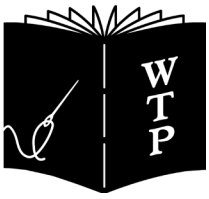
Occasional Papers
([on])
Practice & Form

Teaching God's Daughter

William Patrick

Welcome Table Press
Pamphlet Series



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The Welcome Table Press *Occasional Papers on Practice & Form* is a periodical pamphlet series featuring spoken essays that originated as talks delivered at symposia, conferences, and other gatherings where friends of the essay might be found.

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Teaching God's Daughter

1.

Halfway to Naitauba, the boat's hull cracked. Naitauba was my last stop—a minor island on the eastern side of the Fijian archipelago, a mile and a half in diameter and 5,300 miles from San Francisco—and it was my last stop only if our twenty-eight-foot fiberglass boat reached it in one piece.

Four other passengers were aboard, all of them devotees of a guru named Da Free John, and all of them were vomiting: three where they crouched in the stern seats, holding onto whatever felt secure as the boat dove from crest to trough in the eight-foot swells, and one bent over the starboard side. Amid the pounding and the spray, none of them seemed to care about the Fijian deckhand ferrying sea water from the bilge in the forward cabin—back and forth, emptying his pail off the port side—again and again and again. The boat's captain, named Solo, scanned the sea ahead and didn't say a word. I was tempted to ask if he could radio Chewbacca for a rescue boat, but he looked a little humorless.

For a few seconds, I wondered if any of the devotees were thinking, *This is a hell of a way to start a pilgrimage*. But then I wasn't a true believer. I *would* think something pragmatic like that. I was headed to Naitauba because the guru's organization, the Free Daist Communion, was paying me two grand, plus travel expenses, to help one of Da Free John's teenage daughters with her creative writing. I didn't have to prove the worthiness of my devotion through years of service, or work my way up the spiritual ladder and then pay several thousand dollars for a month-long retreat on the island.

Maybe these devotees are less attached to their egos than I am, I reasoned. *Perhaps they've already achieved a measure of transcendence, so they consider their puking a necessary purification.* At that moment, two unrelated thoughts popped into my head: shark calling and Georgia Witham.

I had learned about shark calling from my *Lonely Planet* travel guide to Fiji. Apparently, the power to call sharks emanated from a village on the plantation island of Taveuni—the very island we had flown to from Suva, Fiji's capital—and the island where we had boarded our now-leaking boat. For all I knew, this deckhand was one of the village shamans who possessed the mystical ability to charm ruthless sea monsters. My guidebook described the start of the annual ritual: "When the big day comes, the caller wades into the water, neck high, and begins chanting. Within thirty minutes, a school of up to fifty sharks, led by a white shark, will circle the caller."

After that, of course, the other villagers coaxed the sharks into the shallows somehow and chopped all of them up—except for the leader—because they believed the white shark had formerly been incarnated as a Fijian boy. But, more importantly for me, the book had explained this shark-calling power could also act as a protective force if and when a boat capsized. Okay, that clinched it. I was grabbing onto the deckhand if we went down. Given the situation, planning for sharks seemed only sensible.

The Georgia Witham thought came out of left field. She had been thirteen, going on twenty, and had lived near my grandparents' house on the eastern shore of Lake George when I was twelve. Georgia and I had spent hours making out on the blue, Naugahyde bunk cushions in the cabin of my father's fishing boat, which was called *The Reel Lucky*—Reel spelled with two *e*'s. At twelve, I hoped the boat's name promised an actual sex life for me—a sex life that might involve other people—so I struggled, night after sweltering night, to ease Georgia out of her convictions. No luck. She claimed she was born-again Christian, and didn't want to be guilty of offending her Savior.

I was raised Catholic, so I certainly understood the guilt part. When I confessed my sins to the parish priest who summered at our tiny chapel, he yelled so loudly that I hustled out of the church and never went back.

Georgia had generated my last gasp with organized religion, so I guess thinking of her in that moment of crisis made associative sense. If I was going to be ladled into the Pacific Ocean, I had better rediscover a link to faith, and pretty fast. As Georgia's face swam in my memory, though, and as I leaned closer to ask Captain Solo about our chances, I began to feel sick, too, and stopped thinking about anything else for a while.

2.

