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Lucky Charms

Timothy James Moriarty

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, tmoriarty1@gmail.com

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LUCKY CHARMS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Theatre

by

Timothy James Moriarty
B.A., Boston College, 2008
M.A., Boston College, 2011
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Abstract

This paper details the writing process and performance of my autobiographical one-person play, *Lucky Charms*. The play presents my decision to leave the Jesuit novitiate while in the midst of a crisis of faith. Through the recollection of various experiences from childhood and adolescence, the narrator attempts to discover what it means to truly have a “spiritual experience.” Along with my own perspective, the piece also incorporates various other characters from the author’s past. In this document I have detailed the challenges and difficulties of writing and performing this piece, examined the theoretical and practical implications of its major themes, and have included a written copy of the script.

Introduction

The Master of Fine Arts in Acting program at LSU culminates in the creation and performance of a one-person play. I chose to write and perform a piece centering on my decision to leave the Jesuit novitiate in 2011. The play became a way from me to explore the experiences and insights that led to this important decision.

In what follows, I explore the intellectual and creative process of generating and organizing the material. In chapter I, I talk about my initial interest in creating a piece about the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ. In chapter II, I explore how this interest in Hopkins led to a re-ordering in my understanding of spirituality and art. In chapter III, I describe how this growing appreciation for the artistic process compelled me to abandon my plans and began writing down whatever ideas and stories came spontaneously into my mind. In chapter IV, I investigate the works of Spalding Grey and Julia Sweeney and explain how these artists confirmed my growing desire to create a comedic autobiographical monologue. In chapter V, I discuss the structuring my material along the lines of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey." In chapter VI, I present the script as it stood in December of 2014. In chapter VII, I discuss my performance of the piece. In chapter VIII, I examine some of the technical aspects of the performance.

I. Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ

My first impulse was to create a piece about the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ. Hopkins is known as one of the greatest poets of the Victorian era. In Hopkins's life and thought I found a beautiful synthesis between spirituality and artistic creation. When Hopkins first became a Jesuit he burned all of the poetry from his younger days. He believed that the service of God was irreconcilable with an artistic vocation. He wrote in his journals: "the higher and more attractive parts of the art put a strain upon the passions which [would be] unsafe to encounter."¹

In my teens and early twenties, I too dismissed the arts as expressive of "the lower parts of human nature." The truly noble calling was a life of self abnegation. Human nature, corrupt and fallen through original sin, must be transcended. Why hold a mirror up to nature if nature is corrupt? The universe in my mind was analogues to a two-story house. On the bottom floor was the mess that we call our fallen human nature. On the upper floor was the grace-filled life made available to human beings through the Sacraments of the Catholic Church. I thus saw the spiritual path as the means by which I could escape the world.

In 1866, seven years after Hopkins's joined the order, his creative impulses could no longer be held at bay. When reading an account of a shipwreck off the coast of England, he was filled with the irresistible desire to create. Seventy-eight passengers died in the wreck, including five German nuns exiled from their homes and bound for America. Hopkins was deeply affected by this story. One of his Jesuit superiors, recognizing a deep movement in Hopkins's soul, suggested that he write a poem about the event. The result of this prompted was an epic poem called, "*The Wreck of the Deutschland*." Here Hopkins's exile from art came to an end. He would go on to create some of the most beautiful poetry of his day.

This story touched me because I have had a similar experience with acting. When I was in 7th grade I performed my first play: "The Hound of the Baskervilles." It was a comedic adaptation of the novel by Sir. Arthur Conan Doyle. I played Dr. Watson. It was a magical experience and I quite simply stole the show. In high school I became deeply devout and interpreted my 7th grade theatrical experience as vanity. The problems facing our world were far too serious to warrant wasting time with such frivolous nonsense as theatre. The only noble path was one of self sacrifice and Christian service.

When I decided to leave the Jesuits at the age of 26 after wrestling with a spiritual and intellectual crisis of faith, the question of acting came flooding back into my consciousness. The day after leaving the novitiate, I had a powerful dream where I encountered Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ in my childhood basement. Fr. Greg was one of my Jesuit heroes. He has spent his life caring for the Latino population in East L.A. and helping rehabilitate gang members. In the dream he asked me if I had ever tried acting. I said, "No, not since 7th grade." He responded with a smile, "You should!" I took this dream

¹ Mariani, Paul. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life*. New York, New York: Viking, 2008. Print.

seriously and enrolled in an acting class the following week. Since then I have been attempted to synthesize my new found love of acting with my prior interest in spirituality.

Although I enjoyed reading Hopkins as a Jesuit, I didn't really appreciate him until after leaving the novitiate. I read a biography of his life by Paul Mariani called, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* which had a profound impact on my thinking. His synthesis of spirituality and aesthetics were crucial in allowing me to pursue acting.

II: Spirituality and Art

As Gerard Manley Hopkins matured, he became more and more focused on finding God in the world. From his reading of the medieval theologian Duns Scotus, Hopkins came to believe that everything in the universe is characterized by an inscape, i.e. the distinctive design that constitutes its individual identity. This identity is a dynamic process; the individual thing “selves,” that is, enacts its identity. Thomas Merton elucidates this concept: “No two created beings are exactly alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary, the perfection of each created thing is not merely its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself.” In other words, to the extent that a being honors itself by truly being itself, they are holy.²

According to Hopkins, human beings are unique in the universe in that we have the ability to recognize the inscape of other beings. This recognition occurs in an act which called the instress, i.e. “the apprehension of an object in an intense thrust of energy toward it that enables one to realize its specific distinctiveness.”³

This idea was a very exciting discovery. It reminded me of something that James Joyce spoke about in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen Dedalus says that when the mind apprehends an object as an artist:

The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. The instant wherein that supreme quality or beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like to that cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley’s, called the enchantment of the heart.⁴

Following Thomas Aquinas’s theory of aesthetics, for Joyce the beautiful is that kind of good in which the soul rests without possession. In other words, the beautiful is that which is pleasurable in itself. Art is concerned with beauty and thus, in a piece of artwork there is a disinterested enjoyment of the thing for its own sake.

Hopkins’s approach to art prompted a radical reordering in my own approach to reality. For the majority of my life, I looked at the world through the lens of intellectual conceptualization. This over intellectual approach to life prevented anything from appearing within my field of consciousness that did not fit within a fixed system of ideas. It followed that I viewed art as important insofar as it meant something – i.e. referred to an idea.

² Merton, Thomas. *Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1972. 29. Print

³ Greenblatt, Stephen et al., Ed. “Gerard Manley Hopkins.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. 2. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. pg. 2159. Print

⁴ Campbell, Joseph. *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976. pg. 350

In reading Bert States book, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*, I came to understand that I was operating out of a semiotic approach to art. States defines semiotics as the scientific analysis of the means, or apparatus, of the mimetic process. A semiotic understanding of art therefore, interprets artistic creations as referential.⁵ In Plato, for instance, art is an imitation of the world, which is itself an imitation of the world of the Forms. Art is a kind of meditation between abstract (and thus for Plato, pure) truths and a particular culture.

Hopkins suggests a radically different position towards art. In order to discover the inscape of a thing, the artist must allow the thing to exist in its unique individuality. This utter distinctiveness transcends conceptualization. There are many similarities between Hopkins's approach to art and what States calls, the phenomenological approach. According to States, the problem with semiotics is "the implicit belief that you have exhausted a thing's interest when you have explained how it works as a sign." In contrast, in a phenomenological understanding of art, the observer withholds judgment and analysis and simply allows him or herself to experience the thing.

In Martin Heidegger's essay, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, he claims that art is characterized by the fact that it is never used up: "it does not, like a tool, 'disappear into usefulness.'" In other words, a piece of art is not of value simply because it is a place of reference. The true value of art is as a place of disclosure. And according to Heidegger, what is disclosed in a piece of art cannot be found anywhere else.

But what allows one to experience the thing as it is? What are the conditions for the possibility of human consciousness becoming a place where the "things" of the world can disclose "themselves?" To answer this question, we first must step back and reflect upon our mode of thinking. How do we think about our world? Are there different modes of thinking? Does reality change depending upon how I look at it?

