

*My favorite things, with April Salzano, Jack Smiles,
Mandy Foster, a new Paper Cuts,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

September 2014

MAGAZINE

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Subscriptions Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
Austin Richards
ads@blotterrag.com
940.395.5925

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
Jenny Haniver
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
chief@blotterrag.com

919.933.4720 (business hours only! you
may call for information about snail-mail
submissions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
Marilyn Fontenot
marilyngfontenot@gmail.com
919.904.7442

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The Blotter is a production of
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.
A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

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“Adios, Audio-Visual”

Many, many years ago, so many that I hesitate to give an exact count, our house had a James Thurber moment. If you know what that means, please sit back and enjoy your coffee while we bring the rest of the folks up to speed. You others, go get a copy of “The Night The Bed Fell and Other Stories.” Here, go ahead and read. We’ll wait for you....

Dad was a social studies teacher at the local middle school. In the early-sixties, he became the Audio-Visual guy, because none of the other teachers wanted the responsibility and because it let him tinker with the equipment while teaching the techie nerds. Who here remembers being allowed to get out of upwards of a half-hour of some horrible math quiz in order to wheel a projector from the gym over to the biology classroom (switching out the “How to Avoid a Nasty Groin-Pull” training film for “Bacteria Are Not Our Friends, So Wash That Beaker!”)?

As AV teacher, Dad had to preview movies shown at school, for breaks, bad splices, content appropriateness, and, of course, because it’s good fun to look at movies, even if they’re only educational films. We gathered in the living room on movie night when Dad set up the projector in the hallway and took the pictures off the wall, turning our house into a little theater. Mom took out the frying pan and lid and toasted up popcorn (this was back in the day before scientists had found a real purpose for microwaves). And, if we were really good, there were a couple of Hershey Kisses hidden somewhere I couldn’t heretofore find them, and these were distributed before the film started. Life was good and sweet and suddenly there was “Protecting Yourself During a Thermonuclear Explosion or: How I Learned to Dive Under My Desk in Sixth Grade and Still Flirt with Katie from Down The Street.” Man alive, you can’t beat the old classics.

Our town had no movie theater – the closest one was a couple of towns away, a single screen. We lived in a suburb of New York, so we had an absolute plethora of television channels – the three networks, two local New York stations and public TV. If you wanted to see a movie, there were probably two to choose from on any given evening, which was considered the height of civilized living anywhere in the free world. Therefore any movie was a good movie. In my opinion, the best of all had special effects by Ray Harryhausen, or were war movies, the war being interchangeably Civil, One or Two. (On a separate note, to this day, I think that all movies should start with the theme song from Gone With The Wind. Just saying...)

Pertinent details: once upon a time, Dad had worked part-time with the town Recreation Department as a little league umpire. That dubious connection led to him arranging a “Friday Evening Film Festival” in the summers. He convinced the janitors at the middle school to splash the outside wall of the gymnasium with a giant white rectangle

of paint. He scrounged two hundred feet of extension cord as well as British POWs trying to escape from a hardware store with Sid Caesar and Edie Adams. Posters in the pharmacy and the supermarket announced each Friday's feature. Camp chairs or army blankets were a must, as were Mom's frying-pan popcorn and mosquito repellent (not in the same recipe) and a nickel's worth of Bazooka Joe bubblegum.

Great as it was to sit out under the stars with a crowd of fellow citizens and watch a movie projected onto the school wall and hear its low-fidelity soundtrack and dialogue out of a couple of speakers, it was even more awesome to sit on the floor in the living room with heads resting on the couch-cushions: masters of the show, controllers of the projection. We don't give a second thought nowadays, but it was once a very cool thing to have to pee during a movie and have the power to say "hold on a moment, I'll be right back" without missing a frame.

Hold it! I know many of you don't believe me, but this used to be a huge deal. Back then *nothing* waited. If your phone rang, it rang until someone hung up. If you were on the phone, the caller got a busy signal – a rude-sounding beep-beep in their ear, telling them to hang up and call again sometime. (And you didn't know who it was!) If you missed the start of a movie, you missed the start. If you didn't get home on time for the news, you didn't know what was going on. It was amazing! In all fairness, trains didn't wait, but another one came along after a while, so there's that. Sorry – that was a lot of nostalgia for one day. I need an aspirin. (That's the little white pill that stops pain. For crying out loud - it's on the shelf in the bathroom.)

Before we go any further you should know that back then you couldn't just rent any movie that had ever been made like you mostly can today in a corner video shop or download it or flip around the hundreds of channels. There was a place that rented out movies to theaters, an hour's drive away from home, in the city (not New York but one of the satellite urban sprawls nearby) that had rooms full of cases and spools and reels and bulbs and sprockets and cables and belts and all of the paraphernalia of filmdom. They let Dad order titles over the phone and then come and get them. It was easy and cheap and I won't say any more about that. If you know what I mean...

