

A Lick Of Common Sense

I was twelve when I figured out God.

Mom was a devout Presbyterian who taught Sunday school. Every evening she read to me from a big white Bible. One bedtime she pointed at a painting of Paradise. “Since Jesus came to save us, one day the lions will lie down with the lambs instead of eating them.”

I worried the lions would eat people instead.

Grandmother was the president of the local Presbyterian Women’s Society, and boy, could she pray. I didn’t like going to her house for lunch on Sundays because she prayed until the hot biscuits got cold, then the butter wouldn’t melt. The men in the family didn’t read the Bible, go to church, or pray. Regardless, they still didn’t get to butter the biscuits while they were hot. One time I was so hungry that I tried to sneak a hot one. Although her eyes were closed tight, Grandma said, “Don’t touch it, Danny,” and she went right on praying.

You see, I had a reputation for being irreverent. It was because my mother insisted there was a Santa Claus long after everyone in my class knew he was a myth. I pretended to believe in Santa until the seventh grade since, supposedly, he brought the presents.

Our church was built out of local granite rocks and sat like a grey dungeon in the center of town across from a little grocery store and the post office. The downstairs was one large open space so they used moveable walls to separate the children’s Sunday school classes.

My Sunday school teacher couldn’t stand me. Mrs. Kendrick was one of those pale, wrinkled ladies with sprayed-stiff bluish-white hair and a sweet facade, but she was irked at my questions. She never called on me despite my raised hand, instead, she picked her granddaughter,

Nona, or this religious kid, Ralph, who never polished his shoes. I interrupted to ask, “Why would a loving God make his son die on the cross? Isn’t that cruel? How could Jesus’s death pay for everyone’s sins?” I asked worse questions but you get the point.

I’d raise my hand and when she didn’t call on me, I’d stomp my foot. If that didn’t work, I’d rock my chair and make snorting noises like my 4-H pigs. One time I pulled Nona’s long brown hair after she stood and answered for the umpteenth time.

“Ouch!” she hollered.

The old lady’s face turned bright red and I saw the evil in her eyes. She shrieked, “You get out of here and go pray to God you won’t end up in hell!”

My face was hotter than hell because kids in the other classes stared at me as I stood outside the rest of the lesson. My friend Elmer was in another class and he asked later, “What did you say this time?”

Elmer was two years older since he got held back in fourth and I skipped the third grade. It was a small school and Mrs. Hunt taught second and third grades in the same classroom. She told the principal she couldn’t handle having me in her class for another year. I’d get my work done and then do the third-grade assignment. When I finished, I whispered to other kids, “Hey look at me.” I made stupid faces like rolling my eyelids up, crossed my eyes, or flexed my biceps. You know, funny stuff.

They stuck me into fourth grade with my tough Aunt Cora and Nona, but Ralph stayed in third grade with his ugly shoes. That’s where me and Elmer got to be friends. He was big and took my side against the other fourth and fifth graders who said I didn’t belong there. In return, I passed him answers to tests when Aunt Cora wasn’t looking.

She used a yardstick to limp around because of her arthritis and slapped it across your desk if you weren't paying attention. If it smacked your hands that was your problem. My dad said, "If you get in trouble with Aunt Cora, you'll get your butt warmed."

I paid attention.

Good old Mrs. Kendrick tried to get me in control by saying, "God is everywhere. He sees and knows all, even your deepest thoughts, and if you don't obey him, you will be punished."

"Why doesn't he punish every murderer, thief, and rapist?" I asked. "A lot of them get away. I read about this serial killer who's still loose."

She stared at me.

I chalked up a point for my side.

Nona flipped her long brown hair and said, "Why don't you just shut up for a change?"

So much for Christian love, I thought as I was sent from class.

As I stood there twiddling my thumbs, I got to thinking that 'Stump the Teacher' was a great game. Maybe I'd start a TV game show and wiggle my eyebrows like Groucho Marks. I practiced making them dance and the kids from other classes started laughing. Mrs. Kendricks was furious and sent me to the janitor's closet, thinking I couldn't cause more trouble. I sat on the mop bucket and got to looking at the cleaning chemicals. I wondered what Clorox and Ammonia would do together. They should be really powerful cleaners if combined. They were. I burst from the closet into the big room as the fumes boiled out. They had to clear all the Sunday School classes.

