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Say "Thank You, Jesus!"

David Pulsipher

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“YOU HAVE TO GET A POLISH DOG from Max’s,” Shawn told me before I left his apartment this morning. “Max has the best hot dogs in town.” It is a stroke of good fortune that I found it so soon. Chicago is a big city, and I’m going on sheer luck, wandering aimlessly through the maze of skyscrapers and dirty sidewalks. Now, with my Polish dog in one hand, and a large root beer in the other, I stand on State Street and wonder what to do next. The rest of the morning and the whole afternoon stretches before me. My ticket to the Monet exhibition isn’t until three o’clock. If I can just get out of the shadow of these buildings, perhaps I can find the sun again. Maybe a nice grassy park to enjoy my meal and read The Power of Myth. Does Chicago have any parks? I put my
root beer on a bench and check the small stack of flyers that I picked up from a tourist booth near the train station. Grant Park is only a few blocks away. And there is a Gospel-Fest today. What luck. I stuff the flyers into my book and put it under my arm. Grabbing my root beer I walk to the curb and wait for the light to change.

Within a block I can hear the music, and within another block I can see the park, but I am blocked by railroad tracks. I follow the tracks south to a bridge, and the singing grows louder with each step. Finally, through the trees, a stage comes into view, set in the middle of a road. I weave my way through the small crowd to a shady spot under a large elm, where I sit on a curb and try my first bite of Max’s Polish dog. It snaps between my teeth as the breeze from Lake Michigan tickles my eyebrows and the Gospel-Fest music bounces in my ears. The sausage skin is tight and thick and brown like the Lebanese man who was tending the shop, and each bite is like popping a balloon. Juice streams out the corners of my mouth and onto the pavement between my legs. With my thumb and forefinger I remove the pickle wedge and tomatoes and place them in the gutter as I shift my butt on the cement. Good hot dog, but with all due respect to Shawn, I’ve tasted better.

The root beer isn’t fizzy anymore because of my detour around the tracks, so I place it carefully in the gutter next to the pickle wedge and hope that no one kicks it over. From where I sit I can see mostly legs, and sometimes through those legs I glimpse the stage, from which a large group of teenage singers is belting out praises to Jesus Christ. My hot dog is almost done, but the singing has apparently just begun. The bright round faces shout “Hallelujah!” as their shoulders—hundreds of shoulders draped in white cotton robes—bounce and shake to the rhythm of the electric organ. Young faces. Black hands. Short hair. White teeth. Loud claps. “Hallelujah, Lord!”

All around me clusters of black legs move to the music. Hips sway and bounce. Hands stretch and shake. My mouth moves to the rhythm, the hot dog pops to the beat, and I begin to move my head from side to side. Then I spy a man with starched legs and khaki shorts standing quietly among the bouncing black bodies. My
head stops moving because he isn’t bouncing. The sight of his bleach-white legs reminds me of who I am and jars the rhythm from my head. I chew the last bite of my Polish dog and wash it down with a swig of flat soda. Leaving my wrappers and pickle in the gutter, I stand up on the curb for a better view of the singers, brushing a nervous hand across the seat of my jeans to clear off the pebbles and leaves.

With my head slightly above crowd the wind hits me more forcefully in the face. It blows from the lake across the open stage, through the singers’ white robes, across the tight black curls of hair, to my pale cheeks. It feels good and clean and tickles my ears. The sun would be hot without the breeze, but the breeze would be cold without the sun, and across the lake, dark clouds gather and murmur and send a new gust across the stage. With one long “Amen” the singers lift a final high note to match the new chill in the wind. The crowd applauds and shouts praises, and the breeze flutters the young white robes as a large jolly man in a milky cream suit steps on stage and grabs the microphone.

“Lordy, it may rain yet. But we’re a’prayin’ it don’t, ’cause we still got a lot of singin’ to get done.”

His chest rumbles each word, and the crowd, which only a few moments earlier was an ocean of rhythm is now quiet and listening. The dark clouds are beginning to move across the lake towards the park. Thunder booms.

“I’m sorry, Lord,” the man says, looking back at the clouds. “I repent.”

Laughter from the crowd.

“Praise Jesus. While the next choir is gettin’ set, let’s talk about why we’re here. You havin’ a good time?”