So, now we're finally here – a summer evening in 1965 or so. Dad rented a thriller for the coming weekend, and was going to preview it. We were all set, kids on the floor, popcorn in a big bowl, Mom and Dad on the couch. Tippi Hedren, Rod Taylor and Suzanne Pleshette in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds."

Hang on, one more thing: Mom can't see very well. When I was little, she could do a hell of a lot of other things, though, including hearing you sneak sandwich cookies out of a plastic bag in the kitchen while sitting in the other room hemming a pair of my sister's pedal-pushers and listening to Mahler's Symphony number 3. Don't get me wrong – if there was ever a person who put paid to the term "handi-

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CAUTION

Do good, be nice, call your Mom.

“The Prospect”

by Jack Smiles

The batter jumped back as the pitch flew at his head and then stared open-mouth as the ball broke in an arc, smacked into the catcher’s mitt and the umpire called strike three.

On the bench Bill Poole, the manager of the Wheatland Township High School Threshers, spit in a bucket and said, “holy shit.”

At the other end of the bench Max Fell let out a low whistle, looked over his shoulders, leaned into Elmer French, lowered his voice and said, “Did you see that?”

“Yep,” French said, “Struck ‘em out.”

“No, no, no...”

“Yep, he did. Struck ‘em out.”

“Yeah, Yeah, I know he struck him out, but did you see that Goddamn pitch.”

“Yep, looked like a curve.”

“A curve? It floated like a Goddamn paper airplane. I thought it was gonna hit the bat-

ter in the head and so did the batter.”

“That’s Bo Webster, the Sheriff’s boy.” Now French looked around and lowered his voice. “I coulda struck him out.” Fell rolled his eyes. “It’s not about the batter. It’s about the pitcher. He could write a Goddamn textbook.”

“Doubt that, since he ain’t even ever read one. He carries ‘em home, though, for Mary Lou Radle.” French slapped his knee and laughed.

“It’s just a saying. Textbook,” Fell said. “It means his mechanics are about perfect.”

“You can say that again. He can tune a tractor till it purrs like a kitten.”

Fell raised his eyebrows turned toward French and waited for the laugh, but French just stared out at the field. Just then a crack like a pistol shot startled Fell.

“What the...” he looked at the field and saw the Threshers’

catcher throw down his mitt and wave his hand like it was on fire.

“Fastball,” French said.

Manager Poole spit in a bucket and said, “holy shit.”

Fell said, “Yeah. Holy Goddamn shit.”

“So, you’re some kind of scout?” French asked.

“Yeah, some kind. The kind that hasn’t signed a decent prospect in four years and got sent to Siberia.”

“Siberia? This ain’t...”

“Yeah, I know,” Fell interrupted. “It’s a saying. Siberia. Look, they say you’re his lawyer, why don’t I make an offer right now.”

“I ain’t a lawyer, but I do clerk for Judge Thompson and I give folks legal advice from time to time.”

Fell sighed. “I have a contract right here in my pocket. I’ll give him \$500 for his name and send him over to Wichita for starters for \$150 a month.”

“Don’t know about that?”

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“Okay, okay. A grand and \$200 a month.”

“Don’t know about that either? He’s only 17. You’d have to ask his old man.”

“Seventeen?” Fell had taken him for 19. “So, where’s the old man?” Fell asked looking around at the sparse crowd.

“Ain’t here. He’s back a farm birthing a cow and if Terry knows what’s good for him, he’ll get back there and help as soon as this game is over.”

Man, Fell thought to himself. This joint is right out of the Grit.

“Look, let me take you out to dinner tonight. You, the kid, his parents. Best place in town.”

French stared out at the field and watched Terry strikeout another batter. “Make it tomorrow. Meet us at the Bales at 7:30. It’s easy to find on Main Street. Best place in town and the only one.”

It was easy to find, all right. Bales was right across the street from the hotel, which, Fell judged, wasn’t half bad for cross-

roads cowtown. He got to Bales early and took a table against the wall opposite the bar. They came in on time, the father, Wilson, leading the way with Terry close behind him. The old man pulled a chair out for his wife, Denise. Terry did the same for his girlfriend, Mary Lou. Fell sized Terry up. He wasn’t a big kid, looked to be about 5-10, maybe 160. Built, though, with those long, lean farmer muscles showing below the rolled up sleeves of his flannel shirt. And he had a posture, the kid did. Like they used to say about Big Ed Walsh. He could strut standing still.