The sanctuary had huge stained glass windows depicting scenes from the New Testament. The light streamed in like God was looking into your guilty heart and there I was,

imprisoned in this grey stone building. In the front where the choir sat, there was a spotlight on a large gold-framed painting of Jesus. He kneeled and looked up at the sky as he prayed to God, “Let this cup pass from me.”

I wondered if Jesus was on the same level as God, why didn’t he just walk away instead of letting himself get crucified? Got removed from Sunday school class again. I kept score. I was up twelve points on Mrs. Kendricks, one for every disciple.

The building had a square bell tower with a dusty room just below the bell. The only fun I had at church was when the pastor relented and let me ring the bell to call everyone into the service. I pulled down on the rope and it lifted me clear to the ceiling. I came down and pushed off the floor. I got to swinging and ringing and swinging and ringing, grinning like an idiot. The pastor had to grab my legs to make me stop.

People complained as they walked into the foyer, “Danny even has a cowlick on the back of his blonde hair like Dennis the Menace.”

The sermons were boring. I’d heard them before – about Jesus healing the leapers, restoring the sight of the blind, and driving devils into pigs that drowned themselves. I felt sorry for the pigs. It didn’t make sense because the preacher said God loved everything, even pigs and guys like me.

Communion was the worst part. It made me nauseous to eat Jesus’s body and drink his blood. It felt like cannibalism. But trapped between Mom and Grandma ensured that I ate the cracker and drank the grape juice. When I got to squirming and wiggling cause my skinny butt hurt, Grandma clamped a hand around my knee. “You need to pray,” she whispered.

And pray I did. I prayed the service would end.

At Christmas, we went to church the night before and they talked about the miracle of the virgin birth. I didn't get it, so I read up on where that idea came from. Seems Zoroastrianism believed in a virgin birth and a messiah to save the world hundreds of years before Jesus was born. I dared bring that fact to Mrs. Kendrick's attention the next Sunday and she said, "Go out and repent of your evil thoughts."

Fine with me. She didn't say where to go repent. I wandered upstairs, then crawled up into the square bell tower. In the dusty room below the bell, I found an old plywood board with an assortment of knots stapled to it. Had my dad's name written in ink. I took it home and he was surprised. Seemed his Scout troop used to meet there.

Now that was a better reason to go to church – make real knots instead of mental ones.

Dad tried to teach me how to tie them. But my fingers didn't work like his no matter how hard I prayed. He gave up trying to teach me. "Son, you're too smart for your own pants and you haven't got a lick of common sense."

That threw me off for weeks. How could a guy be too smart for his own pants? Did pants care what your IQ was? And what the heck was common sense? I had five senses like most people; was there another one I didn't have? The worst part was him saying I didn't have a lick of it. I knew what a puppy lick and a cowlick were, but a lick of common sense? I dreamed this monstrous tongue came down from the sky and licked me until I drowned. My face was wet when I woke up. Fortunately, it was just sweat.

On Easter, we got up at the break of dawn to freeze and watch the sun come up. I asked Mom why we worshipped the sunrise. She said it was symbolic of Jesus who rose each morning to remind us of his glory. I wondered why he needed to be worshipped. Didn't Jesus feel good

enough about himself without us humans supplicating and crying out, “Glory to God, praise Jesus?”

I got to thinking maybe I was a sun worshipper. It made more sense since it was the source of life on earth. I didn’t tell Mrs. Kendrick and made it through the class.

One Sunday I asked Mrs. Kendrick, “Why do we call God a him and capitalize he? Why not call it her or she like Mother Earth?” Nona and Ralph snickered as she booted me out.

As we drove home, I asked Mom, “Isn’t it true that Presbyterians believe it’s everyone’s right to worship God according to the dictates of your own conscience?”