Shouts from the crowd.

“Say ‘Hallelujah!’”

“Hallelujah!” shouts the crowd.

“Has the Lord been good to you today? Say ‘Praise Jesus!’”

“Praise Jesus!”

“If the Lord’s done anythin’ for you today, that you know you couldn’t have done by yourself, raise your hand.”
Hands stretch towards the stage.

"Now that ain’t very good. I said if the Lord’s done anythin’ for you today, that you know you couldn’t do for yourself, raise your hands!"

More black hands. I see one delicate white palm.

"Now say ‘Thank you, Jesus!’"

"Thank you, Jesus!" shouts the crowd.

"I can’t hear you!"

"Thank you, Jesus!"

I move closer to the stage and lean against the pole of a dining tent, next to two women—one old, one young—sitting on top of a picnic table. Their hands are in the air with the rest of the crowd.

"All right, now I want you to turn to the person next to you, put your arm around their shoulders and say ‘I love you.’"

The women next to me hug each other, and I hear them whisper, "I love you."

"Now turn to the person on the other side—black or white, it don’t matter to God—put your arm around them and say ‘I love you.’"

The older woman looks my way, and I stare at her eyes. My folded arms seem stiff and awkward as I try to untangle them, but she looks away, pretending our eyes didn’t meet, pretending to study the man on the stage. I put my hands in my pockets and study her shoulders—pocked and scarred and bony, protruding from a sleeveless blouse—wishing I had put my arms around them and felt the scars on my smooth palms—wishing I had said "I love you."

Pushing myself from the dining tent pole, I shuffle through the crowd and away from the stage, kicking pebbles on the park path as the deep voice in the milky cream suit rumbles behind me.

"Hallelujah! Now ain’t that nice? Praise Jesus! Well, it looks like the next choir is ready, so I’m going to give them the mike and they’re going to sing sweet praises to the Lord. Let’s give a big welcome to the First Trinity Youth Choir."

The singing starts again, but as I walk it soon fades into the spray of Buckingham Fountains. The wind blows its mist into my

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face and chills my cheeks. Three more hours until the exhibition, but I don't feel like reading now. I leave the pathway and follow the streets across the bridge and back into the city. I submerge myself into the shadows of the buildings, searching the nooks and the alleys for something to see, something to distract me. Walls of glass and steel hem me in, focus my path, limit my steps. It is almost like the massive walls of Zion Canyon in Southern Utah. But Zion's Narrows are silent and still, and the rock walls are warm in places. This city canyon is ceaseless noise and movement, and the steel walls are cold and impregnable. Looking up, I see a sliver of cloudy sky, which is growing darker with every passing minute. I crane my neck backwards trying to perceive people on the seventieth and ninetieth floors—people whose offices must sway in the wind and mist. I probably look like a tourist.

Then I hear the chimes—coming somewhere from that same sliver of sky. Chimes—echoing from windows, bouncing around corners, blending with the howl of the frantic wind. The echoes and the wind and car horns blur my sense of direction, so I simply follow my instincts, searching for the source of the music, trying not to look like a child lost in a department store. As I walk people rush past me with umbrellas, darting in and out of doorways. The wind that sweeps through the city canyon is chilly now, and its music finally leads me around a corner to the source of the chimes. Sandwiched between two large bank buildings sits a small cathedral made of brown marble. Pennants hanging from the street lamps advertize the attractions inside: *St. Francis: Love is Our Business*. I cross the street and as I dart through one of the three shadowed portals the raindrops finally begin to fall.

In the foyer I can no longer hear the chimes. The foyer is empty, but from the sanctuary I can hear the sound of angels singing. It's been over five years since I attended a Catholic Mass, and I am suddenly overwhelmed with yearning, so I walk up the stairs and through the doors towards the singing. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I notice that the brown marble rises high above my head and plays into intricate patterns on the ceiling. The center aisle stretches in front of me to an altar far, far away. And around
the altar I see small figures in white robes that drift and float. One of them has a tall, pointed hat, which marks him as a bishop. Suddenly the singing stops and the bishop chants something about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. A friendly friar steps out of the shadows, hands me a program, and disappears. I look at the cover—"The Ordination of Friar Thomas, Friar Michael, and Friar John." What luck, again. I take a seat on the aisle so I will be able to see the priesthood candidates prostrate themselves on the floor. It’s something I’ve only read about. As I study my program I am startled by a sprinkle of water on my head and cheeks. I look up to see the bishop walking down the aisle, purifying the congregation with an evergreen branch. He dips, then flings the holy water—right, then left, slowly down the aisle. From the balcony an angel sings.

