

## Separate Paths

It would be a sin to take for granted the life I now have. I might still be considered lower class - "poor" - but I'm a lot richer than I look. Although it has only been about ten years since I moved up a notch from utter poverty, it is as if my all that I experienced back during that time occurred within an entirely different lifetime.

I lived in a Cracker Jack box, as we would affectionately call the flimsy double-wide trailer, with my twin sister, Erin, and her daughter. Erin bartended, making decent money, reading tarot cards on the side. When she wasn't working she was out partying, acclimated to the front porch pow-wows of blunts and forty-ouncers found throughout the park each evening. That left me home with her daughter for most of my days, fixing meals, reading Dr. Seuss, and scrubbing toilets.

My sister and I stood out in the trailer park like two sore thumbs: two young white women - twins, no less - living with a three-year-old girl, two cats, an umbrella cockatoo, a four-foot green iguana, and a six-inch Peruvian tarantula. Word of the oddities got out quick, and our flimsy Cracker Jack box soon became a novelty, of sorts. Strangers from the part would come knocking at our door, curious about the menagerie and intrigued by the prospect of a tarot card reading. Both my sister and I

read back then, and we both had a reputation for being very accurate.

Tarot actually began as a simple card game. According to the research of tarot enthusiast Sandra M. Power, "it is believed that [tarot cards] were originally created as a game for Nobles. It is not until centuries later that the cards reemerged, this time as a tool for divination." One must ask how a simple card game might acquire the ability to spell out a person's life. Moreover, if the cards truly possess no actual diving power, how large of a role might superstitious suggestion play in their seemingly amazing and accurate results?

The University of Oregon's 2000 research staff suggests:

Every religious system tends to accumulate superstitions as peripheral beliefs - a Christian, for example, may believe that in time of trouble he will be guided by the Bible if he opens it at random and reads the text that first strikes his eye.

Although it would be considered blasphemous by many, I would compare this to the random picking of tarot cards for equal advice. Both require enormous leaps of faith and personal interpretation, and each also has either a genuineness or invalidity based on the subjective views of a given individual.

Belief in any religion alone requires a leap of faith. Religious books are taken as literal stories, sentences and

words studied and interpreted for deeper truths and spiritual answers. Religious figures are put on a level above human and, many times, deemed superior to the religious figures of other belief systems. The Encarta Encyclopedia states:

In some societies a Shaman is believed to have the power to heal . . . many religious leaders and founders - including . . . Confucious, Laozi . . . and Buddha - have been credited with miraculous powers. . . . Moses and the prophets of Israel were said to have performed miraculous acts at God's bidding, Muslim tradition includes accounts of the miracles of Muhammed, such as his extraordinary healings.

In a day and age when a person claiming to have experienced such miracles would likely be committed for mental evaluation, belief that such miracles ever occurred, regardless of the religion, takes a great deal of blind faith. Can the argument that these events were documented as truths in books such as the Bible and the Koran actually verify their historical validity? One must ask: How far can blind faith take a person's beliefs? How dramatically might it alter an individual's life? Are the results always positive?

I moved out of the trailer close to three years after I moved in. After several hardships Erin had been barely capable

of handling, she succumbed to the addiction that consumed a large faction of the trailer park. Finding myself living full-time with a speed addict, taking care of a young child full-time and trying to maintain a house that was literally falling apart around me, I felt I had no choice but to leave Erin in her own mess. I wished with all my heart I could have been an angel or a saint; perhaps then I would have had the patience and strength to endure while Erin ran through her addiction's course. Only human, however, I knew the only person I could save was myself, and possibly my niece.

Within a few weeks of moving I was tipped off as to who was supplying Erin with her drugs. I acquired the man's telephone number and called to confront him. He met my words with great hostility, our conversation turning into a heated argument on choice and ethics. Hitting a brick wall with the man's incomprehensible logic, I ended the argument by warning him of his ensuing "karma;" he supplied dangerous drugs to people, and for that he would eventually pay. As it turned out, I couldn't have found a better set of words to throw at him.

He called me about a week later, desperation emanating from his voice. He went into great detail about several events that had occurred since we last spoke: his truck had broken down and would need several hundreds of dollars in work if he wanted it running again, he had slipped and injured his back, he had

broken a thumb while hammering a nail on the job site. His voice quavering, he asked if would I please - he'd do anything if I would just please - lift the curse I had cast upon him.

I considered the situation for a moment, and then voiced my compromise: I would . . . arrange for the curse to lift itself as soon as he stopped supplying drugs to Erin. He was to cut off all ties with her immediately. He found the compromise to be wholly acceptable.

The power of belief is a strong force, even if it is not clear just how much "power" actually ever comes into play in any given scenario. Just the same, it does not seem that uncommon for religions to forge a large part of their faith through incredible feats believers attribute to spiritual integrity and/or fitness. Encarta Encyclopedia states of advanced Hindu Yogi, for example:

They are supposed to acquire certain remarkable capabilities. They become insensible to heat or cold, to injury, to pleasure or pain. They can perform supernatural mental and physical feats and even change the course of nature.

