

Salvation in ill-fitting blue pants *by Jeremy John*

IT HAPPENED WHILE I WAS READING THE BEATITUDES, sitting outside against a brick wall – the loneliest place I could find – facing an inmate baseball game. I became a Christian.

I had decided to go to prison in 2002. The woman who is now my wife, Charity Ryerson – both of us staunch peace activists – was with me. The United States was matching terror for terror in Afghanistan, and our nation was headed straight toward the Iraq War. The crescendo of political-corporate-military aggression left us increasingly desperate to respond in some way. So we drove to Chicago for the WTO protests. Then, two weeks later, we were off to Washington for an activist conference.

We even climbed one of those agit-prop war billboards that read “Unity: what makes us great,” complete with a starry-eyed little white girl sitting on her father’s shoulders waving a sparkler. We spraypainted “DISSENT” over the word “Unity.” We couldn’t just stand by. We were ready to die to stop the march of imperialism. At minimum, we thought we would go to jail.

So our next stop was the annual protest at the School of the Americas (SOA), that iron fist of globalization. The school – recently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation – is notorious as a place where the United States has trained Latin American military personnel in techniques of torture, forced disappearances and other dirty tricks used to repress forces unfriendly to American interests.

In November of 2002, we and 12,000 other protesters gathered outside the Fort Benning Military Base that houses the school in Columbus, Georgia. Charity and I cut the lock on a small pedestrian gate and walked onto the base. We, and 94 others, were immediately arrested. We spent two nights in the Columbus Stockade and were released.

Five months and a guilty plea later, we drove our beat-up, light-blue Toyota, straps from its bike rack streaming in the wind, again from Indiana to Georgia for our sentencing. Judge Land sentenced us to six months in jail and one year’s probation.

I was stripped, searched, and issued an ID card with prisoner number 020-700023. The warden escorted me into a little room, sat me down, and said, “So, I hea’ youh one of dose pwotestohs. Well, let me tell you, we don’ have no pwotestohs in dis heah jail. So while youh heah, if I catch you doin’ any of that pwotesting shit, I’m gonna thwow you in da Hole so quick youh head’s gonna spin. And I’ll make shuwe dat youh in dere wid Bubba.”

On July 22, 2003, Charity and I reported to our prisons.

At noon in Terre Haute, Indiana, I hugged my father, my brother and my weeping mother goodbye and walked up to the double fence lined with sniper-manned guard towers and filled with coils of razor wire.

I received a pair of ill-fitting blue pants which reached my mid shin, underwear, a v-neck shirt, a pair of plastic flip-flops for the shower, a sheet, a blanket, a pillow, a bar of soap, a razor, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a notebook, a cheap pen and some envelopes. I walked up to my new room, the size of a two-car garage, which I shared with 15 other men.

I lived in a state of incredible tension for the next few months.

I found the chapel, and I found a Bible. Before prison, I had set out to read the entire Bible, and, depending on what I found, either refute or endorse it. I had gotten to Daniel by the time I was incarcerated. Prison provided plenty of time to continue reading. The Old Testament didn’t really do it for me. And I really didn’t like the Christians in the camp. I crashed a Bible study by arguing against obedience

to the governing authorities.

But something happened when I got to Matthew – something that had never happened in all my love affair with knowledge. I had read Taoism, Buddhism, Confucius and the Qu’ran. I had read Marx, Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon and Malatesta. I had read Wittgenstein, Camus, Sartre and Fanon, but nothing compared to the story of Jesus.

Jesus’s story cannot be dismissed as yet another action that makes sense from a rational perspective because he chose to die. If Christ’s action could “make sense,” then it would not be a perfect love, it would instead be an everyday selfish act, explained away by self-serving motives and purposes.

Camus could not understand suicide because the rational actor ceases with the death of the rational actor. Death does not compute. Rationality dies at the grave. But Jesus chose, in the Garden of Gethsemane, to die, trumping rationality with love. For me, this annihilates the model of the rational actor. Jesus’ death on the cross is the perfect philosophical concept of love made incarnate.

