

A TERRIBLE DAY

by Mike Finley
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excerpted from a book in progress, **THE CLEVER & THE GOOD**

One day in November of 2003, something terrible happened to me. In my heart, today, I describe this event as a blessing. But at the time -- and sometimes even today when I get confused -- I describe it as my downfall. It was the day I first prayed to Jesus.

It's not that I was anti-Jesus. I attended seminary as a young man. I studied the New Testament and was in thrall to the personality of the Christ, on many levels -- the wisdom, the poignancy, the brilliance of his revolution. But my Jesus was an angry, frustrated, visionary fellow -- a guy like me.

Indeed, I fashioned a Christ after my own image -- as a kind of tragic hero that no one besides me really understood. It was my belief, for instance, that neither the Jews nor the Christians quite figured Jesus out.

Yes, he was the Messiah. But the Jews weren't expecting that kind of Messiah, one who was global in his intentions, and more interested in the universal spirit of mankind than in restoring the glory that was Israel. So instead of rejoicing at his intervention, they did him in. Not so much that he was a false messiah as that he was not the messiah they wanted. So the Jews got it wrong.

But the so-called Christians didn't figure him out, either, not in my view. They deified him as the son of God, after he many times declared himself the exact opposite, the "son of Man." To me the new sect of Christianity -- still going strong 2,000 years later -- could all be chalked up to the human appetites laid out by Dostoevsky in his "Grand Inquisitor" dream sequence in *The Brothers Karamazov* -- for miracle, mystery, and authority. Whoever Christ really was, we would interpret him according to these three unquenchable appetites. In short, Christ satisfied people's desire for fascism -- for divine majesty to wipe away our need to think. I alone (plus whatever intellectual I stole the idea from in college) was right about this, and Christians were all wrong. Not just wrong, but diminished by their cravenness in the moment of being wrong.

So, to recap: after 2,000-plus years of the best minds in history reflecting on the nature of God, everyone had it wrong, and I had it right. Dostoevsky also covered this position in another part of the same book -- the desire of some men to lift themselves over God -- a kind of spiritual/intellectual egomania. Or, as I have been calling it, cleverness.

That was my adult belief about Jesus. Surprisingly, I was much more OK with the notion of God. You will find this to be true among clever people -- they will side with God against Christ every time, as if there were daylight between the two. As if points were awarded for doing so. Ego points.

I suspect it is because God is iconic and fixed, but essentially unknowable, whereas Christ was a human being who left a paper trail that we can argue over. We all want to see what we need to see in him, like the blind men of Industan who each have a part of the elephant in their hands -- tail, ear, trunk, flank -- and paint a complete elephant based on that piece. In my case, I focused on Christ's bathos, because I myself was drawn to grief -- and so he became the Christ of Sorrows, exclusively.

I began by promising you a tale of painful humiliation, and I still have not gotten to it. I ask you to picture me then, down by the Minnesota River, not far from the Twin Cities airport. I was climbing along a swampy area, surrounded by cattails and scrub. It was November and cold. The burr plants were in full burrhood, and calling to my Velcro-skinned dog.

I was miserable. September 11th was two years in the past. I had lost most of my writing clients due to the economy or my own discouragement. My income was perhaps 10% of what it had been in my glory days of the 1990s. My children were both suffering from severe depression. I had health problems -- a brain tumor, diabetes, alcoholism. I was living in a kind of superpolitical hell, with the whole country split down the middle, which I could not bear. The fact that everyone who was wrong was a firm believer in Jesus did not make things easier for me. I didn't know what the future held for me and my family, and I was petrified.

I had been attending a church run by a man who lived on my block. I attended less for me (still basically cynical and pessimistic) than for my son, who was struggling in

school and not doing well socially. This little church, an independent evangelical church, was more conservative than I would ever have chosen. They believed in Jesus, period, and he was a triumphant, miracle-working, kick-ass Jesus – light years from my suffering Christ. I much preferred the more staid, ritualistic atmosphere of the Episcopal church -- all the incense of the Catholic Church, in which I had been brought up, and little of the obligation.

So I was attending this evangelical church, a little repulsed by its fervor, but also intrigued by it – by the obvious goodness of the people, by the intensity of their faith, by the realness of their Jesus, by the passion of their prayers. I must underscore that I was just an observer, a journalist, someone clever -- distanced from reality by his mind. I joined in their prayer, but I didn't believe I was doing remotely anything like the people standing around me. They were connecting; I was doing something more remote: "sneaking up" on God with my mind.

Sometimes that's the best thing a clever person can do. I was like "God, if you are there, and I seriously doubt that you are, but anyway, I know this sounds idiotic, please hear my prayer ..."

Suddenly, down by the Minnesota River, out of the blue, a light snow falling, I found myself praying. For real. And to Jesus, not God. This is significant because if Jesus was only a tragic hero of history, it would make little sense to pray to him. I would only be praying to him in case he was really there, meaning, he was some kind of living, present thing.

This was my prayer:

"Oh, Jesus, I don't know if you're there or not. I don't know if you give two hoots about me. I don't know anything. And I feel like a fool standing here in this field talking to myself.

"But if you happen to be looking this way, see how miserable I am. I'm a smart guy but I'm at my wit's end. I don't know where my next check is coming from. I don't know how to pay next month's mortgage. I don't know how to keep my kids from getting sadder and sadder. I have tried to make these things better on my own, but I'm no good at

it. I stink at it. I'm worse than no good, things deteriorate in my hands. I am lost. Jesus, if you can hear me, help me.

