

Chapel Talk
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Pharaoh's Children

Many people, at times when they are faced with some sort of moral dilemma or when they are perhaps forced to make a moral choice, they talk about a voice that they hear in their heads, which, I guess acts as a compass to help them navigate through their decision. I guess this voice that they talk about is more metaphorical than an actual voice that they can hear. I have never heard voices, thank God. I have a close relative who, when she doesn't take her medication, can hear voices. So if I ever begin to hear voices in my head, I'll probably immediately check myself into the hospital.

Some of you who have come to know me well know that I can be pretty irreverent when it comes to things religious. I have a hard time with rituals. What probably none of you know about me is that I am a person of fluctuating faith. If you haven't read anything by Miguel de Unamuno, a prominent Spanish author of the twentieth century who spent his life obsessing over life and death, faith and loss of faith, I recommend his short novel, *San Manuel Bueno, Mártir* (Saint Manuel, the good man, the Martyr), and one other of his novels, *Niebla*, (The Fog). When I read these two books by Unamuno, one a book about a priest who has no faith, and another about a man who spends his life in a fog of doubt, I laughed my way through the entirety of both books. I was laughing because I was no longer alone. I finally found somebody who was asking the same questions as I was and who was completely petrified by the whole life-after-death and is-there-a-God mystery. Here was a guy who was asking my questions and obsessing just like me. Who am I? Why am I here? Who built all of this...stuff? Did anybody really build it at all? Is everything just kind of here, existing randomly? Does anything really mean anything? If somebody did build all of this, why does he let evil jerks go trampling around his garden stealing stuff from his other children, beating them up, making them work, and even making them build homes and palaces and pyramids for them without sharing anything with them? Why does he let

these jerks sit around and eat grapes while their brothers and sisters are toiling and starving out in the hot sun?

The year that I read these two books by Miguel de Unamuno was 1992. That was also the year that I read the Bible in its entirety, the Koran in its entirety, and the Torah. While I really enjoyed Unamuno's writings, I was also peeved. I was angry at him because of the seed that he planted in my brain. He contaminated my soul with the following morbid, insipid statement: "Reasoning and faith are incompatible. Reasoning kills faith." Unamuno's writings began to gnaw at me, and prompted me to read the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, and a few other lame paperback spiritual books with all of the great feel-good, pat, black and white comfortable easy answers. I converted to Catholicism that year. I went to all of the classes, was baptized, took my first communion and my confirmation. The main reason and the good reason why I converted was I wanted to belong to the same faith as my wife. But I was also on a desperate quest for comfort. I was looking to belong to something, and I was looking for a way to fill that hole, that abyss, that bottomless pit that Unamuno had dug into my gut. All of that reading was very interesting and enlightening in many ways but it did nothing to fill the hole. It did nothing in terms of bolstering my faith or convincing me that there was some sort of grand design out there, a beautiful plan for all of humanity.

Faith: Interesting word. Someone with faith has a one hundred percent conviction of the existence of something or someone without having any tangible proof. But what about the questions and the doubts? Is there really anyone who can say that they have faith? Surely, everyone on earth suffers from doubts, don't they? I already said a few minutes ago that I have I guess a kind of fluctuating faith. There are four times in my life when I have had my moments of faith. The first time I experienced that feeling that there is a God was when I was in the middle of the ceremony of getting married. Susie and I had both just said our vows, and my mom's best friend, the town mayor was just about to pronounce us man and wife, and I looked at this person staring back at me, and I realized that I was not alone in the world. It was a feeling that I can't describe but I felt God.

The next three times that I felt one hundred percent convinced of divine presence before me was when I saw each of my three children being born in the hospital. During those three violent moments of watching these three little beings being pushed out and then falling out into the light, I saw God again. I had one hundred percent faith. I felt like I was wrapped up in a blanket of love.

But then after each of these moments, everyday life would come back into full swing, and my doubts resurfaced. Sharing with all of you these struggles of mine concerning faith about, God, Allah, Dios, Dieu, Deus is not easy but I'll give it a shot. In addition to the four times that I felt this one hundred percent faith, there have been many other times when I have felt like perhaps God was talking to me, and I'll mention just a few of them.