I had understood justice, truth, asceticism and oppression, but love was something I really hadn’t grasped. I couldn’t comprehend that God could possibly be loving, let alone love incarnate. Omnipotent, yes. Just, sure. Infinite, no problem. But loving?

I followed with rapt interest the unfolding of this love idea throughout the rest of the New Testament. Paul was a crazy zealot, but what he was really trying to do was take love to its final conclusions. And he ended up in jail, a cir-

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cumstance that did not escape me.

So I prayed the sinner's prayer. I accepted Jesus into my heart and I walked into what seemed to be my own intellectual suicide.

A few months later, as I was coming back in from walking the track, I felt all of these crystalline thoughts, like hardened spiders' webs, entombing my mind. I felt a thousand chattering parrots in my mind, ideologies with personalities that harangued me, mocking my precious Jesus and my new-found, often-misguided piety. I prayed hard for these animated ideas to be swept out, so I could follow Christ with my whole mind.

God answered my prayer like a torrent. I felt the Holy Spirit wash through my mind like a diverted river. It was the work of a moment, but my mind was changed. I had lost those whole-form ideas, those ideas I had so carefully collected and strung upon my neck like pearls. They were gone. After that I couldn't tell you exactly what Proudhoun said about property, or what precisely Baudrillard's impossible exchange was. All those ideologies lost their voices and became two-dimensional, cast out, never to return.

And that was my miracle; that was my real, baptized-in-the-Holy-Spirit miracle, my evangelical experience, the thing I had sought for years through Buddhist meditation, LSD, alcohol, sex, symbolic logic, hitch-hiking and people.

My story of salvation is still being written. It doesn't all happen in a whirlwind. God doesn't perfect us immediately. It's not all angels and the Holy Spirit, 24/7. Love isn't easy, as Christ teaches us. Sometimes we have to go to jail, and sometimes we have to die. But mostly, I have found, we have to die a death each day to our selfish, petty desires and live for others one small step at a time.

Charity converted later, while we were engaged. We are both still activists for social change, but the focus has shifted. Before, much of my criticism of structural injustice was intellectual and ideological, as were my solutions. I believed,

for instance, that changing capitalism to include safeguards against greed would create a very different world. I still fight for structural change. But I do not believe we can create a system, like say, anarcho-socialism, which could re-mold individuals and heal the damage of evil in the world. All systems have holes through which greed can creep in.

So I seek to change the world by loving others. I seek to change structures and hearts, focusing on the latter. I don't believe structural change will matter unless it is undertaken