Once we made it inside the barrier reef, the sea flattened. Free of rough water for the first time in three hours, Solo turned the boat sideways to the volcanic island and gunned it. The four devotees immediately stretched their arms up, palms out, like grateful soldiers surrendering, and beamed with energy. The seasick pallor of their faces morphed to a healthy glow in seconds.

Good God, I thought, *they actually believe this tropical speck is holy*. A wealthy devotee had bought the island for Da Free John in 1983 from Raymond Burr, of *Perry Mason* and *Ironside* fame. Burr and his partner had run a company called Sea God Nurseries, and they had used Naitauba and other islands to cultivate orchids and extract oil from copra, the kernel inside a coconut. Free Daist community members in Boston assured me that, after the guru moved there, the island had absorbed his divine powers and pumped out an intense transmission of spiritual energy at a constant rate ever since. When I heard that, it struck me as the sort of metaphysical gobbledygook they were usually spouting. Confronted by the real practice before me, though, and still green around the gills from the arduous ride, my rational defenses weakened and my anxiety shifted into high gear. *Either these devotees are really nuts or there actually is some sort of divine energy force I can't feel,* I thought. *What the hell am I doing here?*

The obvious answer was the money, of course. I had been self-employed and struggling since the early seventies. Fresh out of graduate school with my advanced creative-writing degree, I had lived in an old church, plowed snow, logged for firewood, and taught a couple of writing courses at the local community college. However, when one of my students who had threatened me one night after class was hauled away in handcuffs after stabbing another student in the library, it was clear my bi-weekly adjunct check didn't add up to hazardous duty pay.

So I drifted into woodworking, first as a sculptor, then as a wood turner, and finally as a cabinetmaker and small-scale contractor in Somerville, Massachusetts. With the occasional help of grants from state arts councils and the NEA, which gave me brief respites for writing projects, I had cobbled together a living of sorts for eighteen years. But my back wasn't getting any younger, and I wanted to write full-time. After my novel won a new writer award from the Great Lakes Colleges Association and a producer for ABC-TV read the book and hired me to write a teleplay, a career shift seemed possible. I had sold my shop equipment and wood the year before the Fiji trip, and I had been trying to survive as a writer since. Two thousand bucks for a couple of weeks teaching in Fiji had to figure as a primary incentive.

I also wanted to save my marriage. My second wife, Stacey, had been a true believer when we met, and she insisted that Da Free John was a perfect kind of divinity for an agnostic like me: he was American-born; he had graduated from Columbia University and won a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford; he had studied with Swami Muktananda in India; he was a prolific author, etcetera, etcetera—in short, the perfect blend of East/West mystic intellectual, so what was my problem? I read a couple of his books, went to one community public relations event, and concluded the Free Daist Communion was a slick cult with a charismatic, crazy-wise leader in the driver's seat, and I was apprehensive about traveling down that road.

Though Stacey drifted in and out of the community for the first few years we were together, she was firmly back in by 1990, and pressing harder than ever for my involvement. Our never-ending dialogue ran something like this:

STACEY

Da Free John is the true Man of Understanding, my Heart-Master, and the source of Divine Love. Why can't you accept that?

BILL

Listen, you can believe what you want, but your guru is actually a guy who was born in Queens in 1939 and named Franklin Jones, okay? A little yoga and meditation in an Indian ashram doesn't automatically transform him into a god. My friend, Rusty, lived in an ashram there, too, and now he imports beads and amber. You don't think he's a god, do you?"

STACEY
Your separation from Bliss has coiled you like a fist. This spiritual practice is the Way of the Heart. Why are you afraid to surrender your anger and doubt?

BILL
It's not about fear. Being legitimately pissed off is natural. Everybody's pissed off about something. And how am I so separated from bliss?

STACEY
You have a personal relationship with the Master. Watch for signs of that in your life. He's waiting for you to make your move.

BILL
He'll become permanently transcendent if he holds his breath waiting for me.

And on and on.

