, trying to lighten up the mood during our conversation. "I don't think until 9/11 most Americans had any concept of Islam beyond Aladdin or Lawrence of Arabia. We thought this was a good chance to show this group of Muslims that has been in this small Ohio town for nearly eight decades."

We've run other "national" *Christian Science Monitor* stories on the front page before. A couple of years back, we ran a front page feature with a large portrait of a Sandinista mural that accompanied a story by a reporter friend who had recently spent three months living in Nicaragua. In the midst of the war in Iraq, we had wanted to look at how Nicaragua was doing now that our militaristic attention had shifted elsewhere. We headlined the piece "Wars Come and Wars Go," and nobody said a word.

The reality is, whether I believe in their God, or go to their church, and even whether the churches choose to support the newspaper through advertising dollars, religion is a part of the life that makes up a small town and the grist for the weekly paper's mill. Churches, in fact, pre-date the beginning of Johnstown and Milliken themselves in this area of northern Colorado.

'Two of God's loveliest creatures'

The story of Cora Dilley and June Grelle

"Matt, you've got to let me write about Rev. Cora Dilley," June Grelle said one day, most of the sentence delivered before the front door of the office closed behind her. If there were two things June Grelle loved, they were God and History, her favorite depending on the subject being discussed at that moment.

A twisting talking Texas tornado of energy that blew into town in 2001, June had spent the past 40 years teaching special education in a suburban metro-Denver community. Now in her 60s, widowed, she found the neighborhood she had raised her family in was deteriorating. Having grown up in the small town of Cee Vee, Texas, she sought to return to such a place.

Her mother, who lived nearby, had recently died. June was trying to sell her house and someone stole the For Sale sign from the yard.

She got mad, got in her car, and started driving north on Interstate 25.

She had traveled nearly 50 miles before she saw the exit for a town called Johnstown. Recently, she recalled, she had read in the *Denver Post* a story about this small community. A farm town being swept up in the newest and latest crop craze ... houses. She decided to check it out.

The featured person in the story had been a beautiful, blond, ebullient real estate agent, Sandie Slafter, who had moved to the community with her husband, Randy, so he could become pastor of a small and growing local church. Sandie was perfect for the real estate boom. Naturally friendly, she had made the vow upon moving to town that she would learn and remember the names of every one of the 2,000 or so residents. As the towns continued to grow, she stayed faithful to that promise and her yard signs dotted the new lawns like bright metal dandelions.

Upon entering the community, Grelle saw a sign for an open house. Following it, she drove up to a home being offered by the woman she had read about: Sandie Slafter. She bought the house.

“God led me to Johnstown,” she would say. Now, apparently God and June wanted to write a story about Cora Dilley.

“More than a century ago, a bright shining star briefly zoomed across this southwest Weld County area and left a glow that remains to this day,” the story June eventually wrote began. “A red-haired, striking beauty came from New York before the turn of the century, bringing her faith to congregations in this pioneer land by horse and buggy.”

Born Aug. 20, 1867, in Newark Valley, N.Y., the oldest child of merchant Morris Elwell and his wife, Ella, Cora Dilley came to

Colorado as a missionary in the United Brethren in Christ Church. After training in Denver, she was assigned to an area in the northern part of the state.

A “circuit riding preacher,” Dilley traveled to the prairie churches that anchored the scattered farms and was regarded as a capable, spiritual, caring and hard-working woman minister, June wrote. In 1897, she led part of her congregation to build a church in the small town of Elwell (named after her parents) that they named Dilley Chapel in her honor. That same year, she married a young couple who had as their witnesses Harvey J. Parish and his wife, Mary, who five years later would lead the effort to create Johnstown just a few miles to the east.

And then she was dead. At age 30. Following “eight weeks of suffering” from what was termed “intestinal hemorrhaging.” One shudders to think what that might actually have been, given the Victorian euphemisms of the time and the press. One wonders what Dilley was thinking during those two months. Had this been the path God had laid for her? To die an agonizing death on the frontier prairie with her family half a continent away?

The April 28, 1898, issue of the *Greeley Tribune* reported that, “Dilley Chapel was crowded almost to suffocation for the funeral ... people came from 20 miles in all directions ... to pay that last tribute to one of God's loveliest creatures. He giveth His beloved rest.”

Dilley was buried under the south window of the church that bore her name. In 1904, it burnt to the ground and was rebuilt. She was later exhumed and moved to the Johnstown Cemetery, where she lies today. The building that housed her church was eventually sold to the Catholic Church and has moved several times around the community. Today, it sits across the street from the house of my mother, who moved up here following my dad's death.

We ran June's story on the front page, with a grainy, sepia-toned portrait of Cora Dilley, and a photo of her headstone at the cemetery, as the art. June smiled shyly on Thursday morning when she came in to get some copies after the paper hit the streets. Then immediately, she began telling me what we should write about next.