Terry, his parents and Mary Lou sat across the table from Fell. French came around and sat with Fell. Watching Terry and his father cut their steaks, with their forks and knives

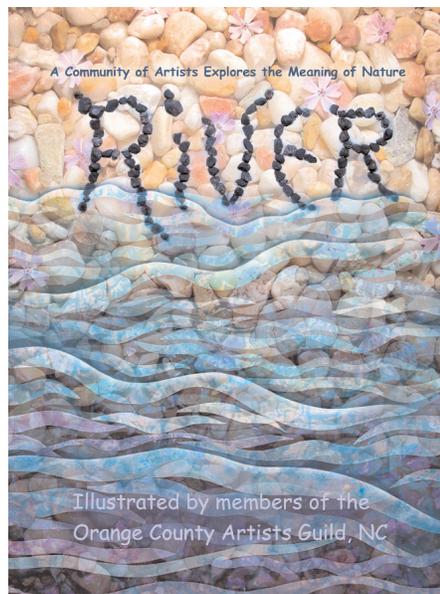
dwarfed by their huge paws, Fell had a hard time getting the image out of his mind of those hands inside a cow’s uterus. When Terry’s father finished his steak, put down his fork and knife and wiped his face, Fell opened his mouth to make his pitch, but Terry’s father beat him to it. “Elmer here tells me you want to send my boy away to play ball clear to Wichita.”

“He won’t be there long, Mr. Kranson,” Fell said.

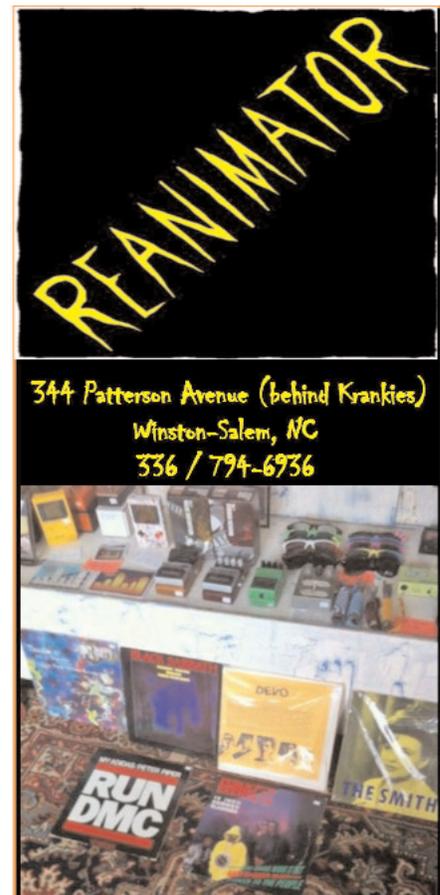
“Well that’s good, gonna need him in August.”

“No,” said Fell, “that’s not what”

Just then the restaurant front door opened. Fell glanced at the man who walked in, recognized him and lowered his head. Terry was about turn and look, but Fell distracted him. “Terry,



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do you know how much Bob Feller made last year?"

"No sir."

"Twenty thousand."

Terry's mother's mouth fell open. "Dollars?" She said with a gasp.

"Yes, mam, dollars."

"Are you saying Terry could make \$20,000 pitching baseball?" French asked.

"Well, yeah, and more than that one day."

Mary Lou muttered "whoa" and elbowed Terry in the ribs.

Fell dared a glance at the front. Yankee scout Dan Kellow stood at the bar talking to the bartender and then turned and went down a hallway toward the

men's room.

Fell excused himself and hurried to the bar.

He put a fiver in the bartender's hand. "If that stranger asks about Terry, you don't know him."

"But he's sitting right there."

Fell put another fiver in his hand, said "You don't know him" and hurried back to the table.

Kellow came out and went back to the bar. He looked at Fell's table, but Fell looked down at his plate. Kellow didn't recognize him. Kellow talked to the bartender, who pointed toward the street and said something back. Kellow went out. Fell

went to the bar.

"He didn't ask about Terry," the bartender said. "He went across the street to get a room. He's coming back for dinner, 20 minutes."

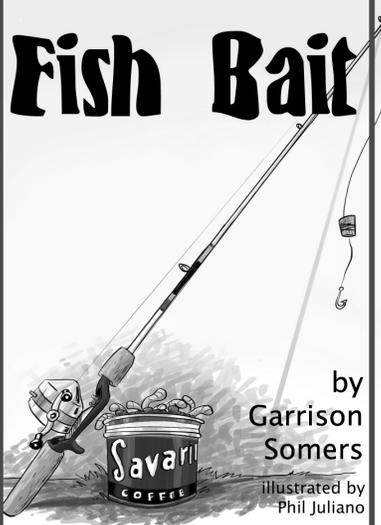
Fell was relieved. He was a step ahead. Kellow had just arrived. He wasn't at the game. But what else could he be here for? Fell went back to the table and waved for the check. As he counted out the money, he said, "Here's my offer. \$1500 for his name. It's unheard of. And \$350 a month. Please think about it." "We will," French said.