The ceremony is long. But I sit on the hard bench and strain to hear every word and every note. Women read scripture. The bishop counsels the candidates to "Feed my sheep." He anoints their hands with chrism and says these words to them: "May the Father, who has begun this good work in you, bring it to fulfillment." And eventually the priesthood candidates lie prostrate in the aisle. As the three men lie on the floor, the congregation stands and from the balcony the angel sings.

"Lord have mercy," he sings.

"Lord have mercy," the assembly responds.

The men’s faces are pressed to the cold stone floor, their arms outstretched. Their robes lie limp about their ankles. And as they lie, the voices of the congregation rise and fall on the indifferent melody.

"Christ have mercy," the angel sings.

"Christ have mercy," the assembly responds.

"Lord have mercy."

"Lord have mercy."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God."

"Pray for us."

"Saint Michael."

"Pray for us."
“Saint John the Baptist.”
“Pray for us.”
A man with neatly trimmed hair and a steel grey tailored suit slides into the pew in front of me. He greets the woman next to him with a clean kiss and an AquaVelva smile. Maybe he sells razors. Maybe he just came from a board meeting about a new line of after-shave. He looks at his watch. “Sorry I’m late,” he whispers to the woman.
“Saint Peter and Saint Paul,” the angel sings.
“Pray for us.”
The AquaVelva man looks at his watch again, rubs his hands together, and strains his eyes forward towards the candidates on the floor.
“Holy Mother Saint Clare.”
“Pray for us.”
“All holy men and women.”
“Pray for us.”
After the new priests are ordained and blessed, they administer mass to the congregation, and then the service dissolves into a swirling mass of chatter and congratulations. The AquaVelva man quickly congratulates his cousin and abandons the chapel. Aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews hug and kiss and linger in the pews. The new priests greet everyone with serene smiles and gentle nods. “Thank you. Thank you,” they whisper. And their nodding heads seem to say, “Bless you my child. Bless you my child,” even to parents and grandparents.

Around the perimeter stand groups of friars talking about Michael Jordan and the Bulls. My mind swims with questions. Who are they? Why do they come? Who was the angel? What does his song mean? I loiter among the marble columns, hoping a congenial friar will notice my questioning glance and approach me, but soon the chapel is empty as the congregation moves to the foyer and basement for refreshments. I weave my way through the crowded foyer smiling shyly whenever someone’s gaze meets mine, until finally I stand in the doorway and look at the damp street. The rain has stopped and now the sun shines in streaks through the buildings
and steams the asphalt. Amazing. The city smells almost fresh. Two friars stand with me in the doorway, and one squints at the sky.

"Think it'll rain again?" he asks the other.

"Well, it don't really matter," says his companion. "We've got to go, rain or shine."

The first one shrugs, "What the hell, I'm outa here," and sprints across the puddles.

I step onto the sidewalk and the smell of grease returns.

"Sir, could you help me get something to eat?"

The gentle voice startles me. I look at the man standing near the church door beneath an ad for suntan lotion which reads, "Love the sun. Worship your skin." His dark face is pleasant and his sky blue polyester pants are clean. I mumble something about not having anything and walk away, feeling the weight of three ten-dollar bills in my pocket. I tell myself that gentle faces are often the most dangerous, but when I reach the corner I turn around. He is gone. I have always had late charity. Once in a K-Mart parking lot, a deaf man accosted me, selling reference cards for American Sign Language. Ten miles down the road I turned my car around and returned to buy his card with a twenty dollar bill. That was rare, to find him again. More often, like this pleasant man, they are gone, and I have to live with my hesitancy for the rest of the day.

I have another hour before the Monet exhibition, and something draws me back to Grant Park, back to the sun and the wind, away from the city streets and the pavement. When I come to the bridge across the railroad tracks I can hear the raucous music again and feel the misty breeze. As I reach the stage and the small crowd, the singing stops, and the man in the milky cream suit appears again on stage.

