

In any battle, In any struggle, In any conflict

I grew up in a large Italian family on the south side of Chicago. My father was the oldest of ten and my mother was the oldest of seven. I had more aunts and uncles and cousins than I could count and holidays were always loud and raucous occasions full of great food and noisy arguments and running children everywhere. Our family were all Catholics but more culturally Catholic than pious. I went to public school and I, like my two older brothers and two younger sisters, received catechism instruction on Wednesday afternoons. None of it seems to have made much of an impression on me. I looked forward to the sacraments of first communion and confirmation with a mixture of anticipation and dread knowing that, as the shortest boy in every class I was ever in, I would be expected to lead the procession when the time came for us to stand and move forward and leave the anonymity of the pews. The excitement largely stemmed from knowing that our extended family would usually include a cash gift with a card congratulating us for our achievement. In my youthful mind, celebrating the sacraments was no different than celebrating a birthday or a graduation, a clear milestone as we grew and progressed from grade to grade.

All of my brothers and sisters had some degree of Catholic schooling but I never did. I attended public school through high school by choice. I am amazed at the autonomy my parents granted me when it came time to choose which high school to attend. I remain grateful for the freedom which led me to choose Fenger, the large public high school near our house. My older brothers had gone to a very good Catholic high school called Mendel run by Augustinian brothers and I suppose it was expected that I would go there as well. But I had no interest in following them for many reasons, not the least being that one was required to wear a sport coat and a tie each and every day of class. And there were no girls there. It was an all male preparatory school and they were serious about preparing Mendelmen as gentlemen.

I did very well in high school despite my laziness, and eventually graduated as valedictorian, an event that nearly ruined me. Like most self absorbed teenagers, I was already full of myself. I saw this as sort of a coronation and a recognition of my elite faculties and an excuse to indulge and pamper myself all the more. A teacher at the school, knowing that I wanted to leave home for college, suggested that I try to get into a small liberal arts school called Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Many referred to the school as the Harvard of the midwest.

I did well at Carleton, despite lacking a clear plan and my continued sloth. I majored in English Literature, as I loved to read and writing came naturally. Plus, it was well known that the humanities were relatively easy and thus, I could avoid the rigors of the sciences. I graduated with honors but spent a lot of time, as did most of my friends, drinking beer, playing sports, and relentlessly seeking pleasure and entertainment in all forms. Our gods were in our bellies. We were young hedonists. When graduation came, most of my friends took the next step and went off to law school or grad school. I was lost and confused in more ways than one. I no longer wished to study law and really didn't know what I should do. I never considered a "vocation" and certainly never gave a thought to what God might want me to do. I had quickly lost faith and assumed the cultural antagonism of the academic world to all things even hinting at the existence of God. One breathed it in there on campus much like wood smoke on a fall day.

After college I drifted and finally came to Colorado. My brother had recently gotten out of the army and was living in Denver. I thought I might stay with him and try to get a job at a ski area, and fortunately was hired as a ski instructor at A Basin. I eventually progressed to the ski patrol and moved over to Loveland Basin. Some might have referred to me during this period as a ski bum but I remember working quite hard, often working two jobs. I washed dishes in a Mexican restaurant, made pizzas and tended bar to pay the rent. Through friends I eventually found a job in the summers as a river guide and friends also help me to find employment at a ski area in New Zealand for a couple of summers. All great fun initially... but also, a bit boring over time.

Eventually, nearing thirty, I realized that this sort of existence could not continue. I had received instruction in first aid as an EMT, a requirement for ski patrolmen back then. I began to form a plan, a half baked desire to return to school and perhaps try to get into medical school. I would have to take all of the prerequisites beginning with introductory courses in biology and chemistry, alongside incoming freshmen. I had carefully avoided the sciences during my time at college ten years previously. I enrolled at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins and lined up all the prerequisites and took them in one fell swoop. I was a serious student this time and did well.

I was admitted to med school at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center from the waiting list just two weeks before classes were to begin. By this time I was living with my girlfriend Deb, who eventually became my wife. I used to joke to friends and family back then that we were living in sin. Somehow, it doesn't seem quite so humorous as I write this. Undisciplined in very many

ways, I was certainly not looking to make vows to anyone, though I can't help but think, even the fact that I was enrolling in medical school was largely due to a vague notion that I would (and should) provide for her...someday.