In Heidegger's essay, *Things*, he makes a distinction between the "theoretical attitude," in which we encounter decontextualized entities "present-at-hand," and "engaged coping," in which we encounter context-dependent entities "ready-to-hand." The former is what we call the theoretical or scientific attitude; the latter is common sense knowledge. When I examine a hammer for instance, I can do so in a number of different ways. From the theoretical attitude I can determine the chemical compounds of the metal, the density of the wood, etc. From the common sense attitude, I see the object the means by which I hammer nails and build whatever it is I'm building. Now according to Heidegger, in day to day lives we rely on our common sense knowledge to "cope" with the practicalities of living. However, in the materialistic and technocratic mindset which dominates our civilization, we assume that only the scientific mode of understanding provides us with the objectively true knowledge of the object.

⁵ States, Bert. *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1987. Print

Heidegger claims that there is another mode of thinking that neither seeks an objective essence nor merely relates to objects as they are of use to us. This other mode precedes common sense and theory. He calls this mode “pure perception.” When we simply let the world be (as “things” instead of “objects” for our human use), we enter into a rich a mysterious world of inexhaustible wonder. In this attitude towards the world, the thing is not a product of my intellectual examination or a means for my use but rather, “a recognized otherness that has its own life process.”⁶

Heidegger equates the mode of pure perception with the artistic mode of perception. From the artistic point of view, when I look at a simple jug artistically, I see more than its function. I see the jug in terms of its origins in the earth, through the clay that makes it, the wine that comes from earth, water, and sun, and its purpose, or gift to humans in giving out drink, etc. In other words, I see the thing within the context of every other thing. I see a world of interpenetration and mutual dependence. The great scholar of Zen Buddhism, D.T. Susuki (of whom Heidegger is quoted as saying, “If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all of my writings”) writes:

Let the intellect alone, it has its usefulness in its proper sphere, but let it not interfere with the flowing of the life-stream. If you are at all tempted to look into it, do so while letting it flow. The fact of flowing must under no circumstances be arrested or meddled with; for the moment your hands are dipped into it, its transparency is disturbed, it ceases to reflect your image which you have had from the very beginning and will continue to have to the end of time.⁷

But we have yet to answer the question: “How do I become a person capable of this mode of pure perception?” Is one simply born an artist or can one develop his or her ability to live this attitude? Since, as Heidegger notes, our civilization has chosen to see the world almost solely in terms of functionality, a process of deprogramming is needed.

It is here that spirituality has much to teach us. Authentic spirituality (divested of its cultural conditioned biases, symbols and rituals) leads the individual through a process of purification, a *via negativa*, whereby one unlearns what one “knows” in order to regain this most fundamental attitude towards reality. A word that best describes the nature of this purification process comes from the 14th century theologian Meister Eckhart.

According to Eckhart, to enter fully into reality, the soul must perform the act of *gelassenheit*. This word has been translated as “releasement” or “letting go.” In David Kangas’s book *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, he writes that in the act of *gelassenheit*, “the self must be dispossessed of its *Eigen-wille* (will to possession of itself), and make itself nothing.” In other words, the self lets go of its conception of itself as originally capable of securing its being: “A ‘released self,’ does not attempt to secure itself in relation to some ultimate ground (for that is what ground does, it secures), but rather holds itself open to the groundless, ungrounding ground.”⁸

⁶ Dreyfus, Hubert. “Hebert Dreyfus on Husserl, Heidegger and Modern Existentialism.” *Men of Ideas*. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaGk6S1qhz0>>.

⁷ Susuki, D.T. *Selected Writings of D.T. Susuki*. New York: Doubleday, 1996. pg. 8-9.

⁸ Kangas, David. *Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2007. Print

The great Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, describes something very similar in his work *Fear and Trembling*. In speaking about “faith” he says that the “Knight of Faith” refuses “the metaphysical move.” Kangas interprets this to mean that the Knight of Faith refuses to understand himself as the constitutive ground of temporality.⁹ Faith therefore, is not the resignation of anything external to the subject but rather, the resignation of the subject himself.¹⁰ And what is most important here is that for Kierkegaard, this renunciation is itself the receiving of everything back “in the power of the absurd.”¹¹ By “absurd” Kierkegaard means that it is not something that can be achieved or understood by the self-positing subject.

We see something quite similar in the teachers of Zen. D.E Harding describes his experience of Zen *satori* in the book: “On Having No Head: Zen and the Re-discovery of the Obvious”:

It was a vast emptiness vastly filled, a nothing that found room for everything – room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far above them snow speaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. I had lost a head and gained a world. It was all, quite literally breathtaking. I seemed to stop breathing altogether, absorbed in the Given. Here it was, this superb scene...utterly free of ‘me,’ unstained by any observer. Its total presence was my total absence.¹²

Spirituality therefore as the process of *gelassenheit*, is not about transcending the world. On the contrary, it is about entering more fully into it. In letting go of my world, I gain the real world. I come to experience reality as beautiful – i.e. pleasurable in itself. The artist, after having this vision, then uses various media or material forms to express this experience of reality. Although it would take us too far a field here to explore the differences between the artistic and mystic, suffice it to say that where mystics can often only experience, the artist is one how has the *talent* to both experience and express.

These ideas were very important to me as I thought about my thesis project. From the beginning I wanted to do two things: 1) somehow express the insights I have had regarding the relationship between art and spirituality; 2) embody these insights in my performance of the piece. The quest now was to write something.

⁹ Kangas, David. *Kierkegaard's Instant*, 155

¹⁰ Kangas, David. *Kierkegaard's Instant*, 155

¹¹ Kangas, David. *Kierkegaard's Instant*, 155

¹² Harding, D.E. *On Having No Head*. London: Arkana, 1986. pg. 2

III. Letting Go

Before coming to LSU, the only prior experience of a solo performance I had encountered was a piece by Aldyth Morris entitled *Damien*. *Damien* was first produced by the University of Hawaii Department of Drama and Theatre in 1976. It was eventually produced on TV by PBS in 1977, starring Terrence Knapp as Fr. Damien. The play is about Fr. Damien of Molokai, the heroic priest from Belgium who spent his life caring for the lepers of Hawaii. Although I have never seen this piece performed, I read the script numerous times and studied photographs of the production. The play is beautifully written and offers a glimpse into the heart of a simple man who sacrificed himself for others. While his sacrifices were driven by his Catholic faith, his story has resonated with countless people regardless of their religious persuasion.

The initial ideas for my own play were heavily reliant upon this work. I studied the staging in hopes that this would help spark my creative juices. The set was very simple; an altar upstage center with a large crucifix and votive candles, a rocking chair downstage right, a small box downstage left on which the actor may lean, sit or rest his foot, and a large open area from downstage right to left for the actor to use when speaking directly to the audience.

My hope was to use the basic structure and staging of *Damien* for my show about Hopkins. In the end however, after speaking with the Margaret Kemp I chose to abandon this idea. Margaret encouraged me to enter into a creative space, whereby I freed myself from any preconceived ideas. I was frustrated by this suggestion at first but eventually I realized that it was an opportunity to experiment with my ideas about the artistic process. To be true to what I had discovered about artistic creation, I must let go of my intellectual planning. I gave myself space to write whatever came to my mind in a kind of free association.

The material that emerged was mainly autobiographical. I began to record various stories from my childhood and adolescence. Eventually, I had thirty pages or so of originally material.

IV. Comedy

After reading some of my autobiographical stories to Margaret, she suggested I explore the work of two solo performance artists, Spalding Gray and Julia Sweeney. Spalding Gray became famous in the 80's for his long autobiographical monologues. Don Wilmeth describes Gray as follows:

The 1980s saw the rise of the autobiographical monologue, its leading practitioner Spalding Gray, the WASP from Rhode Island who portrays himself as an innocent abroad in a crazy contemporary world. . . others, like Mike Feder, who grew up in Queens and began telling his life on New York radio, pride themselves on their theatrical minimalism, and simply sit and talk. Audiences come to autobiography for direct connection and great stories, both sometimes hard to find in today's theatre.¹³

I watched two of his long monologues: *Swimming to Cambodia* and *Gray's Anatomy*. At first I was turned off by his work. While I was impressed with his presence on stage, the whole act seemed narcissistic. The more I watched Gray's work however, the more I warmed up to his simplicity and humor.

