

The Dissonance of Absolution

Gary G. Hernandez

THE PHONE RINGS ONCE. I think about hanging up. The phone rings twice. I begin to believe my luck might hold out. The third ring proves me wrong. Something is amiss when grown children, adults I think we're called, are afraid to call their parents. I wonder if my kids will be afraid to call me. A child-parent relationship is a bizarre mixture of love and fear, respect and resentment—not quite what I was taught it should be, but exactly what it seems to be.

"Hi, Mom, what's up?" I act surprised as if she were calling me and I were happy about it.

"Hi, *mi hijo*," she beams back, pronouncing the words in one fluid utterance—"meeho." I get the uneasy feeling that her enthusiasm is as feigned as mine. I set the thought aside. At the moment I have potential conflict and certain discomfort to get through.

"What's up?" I ask again, giving away the fact that I need to talk about something I don't want to talk about.

"Oh, nothing. Your dad's out in the yard pulling weeds," she says. There's a practiced pause and then, "So, what's up?" Ah, the old, double return repeat. Sly, my mother. I try to evade with some mundane chatter.

"Not much. Work as usual." It's like moving the pawn two spaces out from the knight: typical, doomed, and uninspired.

"How are the kids?" she says with syrupy grandmother intonation.

"They're doing well," I reply.

"That's great." More syrup. She's a pro. There's no waiting this one out. I have visions of Mel Gibson charging the line in *Gallipoli*.

"So, Mom, we've been doing our genealogy. I think we're about as far as we can get." It seems like a good start. She tells me about a conversation she had with her elder sister a few weeks ago and how she said something or another about a dead person who may or may not be related to

me. I let her go on, figuring I'm setting up that all-essential rapport, making her feel comfortable so that she'll be more inclined to acquiesce.

"Wow, that's interesting," I say a little too quickly. "So anyway, we have the genealogy completed for a couple of generations back and we wanted to go ahead and do the temple work for your parents."

Heavy silence.

"You want to do what?"

"Temple work, Mom. You know, baptism and such."

"I know. And you know your grandfather and grandmother were Catholic. They were baptized in the Catholic Church." Her voice is ill humored and impatient.

"I know, Mom," I say, "but we want to give them the opportunity to get baptized in our church. You see, we believe that when people die, they—"

"They're dead, Gabriel." The invocation of the middle name is never good.

"We do it by proxy. They have a choice to accept it or not. You see, we—"

"No, I don't see. I don't like this." Another silence and I'm too uninspired to fill it. "I have to go," she says abruptly. "Your father just came in. Don't mention this to him. "Bye." A click and a buzz.

Feeling a bit stunned, I consult my daily planner, perhaps seeking some direction as to what to do next. Teleconference at 11:00 A.M., it says, and then lunch at 12:30, meetings in the afternoon. Targets to be hit, plans to be made, deadlines pending: the story of my adult life. I'm struck with the irony of being a forty-one-year-old man standing in a spacious office in Los Angeles feeling very much a castigated child.

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My mother says that she and I were extremely close when I was a child. She says that when I turned seven, I drifted away.

I have a memory of my mom when I was about four. We were living in Fayetteville, North Carolina. My dad was in the military, a Green Beret. He wasn't a particularly warm man. I remember hiding under my bed as I heard his heavy boots booming on the wooden floors when he came home. In a visceral sense, I was afraid of my dad. During those years, my mother was my sole source of warmth and nurturing. I had an older brother, but he spent a lot of time plotting my physical demise. When I

was an infant, he tried to throw me in the trash can. Thankfully, my mother caught him.

At any rate, the memory begins with my mom and me looking over our vegetable garden. It was a sunny Carolina day. We were about to head inside when my mom challenged me to a race to the house. Even though I had the advantage of being a boy and having really fast shoes, I doubted I could trump my mother's superior stride. Nonetheless, I took the challenge and off we went. My mom kept up with me with apparent ease while I was putting everything I had into it. As we neared the finish, my mother fell back. I knew she had let me win. She, of course, insisted she hadn't let up at all. What I remember was that it was important to her that I feel good about myself. I guess that's what my mother means when she says we were close: we played, she sacrificed, and I clung to her.