Two years ago this month, I came into work one morning to find out June Grelle was dead. Just the day before, she had been seen bustling around town doing last-minute things for the Johnstown Historical Society; a group she joined soon after coming to town and quickly became a foundation of its effort. She had stayed up till 3 in the morning sending e-mails about projects she was working on, before leaving early to drive back to Texas for the dedication of a historical marker at a church in Cee Vee. She died in a single car crash in southern Colorado. Investigators believe she may have fallen asleep at the wheel, or suffered a heart attack.

Grelle passed away on Oct. 13, 2005, the same date on which in 1944 her little sister had died from a dose of incorrect medication at a Fort Worth hospital, according to family members. In 1946, her father was killed in a hunting accident on that same date as well.

For someone who had only lived in the community for four years, Grelle had become more part of the town -- and knew more about the history of the communities -- than some of the people who grew up here. Her death devastated the women of the historical society, deeply saddened many, and came as a brutal shock.

In the story I wrote about her death, I said news of it had struck people speechless. It was a sad, smiling nod I knew only those who knew her would get. June could and would -- how could you put it? -- tend to go on when you talked to her. I'd call her on deadline about something in a story and leave a message, and a bit later she'd walk in the door of the office. All I usually wanted was a piece of information. A date. Clarification of a statement. And she'd start

talking about this, that and the other. I'd try to be nice, but facing deadline, I'd get her out the door as quickly as I could so I could get back to work.

Now, I wish I had been smart enough to just sit there and listen.

After deadline the week she died, I took the snapshot photo we scanned for her obituary and stuck it in the lower left corner of the front plate glass window that looks out onto downtown Johnstown. June sits there still today, a silent sentinel over the town she blazed across like Cora Dilley, before imbedding into our hearts like a human meteorite with a drawl.

The Albertson Boys

Witnesses with weed whackers

Among the many, including myself, who mourned June's death, it's likely the pain wasn't felt more keenly than among The Albertson Boys. Soon after June moved to the community, she hired them and they quickly became her good go-to guys for getting things fixed, and she became somewhat of a grandma to them.

Remember the old Newhart television show? The one where Bob ran an inn in Vermont? Think of The Albertson Boys as sort of like the brothers Larry, Darryl and Darryl that would do "anything for a buck." Except, while Larry and the Darryls did it all to serve themselves, Randy, his younger brother Tim, and their other brother, Jeff, do it all in the service of Jesus Christ.

Lawn need mowing? Call The Albertson Boys. Dog taken care of while you're on vacation? Fido's got a faithful friend. Christmas lights to hang? They'll hang them. So good and pure and Christian and dependable were these three brothers, that they quickly cornered the odd job and lawn care business in the communities. In 2003, still in their teens, they were honored among other young men

and women in the state as entrepreneurs by the Young Americans Center for Financial Education.

The phrase “The Albertson Boys” came to be a shorthand measure of quality and dependability in Johnstown and Milliken. “Oh, they’re no Albertson Boys,” people would say of other similar services, “but they’ll get the job done OK.”

And then, in the summer of 2005, after more than a decade of building their business, they sold it. Randy and Tim said they had been called to go work for a youth ministry for the summer in Peoria, Ill. Randy, now a student at Faith Bible School in Mitchell, S.D., had met the pastor of the church that year at a conference, and they were going to help him in his ministry.

“It’s not in the worst part of town,” Randy said when I interviewed them just prior to their departure, “but it’s pretty bad.”

“Some crack addict is gonna shoot one of them right in the head,” I told Lesli one night, lying in bed. I asked Randy, as the big brother, if he had any concerns for his and his brother’s safety. He said few if any.

“If you’re in the center of God’s will,” he said, “you’re indispensable until He’s done with you.”

A couple of days after they took off, Tim called me from the road on their way to Illinois. “I guess I felt a little trepidation when we left,” he said, “but not much. We’re doing the right thing.”

To sell their business was a decision based on faith for The Albertson Boys. What some might not understand, and I didn’t understand until I got to know them, is that their faith isn’t blind. It doesn’t cloud, but clarifies. Robert Browning said in a poem, “You

call for faith. I give you doubt, to prove that faith exists...the greater the doubt, the greater the faith if you have it."

Randy and Tim Albertson have their faith. Faith that God is with them and guiding them on this journey. "The easy thing to do would have been to stay in Johnstown forever," Randy said. "But you have to keep growing." Recently, he came up and shook my hand while I was sitting outside the office one afternoon. Now himself the pastor of a church in Missouri, he was in town for the Labor Day holiday visiting his parents, with his wife and their Albertson Boy, James Aquila.

(to be continued...)

