

Life reveals in us the impulse and the intuition to welcome God

Rich Heffern | Mar. 7, 2011 Eco Catholic

When I was young, my family lived on Olive Street in Kansas City. Milk was delivered in glass bottles onto the porch. Our mothers bought vegetables out of the back of a pickup truck parked on the corner, from an Italian with a Panama hat and a moustache.

Summer evenings all of us kids on the block played outside together, on the sidewalk and even in the street. Kick the Can, Red Rover, cowboys and Indians, Inch me and Pinch me were our pursuits -- my brother, Bob, and Buck and Jake Smith, Rita Bunting, Al Wendell, Roland Pease, Bill Dosier, Sid Gold, Martha Schuster and Mary Kleinbach.

Sid we called "Perch Breath," because his family was poor and ate fish that his uncle caught in the city park's lake. Roland was nicknamed (behind his back) "Bumpy" because he was always leaning into you hard, trying to pick a fight. He smelled funny too. Bill was "Willy Scared Silly" because he wouldn't stay overnight with us at the abandoned Schuster house, an abode of spooky noises.

Mostly we had fun together, except for our run-ins with the Gruesome Two.

The two Delaney sisters lived three houses down. Two elderly widows, they were the bane of existence for the kids on Olive Street -- always telling on us, complaining to our parents. Shrill in their scoldings, they were meddlesome and perpetually cranky. Sometimes they even phoned the police who would come and park under the sycamore tree at the end of the block for ten minutes then leave.

Once the Gruesome Two caught Martha Schuster cutting a corner through their yard and dragged her by the ear home to a week-long grounding. They phoned Buck's father one night. Next day the school called.

It happened when I was about eight. Something got into us one Saturday afternoon and, though ordinarily shy, three of us marched right up to the Delaneys as they sat on their porch snapping beans. I cleared my throat to make a little speech.

I wanted to explain at length to them somehow that, though we were just kids, we deserved some respect, that we had dignity, that we had souls. I wanted to tell them (though I really lacked the words) that Rita had the most beautiful eyes, that Jake could tell jokes for three hours without repeating one, that Buck could tell "booger and haint" stories that would curl your toes and curdle your blood, that Mary was edgy, sad and brave, that her mother heard voices and was gone for months at a time upstate.

What came out instead was this: "You're talking to Catholics here!?" They were Methodists, I think.

Margaret Delaney nailed me with a baleful look. I could feel my legs getting rubbery, but I stayed the course and stammered out my one-sentence speech. Surprised by our unexpected behavior, though, they completely forgot to be mean. Elizabeth even went inside and got us lemonade.

Another memory from that same year: My dad took us with him to the country in southern Missouri on a fishing trip. Sitting on a pier by the lake one night, I was watching the skies, following the advice of the narrators of grade-B horror flicks. Suddenly a dazzling meteor raced from horizon to horizon. I remember being thrilled to the bone.

The huge vault of the sky that night seemed so close and intimate. The sense of adventure and possibilities gleaned from looking at those distant fires, those enchanted hieroglyphs high in the sky, together with the sight of the rising moon, the warm, coursing blood under my skin, the mysterious smells of the lake, the unchained freedom of summer, the sweet hungers that summer nights draw out of the young ? all these elements conspired together to fascinate me, enchant me.

From that time on I could not get enough of anything that produced that heady sense of wonder and adventure. First I devoured the science fiction section at the library, reading *The Stars My Destination* and *The Martian Chronicles* with the same sense of excitement. Later in life I moved on to books on science, cosmology and physics, even theology and spirituality. I could not get enough of such knowledge, and still cannot.

All of us have such early memories, incidents in our young lives that prefigure and predict what we have become as adults, pictures in the album that is our inner life. It is an absorbing meditation sometimes to just recall those early incidents that so directly relate to the person you have become 20, 30 or 40 years later.

Such a meditation reveals the unity and wholeness that are present in every life. Seven hundred years ago a Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, said, "Every creature is a book about God... Divinity is seeking to be revealed everywhere. Every creature is doing its best to express God."

Christianity is all about incarnation. Emmanuel -- God with us -- was born in a humble manger in a drafty stable. Incarnation is about our lives, and every human life is a sacred adventure.

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