The falling away, on the other hand, can be represented by any number of adolescent episodes—being caught smoking, shoplifting, drinking, doing drugs—basic rebellion stories all sharing a common plot: I rebelled, she held her ground, and I pushed her away.

It has been thirty-seven years since I raced my mother in our yard in Fayetteville, North Carolina; twenty-eight years since she caught me smoking in our bathroom in New Orleans, Louisiana; eighteen years since I told her in a mall in Springfield, Virginia, that I had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

At the time of the disclosure, I was working on my M.A. in English literature, studying the likes of Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes—people whom my parents had never heard of and whose ideas they would think irrelevant to just about anything. I lived in a different world—a world without the *Reader's Digest*, a world devoid of talk-show hosts, a world filled with grandiose ideas, social critiques, and impracticality.

So my mom and I were walking around Springfield Mall when I saw a missionary who had taught me. I introduced him to my mother. Afterwards she wanted to know how I knew him. So I told her that I met him through the Mormon Church, which I had joined just a few months before.

"Oh my God, *mi hijo*," she said in alarm, "don't tell your dad." I suddenly heard the booming of my dad's boots on hardwood floors—if only I had a bed to scoot under. At that moment, no postmodernism posturing could save me, no semiotic unscrambling could restore my reason, and not even Freud could talk me down from my instinctual recoil.

"Okay," I said, a little disappointed and a little scared and a little angry. In a gross misjudgment I had not anticipated that my mother would care what religion I practiced. My trouble has always been in failing to understand that people invest expectations in others without informing them. In the heart of every Catholic mother lies the hope that her son will enter the priesthood; in the heart of every Mormon mother lies the hope that her son will become a bishop.

Two years after our conversation, I was married in the D.C. Temple, while my mother and father waited in the visitors' center.

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My telecon is over, and I'm now having lunch with some colleagues. One of them says she once knew a Mormon who said he used to baptize the dead. I nod in acknowledgement—acknowledgement that I know what she's talking about and that I know the conversation is dropping headlong into a topic that I sincerely dislike—religion.

Napoleon is quoted as saying that "religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich." Comic genius, that man, master of irony. That pretty much sums up my take on religion. Not the words, the irony. On one hand, I hold religion to be as infantile as Freud declared it to be; on the other I recognize that I'm quite the infant. I once told my father-in-law in a moment of challenge/confession/discourse that I thought religion was a psychological crutch. He surprised me by agreeing. He then added that air was a crutch for living, but he needed to breathe. We had a laugh, and he left his words to haunt me.

Along those lines, when I was in fourth grade a nun told our class that one of the mysteries of God that the human mind could not comprehend was that God has been here forever. She said that as humans we have to believe that everything has a beginning. She smiled and added, "This will bother you for the rest of your life." Damned if she wasn't right. Thus began my struggle with religion: superstitious hogwash versus eternal truths.

So my work colleague goes on to say that her friend would get into a jacuzzi with a bunch of dead bodies floating around and baptize them. She says she was totally grossed out and has since avoided contact with him. She adds that she knew I wasn't that type of Mormon. We order orange chicken and lemon shrimp and laugh about work. I think everyone at the table realizes she got it a little wrong, but I don't see the sense of

jumping in the mud to try to clean things up. An opportunity lost to convert an entire lunch group, I know, but my inner struggles sometimes weigh on me more than guilt and the promise of eternal rewards.

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Later that day, my wife and I are driving on a Los Angeles freeway on the way to dinner. We're on the 210 to be exact, wide-open lanes, wide-open throttle—well, not quite, but the feeling is you could if you really wanted to. The average speed is about ninety, and we're a little above average at the moment.

My wife says something like, "Did you talk to your mom about doing temple work for your grandparents?"

I say something like, "Uh huh."

She, "And?"

I, "She kind of freaked out."

"Like how?"