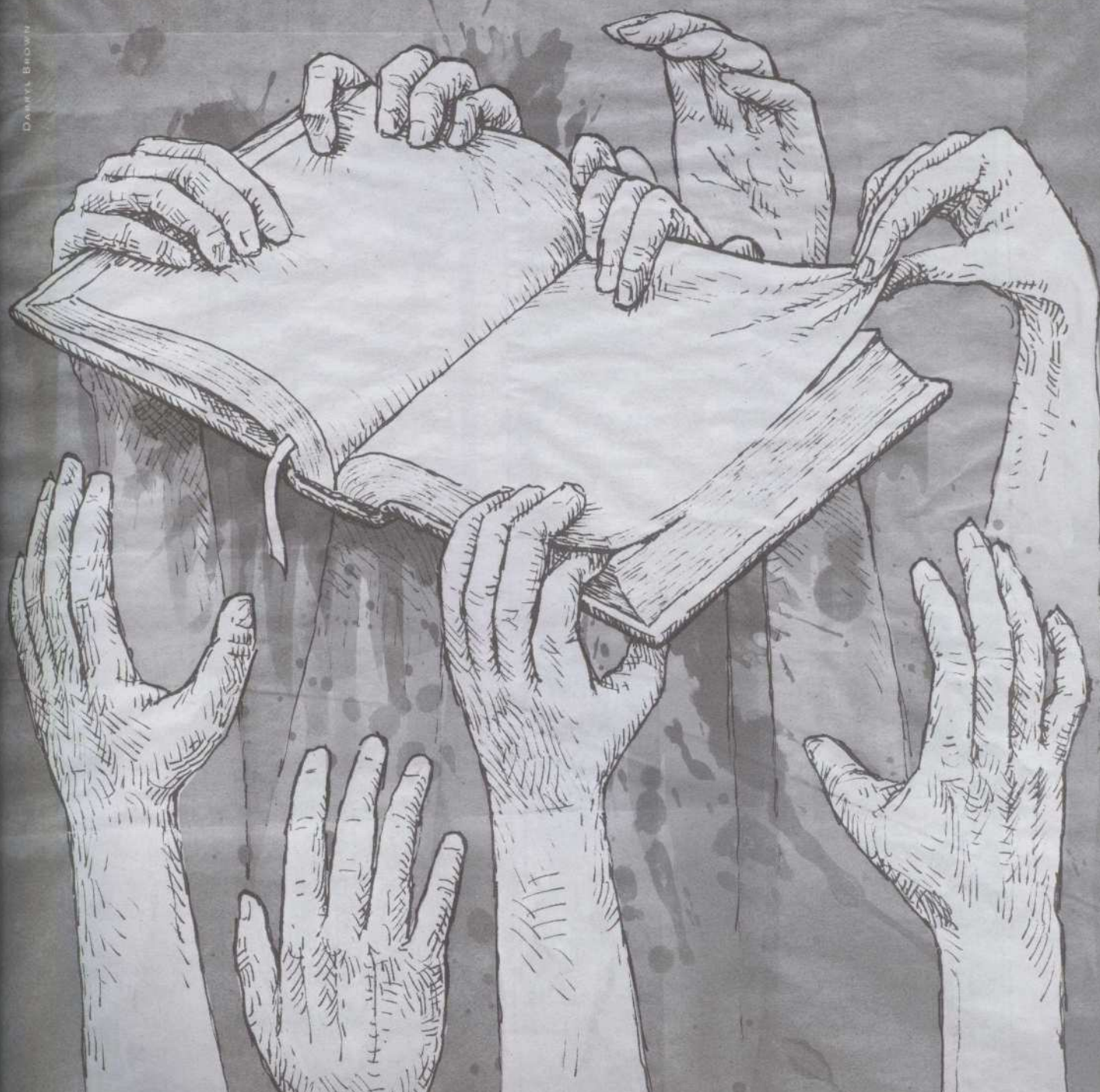
with pure and loving hearts. The political arena is a battleground for good and evil, but good and evil are never embodied within politicians, parties or economic structures per se. The real battlefield is the human heart, where the struggle to love and forgive others takes place. Jesus didn't end the oppression of structures by setting up a Jewish state. Instead, he lived and died for love and truth. He won the greatest victory over oppression by simply ignoring its power to rule over him, even its power to take his life.

I still get outraged at injustice, but I try to avoid letting indignation turn into hatred toward systems or the people in them. Such hatred is as destructive as the system that it seeks to destroy.

WHERE I WAS ONCE COLD AND ANGRY, focused on structures, I am now warmer and focused on people. I read and write less about politics, but I am more involved in groups working for change. I used to be very critical of political groups, and was therefore somewhat of a loner. Now, I forgive the faults as best I can and I just show up. I care less about facts or about proving the current government has lied or manipulated than I do about working with people, for people. My belief in the need for social justice has not changed, but now I come from a place of love rather than a place of justice. And what is justice without love?

Jeremy John lives in Chicago, Illinois.

I had read Marx, Kropotkin, Camus, Sartre and Fanon, but nothing compared.





--like Douglas who broke his collar bone.

I bet that didn't feel very good-- did it, Douglas?



Our bodies are TEMPORARY.
That means they can get hurt
--like Douglas' collar bone--
and they can die.