I have always believed that for comedy to work there must be humility. Narcissists are not funny. From what I understand of narcissists, they live in an enclosed circle and are incapable of connecting with the world in a meaningful way. They are plagued with debilitating selfishness. The world and other human beings are only experience through the lens of their own self-interest.

I believe that a narcissist can't do comedy (at least in the truest sense of comedy) because they are too attached to their ego-projects. Walter Kerr claims that where tragedy is the forward upward thrust of human ambition, comedy is the drag of reminder.¹⁴ He goes on to say that "comedy is tragedy's private diary. It records what might have been concealed, while we were trying so desperately to maintain a social relationship with the gods."

The laughing man says Kerr, "is the man who submits, gives in for the moment, openly admits that he is the captive of sensation and that he can be tickled, or teased by the aroma of dinner cooking, or stirred by the sight of a shapely thigh. The tragic man is an ascetic who will have none of this... The tragic man is humorless... unaware that he has any limitations."¹⁵

Kerr's insights into the nature of tragedy and comedy are fascinating in light of discoveries of psychoanalysis. Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death* has had a tremendous impact on my view of the world. Becker, relying on the insights of the

¹³ Wilmeth, Don B. *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Kerr, Walter. *Tragedy and Comedy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968. pg. 26

¹⁵ Kerr, Walter, *Tragedy and Comedy*. pg. 175

famous psychoanalyst Otto Rank, claims that the vital lie behind all human cultures and personalities is an unconscious fear of death. Out of this fear and inability to accept his or her finitude, individuals create various projects wherein they project their desires for immortality. He describes man's tragic destiny as follows:

He must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anyone else.¹⁶

He goes on to say that:

To become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem in life. Everything painful and sobering in what psychoanalytic genius and religious genius have discovered in man revolves around the terror of admitting what one is doing to earn his self-esteem.¹⁷

My initial hesitancy to write an autobiographical piece was that to speak about myself seemed narcissistic. After watching Spalding Gray through the lens of Kerr and Becker however, I began to realize that there are different ways to talk about oneself. Even if Gray has narcissistic tendencies, people loved him because he made them laugh. His pointing out of his narcissism proves that he wasn't a total narcissist.

Out of this reflection on narcissism and tragedy, coupled with my ideas about spirituality as the act of *gelassenheit*, came a new appreciation for comedy. From the perspective of the mystic, the tragedy of all narcissists is that the ground upon which they attempt to secure their identity is ultimately illusory, i.e. the ego. The journey of the narcissist is a solitary quest to protect and advance his "idea" of himself through various projects (e.g. power, money, fame, etc).¹⁸ The tragedy is that such projects are always doomed to fail and result only in isolation.

The journey of the comic (I am speaking of comedy in its ideal form. There are no doubt degrees and types of comedy) embraces finitude. He or she sees the futility of the various games played by the ego and exposes their hidden absurdity. The audience recognizes themselves in the characters and scenarios and responds with laughter.

Dr. Robert Provine, a neuroscientist and psychology professor at the University of Maryland discovered that laughter is inherently social. At its core, says Provine, laughter is a form of communication and not just a byproduct of finding something funny. He found that the participants of his study were 30 times more likely to laugh in the presence

¹⁶ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Press Press, 1997. pg. 5.

¹⁷ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Press Press, 1997. pg. 6.

¹⁸ Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Press Press, 1997.

of others than when they were alone. When people noted in their journals that they were truly alone, they hardly recorded any laughter at all.¹⁹

Although it would take a further and more detailed exploration to prove this point, I believe that laughter has something to do with the non-verbal expression of one's recognition and acceptance of shared finitude. It is fascinating to me that so many accounts of *satori* or enlightenment in Zen describe the individual as being overtaken by laughter. A 47 year old Japanese business man described his experience as follows:

Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly, 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! There's not reasoning here, no reasoning at all! Ha, ha, ha!' The empty sky split in two, then opened its enormous mouth and began to laugh uproariously.²⁰

In Hindu philosophy, life is seen as the *lila* (play) of *Brahman* (the unchanging reality amidst and beyond the world). If this is true, then the true "point" of life would be to join in this play; to "be" this play. Perhaps this is true meaning behind God's resting on the seventh day in the book of Genesis. The point of his "work" of creation is for human beings to enjoy it. According to Allan Watts, "Man suffers only because he takes seriously what the gods made for fun." From this perspective, perhaps one could argue that all laughter is a sharing in the cosmic laughter of Brahman.

To summarize, a good comedy is satisfying because it reveals the absurdity of our ego/immortality projects. It puts us back in touch with reality by liberating us from the burden of seriousness. Once freed, we become children playing in the sandbox of life. Life becomes a hurricane of delight as the rhythm of the universe flows through us as waves of laughter.

Returning to Gray, while I can only take him in small doses, I have come to respect his work. The journalist Roger Rosenblatt said it well: The specialty of his storytelling was the search for a sorrow that could be alchemized into a myth. He went for the misery sufficiently deep to create a story that makes us laugh.²¹

The other performer I studied was Julia Sweeney. Sweeney is an actress, comedian and author. She had a short tenure on SNL and later became famous for her autobiographical shows. I watched two of her long monologues, *God Said Ha!* and *Letting Go of God*. The main contribution of Sweeney was in helping to solidify my growing desire to write something about my own loss of God. I took notes on structure of Sweeney's *Letting Go of God*, highlighting the trajectory of her journey.

¹⁹McGraw, Peter and Warner, Joel. "Why Do Humans Laugh?" *Slate* March (2014): <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2014/the_humor_code/why_do_humans_laugh_the_evolutionary_biology_of_laughter.html>

²⁰ Kapleau, Philip. *The Three Pillars of Zen*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. pg. 229

²¹ Gray, Spalding. *Swimming to Cambodia*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

Notes from *Letting Go of God*²²

- Story from her youth (Age of reason. Santa Claus doesn't exit)
- Story about Mormon missionaries (Religious questions. Absurdity of Mormonism. But what if Catholics came door to door and told their story?)
- This story provokes a question: Do I believe that God loved me with all my heart?
- Religious history: raised Catholic. Good experience. Felt lucky to be a Catholic.
- Her dad's story – Studying with the Jesuits. They were part of a special club.
- School with nuns. Infatuation with the nuns. Romanticized version. Favorite shows were about nuns
- Story about the difference between old school nuns and new modern nuns. Vocation visits. She didn't want the hippie nun stuff! Where's the Gregorian chant and austerity?
- Her vocation plans were compromised however, because of boys. Cute Jesus poster
- As she grew and matured, her idea of God grew and matured. She had various religious experiences which confirmed her belief in God.
- Heart warming story. After the pain of a breakup she felt love and transcendence.
- Return to the Mormon story. Did I believe God loved me? She realizes that she's become lazy about faith. She saw her old zealous self in the Mormon missionary. She felt moved to take religion seriously again. She went back to mass. Beautiful moments – passionate emotional services.
- But, she still had doubts. Did I believe in the Nicean creed? She went to bible study class.
- She loved certain parts of the bible. But what about the disturbing parts? She take us on a trip through the weird stories in the bible.
- Couldn't wait to get to the New Testament. But she discovers that he's angry and impatient. The Epistles are anti women. Revelation = madness. Where is the nice Jesus?
- She read Karen Armstrong's *History of God*. The bible isn't literally true – psychologically true. She's at peace for awhile. But, what does that mean. Psychologically true? What about non-biblical stories?
- Jesus dies for our sins right? How is that psychologically true?
- What if Jesus was just a guy, a passionate idealist who lost his temper now and then, but who meant well? What if he died heartbroken because his God abandoned him?
- She has a crisis moment. She can't go back there!
- She begins to drifts east. Watches Joseph Campbell videos. Goes to Meditation class. Reads Huston Smith's *Guide to Spiritual Classics*. She's excited about Buddhism
- She decides to travel to the east to explore further. She is disappointed. She feels bad for the poor monks and wants to free them. Less interested in Buddhism after her trip. She realizes that California Buddhism is cleaned up Buddhism

²² *Letting Go of God*. Dir. Julia Sweeney. Perf. Julia Sweeney. Indefatigable INC, 2008. Film.