"My, weren't they fine. Praise Jesus. Come on now, let's show 'em how much we liked their sweet praises."

The crowd applauds and shouts.

"Well, that ends our program for this stage. But we're not done yet. No sir. We're just a'gettin' goin'. In a little while the singin'Il start again on the main stage, so everybody move over there."

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The man steps away from the microphone and starts talking to a stage hand, and the crowd begins to mill and move. Soon I am in a swarm of black faces, sweeping me forward, carrying me towards a large amphitheater on the other side of the grass. People are smiling and laughing, but no one speaks to me. I avoid their eyes, looking at the ground or pretending to search for a friend whenever someone looks my way. Every chuckle seems to be a snicker in my direction. I don't belong here. But I'm trapped in the swarm of bodies so I stay. After a few minutes the crowd dissolves around me and I can see the main stage. People are filing into rows and rows of folding chairs. I notice a white man and woman sitting in the back near the center aisle, so I walk up to them and ask if I can sit on their row.

"Sure," the man says.

They move their legs so I can get in. His eyes are gentle—the kind of gentle I've seen in faces of tender men who suffer nervous breakdowns. His beard is flecked with gray. He leans back in his chair and crosses his bleach-white legs with athletic shoes that don't quite match his khaki shorts. Maybe they are the same white legs from the other stage. I sit three chairs away and wait for the music. I feel his gentle eyes glance in my direction, but I look at the stage.

"Do you like Joseph Campbell?" he asks after a few minutes.

I look at The Power of Myth in my lap.

"Uh, yea," I say.

Silence. I look at the cover and try again. "He has lots of good insight—you know—about love and life."

"I haven't read that book," he says, "but I was at a self-actualization seminar last year, and they had us read The Hero with a Thousand Faces. The whole program was built around his ideas—you know, the hero's journey?"

"Oh," I say, "sounds interesting."

Silence again. I muster a comment. "Was the seminar helpful?"

"Yes, it was. Although I don't think I really understand Campbell's ideas." He pauses for a moment, and sighs. "Actually, I didn't finish the book. But what I read was very helpful."
He smiles, and I smile and nod, and turn my face towards the stage, relieved that our conversation is about to be interrupted. Three large women have appeared on stage, and without an introduction they begin to sing "When the Saints go Marching In." The crowd stands to dance. I stand also. As the music starts, two women squeeze into our row between me and the man with the gentle eyes. The one nearest me is very large and dark, and as soon as she puts her cooler and purse beneath the folding chair, she stands and begins to clap her hands and swing her hips.

"Sing it, Lena!" she shouts.

Her movement is contagious, and as I stand next to her I feel my hips start to move to the left, but I check them. Still, the energy is irresistible.

"Oh, when the saints, Oh, when the saints, Oh, when the saints go marching in, I want to be in that number, When the saints go marching in."

Quietly at first, I clap my hands. Then I raise them above my head, and hope no one is watching. Looking around I see thousands of happy faces, all of them looking towards the stage, and I realize that no one is looking at me, making fun of my awkward attempts to participate. I am insignificant to their joy. Almost imperceptibly at first, my hips move and my shoulders shake. More. More. Faster and faster. The music rocks and tilts. I look at the man with the gentle eyes. He too is trying to clap and sway with the rhythm. Neither of us is very adept, but we keep clapping and swaying. After what seems like too short of time, the music ends.

"Whew!" says one of the singers, wiping her brow. "Hallelujah!"

The crowd shouts their love to her.

"I want to be in that number. I certainly do!"

The crowd shouts again.

"How many of you are saved?"

Thousands of hands stretch skyward.

"Say, 'Hallelujah!'"
‘‘Hallelujah!’’ shouts the crowd.

‘‘If you are filled with the Lord’s love—and I know you are—I want you to grab your neighbor by the hand and say, ‘The Lord is good!’’”

Before I can react, two powerful black hands grab my delicate white palm and I look into soft brown eyes.

‘‘The Lord is good,’’ says the large energetic woman.

‘‘The Lord is good,’’ I answer softly.

The music starts again, the women sing, and the hands clap. I sway and laugh, and the breeze blows through my hair and across my palms as I bring them together in rhythm to the music.