Many of you know that my wife, Susie is from Peru. Since 1979, we have gone to Peru probably almost twenty times to be with her family. Many times it was during the summer and we stayed for almost two months at a time. About ten years ago, I was driving the family car through the streets of Lima, and I was stopped at a red light, and an old lady, with no teeth limped over to my side of the car and put her hand out begging for some money. My first reflex action was horrible. I yelled at her and told her to go away. And then the light turned green, and as I was pulling away, she was able to muster up just enough energy to call out to me with this shrill timbre in her voice: "Solo quiero un pedazo de pan. Algo de comer..." I just want a piece of bread. Just a little something to eat. There is no way for me to describe to you what I began to feel at that moment. Her voice penetrated deep into my gut and I never felt so sad and so ashamed. At that moment, I felt that through her weak, high timbered voice, God was saying to me: "How can you be so despicable? You have so much going for you, and you can't spare a couple of piddly coins for this lady?" I immediately turned the car around and my wife Susie said: "What are you doing? The house is that way". "Yeah, I know but that lady is haunting me. I have to find her." So we spent about ten to fifteen minutes driving around several streets until we finally found her. Across the street, there was a small store, and Susie jumped out of the car, crossed the street and went into the store and emerged with a sandwich and a bottle of juice, and we gave the woman her lunch. I still felt bad because the lady was still poor, with no teeth wandering the streets of Lima, suffering the humiliation and indignity of having to beg for

sustenance but at least for the moment she received some temporary comfort. And at that moment, I felt that warm feeling in my gut, and it was like God was telling me that I had done the right thing. Of course, there was no real sacrifice on my part. It wasn't like I had to forego my lunch so that this woman could eat. I went home to my mother-in-law's and she served me, and Susie, Francesca, Donny and Giancarlo a huge meal. But my first reaction had been to ignore that person; pretend she wasn't there. That was the injustice. And it was the weak timber in her voice that made me feel like God was speaking to me.

Well, I guess I am done now with giving my preamble, and I know it was a little long, so sorry about that. This is a chapel so sharing with you some of my spiritual thoughts, my questions and feelings about faith and God are appropriate in that sense. The problem with my sharing with you my spiritual side is the danger of coming off as a self-serving evangelizing preacher bent on pushing my little political agenda in the name of the Lord. I would never want to do such a despicable thing. On the other hand, I want to present to you my feelings and thoughts in the most truthful way.

There are millions of people today in this beautiful country called America who have come here from far away looking for an opportunity to work for a living, pay their bills, feed and care for their children and enjoy the goods of life. Millions of them come here illegally. Some of them come as tourists and after their visa expires, they simply stay. Others sneak across the border illegally, risking their lives in the process and then begin looking for a way to make a living. They find day laborer jobs; they work digging ditches and doing the dangerous and dirty menial jobs for our huge construction companies, building our bridges, skyscrapers, schools, banks, and homes. They work in our fields harvesting our crops, they work in sweatshops throughout our country sewing, ironing, shining parts to brass beds, they wake up at 4:30 a.m. and stand in a parking lot for hours until pickup trucks arrive to take them to the various churches, homes, schools, condominiums, where they then cut the lawns, weed the gardens, till the soil, plant bushes.

Every time each one of us walks down the street, walks into an ACME or a bank, or a new school or a new building, we can be pretty sure that the chances are extremely high that the

foundation we are standing on was dug by immigrant workers, and in millions of cases all over America, by illegal immigrant workers. Every time that each one of us sits down to eat, we can be sure that perhaps some of the lettuce that we just put on our plate was harvested by an immigrant worker and that it is highly likely by an illegal immigrant worker. Each time that we bite into a hamburger or a breast of chicken, we can be sure that if it wasn't a free range chicken, in all likelihood, it came from a plant that employed immigrant workers, people who are fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, uncles and aunts. If you are a Caucasian child from an upper middle class or wealthy household, and you are bilingual, chances are you are bilingual because an immigrant caretaker, helped raise you, loved you, and taught you part of his or her culture in the process.

