

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 86

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The Confessional.

As I write, wildfires ravage the western United States. In years past, the fire season usually began in late September or October. These last few years, due to drought and increasing temperatures, our Northern California seasonal inferno has arrived early. Three weeks ago, I drove into the Sierra Mountains to evacuate my 92 year old widowed aunt, Joan Irvine, together with her two feral cats, from her Pollock Pines home threatened by wildfire.

My Aunt Joan ("Nonie"), easily settled into our guest room downstairs, comfortably adapting to our house schedule. The tom cats, Trouble and Scamp, proved to be an entirely different matter. They immediately went into hiding, ignoring their food and, indicative of things to come, avoided their litter box. Soon the downstairs began to smell of urine and the hunt for the toms began. Finally, I cornered them in the bathroom where they had taken residence. My generally pacific and calm demeanor had no effect on these animals. They greeted me snarling and growling, displaying sizable fangs. Fathered by a Maine Coon cat, the two brothers possess a heft uncharacteristic of the average domesticated cat. I dressed defensively in layers with my heaviest leather work gloves to protect my hands. As I reached to capture Trouble, he stood his ground and bit my hand, through the protective leather puncturing my index finger to the bone. He did not let go, so I punched him. He relented. I retreated.

This confrontational approach gave way to plan "B." The following morning, after the cats had calmed down, my aunt coaxed Trouble and Scamp into their carriers with treats. They now happily board at the Four Paws Pet Ranch in nearby Sebastopol, a Nuclear Free Zone. Hopefully, the town ethic will have an edifying effect on the both of them. In the meantime, I went to Urgent Care, saw a physician's assistant, updated my tetanus shot and began a course of prescribed antibiotics, 1,000 milligrams of horsepill. The wound looked angry and infected, but most irritatingly, kept me out of the pool for a week.

What shall we make of these times? My aunt's evacuation to the safety of our home is a providential opportunity. The ferocity of her felines manifested externally an internal reality: the turmoil in Joan's heart. The younger sister of my mother, Joan grew up feeling jealous and fearing that, somehow, my mother was favored in the affections of her parents. It may have something to do with the time in which

she came into the world: she was born on March 25, 1929, roughly seven months before the 1929 Stock Market Crash. The material hopes of my grandparents shattered that day. My grandfather, A. Harold Schulz, lost his job as a broker with the Pacific Stock Exchange and despite his education as a Stanford engineer, suffered many of the employment tribulations associated with the Great Depression. And to add salt to his wounds, a few years later, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president, a man A. Harold Schulz considered politically suspect and definitely a socialist, or possibly worse.

While the family still managed to send Joan to private Catholic schools in San Francisco--with the Marist order at Notre Dame des Victoires for elementary, and for high school with the Dominicans at St. Rose--I am certain they endured economic insecurity and the family suffered emotional and relational stress.

There were more substantive experiences of disappointment and betrayal that marked Joan's life. She migrated to Saint Thomas in the Virgin Islands after her graduation from UC Berkeley in the early 1950s. She met and married her first husband, Bill, in a Roman Catholic ceremony, while she entered her life's vocation as a grade school teacher. She eventually discovered the secret that the rest of the community knew: her husband was bisexual and promiscuous with the local men. Her marriage was annulled and she made her way home to San Francisco, a young woman feeling spurned, defeated in love, and profoundly betrayed. A divorced woman in the 1950s, she did not feel welcomed either by her community of childhood friends or by the Catholic Church, and as for her family, her parents had tried to dissuade her from heading off on this great adventure to the Caribbean in search of life. More than ever, she compared herself with her older sister, who had found stability in a loving marriage and growing family. Joan felt judged.

This has manifested in what we refer to in our family as "Irish Alzheimer"-- that is, you forget everything but your grudges. The condition becomes aggravated after a few glasses of white wine, when her pain is on full display.

I greet Joan each morning with coffee and make her breakfast. I listen. I make her a hot lunch. I listen. I prepare an afternoon snack and espresso. I listen. I make a big, sometimes extravagant, dinner, and pour her a glass of wine. Then I listen. Dr. Yong has repeatedly stated that "food is love!" I know this to be true. And listening is love on steroids. I listen and digest and I serve.

So many of her life tales are punctuated by the refrains, "I am still angry" or "I cannot forgive" this or that slight or person. I am listening to Joan's stories and moderating her anger, coaxing her out, forgiving her, and loving her. Ever so gradually, she is beginning to hear herself and release her tight grip on resentment. As she does, I can feel the liberation of my grandparents and my mother, and countless others who shared the same traits and the same anger, nursed the same grudges, and cultivated the same resentments. Joan speaks, I listen, then forgive, and together we clean up our history. Never have I felt more like a priest in the confessional.

While I still view the California wildfire season with trepidation, I have witnessed firsthand its purgative and restorative effects on the forests. These fires remove accumulated debris from the forest floor and help seed new stands of redwoods. In this evacuation prompted by the forces of Nature, God has done the same for my ancestors, through my aunt and me.