Although I would never admit it to her, I was secretly fascinated by the divine part. Who wouldn't be? Da Free John's second book, *Method of the Siddhas*, examined what he called the Saviors of mankind and defined them as: "Great Souls, Master-Teachers who live perfectly in God and are active in the paradoxical and spontaneous functions of the Divine in the created worlds," like Jesus or Buddha or Krishna—or him, I assumed. I had nurtured an abiding interest in Hinduism and Zen Buddhism since college and, at the very least, I was profoundly curious about somebody who had the *cojones* to claim he was an avatar, a living god in human form—not a bodhisattva, working toward spiritual liberation, not a god in training, but the whole enchilada—an already and fully enlightened being. God, living and breathing and camped out on an island in the South Pacific. And how often does someone get a chance to cross paths with God without leaving the planet? In truth, that was probably the real reason I had accepted the job, even if I didn't realize it then.

Later that afternoon, the guru's right-hand man, Godfree, spelled with two *e*'s, drove me up to a *bure* at the top of the tallest hill, maybe a quarter mile above the devotee village. The *bures* we had passed on Taveuni had been rectangular, with low, white stucco sides dominated by dark, thatched roofs. But this one was round, with wood and bamboo stacked vertically and bound by rope to form the circular wall, and a sun-bleached roof that looked like layered straw. You could glimpse its interior through the slats, and that reminded me to ask Godfree about the leaking boat. He confirmed the hull had cracked from the pounding, and he said they'd fix it. *It didn't go down, so where's the big problem, right?* I thought. *I need it to be ready so I can get out of here in two weeks, okay?* Clearly, these people had different priorities than I had.

Godfree gave me the rules: I wasn't a devotee, so I couldn't leave the *bure* without a chaperone. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner would be delivered at eight, noon, and six. There would be three students in the writing workshop: fifteen-year-old Brahmacharini Shawnee, the guru's daughter; her regular teacher, Meg Krenz, who wasn't so thrilled that an outside writing teacher had been brought in; and Shawnee's best friend, twenty-year-old Sarah Seage. Classes would run from nine to nine, every day for the twelve days straight I would teach: poetry in the morning, fiction for half the afternoon, screenwriting for the other half, and I would show movies at night unless Shawnee had other plans after dinner. Finally, Godfree mentioned there was one woman in particular who had expressed an interest in visiting my *bure*, but he had put the kibosh on that; he wanted me to concentrate exclusively on teaching. *Woman? What woman? I didn't know any women there.* Things were getting stranger and stranger.

After I had unpacked, Peter Lennon appeared. I knew Peter from the Boston community, and I trusted his judgment, which wasn't true about most of the other devotees there. When he gave me an enthusiastic bear hug, I felt a sharp electric charge surge through my body. I jumped away and said, "Christ, Peter, what's that?"

He smiled, and said, "Oh, sorry. I've been hanging around with the guru, and some of his energy must be left over."

As I lay in bed that night, transfixed by the tarantula-sized spider moving in slow circles on the outside of my mosquito netting, screams echoed up from the village below. In one sense, I was glad to hear them. The geckos racing across the *bure* walls had kept me awake with their squeaking; a grey, Fijian rat had been in and out of a hole in the wall for hours, gnawing on something over past the table and chairs; and a thousand unseen insects had added an incessant chorus of chomping whatever organic material comprised the roof. Their detritus had been sifting down like dust motes in the moonlight—hypnotic, in its primal way, if you could forget you were just another link in the food chain. So the human screams drowned out the interior wildlife, at least, and countered my temporary paralysis as well. I quickly slid under the netting, retrieved a small piece of two-by-four lying in a corner of the bathroom, and beat the crap out of the giant spider. One down, anyway. Then I dug my travel binoculars out of my suitcase and hurried outside.

A line of female devotees was silhouetted by a jeep's headlights, and their flashlight beams were bouncing around like drunken fireflies in the field above the village. One stocky Fijian was standing in the driver's seat, waving a machete in the air, and shouting something I couldn't make out. He wore a gun belt, with a black-handled pistol sitting in its holster. Another Fijian was hunkered down on the passenger side, talking into a hand-held radio. The devotees began screaming louder and bunched toward the jeep. I worked the binoculars to the right, below the coconut palms, and saw three crabs the size of pit bulls, reared up on their hind legs, claws snapping, advancing toward the screaming women. *Good god*, I thought, *everything is trying to eat everything here*.

3.