Fell got French and Terry and his family out of the restaurant just in time. Their pickup pulled away just as Kellow



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Fish Bait

by Garrison Somers
illustrated by Phil Juliano

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walked across the street from the hotel to the restaurant. Walking in the opposite direction to the hotel Fell turned his head as he passed Kellow in the street. It was dark. Kellow didn't recognize him.

Fell went to the desk and chatted up the night clerk about dinner. "Cut that steak with a butter knife," Fell said glancing down at the registration book. Reading upside down he saw that Kellow was in 10, just two doors down from his own room.

Picking hotel room locks might not like seem like a scouting skill, but it happened before. In Kellow's room Fell found Kellow's personal appointment book on the dresser. He looked at the next day, Tuesday. Nothing there. He looked at Wednesday. It read, "Game at Wheatland high school. Good prospect. 4 p.m."

"Damn Yankees," Fell said under his breath. Wednesday was Wheatland's next game and as far as Coach Poole cared two days rest was plenty for Terry. Back in his room Fell poured a stiff bourbon and played mental pepper with his options. One. Run over to the bar, confront

Kellow and demand he lay off his discovery. Two. Go out to the farm and make the family an offer that would curl the old man's mustache. But the Browns were cheap. Fell didn't have the power to offer the money he was thinking about. Hell, he didn't even think they'd go for the \$1500.

Back his room Fell tried the telephone, but the operator couldn't make a connection to St. Louis. He went to the desk and sent a telegram, but wasn't optimistic. President Miller wasn't gonna buy "the next Feller" description. How could there be more than one?

So Fell chose option one. He stormed into the Bales and walked right up to Kellow. "Fell," Kellow said, "What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere? The Browns find some money in the couch cushions?" "Like you don't know. The kid's mine, Kellow. Mine alone. I discovered him."

Kellow drained his glass, threw \$2 on the bar, said, "It's a business," and walked out.

Fell went to the window and watched Kellow enter the hotel. He waited a couple min-

utes and then went to the hotel. He gave the night clerk a fiver, they were getting scarce. "If room 10 goes out ring me." He gave him another five and said, "Pass it on to the day clerk."

Fell couldn't sleep. He stayed up half the night worrying. He didn't hear anyone in the hall. The desk didn't ring. Kellow stayed in. The next day there were enough cowboys round for Fell to keep an eye on Kellow without making it obvious. The Yankee scout took breakfast, lunch and dinner at the Bales. After dinner he went to the bar. The waiter brought him a telegram. Kellow read it and went back to his room.

Fell made the same deal with the clerk. Exhausted he downed a couple of drinks and slept soundly. In the lobby in the morning, the day clerk nodded at him. Kellow hadn't gone out. Fell

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Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



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followed Kellow to Bales, took a table across the dining room. As Fell ate his breakfast, Kellow walked over to his table and stood over him. "Look, Fell, you're right. You discovered him, the kid is yours."

Fell nearly spit out his coffee. He slapped a hand on the table and laughed. "Since when did the Yankees get a conscience?"

"Do you want him or don't you. Final offer, the Smith kid is yours."

"Smith? Who the hell is Smith?"

"Don't play stupid with me Fell. He's the outfielder from West County high and they're playing here tomorrow."

"But, I'm not here for..."

Kellow interrupted, raising his voice. "I'm not buying your act, Fell, I know that's why you're here. You're getting what you want. Besides I found a better kid. Kranson kid. Terry. A pitcher."

Fell dropped his fork. It clattered off the plate onto the floor. He put his hands over his eyes and moaned. "What? How? You didn't go out."

"I got lucky. I overheard

talk of the kid in the bar. He's a hayseed, but I figured if the truth of the stories were half of what I was hearing, he be a find. For 15 bucks and a bottle of bourbon, the bartender said he get word to the kid and the old man. They came to my room last night. Ruppert wired him personally from New York. The old man was impressed as all hell. Signed him right there in my room. They're all on the way to Springfield as we speak. The old man, the mother, the girlfriend. Gonna get him settled in."

Fell's mouth dropped open, but he couldn't speak.

"Come on, Fell aren't you going to thank me for Smith? Say something."

Fell looked down at his eggs and said, "Who's gonna birth the calves?"

Kellow shook his head. "What? What're you cracking up?"

"Yeah. I'm cracking up."

Well, I gotta catch my train. Good luck with Smith."

....

Elmer French pointed at the boy in the batter's box, turned to Fell and said, "Did you see him throw that kid out at

third? Some arm that Smith kid, hey."

"That runner was so slow, I you could have thrown him out," Fell said.

Just then Smith swung and hit a mighty drive over the right field fence.

"Look at that Fell. Musta went 350."

"My grandma could throw harder than that pitcher and in that wind I could hit one 400," Fell said.

Coach Poole spit in the bucket and said, "holy Shit."



