

AMEN

Johnny Townsend

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I began, “please help me do well on this test.” I was on my way to the Garfield Community Center in the Central District to take a skills test for a City job as a cashier. “Please help me to—”

Stop it, Ron, I told myself. There’s no God. Stop praying for stuff. It’s a simple math test. Just take it.

I looked at my watch. The 106 was due any minute. If it had come early, though, I’d have to wait another twenty minutes for the next bus. “Dear Heavenly Father,” I prayed, “please help the bus be on time.”

Stop it.

The bus was either about to come or it wasn’t. Even if there were a God, he could hardly create an extra bus complete with bus driver and passengers. If the bus came on time, great. If not, I’d have to deal with it. I’d left the house with plenty of time to spare.

The sun was hot on this late August afternoon. But we’d had a decent summer here in Seattle, only eight days above ninety, most days in the upper seventies to about eighty degrees. It could have been worse.

“Thank you, Heavenly Father,” I began.

Oh, good grief.

I’d been raised Mormon, taught to “pray always.” Even after being excommunicated thirty years ago, I’d kept my belief in God, despite all evidence to the contrary. The last few years, though, I simply found it was impossible to believe anymore.

Ah, there was the bus coming over the top of the hill. I breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed my Orca Lift card which let me pay half fare. I’d only been able to find a part-time job the past year and a half after losing my full-time job at the bank, and every month was a struggle to

pay the bills, even with Jeremy's help. I needed that cashier job. It would require constant traveling to a dozen or more locations—some job sites requiring me to board three different buses to get there—but at least the position had benefits.

“Dear Heavenly Father—”

I climbed onto the bus and found a seat.

I'd loved the Mormon idea of eternal progression, taking as long to reach perfection as my personality required. God had always been a benevolent force in my life. The bad things in the world happened because of Satan.

But there sure were a lot of bad things.

What kind of god worth worshipping was weaker than Satan, or gave him a free hand, allowed him to cause so much misery to both humans and animals? And plants and insects, too, for that matter. I'd always accepted that “there must needs be opposition in all things,” that misery helped us to “grow,” but the absolute degree of suffering that existed was far too great to justify. I remembered seeing on television once a clip from a home movie that had been shot by a murderer as he promised a handcuffed couple that he'd torture and kill their baby before killing them, hitchhikers who'd accepted the wrong free ride. The look on their faces was a pitiful combination of both despair and resignation. I was still haunted by it.

What possible “growth” experience could this family need to justify what they were about to endure? And what did it say about a God whose best plan to “help” his children was to allow such horror?

The bus pulled onto Rainier, and I thought about switching to the 7. It would probably be a little faster, but I hated transfers, and I still had one more bus to catch at a minimum. I decided to stick with the 106.

I sure hoped I did okay on this math test. It would be simple arithmetic, and after all, I did have a biology degree, which gave me plenty of practice in both physics and chemistry. I could certainly add up a few

figures. But what if my calculator died? What if I hit the wrong button in my arrogance? What if my pencil broke?

“Dear Heavenly Father, please—”

I felt so guilty for not finishing my prayers. Wouldn't these half-finished pleas irritate Heavenly Father?

What kind of God would want to be pestered non-stop even by completed petitionary prayers that did nothing but emphasize my selfish needs and desires? I'd heard a rabbi say once that only prayers of praise were appropriate. But what kind of God needed to have his ass kissed every day? I thought maybe prayers asking God to help others, the poor, the sick, those in war-torn countries, those in prison, might be acceptable, but what kind of God withheld his aid from the needy until some random third person requested he step in?

I saw an East African immigrant in a hijab running for the bus on Martin Luther King. There was no way she was going to make it on time. I wanted to pray for her, but it was pointless. She'd either make it or she wouldn't.

She didn't make it.

Was it my fault?

Oh, Ron.

I'd been fighting the compulsion to pray for six months now. I sometimes went long stretches, five hours or more, without being tempted, but whenever a real “crisis” came along, I found myself reverting to my old habits. Like when I had to have blood drawn and wanted the phlebotomist to hit the vein right on the first try, or when someone wanted to return an item to the drugstore but didn't have their receipt and I had to satisfy both the customer and the manager.

I needed to do well on this test.

Before long, we were at the Mount Baker Transit Center, and I stepped off the bus and walked over to the 48 sign, checking the schedule. The bus should be here in just two more minutes. Unless it had come early.

“Dear—”

Deal with it, Ron, I told myself. Deal with it.

If there were a God, he wouldn't want me to depend so heavily on him, must have been annoyed as hell at me all these years. He'd want me to fend for myself, overcome my challenges and make something of my life. He'd want *me* to do that, not him. He would already know what *he* could do.

I still thought of God as a he, comfortable with this bit of patriarchy, despite what that probably said about me.

A young black woman with a baby stroller walked over to the 48 sign as well. And a middle-aged Latino man.

Just the other few people at this same bus stop probably needed more help than I did. Why should God, if there were such a being, want to help *me*? If there were truly a benevolent being out there, it certainly rationed its assistance.

The 48 pulled up a moment later, and I waited for the others to board. Then I found a seat in the first row past priority seating so I could still see out the front window and be on the lookout for the community center. I wasn't very familiar with the neighborhood around Garfield.