- She now wonders, if God is nature? Discovery of evolution. Evolution is brutal! God can't be nature! God is supposed to be love and so God and nature must be separate, right?
- Stories of high school. Search Retreat. Feeling of love. What did those warm feels mean?
- She discovers Deepak Chopra. At first she gushes over him but then realizes that he's full of shit.
- Nervous about her relationship with God. She bought into it because "it works."
- Her faith was based on evidence. What evidence? The evidence of how she felt when she prayed. She decides to examine her evidence
- She reads Stephen Pinker's *How the mind works*
- A new Crisis! She doesn't believe in God. The thought creeps in. She panics. How do I go on?
- She bids goodbye to God. God is a broken down old man. She takes God so seriously that she can't believe in him anymore.
- Walked around in a daze for months. Her mind becomes a private place. No longer sharing her thoughts with God.
- What about death? No punishment or reward? I'm going to die! Life is so cheap and precious.
- Her Parents freak out! She eventually reconciles with them. Her Dad gets ill. The family comes together for the funeral.
- She again longs for the beautiful place with ancient songs and art. The place to mark transitions in life. She wishes the Church could come out and admit that it's wrong on a lot of things.
- Conclusion. A second visit by Mormon visitors.
- Ending though: True mystery is all around us. The Church has it backwards. True mystery is THIS world.

V. Dramatic Structure

After studying the work of Gray and Sweeney, I felt confident in creating an autobiographical piece. As we moved into the fall semester, the time came to assemble the various stories into an intelligible structure. What was the dramatic action of the piece? I had a lot of funny stories but what was the journey?

During my time in the Jesuits, I became an avid reader of Joseph Campbell's works on mythology. In his first book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*,²³ he shows how various myths from different cultures and time periods follow the same general pattern. He refers to this "monomyth" as the hero's journey. The hero begins in the ordinary world and receives a call to embark upon an adventure into an unknown world. The one who refuses the call will live the rest of his life in sorrow of regret. The one who accepts the call must face various trials along his way. Often, the hero is aided by a guru or a teacher. The hero often must face death (either spiritual or literal) which is followed by a process of transformation. The hero must then decide whether to return to the ordinary world. If the hero returns successfully, he or she may use what was learned or gained by the journey for the betterment of the world.

Using Campbell's structure as my outline, I set out to compile my various stories into an intelligible structure. Because so many of my stories were from the past, it took me awhile to determine how to organize the material. My first idea was to set the play in a dreamscape. The hero would attempt to climb a mountain and encounter various characters along the way. I eventually came to a much simpler idea. Thinking back to the staging for *Damien*, the idea of setting this crisis in a Church began to resonate. I saw my character in the midst of prayer, having lost his faith in God. Out of his inner turmoil, various memories flood back into his consciousness as he attempts to determine his next move.

I then set out to structure my various stories in accord with the different steps of the hero's journey. I first set the narrator in the chapel about to teach a Catechism class. He is trying to figure out where to move and in his search for answers, thinks back on what has brought him to this point. To establish the *ordinary world*, I use the Lucky Charms story. For comedic effect, I then reveal the extra-ordinariness of my ordinary world through the First Communion, fear of Marian apparitions and Sex Ed stories. To describe my *call* to the Jesuit priesthood, I use the story of the charismatic young priest who engaged in extemporaneous prayer. Comedy again works in that there is some ambiguity as to whether or not my call to the priesthood is the true call. I join the Jesuits ("The Society of Jesus") to bring them back to Christ. The *guru* arrives in my story about living on the Flathead Indian Reservation. Aaron's invitation to see the divine in the ordinary is a turning point in the story. I begin to walk down Aaron's path in my story about the small disfigured tree. This retreat experience marks a clarification of the *call*. I begin to realize that spirituality and the world are not so opposed to each other. The *trials* and *tribulations* are shown in the stories about the yoga lady and the philosophy professor. Intellectual

²³ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1949. Print.

ideas and modern forms of spirituality, although containing partial truths, can be just as deceptive as fundamentalist religion. The *death* event occurs in the dream of the tsunami. This wave represents a power or force that transcends my ego. My response to the wave is to “let go.” Out of this experience, I am invited by the nameless man to *return* to the ordinary world. I demonstrate this through his invitation to eat a bowl of Lucky Charms.

VI. Play Script

(Altar with crucifix upstage center. A lit candle sits on the altar. Columns on either side, give the illusion of a chapel. Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary are on either side of the altar, perhaps hung on columns. Two benches below the altar. (Sound Cue Begins: Credo) Play begins with man sitting entering from D.S. Right. He goes to altar, lights a candle and kneels before altar to pray. He's troubled and distracted. He turns around to leave and discovers the audience)

Brother Tim: *(Startled, not expecting anyone to be in the Church)*...Umm, are you here for tonight's class: "Introduction to Catholicism for Interested Young People?" Oh Great! Welcome! I'm Tim Moriarty and I'm a Jesuit seminarian here at St. Francis Xavier Church. I'll be teaching tonight's class. *(Look at watch)* We actually don't start for another half-hour. There is a Starbucks just down the road if you... *(Notice that they are here to pray)* Ah! *(Acknowledge Rosary)* Me too! Well good for you. Say one for me and I'll do the same, haha. *(Return to Prayer)* Do you feel anything? It's been so long since I've been able to pray... Sorry. Doubts are sometimes part of this journey of faith we're on. Just look at the apostles. We'll discuss all that later on... *(Return to prayer. Rise to leave)* I don't believe in God anymore. I'm sorry; I should not have said that out loud. I know that you're interested in becoming a Catholic and... Actually, it felt really good to say that. It's been bottled up for months and now I'm supposed to teach this class and... *(Beat)* Listen, I don't want to scandalize you but I could use a set of ears. Do you mind? *(Acknowledge "yes")*

It's so odd... you know, I've been thinking all day long about the meaning of life. Do you ever do that? I was thinking earlier, do you recall when the "meaning of life question" first hit you? When life became a complicated puzzle to be solved? I do. I was seven. It was Wednesday morning in October 1993. I had just been sentenced to sit on the stairs. The previous day, Mother purchased a box of Lucky Charms. This was a big deal. The five Moriarty children rarely saw name brand items of anything. Chex? No, no, Crispy Rice Hexagons is what I grew up on. Now, Lucky Charms was the Holy Grail. And I say this not just because we are Irish and felt a deep kinship to the leprechaun spokesman. No, no. There are marshmallow treats interspersed among the toasted oat thing-a-majiggers. This has nothing to do with culture or racial issues. This has to do with sugar and marketing!

Well, for the rest of that evening I can think of nothing else, but breakfast. It takes me hours to fall asleep. When I finally do, I dream that I'm frolicking through a misty bog with Lucky, harvesting fresh Irish marshmallows and singing: "Hearts, Stars, and Horseshoes, Clovers and Blue Moons, Pots of Gold and Rainbows, and Red Balloons!" I eventually awake, ask myself, "Why is this day different from all other days? Lucky Charms!"

I rush downstairs to the kitchen and open the cupboard door. I take down the box. It feels lighter than I remember. I pull apart the already opened flaps of cardboard and gaze inside.... complete emptiness. I look around for answers. To my horror I see my younger

sister Mary, perched on the far end of the dining room table, a huge serving bowl before her, finishing her last bite. She awoke a half-hour before the rest of the household and proceeded to eat the entire box. I breathe and steady my nerves. I walk towards the scene of the crime with great calm and purpose... “Look into Jenny Craig! It is evident from your lack of human decency and self-control that obesity **will be** in your future.” I then proceed to dance around her in a circular pattern, chanting: “1-800-93-Jenny.” (*X 3 - progressively menacing*)

“That’s enough!” The voice of Mother; one sensitive to attacks on weight issues! She’s biting a pen! Whenever Mother had a pen in her mouth, you knew she meant business. “You’re out of control. Go sit on the stairs!” Resistance was futile. I walk to the stairs. Sit. I reflect upon what had just occurred. Various thoughts float through my troubled mind: “What kind of a world is this? Is there such a thing as justice?” “If so, why am I here, in bondage, while Mary is free, in the TV room watching the Price is Right?” And then things got a little deeper, “What makes me me and Mary Mary?” And then, “What am I?” And finally, “How does whatever I am, called Tim, fit into whatever this is, called ‘the world?’” Well, my 10 minutes of solitary confinement eventually ended. I chose to live that day. I went back to the kitchen, opened the cupboard, took out an all too familiar box of ...Crispy Rice Hexagons.