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Paper Cuts - Books you might not have read

by Martin K. Smith

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (Rev. Peter Scazzero,
Thomas Nelson Inc., 2006)

Self-help books are a multi-million dollar industry. The number published yearly in this country, laid end-to-end, could probably build that wall along the Mexican border the anti-immigrationists keep clamoring for. They offer themselves for every conceivable activity: how to eat, exercise, dress one's best; how to survive college, then stalk employment with the skill and success of a seasoned hunter; how to spot, pursue and catch the perfect mate, then have a lifetime of satisfying hot sex; how to raise perfect kids, deal with imperfect adults, balance one's budget and one's mental health; even how to become deceased in an empowering way. (My husband has quite a few in the "How to Survive a Job Where Your Boss and Coworkers are Psychotic Idiots" subgenre.) Christianity in this culture is also big business, meaning that there's another border-wall's worth of books on how to achieve all the above goals using Christly-minded tactics. And the inevitable apotheosis of these two trends is, of course, self-help books on How To Be a Better, Healthier, Happier, More Successful, "Christian," Christian. The Bible, it would seem, is not the last word on the subject.

Something we might as

well get out of the way: do I believe in God? Well...though a lifelong churchgoer, I'm too doubtful, skeptical, irreverent and trust-challenged to say anything more than "I *hope* He exists." As a lifelong resident of a reason-based Western culture (at least it tries to be reasonable, items like Guantanamo, the Kardashians and our current State Legislature notwithstanding), I'm aware that from a reason-based standpoint, belief in a vast, intangible, sentient, omniscient Being who controls all existence, is not exactly rational. I'm also aware, though, that reason can only work from what's known; and that history is full of reasoning, rational types who were left looking like complete idiots when their calmly asserted "facts" were blown up in their faces by later discoveries. Furthermore, to specify "God" as the Being's only name and Christianity as its only approach, feels like trying to lock down this infinitely vast entity into the itsy-bitsy teeny-weeny microscopic confines of a human-framed system. It casts a shadow of superiority over all others: mainstream, esoteric, pagan, New Age, whatever; which I think is undeserved. Any worthwhile religion, properly applied, empowers the better angels of our nature. So to

answer the question: I can't say Yes, and I won't say No. I want there to be Something and / or Someone out there, beyond this stumbling catastrophe-prone mess called human life; Something bigger and better, on some higher level of the game, where everything works out right at last.

So, to the book itself. What, pray tell, is *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*? It's the simple, you'd-think-it-was-obvious idea that if you're an emotionally healthy person, you'll be a happier and more effective Christian. People are leaving the established Church in droves as large as the Israelites out of Egypt in a Cecil B. DeMille epic; and one reason, Scazzero asserts, is the prevalence therein of *non-emo-healthy* holiness.

[The church-leavers] were sincere followers of Jesus Christ, but they struggled as much as anyone else with their marriages, divorces, friendships, parenting, singleness, sexuality, addictions, insecurities, drive for approval, and feelings of failure and depression at work, church and home. They saw the same patterns of emotional conflict inside the church as

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outside...and they grew weary of Christians around them who, regardless of their “knowledge” of God, church involvement, and zeal, were angry, compulsive, highly opinionated, defensive, proud, and too busy to love the Jesus they professed.

One of his own former parishioners, explaining her departure, remarked “Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?”

He has his own Top Ten list of spiritual-unhealthiness symptoms. I won't recap the lot, but most of them are facets of the idea that “Christians shouldn't have these problems.” If you're a true Jesus-type you're never angry, bitter, fearful, lonely, bored with your spouse, traumatized by your past, etc. Just get behind some stained glass and a steeple, and your dysfunctions will all float away. This is not a workable idea. In fact, denying them, or trying to sugar-coat them with “Christian” sweetness and light, may only make them fiercer. Some of the most painful family quarrels are in church “families,” with all sides trying to wrap their arguments in high-minded virtuous “Christian” rhetoric to hide the resentment and bitterness. I've seen it happen.

Scazzero's remedy plans combine straight-up religious practices, like a “Daily Office” time of prayer, Bible study and reflection, with secular improvement strategies such as, find your true self instead of the one everybody expects of you; learn what

past traumas push your present buttons so you can work on de-wiring them; face your emotions honestly, even the bad ones; deal with the facts that you can't control everything, that loss and grief will happen, and that someday you're gonna die. They're the same tasks you'd work on with any reputable therapist or twelve-step group; except here they're well-wrapped in Christian metaphor and liberally sprinkled with Scripture. Finding your authentic self, for instance, is “Know Yourself That You May Know God.” Taking good emotional care of yourself is Good Stewardship:

Few Christians make the connection between love of self and love of others. Sadly, many believe that taking care of themselves is a sin, a “psychologizing” of the gospel taken from our self-centered culture...It is true we are called to consider others more important than ourselves (see Philippians 2:3). We are called to lay down our lives for others (see 1 John 3:16). But remember, you first need a “self” to lay down.

