

THE BURNING BUSH WAS A MICROPHONE

My Father's Two Religions, and the Night They Reconciled

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The Roof We Built for the Stars

When we were boys, my father moved up to the Smith River, outside Crescent City — just under the Oregon border, on the California side. He was building a cabin there, and I say building because it wasn't finished when we arrived, so we helped him finish it. Two storeys, one room deep. The top floor had a clear plastic roof — literally plastic you could see through — which is a terrible idea from an energy-efficiency standpoint, since it has approximately zero insulation. But that was the point. We wanted to see the stars and not get wet when it rained, and my father, given a choice between warmth and the sky, chose the sky and built accordingly.

We slept up there almost every night, and the summers were mostly clear. And it was under that roof that he taught us astral projection. I can describe the method exactly, because I have never forgotten it: you look at the stars, you close your eyes, and you feel your body — he gave us a vivid image for this — as something blue and translucent. You let that blue self rise. It was guided meditation and visualisation, is what it was, delivered by a master, and then we would go: up through the roof we could already see through, out over the world, zooming down wherever we wanted, travelling wherever we chose. We travelled in space with my dad all the time. It was amazing. Those are some of my fondest memories.

The Curriculum

We were homeschooled in that cabin, in the middle of the forest, by a man who was — I say this as a plain description — a super genius. We grew our own food, so life consisted of working, cutting wood, and talking, and the talking went on for hours, which is to say the talking was the school. When we weren't at the cabin we were at the commune — the Magic Forest — where the people were lovely and the buildings were warmer than my father's, though the conversation was not.

And into that curriculum came Erich von Däniken. Chariots of the Gods was in the cabin the way it was in half the cabins in America in those years, and we loved it — and then the movie came out, and we

loved that too: the Olmec heads — the colossal stone heads of Mexico's Gulf Coast that look for all the world like men in space helmets, with the broad features we argued looked more African than American Indian (archaeologists say they are portraits of local Olmec rulers, but archaeologists were not invited to our cabin) — the ancient sites, the whole gorgeous audacity of it. My father was into all of it, and so were we, and it was so much fun. Years later, at Stanford, a friend of mine — a Swiss journalist, a visiting scholar at the business school — told me all about von Däniken, because he was Swiss and she knew him. The world is small, and it enjoys reminding you.

I should say that the spiritual curriculum had two campuses, because my mother ran the other one. My mother believed in everything good and spiritual — that is the most precise description I can give, and she would accept it. When we moved into the little converted chicken coop that had previously been occupied by Wiccans — nice witches — she cleared out the drug paraphernalia and the dried-out weed, but she kept the Ouija board. Made me dust it off, in fact, and we used it every once in a while. I thought it was ridiculous. It was also fun. In my family those two judgements were never considered to be in conflict.

Tullan

Tullan Holmqvist was the first girlfriend I ever brought to meet my family, and the reason no one preceded her is that my family was so unconventional I worried people would go into shock. Tullan was immune, and I should have predicted it: her own upbringing was similarly colourful, and her mother read tarot cards and believed, as far as I could tell, in everything — which I found charming. She loved me, she said, because I accepted her and her family exactly as they were. Of course I did. They reminded me of the cabin, and of my mother, and of home.

The Announcement

So I brought Tullan to my dad and my stepmom Sandy's place — the house where Sandy still lives, guarded by my brother Harold, who is very big and can defend her from any invaders, so don't try anything. Harold was there, and my stepsister Cassidy — Cassidy Arkin, Sandy's daughter. I had just come off my righteous battle at Blyth Software — the campaign I fought channelling Martin Luther King, of which I was extremely proud — and I was telling my father about it, with Tullan beside me, incredibly beautiful and sweet, when he stopped me.

Well, he said, I don't really believe in that sort of stuff anymore, son. I want you to know I've discovered God again. I was a sinner.

I said: what? — because you have to understand my father's credentials. His proudest claim, for as long as I could remember, was that he had been excommunicated from the Seventh-day Adventist Church back in the sixties over race relations. I once ran this claim past my mother, who demolished it with the efficiency available only to ex-wives: no, no — Adventists don't have excommunication, they evangelise everybody. They were just happy when he stopped coming to church and cataloguing their hypocrisy every Sabbath. Both accounts are preserved in this family, side by side, per our usual practice.