Ahhh! 20 years later, I’m right back on those stairs wondering what has happened to my Lucky Charms. For so long, the Catholic “God” filled that empty bowl. No more. What do you do when the foundation upon which your life is built falls apart? Do you know what I’m talking about? (*Beat*) But, what was this foundation? Who was this God? In my childhood living room, two images hung in the most prominent place: The Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. For Catholics, the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is intimately tied to the Eucharist. It’s really quite incredible. With just a few magic words at Mass— “this is my body” – the Catholic priest can transform an ordinary piece of bread into God. What wonderful majesty! What stupendous condensation. O sublime humility. That the Lord of the whole universe should divest himself of glory and come to us - under the form of a little piece of bread - for our salvation!

Well, when the time came for my first communion, I was psyched! Mother took me shopping for a brand new suit. The Church was filled with family and friends. I was crazed with excitement. It was like Christmas! Except instead of presents, I was going to eat God for the first time! (*Sound Cue: Bread of Life*) Mass began. We soon arrived at the homily. Fr. O’Sullivan preached that day about God’s love and how: “Jesus is super excited to become one with you young people, once you’ve digested him.” Mass continued. My anticipation grew. At last, after the consecration, Father invited the first communicants to come forward. The moment of truth! I was second in line. Fr. O’Sullivan took a host from the ciborium: “The body of Christ.” I stuck out my tongue to welcome Our Blessed Lord in his new home: “Amen!”

I didn’t know what was going to happen next! Something? Everything? I waited. (*Kneel-Beat*) The host just lingered on my tongue... It became kinda soggy... Chewing it seems

irrelevant...“Shouldn’t there at least be a tingling by now?”... After about five minutes of nothing, I realize that for this to work, “I need to get him into my stomach!” I rallied my available saliva and try to swallow. But, as I do, the taste and soft fleshy texture overwhelm me. I gag. I try again. Another gag but this time, I spit out the mushy Christ into my hand. Mother was horrified: “That’s Jesus!” We rush to the drinking fountain in the back of the church. I gulp frantically at the waters, trying to get our Blessed Lord down. Mother is there beside me offering words of pious encouragement: “Offer it up! Offer it up for the poor souls in purgatory. Offer it up... for the conversion of Bill Clinton.” That did it! The mere mention of that adulterous pro-abortion fortified my resolve. Bit by mushy bit, I got the soggy Christ down! My first communion!

Next to Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary dominated my youthful imagination. My family prayed the family rosary every evening. On weekends, my dad would volunteer to mow the lawns of our pagan neighbors, and then secretly plant holy metals of Mary into their sod; “The seeds of conversion” he called it. On Fridays, the family would gather around the television set. Mother would pop some microwave pop corn – sometimes low fat kettle corn. Dad would pull out his secret stash of milk duds and red vines. My older brother Casey would get the old VHS up and running – and then we’d all find a seat in the TV room and pop into the machine: “Marian Apparitions of the 20th Century.” (*Sound Cue: Gentle Woman*) There we’d learn that Our Blessed Mother was appearing all over the world, with tears of blood in her eyes, giving small children predictions of apocalyptic desolation. The gist of it was that God the Father was mad as hell and was planning to wipe the sinners out by the year 2000. We’d see images of Eastern European people with their necks cocked backwards, faces full of fear, gazing into the sky, frantically praying the Rosary.

Well, this left quite the impression. As a boy, my greatest ambition in life was that the Blessed Mother would appear to me. However, my greatest fear as a boy was that the Blessed Mother would appear to me... while I was naked. As a child you may have worried about monsters lurking in your closet. You might have been concerned that robbers might enter your room. I worried that the bloody tear stained mother of God would come to me with a message of impending doom, while I was quickly trying to dry off from a bath!

I was not a normal child. The world and the children who lived therein were always mysterious to me. Reflecting on this makes me think; you know, ceasing to believe in God doesn’t just involve God. What do I do with the world? I have no idea! The God of my youth lived in a totally different dimension from this fallen and sinful world. The Moriartys therefore, were proud to be different. We were part of what Mother called, “The Home-School Movement.” Do you know any homeschoolers? Well basically, homeschoolers are like Amish-light; similar sense of fashion, no horse and buggy. This decision was made after my older brother’s second grade teacher started teaching sex-ed. apparently, she was pointing out the relationship between tadpoles and frogs; a slippery slope! Mother was outraged: “Sexual Education is the responsibility of the parents!

The really sad thing is that I never had the birds and bees talk. Well, actually I think my dad tried once. I was a junior in high school. We were on a jog together around a nearby lake. (*Jog in place*) About half-way through he asked: “Hey buddy, you know why we fast forwarded that part in Forest Gump last night?” “Yes.” “Great!” (*Keep jogging for a beat*). Truth be told: I learned about sex years prior from the Encyclopedia Britannica. It was a Sunday afternoon in autumn and I was just back from a Boy Scout camping trip. On this trip, Donny Vincent, a public school kid, had made some outlandish claims around the campfire: “My God, it can do that?” I decided to do some further research. As soon as I returned home, I sequestered myself in the restroom with Volume S. There, on the pot, I learned why the Moriartys always fast forward that part of Forest Gump!

Look, I know we shouldn’t talk about sex in a Church. But...I have to be honest... sometimes I think that the body is more became problematic to my career choice than the death of God. It really became an issue in high school. I don’t know if you recall, but in the year 2000 the world didn’t end. For the Moriartys, this was a catastrophic disappointment. We were really counting on the whole “new heavens and new earth” thing! Well, Mother and Dad, in their post non-apocalypse depression, grew soft and sent us all to school. How depressing! Not only had life as I knew it continued to exist, but now I had to go to school everyday? And, if that wasn’t bad enough, in high school I discovered that “woman” exists. What kind of environment is this for a future priest? Here I am, having made a life-long vow of celibacy at the age of 9, and now I have to deal with this? Well I made a choice. Despite the lure of the flesh, and my growing curiosity about the fast-forwarded scenes of every movie I had ever seen, I took solace in the idea of sacrificing everything for God!

In college, I met a group of students who shared in my sacrificial spirit. They identified as being apart of the Pope John Paul II Generation. Gen JP II! To them, John Paul II represented the youth and vitality of the Church. I always thought that this was a bit odd, given the fact that for as long as I had known the man, he could hardly walk and when he tried to talk, he’d kinda dribble on himself... but anyway. Fr. Chris ran the young men’s club on campus, “The Son’s of St. Joseph.” Fr. Chris was the best of both worlds. He was super conservative and defended the Church’s teaching on things like artificial contraception, but also super cool and enjoyed things like snowboarding. He was a charismatic Catholic and began each meeting with an extemporaneous prayer:

“Father God, we just wanna thank you for giving us the gift of being able to come here and thank you. Holy Spirit – *Spiritus Sanctus* – the Son’s of St. Joseph ask you to make us Christian men after the heart of Joseph, foster father of Jesus. Joseph, foster father of Jesus, we ask for you intercession, you who respected you wife, our Blessed Virginal Mother, so much that you never had sexual relations with her. That’s respect. Jesus, son of Mary, foster son of Joseph, help us to have good clean masculine fun – no sex, no drugs. Brother Jesus, we thank and praise you for our manhood because it is a blessed, sacred and consecrated manhood which... has become unto the Father a sweet smelling and holy oblation. Father God, we ask these things as always through your son, our brother, our bro, our dude, Jesus. Amen!”

To be perfectly honest, I never really cared for extemporaneous prayer. When Catholics venture out beyond the Hail Mary, things get weird. Nevertheless, I found a home within this community of young zealots. We believed! We were on fire! We were going to redirect the wayward course of the secular west! Three of us decided to join the priesthood right after college. I choose the Jesuits of the Oregon Province.

The Jesuits, also known as the Society of Jesus, are notorious for being the most liberal order of priests within Catholicism. They pride themselves on “finding God in all things,” which includes modernity and homosexuals. I decided to join them because I wanted to infiltrate their liberal ranks and through my piety and fidelity to the teaching office of the Church, bring them back to Christ!