For the workaholics who might freak at his urging that they keep a Sabbath every seventh day, he says

We stop on Sabbaths because God is on the throne, assuring us the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities...God is at work taking care of the universe. He manages quite well without us having to

run things. So he commands us to relax, to enjoy the fact that we are not in charge of his world...Every Sabbath reminds us to “be still, and know that [he is] God” (Psalm 46:10) and to stop worrying about tomorrow (see Matthew 6:25-33).

By the way, he – Scazzero, I mean – offers the notable idea that a true Sabbath “is to replenish our energies and make us more effective the other six days.” It's not a Sunday dozing off during the morning sermon and / or the afternoon football game, until you're awakened and handed the Honey-Do list. In his four-part Sabbath plan you Stop, Rest, Delight (in whatsoever delights you, so long as it's not harmful to yourself or others), and Contemplate. It doesn't even have to be Sunday: it can be whatever day of the week suits your schedule.

There are occasional cute moments when Christian terms and modern therapy-speak appear side by side. We learn, for instance, that Jesus was “an inner-directed, separate adult” with “a mature, healthy ‘true self.’” Scazzero has an irony-free, *Leave It to Beaver* earnest style that I suspect is common in much modern Christian writing. He suggests that the pressures of trying to make emotionally healthy changes can feel like trying to break the sound barrier, and quotes Chuck Yeager, the test-pilot who in 1947 was the first to do so (something thought by many back then to be fatally impossible). “After all the anxi-

ety, breaking the sound barrier turned out to be a perfectly paved speedway...The 'unknown' was a poke through Jell-O." Scazzero then remarks,

The point of the story...[is that] you can be sure of one thing: your life, like Yeager's airplane, will shake in the process of you maturing into the person God intends...It will initially feel uncomfortable, as if the plane of your life is shaking from the pressure...If you move forward, however, you will find that God is with you and behind you. His grace is sufficient. His power is accessible. And the unknown before you is really like poking through Jell-O.

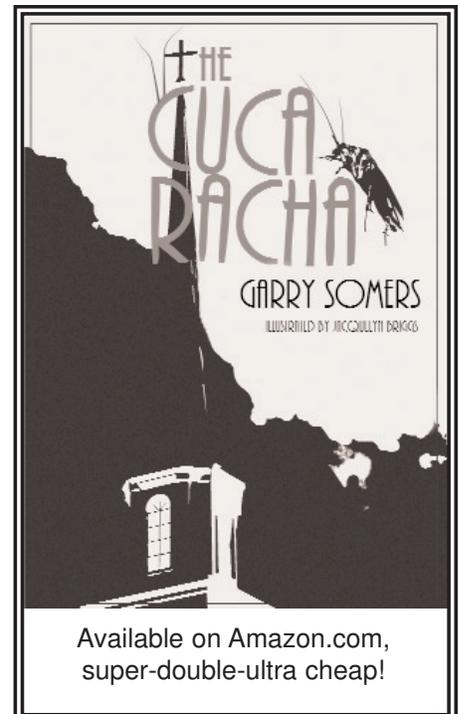
And though he frowns on "the Babylon of our 21st-century world," likening it to the Beast of Revelation for its all-pervasive self-indulgent zeitgeist, he interprets some Biblical teachings in a kind of "Me Generation" way. Jesus saying "My yoke is easy and my burthen is light" (Matthew 11:30) Scazzaro translates as "I have crafted a life for you, a yoke

for you to wear, that perfectly fits who you are. It is light and easy, I promise." Jesus' remark "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37) doesn't mean you have to dump your family themselves, just whatever emotional baggage and dysfunctional relationship skills you may have inherited from them. (So if someday my husband decides to re-activate his Christianity, I won't have to forego his Mama's Southern-style big breakfasts – to which my stomach exclaims "Hallelujah!")

I don't want to say hateful or snarky things about this book, really I don't. It's not bad, or mean, or evil. Its secular suggestions are commonsense, and its religious ones seem reasonable within the closed circuit of Christian belief. Scazzero comes across as an honestly decent sort, who doesn't want people, or the church families they're part of, to suffer emotional miseries. He's not strident, like a lot of his fellows in the Evangelical / Pentecostal realm. He does frown on premarital boinking, and says that the idea of Christianity as just one of many

spiritualities is a lie of that 21st-century Babylon Beast, but these are the only two red flags of intolerance. My discomfort with the book is my discomfort with the idea of "faith," especially "blind" faith.

