
LIGHTER MINDS

TRIFLING WITH SACRED THINGS: A PUBLIC CONFESSION

By Peter J. Sorensen



WENDY BAGLEY

“WHEN I WAS a child, I thought as a child.” I confess. I trifled with sacred things. I didn’t confess my transgression at the time, I suppose because I didn’t realize that I should. So I’m confessing now. There is nothing funny about what I did. At least it doesn’t seem funny now. It was funny then, though—at least it seemed to be. Actually, it seems kind of funny now. Well, really, you know, I guess it was funny! And, though it isn’t much of an excuse, I was part of a whole gang of triflers in my home ward.

For instance, I remember how little Tommy Rutgers reacted when we got the sacrament tray in opening exercises during Sunday School; we were all eight years old at the time and sat in rows by classes. Tommy reached out, grabbed a hefty handful of bread, wadded it up into a ball, and popped the entire thing in his mouth. I remember calling

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out, “Geez, Rutgers, what’re ya doin’?” He mumbled out an answer, but there was no way to hear it. He wasn’t being wicked, though I suppose it becomes a sin to do such things once you’re baptized, but rather he was just being Tommy Rutgers, the same kid who spent an entire afternoon with me just stepping on ants (“I bet we seem sort of like God to these ants,” I noted at the time). When the fun wore off from watching Tommy wolf a sacrament meant for an entire congregation, we played the monkey game, which consisted of mimicking in perfect group formation every movement Brother Jarvely, the Sunday School president, made, up to and including a stare-down contest between him and my good friend Del, who, incidentally, invariably won the contest.

Like I say, it wasn’t just me, or even Tommy. George Davidson was a bit like the rest of us. One day in primary class (it was held on Thursday back then), George saw a

picture of Golgotha with small silhouettes of the crucifixes in the background; he muttered, under his breath, “They kinda look like telephone poles, don’t they?”

I do remember that getting older didn’t help much. When I became a deacon, “hangman” was the game of choice to pass the time during sacrament meeting. We also developed the fine art of “cracking eggs,” which involved closing your eyes, then letting the deacon next to you hit you (gently) on the head, finally running his fingers down your face in imitation of a cracked egg. The effect was stunning, and it was quite innocuous compared with other activities. On fast Sunday, I, being the best artist, was always recruited to draw pictures of steaks, turkeys, potatoes, corn on the cob, and assorted pies and cakes, all on the back of the written program. If we were lucky there were few announcements that week, so there was room for a three-course meal and four or five games of hangman.

Being a teacher gave me more responsibility but more chances to abuse it as well. Back then one or two teachers were always assigned to prepare and pass the sacrament in the Junior Sunday School. It was a vicious tactic, now that I think about it, but we used to stuff the paper cups in the trays as tightly as we could, because for us there apparently was nothing funnier than watching four-year-olds trying to pull them back out when full of water. I think I’m a bit hypocritical now, since if I caught some teacher doing that to my kids, I’d have to clobber him. And even in the big people’s meeting, we teachers (who as teenagers were always hungry) would not fail to consume all the leftover bread from the sacrament trays. The rationale my friend Dennis gave me was that since it was already blessed, it would be sacrilegious to throw away all that bread.

Things did not improve when I became a priest. One evening I was the middle man in a row of three priests at the sacrament table. When it was time to stand up and break the bread, I tapped my comrades’ knees so we could stand up in unison. But I couldn’t resist whispering, “Ready, **BREAK!**” as we stood. I was so distracted by my own cleverness that when I knelt to offer the prayer on the bread, I began, “Our Father in Heaven, we thank thee for this food.” Immediately my friend Del, standing next to me, kicked me in the shins and awakened me to the enormity of my actions. But I hadn’t learned my lesson yet; I kept talking and distracting everyone all during the rest of the meeting. On the way home from church, my father was stone silent. We

pulled into the driveway, Dad turned off the ignition, then learned over and socked me in the shoulder with a force that took the pain right to the bone. "That's for goofing off in sacrament meeting," he declared, and my attitude toward sacred things has never been the same since.

So, as I say, I confess. If I'd gone to my bishop with this story, this many years after the fact, he would have looked at me and said, "Brother Sorensen, I'm a busy man. Haven't we both got better things to do?" Or perhaps, "Thirty-eight years old, and you're still pulling pranks like this?" But the need to confess is pretty strong in me. I hope this hasn't been burdensome. I would ask for absolution now, but there's still the matter of the district belching contests when I was a missionary. . . . ☐

RUST

I watch the storm begin
to take the hill

she races on,
girdled in black,

her spokes flashing like lightning.