My first objective as a Jesuit was to find allies. I found one in my entrance class: Juan Manuel Morales. Juan Manuel Morales was a thirty-five year old native of Mexico, who had spent most of his life in Eastern Washington. He was the definition of piety and reverence. The walls of his novitiate room were plastered with images of saints and angels from the pre-Vatican II era. Each evening after dinner we’d convene in the chapel to pray the rosary while the “social justice” Jesuits were watching TV. In Juan Manuel Morales, I found a faithful son of the Church, who could assist me in the coming reforms.

My plans for Juan Manuel were compromised however, on a bright sunny day in January. We were sent out together to do some shopping for the house at Costco. The drive began pleasant enough. I listened to Mother Angelica on Catholic radio while Juan Manuel reorganized his collection of holy cards. While waiting at a particularly long stop light. Juan Manuel turned to me. He had a serious expression on his face: “Brother Tim, did you read in the newspaper about the man in northwest Washington State that was put into prison for loving his animals?” ... “What? “Well, like, you know he had a special relationship with them. The new law is really strict and I don’t think it is right.” “Juan Manuel what are you talking about? Haha, Do you have a special thing for animals? Like St. Francis?” He wasn’t laughing. “Well, since we are brothers I will tell you. Remember I told you that I had a pet chicken? Well, she was kinda like my girlfriend. I cried very hard when she died.” “Helen the Chicken...was your girlfriend?”

I just kept driving, asking Mother Mary for guidance. Juan Manuel proceeded to tell me about his escapades with various farms animals of Yakima County. He said he had to be very careful, especially with the cows. We eventually reached Costco. I was in a daze; I hardly enjoyed the samples we tried. As we made our way through the frozen meat aisle and I grabbed a slab of chicken breasts for that evening’s dinner, I turned to Juan Manuel and said, “Umm, Juan Manuel don’t you think you should tell Fr. Jim about Helen.” Fr. Jim ran our seminary program. “Brother, that’s kinda like my decision.” “Oh yes, it totally is. But, don’t you think maybe it might make you feel good to share this with Jim?” “Well, Brother I don’t think so. And I would be kinda very upset if found out you told Fr. Jim. Brothers don’t betray each others trust.” He then looked at me square in the eye and said: “I hope that you are my brother.”

Well, I did end up telling Fr. Jim about our little bestiality issue. Juan Manuel Morales was asked to leave the Jesuits a few weeks later. Yes, I betrayed a brother. Yes, it was sad to lose an ally. However, I did hear that he was picked up a year or so later by the Benedictines. And they have an abbey in the country, and so... I guess it all worked out...

That was the first crack in my armor. I mean, if my allies in the Faith dated livestock, what did that mean? The crack only grew more severe during my first active assignment as a Jesuit. I was missioned to the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana. The Jesuits have a small mission parish on the reservation and I was sent to assist the pastor.

Upon arrival, I immediately went to examine the church, which has become known as Sistine Chapel of the Rockies. In the 1890's a little Italian Jesuit painted 58 original murals on the walls and ceilings of the church. It was spectacular. I was awe struck. "What a triumph of Christendom!" To see such a sight in the middle of nowhere! I sat in the front pew and took it all in. As I was admiring the scene, an old janitor named Aaron quietly mopped the floors. After awhile he came up beside me: "Do you notice anything about these paintings?" "He must be an art buff." I looked around trying to think of something intellectual to say, "Ah, well the proportion and the use of shadow on this one behind the altar is very interesting." "Do any of them look like me?" I looked at Aaron, dark skin, long dark hair, prominent cheek bones. I looked at the paintings again, "white, white, white, that one looks dark! Oh, dang that's Satan." "No." "Come with me."

Aaron took me outside of the Church. The sun was setting. Rays of light bathed the Mission Mountain Range with streaks of yellowish red. In the distance I could see the deep blue waters of the frigid Flathead Lake. Aaron stretched his arms: "When my ancestors were forced from our homes, we were brought to this reservation. The missionaries came and built this Church: St. Ignatius of Loyola. They told us that it was God's house and that we could no longer worship in our old ways because in doing so, we were honoring evil spirits. (*beat*) Do you see that pine tree swaying? Look! Watch how it dances with the breeze. Listen to the music of its ruffled branches. My people believed that everything in this world is sacred. The Missionaries told us that God lives in the piece of communion bread. This is true! But God also lives in that pine tree, in those mountains, in that lake." (*gasp*) "Heresy!" "Transubstantiation is a defined doctrine of the Church, how can he put a pine tree on the same level as the Eucharist!?"

Well, as the weeks progressed, I spent more and more time with Aaron. Aaron taught me to love nature... in an appropriate way. I discovered that was in tune with something. He was alive in a way that I wanted to be. And yet, he wasn't Catholic. He wasn't even Christian! What was I supposed to do with that? When my time on the reservation ended, I was filled with new questions: "What does it mean to be holy? What does it really mean to have an experience of God?"

Later that year I think I had one. Jesuits are required to make a 30-day silent retreat in the course of their novitiate. I had great expectations! Perhaps that longed for Marian apparition, fully clothed of course. However, two weeks in, nothing... was...happening! I

tried different prayers. I fasted on bread and water for a week. Nothing! It was brutal. I decided to skip one of my prayer sessions and take a long hike alongside the Columbia Gorge. The Columbia Gorge is a massive canyon of the Columbia River which stretches for over 80 miles through the Cascade Mountain range. The skies that day were gray and stormy. The wind was howling. After walking for about an hour or so, I came upon a small goofy looking maple tree. It was unimpressive, short, devoid of leaves. But...for some reason I couldn't keep my eyes of this thing. I just stood there and looked at this tree. A thought entered my mind: "that tree is bent out of shape because of the constant winds that blow off the river." Time passed. "This tree isn't apologizing for itself. It has no concept of "treeness" to which it must conform." I don't know how long I was there. Time didn't matter. Just as I was about to leave, a final question came before me: "If this tree can just be what it is, in this moment, why can't I?"

A kind of bliss flowed through me. I can't describe it but in the brief moment that I gave up my need to judge the world, it felt as if a block of steel suddenly melted within me. My body and mind began to flow like the Columbia River beside me and in that moment: all was well.

When the retreat was over, my questions had changed: "What was that?" "How do I get back there?" "Is Christianity the only way?" The search was on! I started spending hours in the library, reading books about mysticism, meditation and eastern religion. I was particularly interested in yoga. I started doing Chattaranga Dandasas in my room during prayer time. A few weeks later I decided to try out a local yoga studio. This was a big deal for me. I mean at the time, I rarely wore sandals. The exposure! (*Sound Cue Begins: Yoga Song*) So I go to Yoga Bhoga in Portland, OR on a random Thursday morning. There are about 15 people in the room. I am the only man. I attempted to sit cross legged like the other ladies with questionable results. The instructor walks in:

"Namaste everyone! My name is Lila. That means "Divine Play" in Sanskrit. So, I'm super into mantras this week and today, my mantra is: 'I'm enough.' You know, three years ago, after two kids and a tummy tuck, not to mention a very nasty divorce, I said, 'Sheila,' that was my name at the time, 'Sheila, it's time for me!' It was the voice of Lila! I'm enough. Friends, as we all know, the love of self is the new great American love story! I firmly believe that. I had a little ceremony last month, Lila presided. Because: 'I'm enough.' Now that doesn't mean we have to be little celibate monks living in Himalayan caves, stop it right now are you serious! But it does mean putting even sex in its proper place. I suggest divesting it of symbolic meaning. As of two years ago, I ceased to think of myself as a man or a woman. Lila's beyond that – she's universal consciousness. You know, we are all propagandized as children to say: 'Oh that's a man, that's a woman.' But friends, in reality, we are just people. With penises and vaginas, sure, but people, fundamentally! (*Nod head*) I'm enough... and you are too!" (*Sound Cue Ends: Yoga*)

I continued going to Yoga Bhoga over the next few months. I don't know why. Despite my aversion to the smell of feet and narcissism, I was fascinated by the idea that I could get closer to God by quieting the ceaseless chatter of my brain and entering my fully into

the here and now of my body. Later that year, I even saved up money from my monthly Jesuit allowance, took a trip to the neighborhood Wal-Mart and purchased my first pair of flip flop sandals! So you know... things were happening!

My flirtations with the “New Age” had started to concern some of the brethren. For my next assignment as a Jesuit I was sent to study philosophy. It was time for something solid; something intellectual. I was thrilled. My quest for the “presence thing” could continue in earnest. In philosophy studies became friends with a philosopher from Texas named Paul Lawrence.