Seven days into the teaching, everyone seemed to be thriving except for me and God's daughter. Meg Krenz had overcome her resentment and presented a spiral shell to me as a peace offering. She and Sarah Seage were pumping out exercises and sharing them proudly, day after day. Da Free John, from his remote hermitage on the far side of the island, had named our workshop, "Write Your Heart Out." Not terribly impressive as a moniker, in my opinion, but it did have that signature word, *heart*, in it, so I guess that signaled his stamp of approval.

However, Shawnee acted sullen and remote almost every second she was in class. She got what she wanted passive-aggressively: by crying, by stubbornly refusing to work, or by not communicating. Blonde and willowy, wearing gauzy, New Age layers, she was the willful embodiment of petulant otherworldliness. How much was real and how much practiced stagecraft was impossible for me to know. Should I have expected somebody more down-to-earth? She was identified, after all, as Brahmacharini—a traditional Hindu honorific that signified a celibate student of the Vedas. Plus, she had spent her entire life cloistered from the contemporary, media-saturated world, assured that she was a spiritually elevated being by virtue of her lineage, so I suppose being contemptuous of an outsider like me was understandable.

What else did I know about her? The week before I flew to Fiji, I had received an ambiguous letter from Godfree, telling me that Brahmacharini Shawnee did, on the one hand, possess an inflated sense of her own abilities, but he also described her as struggling to grow up, whatever that meant. In addition, Godfree attached a thirteen-page list of the books in the island library, about ninety percent of which I had not read. So my do-it-yourself, two-week creative writing curriculum would be thrown into the ring with the Vedas, about fifty other wisdom texts revered for the last two thousand years, and most of the classics of Western literature. No pressure there.

In discussing the workshop, Godfree cited the characters in a James Purdy short story he had read in Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction*, and informed me that Brahmacharini Shawnee would see these normally dysfunctional human beings as insane. They were committed to—in his words—lives of unhappiness: "The people she knows and admires—all of them—do not behave anything like the people in Purdy's story, or in virtually any other serious modern story that readily comes to mind."

In my mind, that set up more serious problems. If what Godfree said was true, what craft models could I find that would strike her as relevant or inspiring, and if it was untrue, how should I handle the seamier aspects of her world that Godfree had not discussed? I had seen *The Today Show* exposé from 1985 about ex-members of the Free

Daist Communion who had sued their former religious organization on the grounds of brainwashing and sexual slavery, and I had heard confirming stories from devotees who had spoken out of turn about the inner workings of the community.

In 1973, Da Free John had initiated his crazy wisdom practice—a cycle of celebrations he called "The Garbage and the Goddess" period—at his Mountain of Attention ashram in northern California. The celebrations amounted to Tantric feasts, in which all the previous, strictly-ascetic rules of the spiritual practice were abandoned. Select groups of devotees were instructed to drink, smoke, dance, sing, ingest hallucinogens, and copulate, with the guru acting as participant, ringleader, and teacher, by turns, apparently claiming that his mimicry was intended to illustrate the dead-end nature of human, root-chakra desires.

Beginning in that Garbage and Goddess period, Da Free John had requisitioned many of his female devotees over the years, letting their lovers or husbands sort out their jealous conflicts in any way they chose. He told everyone, in talk after talk, "It is all garbage. I spend a lot of my time packaging your garbage, trying to get you to recognize it. Everything the Guru gives you is garbage, and he expects you to throw it away, but you meditate on it. All of these precious experiences, all of this philosophy…. None of them is the Divine. They are garbage."

Well, somebody is inevitably unhappy after an orgy, so it's no wonder a decade or more of that kind of behavior eventually sparked some lawsuits. In 1990, when I arrived on the island, Da Free John still maintained what he called his *Gurukula*, consisting of nine live-in, female assistants he instructed in various spiritual and secular ways, but nobody seemed to care as much about what happened on a remote island in Fiji. No new lawsuits were in the works, anyway. Nevertheless, Brahmacharini Shawnee was born in 1975, to one of the guru's many wives, which included a former Playboy bunny, and who could predict what fifteen years spent witnessing consistent debauchery in the name of enlightenment had spawned in her personality?