The Signs

Then he explained, with Sandy sitting right there, which made it awkward for everyone — but it was Dad, so we listened. He'd had a girlfriend in the sixties, down in Palo Alto, a Black woman he had loved in exactly the years his church was failing its own gospel on race. Decades later he had come to know her daughter, who attended the same church he'd begun attending in Oakland, and — he told this part with the directness he told everything — he had started an affair with her. They would go off and have what he called interludes, which is a euphemism for sex. And driving home from these infidelities, he kept noticing things. A skeleton, like the teaching skeleton hanging in a doctor's office window. A black car with tinted windows and a personalised licence plate that sounded like DEATH. There were more — ordinary things, the kind you pass every day without seeing, except that he was seeing them, every time, on that particular drive. And eventually, he said, I realised it was God speaking to me about my spiritual death, because I was sinning.

I said: are you sure you weren't just feeling guilty for being a jerk — for cheating on your wife?

No, he said. It was God.

Okay, Dad, I said. And that, he told us, was when he realised he needed to return to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Reconciliation

But I had to ask the real question. Okay, I said — but what about everything you taught us our whole lives? The astral projection. Chariots of the Gods. All of it. How do you reconcile that?

Oh, he said, well, here's the deal. You remember the burning bush? Where God spoke to Moses? That was a microphone, connected to a ship. What the Bible calls angels are a more advanced species — who are also children of God. And the chariot of fire that took Elijah up — though in our family we credited it to Gabriel, as we credited most things to Gabriel — that was a re-entry vehicle.

I said: that's a good one. I'm with you on that one. That is a genuinely good metaphor for the Bible.

And did you run this by the pastor?

Oh yeah, he said. We've agreed to disagree. But I'm rejoining, and I'm becoming a deacon.

The Passover Objection

I should record one more exchange from these theological negotiations, because it marks where the reconciliations stopped. In our family the famous angel was always called Gabriel — whatever the text said, and whichever angel it actually was. The habit came from Passover, where the destroying angel goes through Egypt on the night of the tenth plague, taking the firstborn. I had accused that story, to my father's face, of justifying genocide — the killing of innocent babies — and asked him how God could do that and not be, frankly, kind of a jerk.

He said: the Lord acts in mysterious ways.

The general-purpose Christian cop-out, was my thought — though I kept the thought to myself. What I would say now is this: every coordinate system has questions it declines to answer, and my father knew exactly where the edges of his were, and he stayed inside them, serene. I had found the question his system would not hold, and he had answered it by declining it, which is an answer of a kind. It took me another thirty years to understand that the alternative to a system that declines your question is not a system that answers it. It is a substrate that can hold your question and his serenity at the same time, without making either one surrender. That is what I went off and built.

What Went Through My Mind

I will tell you exactly what went through my mind as I stood there — Tullan and I were hugging the whole time, by the way, because we always hugged. What went through my mind was: oh no. My father is so charismatic, he is going to found his own religion. People have done it — the Branch Davidians started somewhere; every religion was founded somewhere, usually by somebody's magnetic father — and everybody I knew growing up, down to my grandmother's friends, seemed to have to have their own damn religion. This will never last with the Adventists, I thought. He'll stay a while, then create his own faction and start his own church.

What I did not appreciate, standing there, was what I had just watched him do. My father held two complete cosmologies — the God of his childhood and the advanced children of God he'd found in a Swiss paperback — and when the day came that he had to keep both or lose one, he refused the choice. The burning bush was a microphone and it was God's voice; both, in one sentence, without apology. His pastor, to that congregation's everlasting credit, said we've agreed to disagree and made him a deacon anyway. Two coordinate systems, one man, one church aisle, no surrender demanded and none offered. I have spent my career building the mathematics and the machinery for what my father did in a living room, standing in front of his awkward wife and his proud son and Tullan — and what the pastor did in one sentence. My mother kept the Ouija board. My father kept both religions. I kept the whole record, which is how you know this story at all. Okay, Dad.