“Truth? Do I **know** the truth? Do I **have** the truth? When you give a bird a definition, you kill that bird; it’s gone forever. For the expert, life is a game of scrabble and words are like those dead birds! Oh sure, be an expert and speak, shout, shit your words like there’s no tomorrow and tomorrow and yesterday, creeps like a mouse with self-esteem issues contently intoxicated with God’s love after imbibing a goblet of wine provided by Mr. Kool Aid after accepting Joseph Smith into his heart in accord with his Karma. Or, you can be a beginner, and not know, and let the fucking birds live!”

Philosophy can screw with your mind. It made me wonder: What is the correlation between the words I use for something and the reality of that thing? I mean, the word blue and the experience of blue are two different things. How absurd would it be for a group of blind people to debate about the color blue? Are debates about God any different? Most people think they know what they are talking about when they use that word, but do they? What if my definition – my ideas – my doctrines about “God” keep me from whatever that word might mean? Jesus said that he who loses his life will find it. I wonder if it’s also true that he who loses his God, will find him, her, it, whatever...

I’ve been wrestling with this question for months. I tried talking with Fr. Jim yesterday. I went into his office, sat down and said: “So, Jim, I love being a Jesuit but I kinda think I don’t believe in God anymore.” He rocked in his rocking chair, smiled, nodded his head as if to say, “Ah yes, the ‘I don’t believe in God’ conversation” and said, “Well... what does Jesus say about that.” “Well, Jim, that’s kind of the problem, I don’t really believe in God anymore.” “Oh I understand what you’re saying, but I asked, have you talked to Jesus about that?” “Jim, I don’t believe in God.” (*Nod head*) “Go back and talk to Jesus about that.”

So that’s why I’m here. I came to talk to Jesus about the death of God. (*Sit down in same place as top of show. Few beats*) Silence (*beat*). You know, I just remembered a really weird dream that I had last night. I wonder if it means anything. I was on a white sandy beach on the Oregon Coast. (*Sound Cue Begins: Gentle Waves, Light Cue: Spotlight downstage*) Next to me was a mysterious stranger without a face. Behind me I saw a large crowd of people. Fr. O’Sullivan, Fr. Chris, Lila, Aaron and countless others. Some were standing high atop a bluff. Others were closer to the surf. I looked back at the mysterious man beside me. We gazed out onto the horizon. The wide blue ocean was beautiful and serene. In the far distance I could barely make out what appeared to be a huge wave. It grew closer and closer. I began to panic. I looked over at the mysterious

man: “We need to run!” No response. “Sir, that’s a tsunami, we need to take high ground or we’re going to die.” “Sir...” The stranger grabbed me by the hip and looked into my eyes: “All will be well.” The wave began to crest. I looked up and up and up; a one hundred foot wall of water.

I thought about running. I thought about praying. I thought about crying. Suddenly, the image of that goofy little tree beside the Columbia River floated before my mind’s eye. My muscles softened. The waters came. (*Sound Cue: Big Wave hits climax here*)

The dream transformed. I found myself atop the wave. I was riding it like a tan person from a tropical place. It was exhilarating! The world was flowing. Everything was moving. I gazed up at the sky. The sun looked like a flaming Eucharist, bathing the world in its presence. All indeed was well.

The dream transformed again and I was back on the beach. Everything was the same and yet totally different. I looked over at the man and suddenly recognized him. He smiled and said: “Come and have breakfast.” He led me down the beach to a small charcoal fire. There, beside fire on a small picnic blanket, was the most beautiful site I have ever seen. The Holy Grail: a large serving bowl filled with a freshly harvested batch of Lucky Charms!

(*Sound Cue: Bells and then back to Credo*) (*Look at watch*) Oops, look’s like it’s time for class. Thanks letting me get that out. So, welcome everyone to our first installment of “Introduction to Catholicism for Interested Young People.” Today we’re going to talk about the creed. What does it mean to say, “I believe in God?” What does it mean to... (*long beat*) I’m sorry, I can’t do this anymore. I have no idea what it means to believe in God. I have no idea what it means not to believe in God. I think that’s all for today. Class dismissed. (*Rise, walks to candle, brief hesitation*) The only thing I know for certain? I’m going to the beach! (*blow it out*)

VII. Analysis of the Performance

Lucky Charms played for two public performances on December 9th and 12th in the LSU Studio Theatre. My overall goal for the performance was to be fully present in each moment. Since studying at LSU, my consistent tendency as an actor has been to push beyond what I am feeling in the moment. Although there is still much work to do in ceasing to work, there were moments in the course of performance where I was able to achieve a level of simplicity and honesty.

To explore the nature of this experience I have found Patsy Rodenburg's book, *The Second Circle* deeply enlightening. In this work, Rodenburg lays out "three basic ways human energy moves."²⁴ Briefly, a person in First Circle draws energy in but offers nothing out. This is the self that withdraws from the world and whose awareness is centered within. A person in Third Circle expels energy but is not receptive. This is the self that throws its energy outwards in an unspecific and often bombastic fashion. A person in Second Circle is in the "zone" - in the moment, connected within and without, giving and taking.

For much of my first year at LSU, my acting was very dull. Too often I have thought like a director instead of feeling like an actor. Knowing where the scene "should go," I often feel compelled to force moments in an attempt to make the performance match my ideas. Despite screaming quite loudly at times, I very seldom felt "in it." I suffered regularly from a horse voice and periodic spells of light headedness while on stage. I see now that these issues were symptomatic of a Third Circle approach to the work. The hoarseness was the result of pushing and forcing my voice and body beyond what I was actually feeling. The light headedness was the result of holding my breath, which is symptomatic of my attempt to control my performance. Although Patsy doesn't say this, I would argue that First and Third Circles are really two sides of the same coin. An actor in First Circle is absorbed in his own inner/subjective experience. An actor in Third Circle is distractedly fixated on the outer/objective world. I believe that to be an actor and a human being in Second Circle, one must transcend these categories.

It is difficult for me to describe my experience of being "in it" without discussing the conditions which have allowed me periodic glimpses of this experience. Experiencing Second Circle is all about letting go. For me, the biggest obstacle to experiencing second circle is the very idea of subjective and objective reality. To be fully connected to the "inner" and the "outer" world is to realize that there is only one world. This takes us back to our discussion earlier concerning the relationship between spirituality and art. According to Heidegger, the fundamental sickness of western thought is the prioritization of one form of consciousness to the exclusion all others. According to Karlfried Graf Durckheim this is:

Objective consciousness, which makes us see reality as something 'objective,' that is, something existing without reference to ourselves, and makes us apply the yardstick of 'objectivity' to everything we do. Bravely setting out to

²⁴ Rodenburg, Patsy. *The Second Circle*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2008. pg. 15.

understand, control or shape our world around us, we discount our own aspirations and desires as merely subjective.²⁵

Durckheim claims that the source of the objective vision of life is grounded in the ego – i.e. what is meant when we say, “I am I.”²⁶ If “I am I,” everything not “I” is other – i.e. objective. However, in Zen and in Taoism (and in Heidegger), this sense of “I” as separate from the rest of reality is an illusion. According to Alan Watts:

In the Taoist view there really is no obdurately external world. My inside arises mutually with my outside, and though the two may differ they cannot be separated. Thus everything’s ‘own way’ is the ‘own way’ of the universe, of the Tao. Because of the mutual interdependence of all beings, they will harmonize if left alone and not forced into conformity with some arbitrary, artificial, and abstract notion of order, and this harmony will emerge *tzu-jan*, of itself, without external compulsion.²⁷

Tzu-jan is the Chinese word for nature and is interpreted by Watts to mean: “That which happens of itself.” Mutual interdependence is the belief that every thing or event is what it is only in relation to everything else. Taoism and Zen are thus characterized by a radical trust in nature. The Tao is the flowing course of nature which has its own organic pattern. The man of Tao thus follows a life-style of *wu-wei*, which can be translated as “non-doing” or “not forcing.” Watts explains that this is what we mean by “going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming sails to the wind, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer.”²⁸

How does this relate to art and more specifically to Second Circle? Watts speaks about the art of calligraphy which sheds great light on the art of acting. He claims that:

Calligraphy could be described as: dancing with brush and ink on absorbent paper. Because ink is mostly water, Chinese calligraphy – controlling the flow of water with the soft brush as distinct from the hard pen – requires that you go with the flow. If you hesitate, hold the brush too long in one place, or hurry, or try to correct what you have written, the blemishes are all too obvious. But if you write well there is at the same time the sensation that the work is happening on its own, that the brush is writing all by itself – as a river, by following the line of least resistance, makes elegant curves.²⁹

True artistic creation “feels” like something is happening on its own. It’s very much as Shunryu Suzuki says about breathing:

²⁵ Durckheim, Karlfried Graf. *Zen and Us*. New York: E.P. Dutton. 1982. pg. 18

²⁶ Durckheim, Karlfried Graf. *Zen and Us*.