But hey, was any of that really my business? I was just hired to teach her writing. So during that first week, I dutifully trotted out exercises that featured free verse; internal rhyme schemes; third person limited omniscience in fiction; three-act dramatic structure with Syd Field's paradigmatic plot points; the villanelle, with its incantatory repetitions; central characters and their outer motivations in screenplays; varieties of voice in Robert Frost's early, *North of Boston* narrative poems; John Gardner's theories about profluent plots; the important differences between Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnets; story leaps; appositives; and a whole stable of other craft champions. Shawnee wasn't impressed by any of it.

On the seventh morning, I hauled out my trusty sestina exercise and read through to the last, three-line stanza from the heart-breaking example of the form by Elizabeth Bishop:

> *Time to plant tears*, says the almanac.
> The grandmother sings to the marvelous stove
> and the child draws another inscrutable house.

After I provided the formulaic key for the six end-words, all three students tried their own sestinas for an hour. When I asked Brahmacharini Shawnee to read what she had written, she shook her head and deferred to Sarah. I insisted, and she finally gave in, but read the first two stanzas she had finished as fast as she could, holding her pen underneath the lines to mark her place as she went.

> Once came to this wave-surfing play
> A Paul Jones man of madness
> Who arched and weaved the circles
> Into dimples in the praise of Bhagavan. The forms exploded laughter
> Into comets shouting light
> And devotion left the shadows
> And came out into the light. No more shadows.
> We're now joyous to be the toys of Beloved's Play
> And rattle to join at sunset, this jamboree of light.

And skipping Moth and acrobatic Stephan revel in the screaming madness,
And green saris caught on his intoxicated toes. The escalating forms
Of Kathryn swooned in smiling circles.

There wasn't anything mechanically wrong with what she had written. She had the end-words in the right order, her diction level was consistent, some of her word choices interesting, and she had thrown in some alliteration for good measure. If a student in the real world had written those stanzas, I would have been encouraged. But from her, conceptually, it was just another example of spiritual jargon centered on her father and transcribed almost literally from what I knew of her experience. Where was the leap of the imagination I had been harping on for the entire first week? Shouldn't she be able to think outside her world?

Maybe I was tired of being lonely and cooped up in that *bure*, teaching day in and day out. The float arm in the toilet tank had rusted through and disconnected the night before, so every time I needed to flush the toilet, I had to fill a pail in the sink and pour it into the tank. On top of that, another giant spider had taken up residence inside the toilet bowl, and I couldn't persuade him to come into the open for a clear shot with my two-by-four, so that was lurking in a corner of my mind as well. Add in the heat, and the flying cockroaches, and the repetitive meals that started with pasty tropical fruits and ended with greasy fish. Paradise had begun to sour. Maybe that was it. I had expected all of it to be different. So when Shawnee marched out another paean to her Heart-Master dad, I lost it.

"What have I been asking you to do?" I cried. "Create a world that isn't familiar. I'd even accept a dream sequence at this point." Shawnee looked confused. "Look," I went on, "what if, as we're sitting here, Sarah suddenly rose up out of her chair, helicoptered around the room a few times and then descended head-first back into that chair, singing 'The Star Spangled Banner' the whole time? That would be something unusual and unexpected—the kind of thing that we might associate with dreams—correct?"

Shawnee looked even more confused at that point, and said, "One day last week I walked into a room where Kanya Remembrance was meditating, and she was hovering up near the ceiling. I smiled at her, and waved, and walked out. Is that what you mean?"

4.

Okay, I'm teaching in a galaxy far, far away. How do I instruct an alien? That's where my thought-process began, and it went downhill from there as I considered Shawnee's bizarre pronouncement. *Whose crazy-ass idea was this, anyway? Who died and left me boss of this* bure *asylum?*

I had always reminded myself to learn from my students, but maybe that abstract ideal applied only when the lessons they offered coincided with my own notions about existence. Were only comfortable lessons admissible? Was I afraid to operate within Shawnee's parameters? I knew my tendencies: I often pushed too hard when students acted preoccupied. And in the heat of a teaching moment, I could easily slip into pompous or sarcastic mode if a student was acting really dense. But this was more than a simple problem of attention or intelligence. This was an impasse. All that I had brought to the table was being dismissed as unworthy or irrelevant.