I've seen her before
in the papers,

In front of everyone,
alone.

I want to shout,
there is no finish line—
they took it down,

went home to their fires,
all except me.

There is no fire,

not even cold cinders
waiting for me

in the damp fireplace
only rolled newspapers

and taps of rain
pelted down my chimney

like thoughts
that do not sizzle,

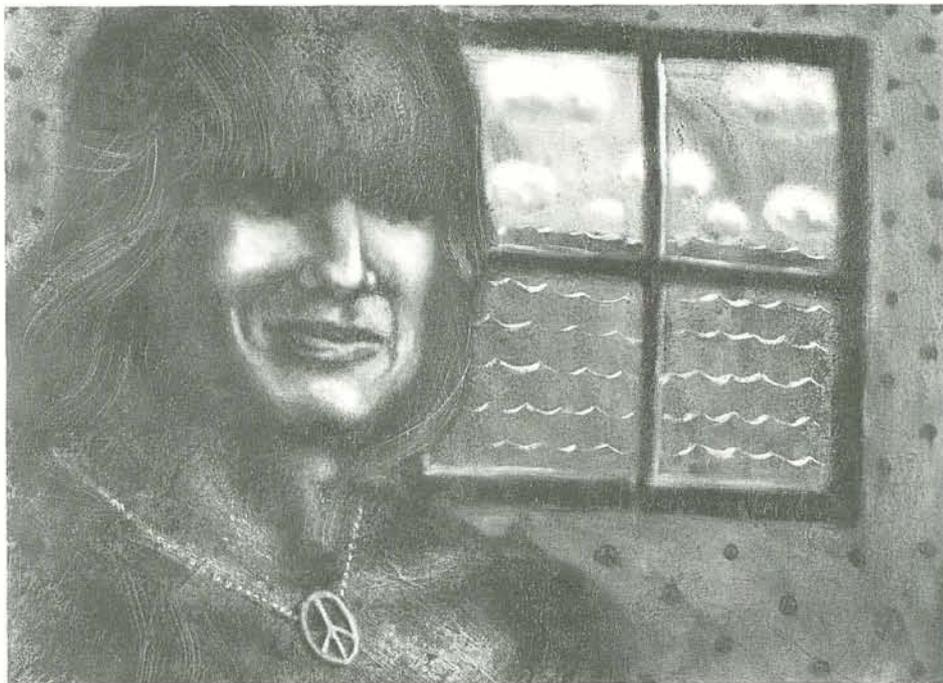
but rust.

—TIMOTHY LIU

FROM THE CAMPUS

WEEKENDS ON HIS HOUSEBOAT

By Gary Burgess



DAD WOULD SAY his story began when he was sixteen. That year he entered Cal Berkeley as an engineering student. His hair was short. He liked playing sports. He was away for the first time from his prosperous parents, and after three months he ended up living with a group of "communist" graduate students in a basement apartment off campus. It was dirty and messy, and he failed most of his classes that first semester. Home for Christmas, his dad took his car away for the bad grades. Enraged, he ran off across country to Greenwich Village. This was in 1957.

My memory picks up in the early seventies, after various houses in the hills of Marin County, California, ideas, books, and records have all come and gone in an unending sun that rises every morning and bleaches his

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cut-offs. He has had two marriages and divorces, random jobs, roommates, and friends. He's written poems and short stories, and a three-act play. In 1972 he is living in a houseboat off Sausalito, like a lot of other "long hairs" are doing. There he is writing a screen play, with neighbors who keep big Persian cats in their houseboats. They look very healthy, wear loose clothing, and they say to Dad, "Hello, Bruce," very quietly.

Inside his houseboat he asks us if we want any music, and when we blankly nod, he puts something on like Carole King, The Grateful Dead, maybe Mississippi John Hurt, or anything from the San Francisco sound. There are tree trunks in there, big paisley pillows, and a tall water pipe. He has a wall-length print of a medieval wedding feast over his water bed. He puts his books between bricks and scrap wood. We sit down and he pulls out the charcoals and paints for us to use,

leaving us on the floor in the living room so he can get into his own things.