Encarta is quick to note that actual documented accounts from sources outside Hindu influences are far and few between. The authors continue by stating:

Most impressive, perhaps, is the Yogi-sleep, in which

animation is nearly suspended, enabling the Yogi to be buried alive for days. The Yogi-sleep has been explained by some authorities as a sort of cataleptic state induced by self-hypnosis and not essentially different from cataleptic states that can be found in mental hospitals.

The comparison of the Yogi in question, even indirectly, to mental patients is likely valid, if only for the fact that these people are burying themselves alive in the first place. Faith does tend to take people to extremes, however, even if many of those extremes can be difficult to understand from an outside point of view.

When peering at any religion from the outside, it is difficult to say when that religion has gone too far in its practices or beliefs. Are Jehovah's Witnesses wrong to refuse blood transfusions, fearing the wrath of God for "eating blood?" Are missionaries wrong to bombard nonbelievers with their endless preaching, if they truly believe they are doing God's work? When it comes to religion, who really has the authority - other than God in It's Being - to express without a shadow of a doubt that they know what is correct?

And yet I, a Pantheist and Humanist, will protest without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus "saved" my twin sister. When she hit rock bottom with her speed addiction, it was her new-found

faith in Christianity that pulled her through. With it, she rose above the addiction. Her faith literally transformed her from a hapless and pathetic addict, to a strong and resilient survivor. She now has a family of her own, is self-sufficient, and truly has a resolve of steel. Do I believe Jesus, personally, gave her the strength to stop the drugs and reclaim her life? I can't really say. I will say, however, that I believe such strength lay within her all along, but I am glad that religion helped her to find it.

Evidence of Jesus's power to heal has been well documented, both in the Bible and in present day. Christian activist Dan Downey claims: "I was afflicted with an ailment that caused me great pain and suffering from which the medical profession could find no cure. After seeking the Lord for healing . . . I had been healed." While one could speculate that Downey's condition was purely psychosomatic, being that he endured "pain and suffering from which the medical profession could find no cure," his case is not isolated, not is it isolated to the Christian faith. "Pranic healer" Marilee Mclean gives the testimony of patient Sue Miller: "she was recently diagnosed with breast cancer and received Pranic Healing treatments. Examining her later, her surgeon could no longer detect the cancer."

While the above are quick to credit divine intervention in their respective cases, it is necessary to examine the role of

the individual's faiths in their healings. Like the tarot cards, whose abilities only exist within the limits of their practitioners' and consumers' faith, would spiritual or religious healing without faith be possible. According to Encarta:

Some scholars have drawn parallels between shamanistic healing and psychoanalytic cures and have concluded that in both instances efficacious therapeutic symbols are created, leading to psychological release and psychological curing.

With such parallels in mind, what truly would be the difference between a revival faith healing and a visit to a Native American Shaman - besides the individual beliefs of those hoping to be healed?

The devout Christian Erin now is, she is quick to point out that I will be damned for all of eternity because I do not worship God through her catalyst. I mention that there are so many religions, and so many similarities between those religions that it would be impossible to say one of all but one should be damned. The similarities between Christianity and Islam, for example, are remarkable. To make my point, I did some cross-referencing:

Genesis 1:31 and Koran 11.7 both state that God made the earth and heavens in six days. Chapter eight in Genesis goes

into great detail the story of Noah, while the latter sections of the Koran's chapter seven go into great detail the story of Nah. Both are told by God to build an ark and fill it with two of each creature, and both survive the notorious Flood.

Revelation 20:12 and Koran 11.98 both warn of the Resurrection Day; Revelation 21:1 and Koran 14.48 both speak of a new earth and heaven to replace the last.

I do not suggest that these comparisons validate the contents of either book, but rather exemplify how subjective religion really is. I find it amazingly ironic that two almost identical religions can believe the other is damned. Arguments of right and wrong seem pointless when all sides are clearly arguing for the same cause. And yet, people kill and die over that cause.

Faith has gotten me through my share of trials and hardships, but I really don't feel the need to explain my beliefs through means of religion. I've seen miracles in the name of a God without a name or a face; I do have my opinions, but there are as many opinions on this planet as there are sentient minds. It's all subjective.

I sit here, reflecting on the Cracker Jack box that has most likely melted in the rain by now, the things I've witnessed since my short life there, the epiphanies I've experienced through hardships and lessons too numerous to document. . . .

I wonder if Jesus really does talk to my twin sister.

Moving beyond reflection and wonder, I must take a moment to feel thankful for my God, in all Its vagueness, for everything that has led to the life I now have. My faith is just as strong as any other, perhaps even stronger, despite my need to look at religion, and even faith itself, from a critical approach. And if my twin sister is correct, that I might go to Hell for such beliefs, I take a great deal of satisfaction in knowing I'll have Buddha, Muhammed, Confucious, and other great minds with which to spend my fire-and-brimstone eternity. When we're not discussing out ill-conceived spiritual philosophies, lamenting over the idea that we were stubborn and set on following our own, separate paths, we'll pass the time playing games of tarot. Heaven forbid.

Sources available upon request.