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The Blessing of Padre Pio

I was raised Catholic, although it has been more than three decades since I have practiced that early faith actively. During my teenage years, I rebelled. I saw more hypocrisy and greed than truth within the structure of my religious upbringing.

Perhaps it was simply the rebelliousness of youth, or perhaps it was a necessary step in my own personal evolution. At any rate, I began by throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Literally. I disowned the baby Jesus. I rejected the entire notion of Jesus as Savior, a holy child who came and suffered on our behalf. I rejected the notion of original sin, rejected the notion of some privileged class of priests who could intervene for me before God. Furthermore, I rejected God himself and washed my hands once and for all of all that religious hogwash. I didn't need it. I vowed not to subject my own children to such rigid dogma. I would allow them to choose for themselves.

For perhaps ten years or longer, I remained content with that decision, but as I grew into adulthood, married, started a family and began a career, I found there was an empty space in me, an undefined longing for something more. I experimented, on and off, with various practices—meditation, yoga, this church or that—never quite finding that elusive connection to the greater whole I sensed was there.

Eventually I discovered the New Thought movement, a branch of religion or spirituality that embraces the power of positive thinking and recognizes humans as co-creators with a panentheistic God. I found the Unity Church, and that became my spiritual home for a time. It gave me a liberating perspective on my own spiritual power as it encouraged direct communion with Spirit, no priesthood required. For me, it seemed to strip away all the layers of dogma leaving a refreshingly pure and innocent experience of faith. Unity taught me that I was in control of my own destiny. I could tap into the Universal Power of creation and, with my thoughts, words and attitudes, create my own reality.

Despite the gradual metamorphosis in my spiritual beliefs and practices, I have grown to value the contribution that my early religious upbringing gave me. I often thank Catholicism for infusing

me with a sense of the divine and immortal nature of life. While today my faith takes a very different form than that original Catholic tradition, Catholicism instilled in me an unshakable belief in a Higher Power and faith that good will triumph over evil, at least over the long haul.

To this day I have a nostalgic longing for the comfort I once found in the church of my childhood. Although I rejected the structure of Catholicism, I'm still drawn to the architecture and tangible sacredness of the building itself: the immense space, the great domed roof reaching up into the heavens, the quality of light streaming through the stained glass windows, the lingering scent of incense, the echoing of my shoes on the marble floor, the cool smoothness of the polished wooden pews, the palpable sense of decades of prayers offered, heard and answered.

While the image of Jesus on the cross is one to which I've not yet reconciled, there is another icon of Catholicism that has remained curiously close to my heart: Mary, the Holy Mother. In times of great distress or fear, I have found myself reciting the Hail Mary automatically and without conscious thought. Each time I've experienced this automatic response, I have shaken my head and wondered at how deeply rooted, how in the blood, my early training lies, despite years of attempting to distance myself from it. I try to dismiss the inclination to cling to this ritual prayer as nothing more than ingrained habit. Yet, beyond the habitual response, there lies a great comfort and a great feeling of connection to that deeper dimension of Spirit as I recite the words.

As Cameron became ever more deeply enmeshed in his drug-induced dysfunction, I grew ever wearier and desperate for change. In the late summer of 2003, Cameron was working his way through the slow meanderings of the court system. He was out on bail awaiting trial or a plea agreement. He'd moved into a halfway house and was working day labor jobs while looking for a better opportunity.

It was tough for him to try and pull himself out of the deep hole he'd created. He now had an address at the halfway house, but previously he'd been living on the streets. He had no phone, no recent work history, no decent clothes and pending criminal charges. Not many people were willing to give him a chance. Even though he had

been working hard to control his addiction and turn his life around, we had been advised to expect a seven to ten year sentence in the state prison. His public defender was trying to negotiate a reduced sentence through a plea agreement. I was holding my breath.

In every waking moment, I was recognizing the need for breaking whatever karmic bonds held us trapped in this never ending drama. I had lived so many years in a codependent state, like a puppet constantly having my strings pulled by the events in Cameron's life. We were so entangled that sometimes I didn't know where his life left off and mine began. I was always trying on the one hand to keep my son alive and healthy and out of harm's way, and on the other hand to tame the fearful and sometimes viciously recriminating voice in me that was so ready to lash out at him in judgment. I would bounce between being his rescuer and being his judge and jury.

I had reached the breaking point in what seemed a lifetime of trying to rescue my wayward child. The thought of him spending years in prison was heartbreaking, yet I knew it was through his own choices that he'd arrived in this place. Whatever mistakes I may have made raising him, he was a grown man now and needed to stand on his own two feet, make his own decisions, and suffer the consequences for those decisions.

For months, I had been praying for the ability to let go. Rather than praying for any specific outcome, my prayer had become simply for him to be whole and happy and for me to be able to step out of the habitual role of rescuing.