Do you remember several decades ago, when Moonies seemed to be everywhere? (Scazzero's brother joined them, and was forthwith declared dead by their traditional Italian papa.) They creeped me out, with that smiling gaze which somehow suggested large empty spaces in the mind behind it, from which important parts of their humanness had been removed, and which seemed to focus not exactly on me but on Something large, powerful and unearthly, standing right behind my shoulder. That's my image of unquestioning faith. You consciously choose to assert, despite a major absence of evidence, that "Yes, there *is* a large, invisible Pink Elephant in the parlor." If you go deeper – and



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other believers will be more than happy to help you – you start earnestly speculating, in ever-increasing detail, on the creature's persona, habits, preferences, care and feeding, and especially its demands. You may also encounter, from said believers, religious-style emotional blackmail, as in “if you *don't* Believe in it, you'll terribly Hurt Its Feelings. Plus it might Trample You to Death for Eternity.” All the while, you're deliberately turning off the parts of your mind wherein you'd face the elephant-sized possibility that *it might not actually exist*.

Mind you, I haven't much interest in atheism either. Atheists can be just as dogmatic as any Southern Baptist mullah. I easily envision atheism as a toddler in a tantrum, stomping his foot: “No, no, no! There *isn't* an elephant, there *isn't*, there *ISN'T!*” Either choice feels like locking oneself away in the windowless cage of this Pachyderm of uncertain existence – a metaphysical compadre of

Schrödinger's Cat, maybe? – and insisting that the tiny space is the entire show, wilfully denying the vast circus outside. When you wilfully turn off part of your reason, when you lock yourself in that cage of One Way, and insist it's the only way: no matter how earnest and well-meaning you might be, you're going to inflict emotional pain on all those outside who don't, won't or can't join you. This is why “Christian” writings like this give me the willies. Scazzero never once acknowledges doubt of God's existence, a possibility no one with fully-functioning reason hasn't considered at least once in a while. I have a mortal fear and hatred of wilful unreason, especially when it catches a serious case of Zeal, the burning kind so convinced it has the Right Idea of How To Fix Things, that my feelings on being trompled by it won't even appear on its radar – or worse, will be deliberately ignored. We all have seen the nastiness that can result. Many of us have Bible-shaped (or

Torah-shaped, or Koran-shaped) bruises on our psyches from same.

I want God to exist, in some way or other. I want all the good stuff I've been told about Jesus to be true; and I try to live as if it is. And one of the many cool things about Him is that He didn't discriminate in who He brought good news to. Anybody at all who got near Him received some. The chief priests and religious bigwigs – the ones who in modern times would make lots of money selling books like Scazzero's – kept giving Him grief about it: “You're not doing it By The Rules!” He replied “Phooey!” and went back to healing whosoever He damn well pleased. So in that ecumenical spirit, I say: I want people to have emotional health, so they can freely enjoy the circus of reality; but I will never insist on belief in any dogma as the admission price.



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them.

We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

With increasing frequency, I have nightmares that cause me to grind my teeth and snort (like a pig, like a bull about to charge the red cape) to try and wake myself up. I don't know why the saying-goodbye scene turns into a yellow-porchlight on a dark street cliché that masks some kind of inevitable, ineffable haint. Nor do I know why such things cause me fear. I walk down dark streets with no concern,

CC - cyberspace

“Three A.M.”

by Mandy Foster

How many coughs during the night did she miss? The crucible in her skull woke her from dreams of labyrinthine staircases sliding under her feet. She swallowed pills and lay in bed waiting for sleep to overtake the pain. Then the cough: fitful, mucosal, somnolent. If only he would pad through the hallway to their bedroom, climb onto the bed and snuggle down between their bodies. He was young enough that her nakedness would not matter. She could rest her fingers on his smooth skin, count his soft snores, feel the pulse of his heart. What if all this was taken from her? If that woman cyberstalking them drove down from Georgia, knocked on her front door, took a knife to her throat, assumed her life as it lay seeping out of her onto the hardwood floor. If she had an aneurysm while standing in between the Cheerios and Cinnamon Life. If the cough was not allergies, but deadly asthma. But the coughing stopped. He was still in bed. The chemicals saturated her blood, pulled her into sleep, through dreams of women with fiery hair and sharp knives and voices like robots, intent on lying naked on her floor.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Jack Smiles lives in Wyoming, PA and has authored biographies on ballplayers Bucky Harris, Big Ed Walsh and Hughie Jennings.

Martin K. Smith of Durham, NC is publisher of The Blotter Magazine and author of the novel *All Tomorrow's Parties*.

Mandy Foster is a recovering lawyer living and writing in New Orleans. When not writing, she bakes cakes and chauffeurs her two young sons. Her work also appears in *With Painted Words* and *The Wi Files*.

