

Book excerpt: Life at close quarters

Paul Wilkes | Mar. 2, 2009



Excerpts from In Due Season: A Catholic Life by Paul Wilkes

I wasn't broken by the city, I had -- at my own request -- been broken by God.

My life had been shattered by a God who had stealthily stalked me for years, but who then, when I lowered my sanctimonious, protective, rationalizing shield, saw his opportunity. He struck, and struck decisively. This was not the distant God I first prayed to in Cleveland, then in Milwaukee, at sea, in Boulder and Baltimore. Not an imperious God, friendly God, or compassionate God. Certainly not Merton's God of "mercy within mercy within mercy."

No, this was a far more calculating and jealous God. This was a God demanding everything, brooking no compromise. He had waited for me to put a leg onto the big stage of New York and then, as the lights were going up, he threw out the scenery, the script, the plot.

Instead, he shoved a new and improvisational story into my hands, a new vision of what it is to be a human being.

How did I respond? I dumbly had the audacity to ask this God to direct that story. I told him I wanted to live as he had lived, to have the faith of a mustard seed, to be a lily of the field, the bird without a nest, the traveler not knowing where he would next lay his head.

Read Arthur Jones's review of *In Due Season: A Catholic Life*: [Wilkes' autobiography is a spiritual classic](#) [1].

He listened to my pleas. He answered my prayers. ... And my entire life had gone to hell.

Here I was, 35 years old, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, a knapsack at my feet, about to embark on a journey to hastily found destinations. I didn't know what else to do. I was paralyzed. I could keep going on as I was, my marriage a tortured pas de deux, the distant rumbling in my soul a deafening roar. In the past few weeks there had been two deaths -- senseless, horrible deaths that had put me over the edge. My head pounded, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. I couldn't pray. I couldn't write. I could hardly complete a spoken sentence. I needed to cut loose from everything. I needed time and space to think.

As I sat there in the Port Authority, I hid my face behind the morning's *Times*.

Had one of my editors, briefcase in hand, bustling in from his New Jersey or Westchester home, come across this knapsack-bearing almost middle-aged hippie, so sadly late for the revolution, I don't know what excuse I could have conjured up. I had a car; what was I doing taking a bus? And where exactly was I going? I didn't exactly know. For how long? Well ...

None of the places was near any major city, but somehow I hadn't factored that in to my hastily conjured travel plans. Still, I knew I had to leave the convenience of a car behind, denying myself an easy escape or quick return. It had only been a few days before that I had told [my wife] I had to get away and do it now. I was surprised when she quickly agreed to the non-plan of a man she knew planned for everything in his life.

After a phone call from the bus station ... a short, mostly quiet ride to the monastery ... After the monks had filed out, I lingered in the chapel, already picturing myself as one of their number. Mind you I had been there no more than a few hours. ... It was love at first sight. ... At the sound of a bell, we filed into the refectory, which once must have seated at least 50 or 60 men. Now there were fewer than a dozen.

The conversation was not about Origen or Augustine, but about the "silly old bitch" who had come to them earlier that week, claiming that she had had a vision of the Virgin. One of the monks mimicked the guest, his bulging eyes tracing an arc at the upper reaches of his lids.

"I said, 'Honey, if the Virgin is appearing around these parts, at least she could tell us about it.' " There was a monk or two that sat quietly eating. The rest of the small community howled with laughter.

I tried to shake my reporter's snap assessment of the place. It was a sad place, filled with too many misanthropes with nowhere to go. There was something more toxic in the air.

Not that being gay, which a good number of them were, was the issue. Looking back, there had been a devoted teacher at Cathedral Latin who enjoyed tucking his hands into the back pockets of the boys and giving a squeeze, effeminate priests at Marquette who were great professors and spiritual mentors. Fr. Petroski was most likely gay and he had profoundly changed my life. But here, in this kind of enclosed life, the gay overtones and gay humor were corrosive, undermining the kind of esprit de corps needed to bond a group of men. ...