In the summer of 1977, I had just returned from Costa Rica after having studied and lived there for two years. I wasn't going to start college until January, the second semester so I started looking for a temporary job. After about three days of looking, I found a job working for a company that manufactured brass beds in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I arrived at work on my first day at 8 a.m. The supervisor gave me my card, walked me over to the shift clock and showed me how to punch in: "If you are five minutes late, we will dock you a half an hour's pay. This job is yours on a daily basis. If you don't show up to work tomorrow, you won't have a job here anymore. You have to call in beforehand. If we don't like your excuse, again, you won't have a job here anymore. Your station is over there with the P.R.s". I asked: "What's a P.R." He answered: "Puerto Rican". When I got to the station, a huge man in his early thirties gave me several rags for buffing and shining, and showed me my area. "These tubes here are parts of a brass bed. You have to apply this paste to the tubes and rub them until all of the scratches disappear and the tube is shiny. Then you put it over here in this bin. He then walked me over to Manuel's station, a short skinny Dominican in his early twenties. "You see how shiny and perfect Manuel's tubes are? You have to make yours shiny and perfect like his. When you get done with your first batch, Manuel will inspect your work". The man then walked away, and Manuel showed me how to rub and shine the tubes. I rubbed and shined for two and a half hours until 10:30 a.m. when one of the 10 or so supervisors who were all big brawny types around 220 pounds, rang a bell and yelled out instructions for us to take our fifteen minute break.

In my area, just about everybody was from Latin America. They weren't just Puerto Ricans as the supervisor had told me. They were from everywhere: Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Ecuador. At 10:45 a.m. another bell rang and the supervisor yelled out for us to get back to our stations. We rubbed out scratches on the tubes from 10:45 until 12 noon. AT 12:30, we then rubbed and rubbed and rubbed until 4 in the afternoon. At thirty minute intervals, one of the big brawny brute guys would stop at our station and chastise us to work faster. "Come on now. You've got some scratches on this one. Do it over. Your bin's only half full. You better pick that pace up". I had had a few loud and obnoxious wrestling coaches like that when I was growing up so their badgering and harassing didn't really bother me, but the big difference here was all of my coaches loved me and always wanted the best for me. These guys didn't even know me much less care about me. Anyway, I was only going to work in this factory for two months so I was just letting everything roll off my shoulders.

By the third day, I was promoted from rubbing with just rags to buffing with the drill buffers. The excitement of using this new machine literally lasted about fifteen minutes, and I realized that my position in the factory was the same. I was one of about two hundred other heads of human cattle providing horsepower for the production in the plant. On around the sixth or seventh day on the job, one of the workers cut his hand with a saw. It was in the area that they called the Brothers section. The area that the supervisor called the P.R. section was where I was stationed, with the immigrant workers, and the area that they called the Brothers section was the more skilled section of the plant where the African American workers were stationed. They used power tools and basically were in charge of packaging. They spent their day constructing thin wooden boxes for the brass bed parts for shipment. I guess the young man who screamed and cut his hand was not too badly hurt because I saw him back working at his station again with his hand bandaged up about an hour later. I remember mentioning to my dad at the dinner table about a worker cutting his hand and he asked me what kind of job I was doing, and I gave him a brief description of my job and the plant. "Good God. You're working in a sweatshop. You should get the hell out of there". So the next day, I remember showing up for work, and rubbing, rubbing and rubbing until the 10:30 a.m. break, remembering my dad's words the night before, and then walking over to the shift clock and punching out and not returning the next day. The workers in that plant punched in everyday, worked in very uncomfortable quarters with poor

ventilation and no air-conditioning, listening to the grinding and squealing of power tools and the ignorant grunts and threats from the brawny supervisors from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. If they got sick and couldn't make it for the day, they most likely lost their job to somebody else. My wage during the seven or so days that I worked in that sweatshop was about \$1.75 an hour which was the minimum wage, and pretty much everybody else in that factory with the obvious exception of the supervisors was being paid the same wage by the feudal lord who owned that factory. That was the summer of 1977.

