

## Un-Domesticated Mysteries

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St. Luke 2:11-14

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*“Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.’”* (St. Luke 2:11-14)

It began with a gift and a conversation with his son. The late John Leonard, one of our country’s most gifted essayist, told the story of receiving a beautifully bound translation of the Gospel According to Saint Mark translated by his friend the novelist Reynolds Price. He received this gift shortly after a conversation with his fourteen-year old son proclaiming his atheism, and shortly before the arrival of Christmas. My temptation is to read you the essay Leonard wrote for *The New York Times*, but a homilette can’t contain a whole newspaper column, so I shall summarize, paraphrase and quote a bit.

After relating, hilariously, his own adolescent struggles with faith which culminated in a Youth Sunday sermon Leonard delivered at sixteen years old in his home church, he described his own college education in which the “abyss” on which we are precariously perched by virtue of our existence is reduced to an aesthetic category, rather than a moral one, in the vain attempt to domesticate the mysteries of life and death. Leonard sums up his college experience by saying he “took courses in irony.”

Leonard puzzles, after his son’s own adolescent announcement of atheism, over whether perhaps he hasn’t done such a great job of preparing his son for the realities of life. Basically, he says, he has taught his son to ask, “What Would George Orwell Do?” when facing life’s perplexities. But, perhaps, he reasons, being a thoroughly decent young chap isn’t enough to deal with a world that is so thoroughly indecent, so thoroughly irrational, a world which “with a bloody claw, scatters all axioms.”

With Christmas staring him in the eye, Leonard says, knowing that Frosty and Rudolph and Bloomingdale’s and the Grinch have stolen Christmas from him, it suddenly occurs to Leonard that his son needs more than good intentions, good manners and a good head on his shoulders to face the inevitable losses, and griefs, and disenchantments of this world.

“He has,” he says, “neglected to talk to his son of final things. They talk of haircuts, homework, TV programs, sports scores, eating habits.” But he has never told his son “that the standardized ethics of his household have a history; that the cross in his imagination might be a growing tree; that sacrifice and reciprocity, grace and mercy, love and justice, are more than just ideas or deductions or theories waiting around for proofs. They are dreams that have survived our knowledge of ourselves. They are scales on which we measure our worth. They have even outlasted a church of inquisitors and clerks.”

Leonard confesses that if he knew how “he would say to his son that, granted, religion is wishful thinking, but there is no other kind of thinking, and it seeks ceremony. Just as there are tools that we trust, that are true, so there are symbols that are sacred, in which our hopes repose, true, too, and enduring. Look, he would say, at the shadow in European painting, or at cathedral light. Listen to Bach, or to Handel’s *Messiah*. They aren’t arguments, any more than the imagination of the Tao is an argument. They do, though, bear witness to an unarguable need, a passion. We wonder.”

If he could find it in him to have this conversation with his son, Leonard says, maybe his son, “a cat among proofs” might realize also that there is a document written long ago by people who encountered something that fired their imaginations and made it possible for them to face life’s suffering and grief. Quoting his friend, Reynolds Price, Leonard says, maybe his son, like he, would see that once upon a time, long, long ago, “a great thing happened in the presence of human witnesses who, however slow to comprehend, eventually did so and survived to tell the tale.” And, perhaps, his son will wonder too.

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All quotes from John Leonard, “Good News,” in *Private Lives in the Imperial City* (New York: 1976-1979), pp. 13-16. The essay was previously published in *The New York Times*.