However, the problem went deeper than that. At the beginning, Peter Lennon had shocked me, literally, and now Brahmacharini Shawnee had assured me that her world was one where the laws of physics, as I understood them, didn't apply. Okay, so people on that island could levitate during meditation, or carry around force fields, and those were unremarkable commonplaces there. What if I started with that reality and built exercises from there? Why was I so resistant to changing my program? After all, in my spiritual reading, I had run across numerous accounts of supernatural yogic practices, like a yogic master who had stood on his head for ten years, even though I had never, personally, witnessed anything like that. Was Shawnee lying, or was I just another doubting spiritual novice?

That being acknowledged, all of it seemed nuts to me, but what did I know, really? Hell, once when I dropped acid, a thought-balloon had appeared over the head of anyone who spoke—even guests on *The Tonight Show*—containing exactly what they were saying until their words broke apart, letter by letter, and floated away. At the time, it had seemed alarming, but I also considered it a fascinating addition to what I thought of as normal life. So why couldn't I accept Shawnee's version of normal? Perhaps it was because the alternate world that existed for the devotees on that island—the one that revolved around their man-God—was one that sucked up my quotidian reality, yanked

it inside out, and subsumed it inside their guru's own iconoclastic image and words. *Leave your mundane beliefs at the door, Mr. Patrick. Your priorities don't apply here.*

Midway through my second week, Godfree pressed me to stay longer and meet the guru. He had visited me most nights to watch movies, even when the students weren't there, and that had eased my loneliness a little. I didn't assume we were best buddies, but his request still surprised me.

"I have to fly to the Midwest the day after I get back to Boston," I told him. "The reservations are all set. There are ten colleges—classes and dinners and readings--back-to-back, over three weeks. The honorariums for reading comprise my award, and I need that money. Rescheduling the trip would be impossible. I would just lose everything."

"Exactly," Godfree said. "That's the point. Lose everything. Don't go back at all. Stay here and be the main writer for The Free Daist Communion. This is an opportunity to speak to the world. You can translate the guru's message in a way that will save millions of people from unhappiness."

I hadn't seen that coming. "No, no thanks," I sputtered, and then I admitted, "Look, I need to go home. I miss my wife and son. I miss my own life."

Godfree had brought a tall guy named Dan with him, and Dan was staring at me, the pupils in his eyes dark and dilated. "Your wife and son don't matter," Dan said. "Da Free John is here to free all people, and you should help him do that. The Way of the Heart is the most profound spiritual path ever offered to mankind."

"I can't just forget about—" I started to say, but Dan broke in. "You need to understand this," he said. "If you choose our way of life, you get rewards far greater than any pain you could feel over losing a family." That was all I needed to hear.

On the day I left for Taveuni, the boat was filled with Fijian carpenters who had been building the new school for devotee children on the island, and who were now traveling home to Suva for a week off. The minute the boat emerged from the barrier reef, we hit the same turbulent waves, but this time the wind was behind us and the boat seemed to glide along the crests. Still, half an hour into it, my arms and legs started to tingle and my stomach ached.

Suddenly, I was crying. It was more than whimpering and less than howling in grief, but it was unmistakably crying. At first, I figured it was motion sickness, probably exacerbated by the exhaustion brought on by twelve straight days of teaching and twelve labyrinthine nights of scratching my bug bites raw. But the crying didn't stop. It grew stronger, for no reason I could discern, and occasional, loud sobs erupted. The closest carpenters were staring, and one held out a bucket for me, but I waved it away. Whatever I felt, it was way beyond the nausea phase.

Embarrassed, I leaned against the seat in front of me and covered my head with my arms. At that point, a brilliant light flashed behind my eyes, and stayed. Inside the light, an image of Da Free John hovered. The tingling in my extremities stopped, and the light intensified. The image pulsed, and I was mesmerized by it. I couldn't even feel the boat bounce from wave to wave.

When we reached Taveuni, I described what I had seen to Solo, and I asked if that was a normal occurrence for people leaving Naitauba. "No," he said, "no one has ever told me about that, but I think it means I will see you again."

"Visions?" one of the carpenters asked me.

"Something like that," I answered.

5.

Had I missed my calling? Was I meant to be a scribe for the Divine, and was I too egotistical to accept that selfless job? Since I had been raised Catholic, the recovering altar boy in me assumed that a Christian God was the source of all life-changing calls, and that a summoning like that would always involve a miraculous task, like Saint Patrick driving all the serpents out of Ireland, or the visionary Joan of Arc following God's instructions and leading France's army to victory over England.