From 1978 to 1983, I worked full time as a bilingual security guard in the evenings and I went to school full time at George Washington University. I worked primarily at 17th and Constitution Avenue in the old Pan-American Union building, The Organization of American States. But I also worked on Sundays all day at the Pan-American Health Organization. And later on, when I became a guard supervisor for a short while, I made the rounds to five different buildings ranging from the area near Foggy Bottom all the way to 17th and I streets. My girlfriend, Susie Ruiz and I decided to get married early. We didn't want to wait four years until I graduated with my degree, so we decided to just work and study at the same time. So we got ourselves an apartment in Arlington, I started working full time as a security guard at night while studying by day, and she got a job working in the Education Department at George Washington University.

I worked many different shifts, but for a four year period, I had the good fortune of working from 4:30 p.m until 11:30 p.m. Monday through Friday at the Organization of American States and from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. at The Pan-American Health Organization on Sundays. It was a very good gig for me. I was able to study full time and work full time and still enjoy great times with my new awesome wife who had a ton of friends in the Washington D.C. area.

From this point on in my talk, I have changed many of the names of some of the people who were my supervisors, and I have also changed the name of one of the companies that I worked for. I feel that it wouldn't be fair to mention the company because while I feel that the feudal system that I worked in was unjust, my bosses and the individuals I worked with were good people. I liked them. So here goes. The company that employed me - which I will call Global Buildings, Inc. - was run by a man in his early sixties, whom I will call Chuck Backus. I'll never

forget my interview with Chuck in my effort to get the bilingual security guard opening. I walked in, he stood up from his desk, he smiled, asked me where I was from, seemed to take an interest in the fact that I was a student at G.W. U. and then asked me if I spoke Spanish. I said: "Yes. I am fluent, and I can read and write it very well. He then called in his administrative assistant, a young Peruvian woman whom I will call Techí Flores: "Techí. Talk in Spanish for a minute with this young man, please." Techí and I started speaking, and after about a minute, Chuck stood up from his desk again, pulled out a tape measure and started measuring me like a Taylor. "I need to get an idea for your uniform". He then left the room and came back with five blue shirts, a security guard cap, a badge, five pairs of pants, a blue suit jacket, a blue tie, and a billy club. "It's now 2:30 p.m. I need you to start working for me at 5 p.m. tonight, so you will need to be at 17th and Constitution, at the C Street entrance at 4:30 p.m. so that my assistant Steve and I can show you the ropes. Techí says you speak great Spanish and that's good because you'll be speaking more Spanish than English on this job. Welcome to the team." A few hours later, I was working at the Organization of American States as a bilingual security guard which entailed signing people into the building, answering phones, standing at doorways during banquets, helping the caterers carry trays from time to time, and parking diplomats' cars for them. The Organization of American States is a political Organization, like a mini United Nations. All of the countries of the Americas, from Canada, all the way down to Argentina are members of the O.A.S. Each country appoints an ambassador to the O.A.S. From 1978 until 1983, there were a few occasions when I was assigned to stand at the doorway in the delegates' lounge while the politicians carried on their negotiations, arguments and talks. I was even there in the delegates' lounge in 1979 during the Sandinista uprising in Nicaragua, and Sevilla Sacasa, the ambassador to the O.A.S. for Nicaragua was speaking and suddenly several angry Nicaraguan protestors showed up outside on the front steps of the Pan-American Union Building and were waving flags with red ink stains.

All of the security guards who worked with me at the O.A.S. and all of the security guards who worked with me at the Pan-American Health Organization were immigrants from Latin America. Chuck Backus and Global Buildings, Inc. had at that time fourteen contracts in fifteen different buildings. He provided these fourteen different organizations with security guards, night cleaners, messengers, and I believe in some cases, building supers. Apart from his assistant

whom I will call Steve Peabody, the supervisor and myself, just about every single other person in his employ was an immigrant worker. He had janitors, cleaners, security guards, messengers working all over the place, at places like The Organization of American States, at the Pan-American Health Organization, The Pan-American Development Foundation, as well as several other buildings. I remember having to work an extra shift in a building across the river in Rosslyn a few times. I got to know and became friends with several of the workers under Chuck Backus' employ.