"I would not be praying to you if I did not have some kind of faith in you. I admit, my faith is weak. One teabag in a bathtub of water. But here I am, calling on you, and this is the most I can do today.

"Jesus, if you help me, I will remember. I – I believe you are there. I believe you can help me. I believe you are God, somehow. I don't understand all that, but I'm willing to say yes to it, whatever it is. So I am turning all this stuff that I have no power over, over to you."

That was the prayer, as I can reconstruct it. So it was really a kind of negotiated settlement. *Trust, but verify*. I promised Jesus that I would believe in him and not give him the high hat any more, if he would help me with these problems that I was unable to address on my own. It was a pledge, to a spirit that I had no understanding of.

It was the uncleverest thing I had ever done.

Funny thing, and here is where my story gets cheesy. Almost immediately my sense of panic subsided. I felt as if I had passed through a doorway, out there in the marshes, a doorway that one could only go through forward – no turning back. It was the darnedest feeling – like I had done a good thing that was completely out of character. I had turned my heart and mind over to Someone Else. And it was better than ibuprofen – no worries. I stood in the falling snow and blinked.

It was the cleverest thing I had ever done.

By praying, I had gotten rid of the worst part of the problem -- my paralyzing anxiety. Not 100%, of course -- I could still talk myself into a snit if I gave my fears 10 seconds of description and a good head start. And I can still do it today. But if I let things stand just as they were -- with my problems in Christ's hands -- I wasn't *afraid* any more. And with that realization came an insight – that I fed on fear, that I used it like gasoline to fuel my work, my thinking, my personality. It went all the way back to the death of my sister as a young boy, and the feeling that enveloped me that I was doomed, and

happiness was an illusion. I was one big mobile, skin-encapsulated, fear-based initiative. And suddenly now, I was able to glimpse a life run by something else – love?

Other funny thing. The next day, five separate things happened, all relating to money, that are so "coincidental" that they are comical. As you read, imagine a player piano providing the soundtrack, like in a Keystone Kops two-reeler.

1. I found a check in my wallet for \$350 that had been there for four months. I had forgotten it.
2. Someone I once wrote an article about called me and asked if I could come in and talk about a writing project, with him as the client. (On a topic that I really cared about, intervention for drug and alcohol problems.)
3. A collaborator with whom I had done some successful projects called and asked if I would like to get together and discuss an idea.
4. A client I had been hustling for six months called to say Yes, they wanted to go forward on the project. It was a big, juicy one, too.
5. The bank called to tell me I had added a check deposit wrong. I was \$100 richer on the basis of bad math alone.

Now, I hasten to point out that some of these leads did not pan out. Or, they have not panned out yet, a year later. But you can't imagine what a blessing they were to me that day. They gave me hope. Hell, they made me laugh, the way they happened all at once, like the basket of promises handed to Jimmy Stewart at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

And other opportunities did present themselves over this past year. If I had starved, I would not be writing this, would I? Come on, be clever – admit it's true.

In any event, my real problem wasn't the money. It was the despair. I felt crushed by so many things: the economy, Osama bin Laden, political squabbles, the sadness of my childhood, my family's vulnerability today. What good was my cleverness against these? Had I not prayed, I think my cleverness would have mutated into something inevitably worse: irreversible bitterness. I wonder, thinking back to that snowy day in the swamplands, how close I came to that possibility.

And that's it, my friends. In 30 seconds of prayer, I had temporarily nullified 50 years of cleverness. I became, for that brief period, unclever. Almost "good"! No, I *was* good -- in the sense of, for once, knowing my place in the scheme of things. Which is really all we are good at -- knowing our place (which is not a bad place because it is the vestibule of God's heart) and loving and helping one another.

Now, I told you all this was a terrible thing. What I mean by that is that, the entire way I thought of myself up till that point, as a being who lived by his wits, a creature who stood back from the fabric of life and scouted for "loopholes" -- became suddenly obsolete. That "I," which I had painstakingly built up as an elaborate defense mechanism against the predations of the world, was no good any more. I was trash. It is a terrible thing to realize, that you -- as you have come to know yourself -- are useless. That the identity you clung to all your life was a lie. And that now you are dependant on Someone Else, whom you still have loads of reasons to be suspicious about, and that doorway was a one-way deal. No going back.

Politically, it's a nightmare, because I still, two years later, equate much of Christian culture with fascism -- the manipulativeness, the triumphalism, the list for glory -- all those things the Grand Inquisitor revealed, that stir the human breast. I oppose fascism in our culture as I hope I would have in Franco's Spain, or Mussolini's Italy, or Milosevic's Serbia.

I'm still working that problem out. It taxes me.

Nor do I wish to suggest that from this point on I have been a wonderful person, praising God and offering my shoes to the poor. I can still be, at the drop of a hat, my old self -- "intellectual" in attitude, hypercritical of simplicity, creating useless arguments to maintain my distance from others, and from God.

The difference is, I know I am doing that now. And I know this Jesus business is for real. He is so much more than a tragic hero. He is available even to jokers like me, 24/7 -- and once you see that and feel it in your heart, there is no going back. Or, you would have to be cleverer than me.