I'd been five days late with my last mortgage payment, and I was three months—three months!—behind on my Visa bill. If I didn't pass this test, and the subsequent interview, Jeremy and I weren't going to make it. He was a self-employed contractor but only did piddly little jobs that hardly brought home any more money than my part-time minimum wage job. We faced disaster every month, and given that there was in fact no supreme being to protect us, our luck wasn't going to hold out forever. I *had* to get this job. It was up to *me*.

We passed the Northwest African American History Museum and kept heading north on 23rd. We passed the Sojourner Truth Library and kept going.

I missed Heavenly Father. Even if he wasn't real, I used to *think* he was. I talked to him all the time, not just about my immediate needs but also about my dreams and goals and what things he might want of

me. I felt the way now that I had all those years ago when my mother died of leukemia.

But praying wasn't a harmless habit. It shifted responsibility from me to someone else. And it was important—essential—that I take responsibility for myself. *I* needed to fight for a fifteen dollar minimum wage. *I* needed to fight against fracking. *I* needed to work to restore voting rights to disenfranchised ex-convicts. It wasn't enough to ask God to "help me" do these things. It was up to me to *do* them.

The glory was supposed to go to God, though, wasn't it? It wasn't right to take credit myself.

There was Garfield High School. The community center couldn't be far away. Yes, there it was. I pulled the cord and made my way to the door.

Stepping off the bus, I looked at my watch. It was 6:05. I was fifty-five minutes early. I walked into the building, located the room where the testing would take place, and then walked back outside and sat on a wooden bench in the shade. I watched a mother with two young children about eight or nine years old enter the building. I could hear shouts from kids playing somewhere inside.

The funny thing was, it should have been clear all along that prayer was useless. I remembered a general conference when one of the apostles had said that we should "pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on us." *Of course* everything depended on us. Even they knew it. The problem was that if I was praying as if the solution to a given problem depended on God, then psychologically, I was going to be affected by the belief he was going to help, and I was unconsciously going to work with just a little less dedication myself.

A chunky black woman in her twenties across the street was yelling at someone down the block, quite angry about some terrible thing the other person had apparently done. Curse words flew about left and right. A child walking up to the community center seemed oblivious.

It took me a minute to realize there was no one at the other end of the block.

I still allowed myself to say one complete prayer a day. As I was falling asleep next to Jeremy each evening, I thanked Heavenly Father—or the universe, or whatever—for at least ten specific good things that had happened to me that day. It was more an exercise in gratitude than a real prayer, but I still addressed it formally.

And always felt guilty immediately afterward for doing so.

Was I ever going to grow up? I was fifty-six years old, for crying out loud. I felt guilty for praying and I felt guilty for not praying. When was I ever going to just live my life?

At 6:30, I walked back into the community center and, as I'd expected, the proctors let the candidates into the multi-purpose room early to find our seats. I'd taken this test last year, done well, and then flubbed the interview. But just before the last test, I'd chatted with a few other nervous candidates, encouraging them. I didn't want to be mean today, but I had to perform better than everyone else. I couldn't afford to be "nice."

So were atheists by definition more selfish than believers?

I'd attended a meeting last night to fight for rent control, and I didn't even pay rent.

I stared at my calculator and pencils and eraser. I stared at the wall. I didn't make eye contact with any other candidates.

At 7:00, the proctors handed out the tests, and we turned them over and began working. I had to add and subtract these columns of simple figures. Multiply three dance classes times the fee. Decide if several rows of addresses were the same or different.

A child could do this.

I remembered that my boss at Rite Aid had fired three new employees over the past few months because they couldn't count their till at the end of their shift.

There were thirty candidates in today's session taking the test, and this was only one of two sessions. I had to beat *sixty* people to get this one miserable job. Jeremy and I were going to lose the house if I didn't.

I'd applied for over five hundred jobs—five hundred!—in the past year. It always came down to the interview, the six times I managed to get one. I had to do better in my interviews.

“Dear Heavenly Father—”

The realization that there was no God struck me again as if for the first time, and my throat constricted. I wasn't strong enough to do this on my own. I *needed* God.

The last question indicated that I was supposed to leave a till filled with one hundred dollars in bills. The till currently had one twenty, three fives, and a ten dollar roll of quarters. What additional amount in bills did I need to leave? I smiled. Most people were going to say they needed fifty-five dollars more, but the quarters didn't count. They weren't bills.

I finished the test, sure I'd answered every single simple question accurately. I stood up and handed my test to a proctor, the first person in the room to do so. I walked back outside, crossed the street to wait for the 48 going back to Mount Baker. A frail, elderly black woman with osteoporosis waited patiently with her cart of groceries. A young white man talked loudly on his cell phone. An obese black woman who'd tested with me crossed the street and joined us a moment later. She looked at me and smiled.

I wanted to pray.

When the bus pulled up a few minutes later, I climbed on board, paid my fare, and found a seat on the shady side of the bus near the back door. A teenage black girl with huge earrings texted on her phone in the row in front of me. A forty-something black man in stained work clothes took a sip from an old Coke bottle filled with water. I stared out the window at some graffiti sprayed on a tottering wooden fence as we slowly pulled away from the curb.