One of the drawbacks of working for Global Buildings was one was never quite free from work. On my one day off I was constantly receiving phone calls with Techí Flores telling me I had to come in and work for so and so at such and such a building who was out sick, or I would be told sometimes ten minutes before the end of my shift that I couldn't leave and had to pull an extra shift. Many times I had to keep working until the next morning. The one advantage I had was I was American. I had the excuse that I had to go to classes at the University, and on my day off I just stopped answering the phone. (And there were no answering machines back then so it worked out great in that regard.) But my compadres, the other guards, the messengers and the cleaners were not so lucky. Chuck, Steve and Techí would put the pressure on them, and they had no choice. They had to come in. They were immigrant workers, they needed the job, they had no recourse. But Chuck Backus was one of the good guys in a sense: he knew the system of the "Patrón". Chuck Backus was the Patrón - kind of like the benevolent Feudal Lord who took good care of his flock.

If you make just a little bit more than minimum wage in this country, it is impossible to live within your means. You have to eat, you have to pay rent, you have to pay for your children's medicines, you have to buy clothes, and the list is endless. Sooner or later, and more sooner than later, you come up short for the rent, and that's when Chuck Backus comes in and bails you out with a loan. "Alright Arsenio, alright Silvana, how much do you need to cover the rent?" "About two hundred dollars." Chuck would then call Techí Flores in. "Techí. Arsenio is about two hundred dollars short for his rent this month. Cut him a check for four hundred dollars so he can have a little breathing room".

And so off Arsenio would go to the bank breathing a little better. Then three days later, Arsenio or Silvana, or Carlos would get a call on their day off and it could be 10 p.m. at night or 2 o'clock in the morning. "I need you to get over here to C Street right away". And Arsenio, Silvana, Carlos would have no choice. They were indentured servants. They had to get up, leave their families at whatever time it was and go to work.

Here's another example. One of my fellow security guards who had come to the U.S. illegally from Bolivia in the late sixties, and who was now in his late fifties, was not able to secure a loan, a mortgage for a home that he wanted to buy. Well, I'll call him Carlos Medrano. Carlos was a hard working loyal worker for Chuck. Chuck Backus helped him secure the mortgage. I don't remember the details. I don't remember if Chuck gave him money or signed for him or what, but Chuck pulled some strings and Carlos bought his house. Carlos was, of course, signing off for permanent indentured service as far as I'm concerned. Chuck was one of the good guys. He was a compassionate, caring man, but he was still part of a feudalistic system that exists in our country today. There are entire sectors of our economy that are addicted to cheap, indentured labor. My co-workers were stuck. They had no way of improving their lot. There was no access to upward mobility. They didn't have access to schooling, opportunities to study in order to acquire a new skill apart from sitting in a chair all day, standing at a doorway, cleaning floors or running around delivering messages. They were paid a little better than minimum wage with time and a half for overtime pay, and they had no health insurance. And they were at the beck and call of their bosses almost twenty four seven.

In Los Angeles, thousands of immigrants line up every morning for day labor jobs, working in fields, picking crops, doing gardening work, cutting lawns, pruning bushes. They are shuttled to construction sites, where they dig ditches for day laborer's pay; they work in kitchens in restaurants all over the United States today. Down in Jupiter Florida in a condominium complex where my parents used to live, you will see dozens of immigrant workers from Latin America doing the garden work around the twenty or so buildings that make up the complex. There are companies not too far from here who employ thousands of immigrants in the food processing industry.

In the debate that is being waged right now on immigration in the U.S. many people argue that we must put a stop to illegal immigration, that the millions of immigrant workers are a drain on the economy, that they take away jobs from Americans who need the work, that they drive vehicles without a license or insurance, have accidents and that the American tax payer ends up footing the bill.

But other people, myself included, are asking the following question: Who is luring all of these people here? If, indeed, there are thousands of Americans who are out of work because of the presence of illegal immigrants, why are these American-owned companies hiring non-Americans? There is talk on the Hill of passing a law that would make it a felony to enter the United States illegally. Why are our politicians also not working on passing a bill that would make it a felony to hire illegal immigrants? Why is there no law in the works to make it a felony to engage in the despicable behavior of hiring practices that are nothing more and nothing less than acquiring cheap labor and treating people like indentured servants? This is a human rights issue. What is happening to our immigrant brothers and sisters is wrong. It is one of the great injustices of our time.

Amen.