While in Denver during my fourth year in med school, we were robbed one night while out at a movie. The police thought the perpetrators were in and out of the house in less than five minutes as they had taken just a few things. But the effects of that episode lingered far longer. Suddenly, I couldn't sleep. There was a fear and an anxiety that I sensed, a cold chill, an evil presence in the house that was almost palpable. I experienced a most uncomfortable feeling of dread. I would lay awake at night, sometimes with my heart pounding but always with a feeling of great unease. Sometimes I would get up and pace. If you talked to me during the daylight hours I wouldn't have mentioned it and I certainly didn't believe in God. But at night, something was brewing. This discomfort progressed to the point that I eventually began whispering silently a little prayer that I made up to help me fall back to sleep. I would repeat over and over, "In any struggle, in any battle, in any conflict I want to be on the side of Jesus and Mary and Joseph." I would repeat it silently over and over and over and usually, that was enough to help me quiet my thoughts and fall finally back to sleep.

In 1988, we finally decided to get married. We were not church goers and I knew no one connected with the faith. We decided to get married in one of the mountain parks in the foothills just outside of Denver. Deb asked a retired pastor that she knew from her work in cardiac rehab. She did not know him well and I do not recall what denomination he belonged to. He really asked very little of us; no classes, no instruction, no church attendance. However, he did ask to meet us as he wanted to spend an evening with us to get to know us a bit better. I'm not sure what he thought of us and our situation but God bless that kind and gentle pastor. To my everlasting embarrassment, I remember telling him at one point, "Look, I'm going to have a lot of friends there that day, ski patrolmen, river guides, old school friends, please don't put too much of that God stuff into this." I can't help but think that he whispered a little silent prayer of his own that evening.

Eventually, I began a family medicine internship in Grand Junction, Colorado. Once, while admitting a patient from the ER with chest pain, he boldly gave me a tabloid and asked me, "Have you been paying attention to what has been happening in Medjugorje?" I had never heard of Medjugorje and I remember looking over at his wife as she rolled her eyes, as if to say, "Even the doctor you have to be giving this stuff to..." But I am so grateful he did. It was Wayne Weible's paper titled, *Miracle at Medjugorje* with several articles that briefly told the story of Medjugorje and how six young people in the former Yugoslavia had reported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Gospa as they called her, beginning in 1981. I would like to say that my conversion was instantaneous but it was not. Still, I was intrigued by the story and upset when I lost the paper fairly quickly. I had wanted to reread it and perhaps find out more.

That summer I did an obstetrics rotation in Los Angeles at a county hospital. It was a demanding month with every other night call but great training. I met a nurse there that month that everyone seemed to love. She was from Italy... not just of Italian ancestry like me, but actually from Italy. She spoke English with a heavy accent. She was always upbeat and smiling with a great sense of humor. Maybe everyone liked her because everyone knew how hard her life was. Her husband had left her and she was a single mom raising two small boys. She worked nights in a county hospital but never complained and indeed, had a kind word for all. Her whole personality was so different from most of the nurses on the unit, who seemed cold and hard and distant.

One night, at about 2 or 3 in the morning, we were just making conversation as nurses and doctors in training will sometimes do. She asked me what faith I was. I told her I didn't have any faith. I told her I was raised Catholic but didn't believe in any of that stuff anymore. I told her that I thought it was all nonsense; all myths and lies and foolishness. I told her I didn't believe in God anymore. I summed it up by saying that I was once Catholic but now I was nothing... and I see in retrospect now, how true those words were.

This kind and gentle nurse got mad at me. She waved her finger at me and said, "Don't say that. Don't ever say that. If you were once a Catholic, you are still a Catholic. I'll give you a video and you'll see." This was in the days of VHS tapes. The next day she gave me a video titled, *Medjugore, a Message of Peace For You*. But I couldn't watch the video there in California. We interns were housed in an old army barracks, fairly primitive quarters, with rows of bunk beds and communal showers and window fans, but no television.

I watched the video several weeks later, over a Labor Day weekend when I had returned home to Grand Junction. It was an old video, a copy of a copy and sometimes out of focus, but it went right through to the depths of my soul. When I saw the six children make the sign of the cross and fall to their knees at the same instant, all gazing at the same something, moving their mouths in prayer in unison, intensely focused and not blinking with an unworldly look on their faces, I knew in an instant that they were not lying. I knew that they were not making this up, that this was no charade, no hoax and they were not crazy. And almost in the same instant the realization came to me that if these young people were telling the truth, than I was in big trouble. My atheism crumbled. I knew

now in an instant that God existed. All of these years I had been on the wrong track. I had backed the wrong horse. With all of my education I was a fool and my Mom and my aunts and so many others were right all along. I had one foot in hell though I didn't even know it. I was profoundly shaken from that moment. I watched the video again and again and even made a copy of it before I mailed it back.