Recently nominated for two Pushcart prizes, **April Salzano** teaches college writing in Pennsylvania where she lives with her husband and two sons. She is currently working on a memoir on raising a child with autism and several collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in journals such as *Convergence*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Deadsnakes*, *Visceral Uterus*, *Salome*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. The author also serves as co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press (www.kindofahurricanepress.com)

Phil Juliano has been cartooning for over twenty years. “Best In Show” is currently being featured in several newspapers and magazines and is syndicated by MCT Campus where it is distributed to college and university newspapers across the country. To see more of Phil's work go to www.bestinshowcomic.com

"I Remember My Childhood"

as a series of incidents.

I was always watching, middle-child-like,
the worst kind of spectator, silent,
neither victim nor whistleblower,
just an idiot stunned stupid, staring at things
I wished I could undo. My mother
is still picking hot tar off of my older sister's
feet. She thought the blacktop surely dry,
the machines long ago done with their task
of spreading thick goop into what would be
come our road, the thing we crossed
to get to the neighbor's. Years later,
the story is told with Vaseline, and buckets of cold water
brought by father's sharp common sense
in reaction to my mother's wives' tale-stupidity.
I do not remember petroleum jelly, only a maternal
what happened this time and attempt to help. I see
my brother falling off a bar stool in the foreign
air of my father's darkroom, photos bathing
in chemicals, exposing themselves.
My body reached out to catch him
before my mind seemed to know
he was falling.

That same summer, we were, for the first time,
invited to a neighborhood party.
my sister was shoved into a fire.
She had kicked a boy in the balls.
His arms simply reacted. I reached in,
pulled her out. I had made her
wear jeans when she had chosen shorts
because she thought that boy was cute.
Maybe it was the heavy scent of his father
that she was after. This truth too
has been distorted, a story re-told so many times
I have let it turn to ash rather than try
to bandage all the pieces together. Sometimes
when I am sitting quietly at my desk
in the middle of the afternoon, my phone rings.
It is one of my sisters calling
to ask if something really happened that way,
or if it was just some crazy dream.

Two by April Salzano

"Dorothy Was Right"

You should not listen to men behind curtains
who proclaim to be great and powerful.
Booming voices do not warrant gifts.
You will get home if you follow the road
in one direction without turning around,
and red shoes go with just about anything.

continued from page 3

capped” it’s my Mom. She watched TV or movies with us, and sometimes we had to tell her what happened on screen. Not this night, though, and not this movie.

Assuming the statute of spoiler-alerts limitations has been breached after fifty years, we were titillated and thrilled and tickled and terrified by this masterpiece of the scary movie genre. And by we, I mean my sisters and I – who hid our eyes at every attack, every gashing beak, every shrieking, running child or flailing heroine-in-the-attic. Dad had the volume turned up satisfyingly loud so that the techno-coughing of ravens and scree of gulls was right there in the room with us. God, you could almost smell the pong of wet feathers and burning gasoline.

After the movie, as children hyped up on lights, noise and popcorn are wont to do, we dragged our feet; prolonging our toothbrushing and burying ourselves beneath the covers despite it being a sultry and stale summer night. The house I grew up in had no air conditioning (hey, it had a *theater!*), but there was a marvelous attic fan with enough horse-power to get a B-24 off the ground, but on this night it was late and the fan was noisy and so everyone went to nervous, silent bed.

What happened next was pieced together over the post-trauma hours. In spite of being jazzed by Technicolor terror and buttered popcorn, we children zonked out quite nicely, thank you. After a while, Mom went to bed and Dad stayed up and watched Carson, then tromped upstairs to sack out. Within the requisite fifteen minutes, he was snoring the siding off the house. Mom grabbed her pillow and the top sheet and went downstairs to actually sleep. Truth: Dad’s snoring once altered the arrival time of the Gladstone branch of the Erie-Lackawanna railroad due to falling rocks.

Mom was settled in on the couch. Then, in the fan-less silence, she heard something. Scrabbling in the dark. She pulled the sheet up to her chin, to her nose. The scrabbling turned to flapping. She screamed.

It took about three of Mom’s ululating screams to have Dad roaring out of bed in his boxers and undershirt and thundering down the stairs shouting “what the hell!?” Maybe two screams after that and my sisters and I were at the top of the stairs. In the pitch-black living room Dad was shouting “dammit, dammit!” Mom was still screaming. And there was *something* flying around the living room. I could distinctly smell...something. Was it fear or just dirty feet? The Birds! A crash against the wall – a picture frame met its demise. A lamp went over, a lightbulb popped dead. Flapping! Dad threw the front door open. Were we going to make a run for the car?

It ended with a whimper, of course. Mom crumpled on the couch. Dad, wielding a tennis racket, ordering us to stop asking questions and go, impossibly, back to bed. My god! How could I sleep now?

In the morning we saw the little chimney swift that had come down the flue and scared the beejeezus out of Mom. She was in no mood to be teased. The broken glass in the living room was vacuumed up and we talked of it no more.

Ha! What a whopper. We talked about it for years. Alfred Hitchcock had attacked our house! Talk about special effects. Oscar worthy.

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