"Like she got off the phone real quick and sounded pissed off." I ease off the accelerator and switch out of the fast lane. I nervously change the radio station to another station playing identical innocuous music.

"Did you explain to her what temple work was all about?" My wife turns the volume down. Not good. My parents always turned the radio down when they wanted to have a serious talk with me.

"I tried to, but it's not like we had a long chat." We pass a couple of cars. "Maybe we should call the missionaries and have them give my parents the discussions."

We both laugh.

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I wake up at 3:00 A.M. My wife is sleeping soundly. My heart is jittery and there are tears on my face. I'm wrapped in the after-shivers of a dream. I dreamt that I ran into a friend whom I had not seen for years. We were in Red Rock Canyon in Nevada, which happens to be the last place I saw her. We were walking toward her house. Smooth sandstone stretched all around us. Her house was about a hundred yards off, a one-story affair squatting in the desert heat. I asked how her husband was doing. She stopped, took me by the arm, and looked me in the eye.

"He died last year," she said evenly.

An awful tugging erupted in my chest—grief. I gave her a hug and wept, babbling things like “I’m so sorry.” The desert and she and the house then shifted and swerved into the surrealistic horrors that generally make up my dreams. And that’s when I woke up.

The dream has ended but the feelings continue—feelings of loss, remorse, and hurt. I want to wake my wife and tell her—to hug her, to have her tell me it’s all right—but I just lie there and let the emotion ebb out of me and onto my wet pillow. I can’t remember the last time I felt like this; or rather I can’t remember the last time I let myself feel like this. It’s a relief and a burden all at once. I am shamed and I am joyful.

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I’m at work again. It’s afternoon. I make the decision to talk to my dad anyway. It goes something like this:

“Hey, dad, how’s it going?” Same poised enthusiasm that I used with my mom but with a little more confidence. It’s that confidence that a son has when talking to his dad, a male thing, a secret patriarchal language that men blink at when confronted by women but partake of expertly when amongst themselves.

“Oh, pretty good. What’re you up to, son?”

“I wanted to do some temple work for Mom’s parents. It’s some religious stuff we do in our church. I’d like to do it.”

“Religious stuff?” he says like he took a drink of something too sweet. “This isn’t going to cost me 10 percent of my income, is it?”

“No, it’s just a ceremony type of thing. It doesn’t cost a thing. You don’t even have to be there.” I have a good feeling about this conversation.

“So what do you need, some sort of permission slip?”

“Well, actually nothing. I just wanted to let you know, kind of a courtesy thing.”

“Oh, okay, but don’t mention it to your mother. She thinks you joined a cult.” A silence that isn’t awkward and then, “How’s the car running?”

A new batch of memories comes to mind, things like my first car—a 1972 Mustang Mach 1 with a 351 Cleveland and a Holley 650. It was hard to tell who loved the car more, my father or me. And there’s ditching a few classes at college to have a drink with my dad in a bar in Waco, Texas. “I don’t know how I feel about you skipping classes that I paid for,” he said as we drank the beer he paid for. There’s also the time when I told him to

get back in the house and leave me the f— alone, that I didn't need his help working on my car. I was brandishing a large crescent wrench. He went inside and bragged about it to his friends later.

"Running great," I say. "She's got about 30 thousand miles on her. You know, right at that point when everything's broken in but the compression's still tight. She's humming. It's really a quick car, handles well, too."

"Oh, boy," he answers, and we start gloating about engines, torque, and horsepower.

I feel out of sorts after I hang up, a feathery melancholy, not at all like I think I should feel. My wife will be thrilled. Theoretically my dead grandmother will also be thrilled. My mother will eventually catch wind and she won't be so thrilled. Maybe that's it, a little cognitive dissonance to tread in for a while.

For right now I check my planner: Project meeting at 4:00 P.M. and then a business dinner at 7:00 P.M. Later tonight I'll dream of fishing with my dad in some odd place like a busy freeway or out an office window. I'll wake up in the middle of the night and feel empty or cold or lonely. I'll want to wake my wife, but I won't.