I also mailed back some towels I had stolen while in California. There were tall stacks of clean white towels on a table outside the showers and I had taken a half dozen without a second thought. In my prior mind set, they were there, I wanted them and so I took them. Why not? The rightness or the wrongness of the action never occurred to me. Now after the video, I had to send them back with a note of apology. Also that weekend, I had to get rid of the *Playboy* magazines that I had been hiding in my sock drawer and closet. They had to go and I threw them in the trash that same weekend.

I decided I needed to go to confession. It had been about twenty-five years since my last confession, since I had examined my conscience. I had no idea where the Catholic Church was in town and so had to look in the phone book. I found myself in the confession line at the back of St. Joseph's Church that Saturday evening; very uncomfortable and yet determined to do it right. I had forgotten the formula and really didn't know how to begin. As the line of penitents moved forward I found myself more and more anxious, more and more unsettled. I looked around for a pamphlet or a book or anything that might help but found nothing suitable. At one point, I thought: This is sad. I can't remember the *Act of Contrition*, the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*. I can't recall a single prayer for the life of me, except for the one I had made up, the "In any struggle, in any battle, in any conflict" one and I doubted that it would be suitable.

I kept looking over the shoulder of the lady in front of me in line as she read from a little prayer booklet. I was hoping that she would get to the page with the *Act of Contrition* on it. Finally, as she was to be the next one to enter, I mustered the courage to tap her on the shoulder and said something like, "That is a beautiful prayer book. Where did you get it." She started to explain that you could send away for them, or sometimes find them in a rack in the back of the church and then she stopped in mid sentence and handed it to me with a smile and said, "Here, its for you." I was overcome with emotion and I began to cry. This unmerited act of kindness from a stranger was incredibly moving then— and still is. After she went in, as I waited and continued sobbing, I explored the little book rapidly. It was the little blue Pieta prayer book and I still have it, with the woman's name inscribed on the front page.

When I went into the confessional, the priest couldn't have been kinder or more helpful as he helped me through the process of confession. I recounted to him what had just happened with the little prayer book. As my penance, he had me familiarize myself with the prayers in that book. As I left the confessional, I was ecstatic, floating more than walking and smiling ear to ear. I had gone through many emotions much too quickly, from anxious, to tears and now great joy. This pattern tended to repeat frequently during those early days.

I attended Mass and received Holy Communion and again started crying but again with great joy. It was strange to experience these emotions at the same time. Then in the bulletin I found a notice that the Medjugorje prayer group met each Tuesday evening in the church. I attended and sat in the back and followed the prayers and participated as best I could including the prayer of the rosary. Afterwards, noting a newcomer, a man approached me and trying to make me feel welcome, he offered to introduce me to some of the others. The first person he introduced me to was a friendly woman that I recognized immediately, the woman I had stood behind in the confession line. "You're the woman who gave me the prayer book," I stammered. She recognized me as well and we shared a warm hug. She has since become a very dear friend and a great role model as I returned to the church.

Then began an intense honeymoon period as I returned to the practice of the faith. I developed a great desire to attend Mass daily. There was a small beautiful chapel on the first floor of the hospital where I continued in training. They had a 6:00 am Mass and I would try to attend most mornings before we would begin rounds or classes or whatever the day entailed. I learned that at one point, Our Lady of Medjugorje had encouraged her "little children" to put the Mass in the center of each day. I began trying to live the messages: daily Mass, the rosary, monthly confession, and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays.

This very quickly led to some tension in my relationship with my wife. She couldn't understand what was happening to me. I was always stubborn, moody, and difficult and now it seems I was becoming even more so, worse instead of better. I showed her the video I had watched, but it did not have the same effect on her. At one point, exasperated, she blurted out that she wanted me back the way I was. I couldn't help but respond that I didn't want to go back to the old way for all the money in the world. It wasn't that somehow I was suddenly at peace or I had attained great spiritual heights. No, not at all. But I could sense that the path in front of me led to great heights and led to peace and I simply couldn't go back. Plus, I saw and understood so much that had confused me previously. The apparitions at Medjugorje led me to find out more about apparitions at Guadalupe, Rue de Bac, Lourdes, Fatima, Garabandal, Kibeho, and so many more. I watched the video *Marian Apparitions of the 20th Century* and continued to read widely.

