Faith, Writing, and New Jersey Diners [1]

November 30, 2015 Writing and Faith [2]

Theme Essay by Kathy Curto

Going Back to the Source—and the Boss



I confess: I'm a confused Catholic. I don't go to church every Sunday, but I try to say Grace every night. Two strands of rosary beads hang from the closet doorknob in my bedroom. One was my mother's; the other I bought in Palermo a few years ago from a little old lady who sold saint statues, beads, and prayer cards on the street.

I pray to St. Anthony when I lose stuff. Once in awhile, I say a Hail Mary or an Our Father, hoping for one of two things to happen: to feel the soothing rhythm and melodious predictability of the verse or to be transported back to the late 1970s and my hometown on the Jersey Shore, where I'd be seated with my mom in a pew at St. Joseph's Church during Saturday Night Mass, dreaming of the new Earth Shoes or burgundy corduroys I'd pick out at Grant's department store later that evening.

(Back then, we had a Saturday night routine: Mass, Grant's, and then a Fishamajig at Friendly's. My father went out on Saturday nights, and now, especially in my writing life, I spend countless hours thinking about the trickle-down effects

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of that setup.)

Many of my views are in stark contrast with those of the Vatican, but there are times I derive great comfort from sitting still, quiet, and alone on weekday afternoons in the big church in my small river town of Cold Spring, New York, watching the sun poke through stained-glass windows that offer the kind of gleam which can turn a day, a week, and even a life around.

And if it's a particularly clear ray of light, I pull out a notebook and try to make sentences that sing, flow, and matter. Paragraphs, too.

The only thing I'm not confused about is the value of reckoning with where I come from. That kid in Earth Shoes dreamed of escape, not how to craft a paragraph that feels alive because the older me has had to sit with herself—my restless, anxious, risk-avoidant self.

Writing is reckoning, all right. It's taking one, two, or a hundred thousand ideas and tossing them onto a blank page with the hope that at some point during the morning, or the heavy hours of the night, a groove will take hold and build traction. For the lucky ones, those ideas may even attract the attention of a dorky angel (or spirit or fairy or celestial superhero wearing reading glasses and carrying a hot cup of coffee) who sprinkles dust over newly formed sentences, miraculously making them sparkle with clarity, precision, and the kind of enlightenment that leads to damn good writing.

Speaking of faith in unlikely miracles, let's talk about New Jersey.

On some dry days, when the reckoning looms and I'm not so lucky—when words aren't landing on the page like I want them to and all my good ideas are hung over—I turn to another cherished mantra of mine: *Go home, have faith, and be patient.*

If the timing is right, I cross the Hudson River, find a different kind of church for that day: a New Jersey diner. I nestle into a booth and order a cup of coffee, two eggs over light, with buttered rye toast and home fries.

And I watch. And listen. Maybe take a few notes.

Inevitably, they arrive: glimpses of tenderness and tragedy—a waitress with a magnificent hairdo and a Hello Kitty pen; a sticky-faced baby tossing dime-sized pieces of pancakes on the floor; the frail hands of a very old man cutting his wife's bacon; breakups, hookups, tears and doubled-over laughter—the stuff of being human.

Angels. Coffee. Superheroes. New Jersey.

It's a sometimes misunderstood place, home to sometimes misunderstood people, so I consider being born and raised there one of the reasons I write. Apparently, I'm not alone. "I think you tend to write about things you're trying to sort out," Bruce Springsteen told Charlie Rose in a 1998 interview that's stored in a sacred place on my hard drive for when I need some more divine writing inspiration. "I think you're trying to write about things that you don't understand and you want to understand."

Amen, Boss.

Publishing Information

- Interview with Bruce Springsteen by Charlie Rose. [3] originally aired on PBS, *The Charlie Rose Show*, November 20, 1998.

Art Information

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- "Red Bank, New Jersey [4]" © Jazz Guy; Creative Commons license.

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