One midweek summer day, I found myself near St. Francis Xavier, my childhood church, and I decided to stop and step inside to see if any peace could be found there. The church was deserted except for the organist who was practicing various pieces of music.

I wandered around and looked in all the little alcoves, their candles perpetually lit in prayer before statues of various saints. The candles are electric now; a few coins in the slot and the push of a button can send one's prayers speeding out for handling the modern way. Maybe soon there will be email and text-messaging options.

I sat in the center of the church and looked up into the dome. Its little diamond-shaped blue stained glass windows had always felt to me like stars in the sky. I closed my eyes and recognized that I no longer knew how to pray or to whom. I moved to sit in front of the

statue of Mary in the front of the church, to the left of the altar and the pulpit.

I talked to Mary, one mother to another. How had she been able to bear the pain of losing her son? How would I bear losing mine to prison? I prayed a few Hail Marys and I closed my eyes and cried. I asked Mary to heal my son and to heal my heart. I cried about our broken world and all the broken people in it. I asked her to make me a good mother and to help Cameron, to make him whole again. I sat quietly for a few minutes, trying not to cry anymore.

I don't know what I believe, really, about Mary and Jesus and all that, but I do believe in the love of a mother for her child, and I believe there is Something that feels our tears and broken hearts. I thanked Mary for listening. I felt she could understand in a way that only a mother who has seen her own child suffer could.

As I sat at Mary's feet, the organist had been practicing odd bits of music, but nothing I recognized. I got ready to leave and he began to play Greensleeves: "What child is this who laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping . . .?" A Christmas carol in August? I think Mary was holding Cameron in her heart just then. It gave me an odd feeling of comfort.

That night, I dreamed about receiving a blessing.

August 26, 2003

The Blessing of Father Pio

A man comes to bless us. He stops and asks me, "Whose blessing would you like, Father Pio's?" I shrug. I have not asked for a blessing and I'm not sure I believe in blessings anyway. He says, "Yes, Father Pio, I think." He cups his hands and pours water over my head—so much water that the blanket over my chest gets soaked, for I am suddenly in my bed. I take the blessing somewhat sullenly.

Later I can't get Father Pio out of my mind. I hear there is a book about his life and I go to the library to find it. The librarian has the book and she's reading the back flap. She says, "This can't be! The flap says it's an incredibly popular best seller." She is surprised that a story about an obscure saint would be so popular. But I tell her, no, it is a very great story. The book opens from top to bottom instead of side to side—like a secretary's spiral notebook.

I woke from this dream feeling I had truly been blessed. It felt disorientingly real, and I half expected to find my bed sheets soaked. The name Father Pio stuck in my head and would not let go. Although I had never heard the name, I felt that it was the name of a real person and that I probably *could* find his life story in a book somewhere. After my visit to the church and my prayers to Mary, I felt as though this Father Pio might be a patron saint for Cameron or for me or for both of us. Within the dream, I didn't really accept the blessing—I was rather stand-offish about it. But when I awoke, it felt like a true gift.

After recording my dream, I went directly to the Internet to search for Father Pio. I learned that there was, indeed, a real person by the name of Padre Pio, a Capuchin priest who had lived in Italy and reputedly experienced the stigmata—the wounds of Christ. He is credited with a number of miracles and was canonized by the Catholic Church in June of 2002.

The day after my dream of Padre Pio's blessing, Cameron called to tell me that his public defender had contacted him with a plea offer: 90 days, a \$2500 fine, and three years probation. His attorney thought the judge might even defer the jail time. A deferred sentence would mean that unless Cameron violated the terms of his probation he would serve no time at all. Padre Pio's blessing had turned into a small miracle. Cameron had been given an amazing second chance.

I went to the library and checked out some books about Padre Pio. I learned that he was devoted to the Virgin Mary and often interceded for people at her request. I learned that he empathized deeply with those who were imprisoned. I learned that he had appeared to others in dreams and that his miracles were not limited strictly to good practicing Catholics.⁸ I believe that Mary sent Padre Pio to me in answer to my prayers.

One humorous incident from his life, more than anything else, confirmed to me that my dream had been real. At one point in Padre Pio's life, he blessed and cured a woman who had been blind. Ecstatic, she fell at his feet begging over and over again for his blessing. He told her to get up, that he had already blessed her, but she kept repeating, "Bless me, Padre. Bless me." Exasperated, he finally said to her, "What kind of blessing do you want? A pail of water on your head?"⁹

The Deep Water Leaf Society

I had to chuckle when I thought about my dream, in which he had poured so much water over my head that my bed was soaked. I felt that beyond the miracle of Cameron's generous plea offer, I was being asked to be grateful for all the amazing gifts I had in my life. Instead of begging to be blessed, like the once-blind woman, it was time to open my eyes to the blessings all around me every day.

And a huge, life-saving blessing was about to come my way through the CJEA training I would begin in October.