Mom swerved as she looked at me. “Well, I’m proud of you. That is true. I’m glad you understand the basic principle of being a Presbyterian.”

I was nervous but said, “Mom, I don’t believe what they keep telling me. I don’t want to go to church anymore.”

She nearly put the car in the ditch before she regained control. “You have to go to church. It’s a sin not to go to church.”

I pulled out my ace card. “Dad doesn’t go to church. Why do I have to?”

“He’s working on the farm.” Then she played her best card. “Your grandmother will kill both of us if you quit going to church.”

I one-upped her. “I thought Gramma was a good Christian and didn’t believe in killing people.” I said, “I don’t mind working. It’s better than sitting in church and getting kicked out of Mrs. Kendrick’s class for asking questions.”

She was quiet the rest of the way home as she gripped the wheel with white knuckles. She told Dad what I said and how frustrated poor old Mrs. Kendrick was with me.

Dad never said much. He shrugged, “Boy’s got a point.”

It was a relief I could worship according to the dictates of my own conscience, assuming a guy had to worship something. Maybe I'd worship that giant tongue of common sense and someday it would lick me.

To my surprise, Grandma said, "It's probably better he doesn't come. He distracts me during the service and I feel sorry for Mrs. Kendrick."

I didn't have to listen to those sermons about the Prodigal Son or the Lilies of the Field I had heard as far back as I could remember. Instead, I chopped weeds or picked up rocks in the hayfield and didn't mind it. It was better than getting a sore butt sitting on those hard wooden pews in the church and listening to the preacher drone away. I looked at the sky and the clouds and saw the mountains sitting there blue and majestic. I kept thinking, "I wonder what God is?" I didn't think he had flowing white hair and a beard like Michelangelo depicted him. Feeling desperate, I prayed for a lick of common sense.

Dad wanted to take this steer to the auction since we needed money. The darned thing must have sensed it was going to die because it fought like a mad mule when he tried to get it into the stock trailer. He was in the front holding the halter and yelled at me, "Danny get behind the steer and push it in."

I put everything I had into shoving on its butt and we got the steer in far enough to shut the tailgate. I stood there huffing and puffing with my legs spread. About that time, it kicked me right in the groin. I doubled over and puked.

Dad said, "You're becoming a man but you still haven't got a lick of common sense."

I'd be thirteen next fall and in the eighth grade. Grandpa took me aside. His brown eyes were firm as he said, "Now don't you become like those teenagers. You have to promise me."

It sounded like being a teen was criminal and downright dirty. I was speechless. Did I have a choice? I couldn't stay being a child and it was impossible to skip straight to being an adult. It felt like once I was a teenager, Grandpa would look at me with irritation and disgust like Mrs. Kendrick and Mrs. Hunt. I couldn't do anything about it. It made me depressed and moody like my teenage sister.

It was maybe three months later I was up at Elmer's and we were out in his corral looking at the steers. Elmer had this bright idea to jump on his steers and ride them around the corral. We planned to enter the Little Britches Rodeo next month and it would be good practice for the bull riding contest. He jumped on a steer and rode it around the corral. It bucked a couple of times but he held on. He slid off. "You ride one."

It looked easy so I sprang onto the back of a bigger one. The son-of-a-gun started bucking like a jackass on crack cocaine. I clapped my legs around its flanks and held tight to the hair on the nape of its neck. "Yea-haw," I yelled as my straw cowboy hat sailed into the sky.

The next thing I knew, I flew through the air, and wham! my back smacked into a rusty plow that was flopped over on its side. Geez, it hurt like the devil and my ears rang like the church bell. I was plum-licked.

Elmer got me standing after a couple of tries.

As I limped to the house my head cleared and it hit me: I knew God and everything about it. It was invisible and everywhere. It was in everything. You sensed it and saw its work all around you. Without it, you wouldn't be alive and nothing in the universe would work. No wonder it didn't answer prayers. Most importantly, if you didn't follow its laws, it punished you immediately.

To this day I'll stand by that lick of common sense.

Gravity is God.

I swear on my aching back.