The front door is open and sea planes are taking off on Richardson Bay outside. His shag rug is thick. He eventually says, "You guys hungry?" He puts a round wooden table, with no legs, on a sheepskin. He slices apples, bananas, cheese, and bread for us. He makes some healthy kind of milkshake. If someone comes in, they ask him how his screen play is coming. Then he gets animated and starts saying it's going well, and that it's about a man, single, up against a lot of corruption in the establishment, a lot of pride and vanity and foolishness. He says it portrays middle-class society, how family, relationships, and values so commonly accepted just are not working. Then he wonders aloud why he ever thought he could raise a family, wondering if he wasn't mad in doing so, and why he wasn't down in Los Angeles making a career out of his talents. He thinks aloud, getting up to change the music now and then, asking the oldest brother, Mike, who is eleven, if there is anything special he wants to listen to.

He seems to know what is happening with us. We don't really question where we figure in his plot structures, or just how he characterizes us. He tries to teach us about things he knows, to turn us on to his music and some of the books he is reading; we don't know all dads aren't this way.

"Now for the *real* drag," he says, and we go up to see his parents in their big house on the hill. It overlooks San Francisco Bay. Dad doesn't like it as much as we do; we always like that house because it is big and has a chin-up bar and swimming pool. It has things alabaster and bronze from around the world. Dad is away from the house where his father is trying to teach my brothers and me what a capitalist is, and his mother is making an attempt to cut our hair. He wants to throw us around in their pool, or let us try and drown him, he is in his cut-offs. When he comes up for air his hair covers his face.

The next day being Sunday, we go to church in his navy-blue, '65 Mustang, where he teaches Gospel Doctrine. The classroom is packed and he energetically goes into the lesson, citing Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Christian theologians, quantum mechanics, and eastern philosophy. He speaks out against the Vietnam War, power, manipulation, and materialism. He says the Church in its beginnings was iconoclastic, revolutionary, that it was saying "no" to orthodox systems and beliefs in America.

After the services and back in his houseboat, he gives us the recall, playing back to

us everything everyone said for the hour, what he meant when he said this, or this person said that. Then he tells us what is hip and not hip to do, explaining to us what is jive and not jive in the world. He goes on for hours. One night I remember he talks about the Tao, and how physics could eventually prove how God could hear all our prayers at once, given at the same time. He explains this with energy, using wide gestures from his head outward, and we begin to understand about omniscience.

Those were the weekends before we moved a thousand miles away from Berkeley, before Mom married the black political science professor. The next summer we found him moved away from his houseboat. We pulled up in front of his porch and he was there without any shirt on, and his hair was still around his neck and shoulders.

That summer, he didn't talk about the screenplay, and the Mustang was gone. He was saying he was an old man more than usual. His parents would say: "He's doing a lot better now, your dad. He has a steady job with a good retirement plan, and he has you boys." "You boys are all he has," they'd say. "You don't know how hard he works for you three."

Now, with my dad, my brothers and I often talk in terms of before. Before this happened to Dad, it was this way—before that happened to us, it was like this. We wonder where we found and how we agree upon the vague optimism and expectations of the present. We look for answers he hasn't mentioned to us, or that he has passed over. We feel sometimes it ended for him in the way his era and counter-culture did, with the bright yellow blaze of youth going down on him, moving away from him like we had. Or sometimes we feel youth never went anywhere, but stayed in that houseboat after he had moved on. Or, we even say that youth in one way or another stayed with him like his hair did, like we did every summer for the rest of the decade, until, that is, my brothers and I started going to college and on missions and began to wonder about our dad, just what he represented. ☞

CANNING

In watching and waiting,
the longest days pass—
until finally everything
seems to ripen at once,
fruit hidden under leaves,
growing in the moonlight,
swelling and softening in the sun.

We try to eat it all, going to bed
with our bellies like melons
and still waking to figs and grapes.
But it is no use,
and we unpack the jars.

Peaches, flesh shading
from gold to red, while
fragrances from under
the broken velvet leave us
wondering vulnerable.
Pears, greed at picking,
dream themselves smooth
and yielding in their
covered bushels.

All become candidates
for the process,
the cold sprays, scaldings,
jostlings, humiliations,
chastenings and knives,
short mottled gray
blades in water-logged
wooden handles,
the faintest gleam of
silver on the whetted edge,
like the last line of a razor
moon in a hard cold night.

When at last we lift the jars
from the dark water; they seem
(in spite of their utter desolation)
eager to appear bright, festive even,
the colors sleeping behind the glass.
But we know that they are not
even ghosts of their former selves.
In fact, it is the ghost that is
gone, the breath, the aromas,
gone from everywhere but our memories,
the memories that live in bodies,
our bodies that winter through,
that huddle around the fire,
around the lamp,
around the table to break the seal,
hoping through cold,
hoping through the dark
for a pentecost of recollection.

—M. D. PALMER