The same silent friar, with the same wrinkled khakis, took me back to the bus station a week after he'd picked me up. ...

The short document I signed that cloudy, dismal morning at Brian Gay Realty was a legal separation, which in two years would yield, according to the benevolent laws of the state of New York, a "no-fault" divorce. My fault? Not really. Hers? Not hers, either. "Something" had undone our marriage. ...

Two days after I had told J.C. our marriage was lost, she handed me the document, a bit surprising in its speedy preparation. Still, I didn't consult a lawyer, or have anyone else read over the document. I didn't even read it myself. That would have been cheating, a sign that I wasn't really serious about the new life I was about to lead. ...



I don't know if I was trying to kill the relationship or give it an acid test, but I invited Tracy to come with me for a community dinner at Jacques'. She gamely agreed even after I let her in on who some of the dinner companions might be. With the help of my CHIPS cofounder, Ed Mohler, the pediatric orthopedic

surgeon, Jacques had put a down payment on a rundown brownstone on 4th Street, a few blocks from the storefront. This allowed Jacques to take in ever more homeless men and women.

When Tracy and I arrived, a series of uneven tables had been pushed together and set for over 20 people. Jacques was his usual ebullient self: "O, my Tray-cee, *ma Cherie*, you are soo beautiful. And Paaaul, the most famous writer, our good companion who means so much to us."

Tracy gamely sat mid-table having a heady discussion with a very distinguished man wearing an ascot -- only slightly stained and tattered along the edges -- about some item currently in the news, when he suddenly rejoined, "Well, before the march to Atlanta, when I was on General Sherman's staff, he made it absolutely clear to us ..." I tried to change the subject, or at least bring the conversation up a century.

About this time we heard a strange, liquid sound, as if a pipe had sprung a leak. Tracy instinctively glanced toward the kitchen. Then, following the sound, she looked into the living room where the professor was ensconced in his Barcalounger, and saw him unceremoniously peeing into a tall pineapple can which beautifully amplified the sound. I leaped up from the table, but stood there, hands at my side.

What was I going to do: stop him?

She looked at me, I at her. Wordlessly she transmitted, *It's OK buddy. I think I understand.*

We went on with our fancy parties, but that night at Jacques' marked once of those defining moments when all pretenses are wiped away, and either you walk away or grow closer. ...

So much had happened in the past six months. The cancer had finally prevailed over Tracy's mother's frail body. We had planned and almost unplanned our wedding as our emotions -- mostly mine, I'm sure -- ran wild. But there, waiting at the altar, was Fr. Robert Lott, tall, gaunt, unsmiling, who had calmly taken over the tiller and guided us through the troubled waters. This would be a thoroughly Catholic wedding, something that had escaped me in the first marriage. ...

I fought Tracy and her love because it had so much power over me. It was a power I could not understand. And even while I stood there as Tracy, so loving and glowing in an 1890s off-white Gibson Girl lace confection, processed slowly and so confidently toward our future, I felt the demons rising up. Demons of doubt. Demons of the fear of compromise. Demons of sheer, unabated terror as to what married life with this woman, and the children she wanted to have, would be like. ...

Our first year of married life was as wonderful as it was tumultuous, as two strong spirits clashed and loved and generally tried to figure out what life at such close quarters was all about. ...

We were in and out of marriage counseling, raging over such important issues as how much ... and if ... to spend on fresh cut flowers, the wisdom of buying more than one roll of toilet paper at a time, and whether or not leaving dishes out to dry was more sanitary than drying them with a towel. But then we would stop and look at each other, finding it hard to remember what exactly had set us off ... this time.

We had a magic together that could bring us to laughter or tears, sometimes at the same time.

But what was really happening in our marriage was that I was dying. This time, it was not the theoretical dying to which I had so dramatically consigned myself during the hermit years. This was death by marriage. My wondrous ego was being impaled on the stake of ordinariness.

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