I read Sheen and Chesterton, the *Diary of Sister Faustina* and the *Song of Bernadette*. I was greatly enlightened by Maria Valtorta's *Poem of the Man God* and encouraged when I discovered that Our Lady had told the visionaries that we should read it if we wanted to know Jesus better. I read magazines like *First Things* and *This Rock*. I remained a daily communicant and after seeing a video about a convict and his conversion and his consecration, I made the 33 day consecration to Our Lady of St. Louis de Montfort. I began attending Marian conferences and was thrilled by the great speakers, the prayerful liturgies and the large enthusiastic crowds. After one splendid conference held in Denver in early December of 1989, I returned home to Grand Junction with great zeal. I tried to share these teachings and sentiments with my wife and others including family and friends from church but with limited success. I was dismayed that so many were not interested in the apparitions of Our Lady and appalled that many were convinced that it was all the work of Satan. They were convinced of this without even looking into the matter. Even the priest and the sisters at the hospital displayed little interest in what was happening at Medjugorje.

One night, after I returned from the exhilarating Marian conference in Denver, I experienced something that was more than a dream. Even now, it is difficult to explain. Some of what I experienced, I know I won't be able to put properly into words. I was in bed and awake, but not fully. I was being asked if I would do something for God. I could see that I had free choice as to whether to accept or reject. My response would have an affect on a great many souls. There would be opposition and suffering if I said yes. But God and Our Lady would help me and as incentive, I was shown a great number of saints rushing to line up to assist me. It was consoling to know that I would have heavenly helpers. I said yes, I would be willing with God's help. Then I was asked to choose one of the saints to be a special helper. By this point, I had at least enough prudence to respond, "Lord, You know best. Please, Lord, You choose a saint for me." And I was shown that Mother Cabrini would be my special intercessor, a strange choice I thought as I had no special attachment to Mother Cabrini and knew little about her. Well, I knew that there was a shrine of hers in the foothills outside of Denver not far from where we had been married, but I had never been to the shrine, and knew next to nothing about her life.

The next morning, as I walked to the hospital chapel for the 6:00 am Mass, in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, an inspired thought came to me clearly. I was to ask one of the sisters to select a Marian hymn to sing before Mass. There was a little board to the right of the altar area where the hymns were posted with felt numbers so all would know which hymn to sing. Only the sisters posted the numbers. Unfortunately, when I arrived, no sisters were there. They often arrived just before the Mass was to begin.

As the time for Mass to begin drew closer and closer I began to sob. This first simple task that I had assented to, I would be unable to complete because there were no sisters there. As Mass was about to begin, I left my pew, fumbled in the box of numbers and posted the number for *Immaculate Mary*. I continued to sob as the sisters arrived and as the priest entered, we all sang, but confused and upset as I was, I sang much too loudly and my sobs were now audible to all. The priest stopped after the sign of the cross and looked at me. He asked if I were all right and then, confused by my behavior, he asked me to leave. I quieted myself and the Mass continued. However the emotions returned intensely and during the Mass I was overcome with such spiritual intensity that I began to sob again. And after communion I began to shake and tremble uncontrollably, not from tears or sadness but truly overcome by what I believe was the action of the Holy Spirit. Now the priest had had enough and he pointed at me and said, "Take him out of here. Take him out." I felt like Jesus must have when on the night of his trial, the Sanhedrin had Him led away. I had barely enough control to reply that I would be good, that I would stop but I had no more ability to stop this trembling than to stop an earthquake.

Finally the Mass was over and the people filed out. I remained kneeling there feeling like I had just been struck by lightning. There was a profound weakness. I was so weak that I didn't think I could stand or walk or even sit unaided. One of the sisters came over and helped me to sit in the pew. Those who remained were confused by my behavior and so was I. They sent for one of the faculty members from the residency. He was kind and trying to be helpful as I struggled to explain to him what had just happened but he had no faith and he wasn't Catholic and I may as well have been speaking Swahili to him. It made no sense. Then they sent for the psychiatrist on call, a psychiatrist I knew and we talked in the chapel for awhile before he invited to me to continue our discussion in his office. I was still not back to normal, and felt kind of like one who still smolders a bit even though the fire has been doused.

Eventually, after about two hours, he let me go back to my day and I was able to function and resume my duties. But the effects of the events of that night and that morning lingered for several days. The psychiatrist thought I had experienced a hypomanic episode and wanted to try me on a medication. I refused. I wasn't sure what exactly had happened but knew with certainty that it was not a psychiatric issue or indeed a medical issue of any kind. With it had come a period of intense spiritual insight. I could see and sense clearly the spiritual battle raging all around us. A day or so later, I had to drive through a bad part of town and the darkness and the evil was almost palpable. I was neither frightened or elated but simply resolved to continue to try to comply with the request...