However, understanding what a divine call actually was became far more complex as, like most people, I coped with the drama of smaller gestures in relationships and careers. Where was the tremor of bliss in a well-made bowl? And when a spiritual opportunity did seem to arrive, why did I choose what I chose? Had I grown incapable of even recognizing a call when it rang out? If a metaphorical burning bush had burst into esoteric voices in front of

me, why had I not paid greater attention? How could a reading tour for a first novel trump a constant transmission of divine energy? I didn't have any good answers.

But I did know that a call demanded a response, and I had emphatically declined to take my seat in Da Free John's ecstatic Amen choir, ultimately because it didn't feel right. To paraphrase Tommy Lee Jones in one of his cop roles, I knew something hinky when I stumbled across it. I couldn't just ignore the series of alarms that had been triggered inside my head. That was half of it. The other half involved my fear. Was surrendering myself to the guru's transcendent agenda that terrifying? Had self-involved aspirations amplified into narcissistic motivations? Was that the primary reason I was writing?

On my three reading trips to the Midwest for the Great Lakes Colleges award, almost everyone I met—cabdrivers, writers-in-residence, convenience store clerks, students, college presidents, diner waitresses, English Department chairs—inexplicably seemed compelled to share their painful, personal stories with me, as if I had been imbued with some inchoate receptivity. Late at night, after my readings, I worked some of those stories into dramatic monologues as I sat alone in historic, college-owned houses.

A couple of years after that, when I was teaching in Virginia, I heard that Brahmacharini Shawnee had moved to Los Angeles and changed her name to Shawnee Free Jones because she wanted to be an actor. The first role she landed was playing a half-naked ingénue caught up in a media-staged Christmas Eve bust in *L.A. Confidential*.

And in the mid-nineties, at 3 am one sleet-plagued winter morning, a ringing phone woke me. It was Godfree calling from Naitauba. He wanted to know if Stacey would consider becoming a member of Da Free John's *Gurukula*—that infamous, nine-woman circle of attendants—and he instructed her to ask me how I felt about it. My instant anger reminded me of how betrayed I had felt by Godfree on the island, and reinforced my distrust of his agenda.

But the anger didn't solve my lack of spiritual connection. After I had run screaming from Catholicism, literature filled that gap. It took a while, but I finally came to understand that what I needed to help me live were the illusions that artful stories provided. The arbitrary, spiritual illusions that Da Free John had co-opted from the wisdom tradition and amplified within his super-charged imagination held too little comfort for me. His version of the Divine involved more loss and suffering than I could bear, and echoed what I already knew.

When I was three years old and my infant brother died, my mother had consoled me with that now-abandoned, least-credible Catholic construct—limbo. I understood reward and punishment, even at that early age, so heaven and hell made a kind of primal sense to me. But *limbo*? Some amorphous celestial location for a nine-month old who had died of pneumonia and who wasn't yet eligible to suffer for his sins in Purgatory? Really? Even now, that idea seems impossible to fathom, and it's no wonder I believe the ambiguities of religion and ego-transcendence contain not just mystery but also the terror of an eternal ascent into oblivion.

In my life, writing has always provided a temporary sanctuary from the uncompromising demands of the Divine. As Franz Kafka said, "God doesn't want me to write, but I must write. A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." A frozen sea often strikes me as a pretty accurate description of my interior climate. I would like that to be otherwise, though, and that's why the search for connection with a viable God—on whatever odd route has been mapped out for me—has lurked relentlessly in the shadows of every endeavor.

Ortega y Gasset said, "The possibility of constructing human souls is perhaps the major asset of future novelists." So writing fiction would put me in God's seat for a change, right? There, I would at least have the possibility of building some jerry-rigged contraption I could call a soul when I write. However, I'm ambivalent, almost always, about that task. Roger Rosenblatt captured my dilemma when he wrote, "I sometimes think one writes to find God in every sentence. But God (the ironist) always lives in the next sentence."

Isn't that the truth? It so often feels like a game of come-from-behind in the bottom of the ninth inning. Writing may after all be a fool's errand—this tracking the Divine one frustrating sentence at a time, aiming to construct and connect with other souls in that literary process—but it feels more than genuine. At its best, it feels sacred, and so far that's been good enough for me.