Have a Little Faith

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Published by Sphere

Extract

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In the Beginning . . .

In the beginning, there was a question.

"Will you do my eulogy?"

I don't understand, I said.

"My eulogy?" the old man asked again. "When I'm gone." His eyes blinked from behind his glasses. His neatly trimmed beard was gray, and he stood slightly stooped.

Are you dying? I asked.

"Not yet," he said, grinning.

Then why—

"Because I think you would be a good choice. And I think, when the time comes, you will know what to say."

Picture the most pious man you know. Your priest. Your pastor. Your rabbi. Your imam. Now picture him tapping you on the shoulder and asking you to say good-bye to the world on his behalf.

Picture the man who sends people off to heaven, asking you for his send-off to heaven.

"So?" he said. "Would you be comfortable with that?"

In the beginning, there was another question.

"Will you save me, Jesus?"

This man was holding a shotgun. He hid behind trash cans in front of a Brooklyn row house. It was late at night. His

wife and baby daughter were crying. He watched for cars coming down his block, certain the next set of headlights would be his killers.

"Will you save me, Jesus?" he asked, trembling. "If I promise to give myself to you, will you save me tonight?"

Picture the most pious man you know. Your priest. Your pastor. Your rabbi. Your imam. Now picture him in dirty clothes, a shotgun in his hand, begging for salvation from behind a set of trash cans.

Picture the man who sends people off to heaven, begging not to be sent to hell.

"Please, Lord," he whispered. "If I promise . . ."

This is a story about believing in something and the two very different men who taught me how. It took a long time to write. It took me to churches and synagogues, to the suburbs and the city, to the "us" versus "them" that divides faith around the world.

And finally, it took me home, to a sanctuary filled with people, to a casket made of pine, to a pulpit that was empty.

In the beginning, there was a question.

It became a last request.

"Will you do my eulogy?"

And, as is often the case with faith, I thought I was being asked a favor, when in fact I was being given one.

SPRING

SUMMER

AUTUMN

WINTER





IT IS 1965 . . .

. . . and my father drops me off at Saturday morning services.

"You should go," he tells me.

I am seven, too young to ask the obvious question: why should I go and he shouldn't? Instead I do as I am told, entering the temple, walking down a long corridor, and turning toward the small sanctuary, where the children's services are held.

I wear a white short-sleeved shirt and a clip-on tie. I pull open the wooden door. Toddlers are on the floor. Third-grade boys are yawning. Sixth-grade girls wear black cotton leotards, slouching and whispering.

I grab a prayer book. The seats in back are taken so I choose one up front. Suddenly the door swings open and the room goes silent.

The Man of God steps in.

He stalks like a giant. His hair is thick and dark. He wears a long robe, and when he speaks, his waving arms move the robe around like a sheet flipping in the wind.

He tells a Bible story. He asks us questions. He strides across the stage. He draws close to where I am sitting. I feel a flush of heat. I ask God to make me invisible. Please, God, please.

It is my most fervent prayer of the day.



MARCH

The Great Tradition of Running Away

Adam hid in the Garden of Eden. Moses tried to substitute his brother. Jonah jumped a boat and was swallowed by a whale.

Man likes to run from God. It's a tradition. So perhaps I was only following tradition when, as soon as I could walk, I started running from Albert Lewis. He was not God, of course, but in my eyes, he was the next closest thing, a holy man, a man of the cloth, the big boss, the head rabbi. My parents joined his congregation when I was an infant. I sat on my mother's lap as he delivered his sermons.

And yet, once I realized who he was—a Man of God—I ran. If I saw him coming down the hallway, I ran. If I had to pass his study, I ran. Even as a teenager, if I spotted him approaching, I ducked down a corridor. He was tall, six foot one, and I felt tiny in his presence. When he looked down through his black-rimmed glasses, I was certain he could view all my sins and shortcomings.

So I ran.

I ran until he couldn't see me anymore.

I thought about that as I drove to his house, on a morning after a rainstorm in the spring of 2000. A few weeks earlier, Albert Lewis, then eighty-two years old, had made that strange request of me, in a hallway after a speech I had given.

"Will you do my eulogy?"

It stopped me in my tracks. I had never been asked this before. Not by anyone—let alone a religious leader. There were people mingling all around, but he kept smiling as if it were the most normal question in the world, until I blurted out something about needing time to think about it.

After a few days, I called him up.

Okay, I said, I would honor his request. I would speak at his funeral—but only if he let me get to know him as a man, so I could speak of him as such. I figured this would require a few in-person meetings.

"Agreed," he said.

I turned down his street.

To that point, all I really knew of Albert Lewis was what an audience member knows of a performer: his delivery, his stage presence, the way he held the congregation rapt with his commanding voice and flailing arms. Sure, we had once been closer. He had taught me as a child, and he'd officiated at family functions—my sister's wedding, my grandmother's funeral. But I hadn't really been around him in twenty-five years.

Besides, how much do you know about *your* religious minister? You listen to him. You respect him. But as a man? Mine was as distant as a king. I had never eaten at his home. I had never gone out with him socially. If he had human flaws, I didn't see them. Personal habits? I knew of none.

Well, that's not true. I knew of one. I knew he liked to sing. Everyone in our congregation knew this. During sermons, any sentence could become an aria. During conversation, he might belt out the nouns or the verbs. He was like his own little Broadway show.

In his later years, if you asked how he was doing, his eyes would crinkle and he'd raise a conductor's finger and croon:

"The old gray rabbi,
ain't what he used to be,
ain't what he used to be . . ."

I pushed on the brakes. What was I doing? I was the wrong man for this job. I was no longer religious. I didn't live in this state. He was the one who spoke at funerals, not me. Who does a eulogy for the man who does eulogies? I wanted to spin the wheel around, make up some excuse.

Man likes to run from God.

But I was headed in the other direction.