I asked to meet with the sisters and tried to explain what had happened but it was largely unsuccessful. I tried to explain my behavior to the priest but again, it was of little use. At some point, I had called my mom and asked her to send me a rosary. She was shocked but delighted. Eventually I began attending daily Mass with her when I returned to Chicago for visits and we began attending Marian conferences together. I would plan trips to Chicago to coincide with the large Medjugorje conference held on the campus of the University of Notre Dame each year. I looked forward to the great speakers, prayerful liturgies and spiritually uplifting weekends.

I went to Medjugorje for the first time in 1993, while the war was still going on. By then, I already believed in the authenticity of the apparitions and everything I experienced in Medjugorje during my stay confirmed my belief. I brought my stethoscope thinking that I would try to help in some way, but it was the kind and generous people there in Medjugorje who helped us: housing and feeding and caring for us pilgrims despite the fact that food and almost everything else was in short supply.

We were told to bring one suitcase with our own stuff and a second suitcase crammed with food and clothes and medications for the people there. I remember arriving after midnight after our long trip and yet, our host family greeted us and served us a hot meal in the middle of the night. I also remember the generosity of an elderly woman with a babushka as she offered me her seat in church. I remember meeting holy priests like Fr. Svet, Fr. Slavko and especially Fr. Jozo, who did not ask us to contact our congressmen or send money to help them in their hour of need, but to send more pilgrims to pray with them. Fr. Jozo had noticed that when pilgrim groups came, good things tended to happen: the electricity would come on or the flow of water would be restored.

In those days, we would gather in the road outside the homes of the visionaries and they would come out to speak with us with the aid of translators. I was blessed to attend several apparitions while there: to Marija and Jakov and Ivan and though I didn't see any outward signs, I could see clearly that these young people were without pretense and the look on their faces and their conduct before, during and after the apparitions convinced me more and more that these heavenly visitations of Our Lady were real. These were humble messengers encouraging us to focus more on living the messages of Our Lady and not at all on themselves.

This was long before the era of cell phones and we had to go to the post office to place long distance calls. During my rare phone calls home, I had to keep reassuring my wife not to worry about us because even though we were surrounded by war, we were safe in this island of peace called Medjugorje. I was having a great time and I really did not want to leave when the time came for our departure.

To me, the messages of Our Lady were so profound that I wanted to share them with family members, co-workers and friends. I began typing up copies of the messages each month and mailing them to those dear to me. This effort eventually grew into a monthly newsletter. Then, one day, a wrongly delivered letter arrived. It was addressed to the **Mir Center of Arizona**. I knew Helen Zec, the wonderful, holy woman who ran the **Mir Center of Arizona**. She had led our pilgrimage to Medjugorje and I had been to several Marian conferences in the Phoenix area organized by her and her group. I knew that *Mir* was the Croatian word for peace. But I have no idea why that letter would have ended up in my mailbox. However, I began to think of forming a similar non profit to aid in distributing Our Lady's messages. I formed the **Mir Center of Western Colorado** but our Mir Center was really just my wife Deb and I. Deb would help me to put the mailing labels on the newsletter each month and prepare the bulk mailing but would not read it or any of the other spiritual material that I continued to offer her. Still she was supportive and understanding and in many ways more charitable than I.

I returned to Medjugorje two more times and had wonderful, enriching experiences each time. One trip was in combination with a trip to Rome for the canonization of Padre Pio. Our little Medjugorje prayer group continued to meet on Tuesday evenings but over time we began to meet in the St. Francis Chapel across from the church. In one message, Our Lady encouraged us to become more active in our parish and so I began volunteering with jail ministry and conducting what they generously called "church" at the juvenile detention facility. We sponsored celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday and combined a holy hour at three in the afternoon with a meal for the poor down at the soup kitchen. We also sponsored visits by Wayne Weible, Father Tomislav Pervan and Sister Emmanuel. We continued to try to spread Our Lady's messages, and to live them. Over time, I began to understand that living the messages is the best way to spread them. I have met the most prayerful, kind and gentle people through Our Lady of Medjugorje.

Looking back, I am ever grateful to the people who took the risk of sharing these heavenly messages with me and wonder what life would be like for me if they had not taken that risk. I am ever grateful to Our Lady who found me in the mud; an egotist, a hedonist—blind, deaf and dumb in matters of the spirit. Our Lady has been doing gently with a loving motherly touch what only she can do. She has been trying to clean away the muck in order to make a self centered, wretched, miserable sinner presentable to her Son. The Lord has done great things for her and through her, for me as well. Thanks be to God.