²⁷ Watts, Alan. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon, 1975. pg. 43.

²⁸ Watts, Alan. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon, 1975. pg. 43.

²⁹ Watts, Alan. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon, 1975. pg. 15

We say 'inner world,' or 'outer world,' but actually there is just one world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door. The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think 'I breathe,' the 'I' is extra. There is no you to say 'I.' What we call 'I' is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all.³⁰

One of the critiques I have with some acting methods is a failure to address the problem of the subject/object split. If we simply accept the presuppositions of our sick culture, our work can only go so deep. There are of course many exceptions to this. Michael Chekov is one. In his book, *To The Actor*, he has a chapter called "creative individuality." He describes this creative individuality as follows:

In everyday life we identify ourselves as 'I'; we are the protagonists of 'I wish, I feel, I think.' This 'I' we associate with our body, habits, mode of life, family, social standing and everything else that comprises normal existence. But in moments of inspiration the *I* of an artist undergoes a kind of metamorphosis. Try to remember yourself in such moments. What happened to your everyday 'I'? Did it not retreat, give place to another *I*, and did not you experience it as the true artist in you?³¹

He goes on to say that this creative self inspires the actor's acting and grants him genuinely creative feelings. Possessing an immensely extended consciousness from its being free of what he calls our everyday self, it is also able to straddle both sides of the floodlights: "For the actor with an awakened awareness of his higher *I*, the audience is a living link which connects him as an artist with the desires of his contemporaries."³²

Although it would take us too far a field to explore the specific ways that Chekov's technique does this, suffice it to say that the key to his approach is in awakening the actor to this deeper source of inspiration. One ceases to create a performance and instead, allows something to happen. The similarities here with Michelangelo's approach to sculpture are striking. The similarities between the experience of holy men and indigenous shaman are also quite striking. In the beautiful book *Black Elk Speaks*, the Sioux medicine man Black Elk describes the experience of healing:

I had the power to practice as a medicine man, curing sick people; and many I cured with the power that came through me. Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power from the outer world, and the visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds. If I thought that I was doing it myself, the hole would close up and no power could come through. Then everything I could do would be foolish.³³

³⁰ Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill, 1970. pg. 29

³¹ Chekov, Michael. *To the Actor*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953. pg. 95.

³² Chekov, Michael. *To the Actor*. New York: Harper and Row, 1953. pg. 96

³³ Neihardt, John. *Black Elk Speaks*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1972. pg. 205

Black Elk's image of the hole fits in very well with Buddhist notions of emptiness. When I become empty, I become boundless. When I give up the idea of "I" with its dualistic splitting of reality between subject and object and resulting First and Third Circle energy patterns, all that's left is relatedness – i.e. Second Circle. In other words, to live from Second Circle is to keep the channel open; to be a swinging door.

To summarize, First and Third Circle energies occur when I am focused on the idea of the "inner" or "outer" worlds. When I really want to feel my performance I am in First. When I want the audience to feel it I'm in Third. For acting to be truly artistic however, one must live on the edge between First and Third Circle. As it is said in the Katha Upanishad: "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard." Or in Kierkegaard's words: "It's not that the way is narrow, narrowness is the way."

What is the nature of this edge and why is it dangerous? There is great risk in letting a performance happen. The ego does not want to give up control. I believe that the problem with "schools" and "techniques" in the realm of art is that true genius comes in breaking the rules. We are trained to be good little boys and girls and this obsession with pleasing "Mommy" and "Daddy" (in their various incarnations) kills all spontaneity. It is in becoming a person truly free to break rules and explore new horizons that separates good pretenders from brilliant actors. No matter how perfectly I determine beat changes, engage in emotional preparation, vocal coloring, etc., until I find the freedom to play, my performance will be as full of blemishes as Alan Watts's self-conscious calligrapher. Techniques must always be transcended because in the words of Watts, "the sense, feelings, and thoughts must be allowed to be spontaneous (*tzu-jan*) in the faith that they will order themselves harmoniously. To try to control the mind forcefully is like trying to flatten waves with a board."³⁴

While most of these concepts are still theoretical for me, I have experienced glimpses of this in the course of my second year at LSU. Although I have known about the idea of Second Circle for quite some time, the "how to do it" is quite another question. Looking back on instances when it has "worked," I can identify four steps.

The first is an act of trust. Like many children, I was educated to distrust my instincts. According to Watts, most westerners are taught to "control their thoughts, emotions and appetites by muscular efforts such as clenching the teeth or fists, frowning to concentrate attention, scratching the head to think, staring to see, holding the breath or tightening the diaphragm or rectum to inhibit emotion."³⁵ I found this list interesting because these are precisely the physical manifestations of my attempts to control a performance. I don't trust the moment and so I use muscular tension to show the audience my concepts of what the character should be experiencing.

³⁴ Watts, Alan. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon, 1975. pg. 118

³⁵ Watts, Alan. *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. New York: Pantheon, 1975. pg. 118

Now according to Taoism, to force something by muscular tension is to close up one's channel. Life, quite literally, stops. The answer seems simple enough: DON'T DO THAT! And yet, to try and stop forcing is itself another manifestation of force. I cannot accomplish *wu-wei* by forcing myself to stop straining. In the words of Lao-tzu, "Superior *wu-wei* (non-forcing) does not aim at *wu-wei* and so it truly is *wu-wei*." True *wu-wei* therefore, is to roll with experiences and feelings as they come and go. This is the second step: to simply flow with the moment.

The third step takes this idea further. Flowing with the moment includes those moments when I feel as if I'm not "in it." The acceptance of not being "in it" is in my mind the "get out of jail free card" in acting and in life. To fully live in this place of utter acceptance of everything and every moment has the potential to remove all blemishes from our work because now the blemishes become part of the work.

To elucidate this point a bit more, in the past, whenever I realized that things weren't going well, my answer would be to try and "fix" my performance through Third Circle energy. During *Lucky Charms* however, I attempted to let things be. Shitty performance or not, I wasn't going to fix anything. It seems paradoxical but when I simply became aware of my periodic lapses in presence and didn't acquiesce to my habitual tendency to "fix," the realization of the lapse was itself the thing that brought me back into presence.

The fourth step concerns my relationship to the audience. When I go on stage in need of audience approval, I am incapable of creating art. I lose all of my power. I am weak and pathetic in my neediness for approval. My cute little "tricks" are no better than a pitiable middle school child with self-esteem issues who buys fancy gifts for his school chums in hopes of gaining friends.

For me, the way out of this trap is a radical re-ordering of my relationship with the audience. When my objective is to share a gift with the audience rather than trick them into liking me, I am free to be an artist. When I cease to identify with my ego-self, what need is there to be liked? Who is actually there to like or be liked? If I take seriously the idea that the artist is a channel through which "something" happens, and if in the art of acting this "something" occurs between actors and the audience, how dare I take credit when this mysterious "something" actually occurs?

To conclude our explication of performance, I believe that the foundation for approaching these four steps is mediation. I started this practice during *Lucky Charms* and it was wonderfully helpful in setting the conditions for "something" to happen. In truth I don't understand how actor training can work without delving into the deeper layers of the human psyche and spirit.

VIII. Analysis of the Technical Aspects of the Performance

Characterization

Distinctions between the different characters and scenes were made through physicalizations, changes in voice, and a fluid sense of areas corresponding to locations within the world of the play. For instance, when talking about sitting on the stairs during my Lucky Charms story, I made use of the altar stairs. For the car ride with Juan Manuel, I used the stage right bench.

In retrospect, I could have spent more time working on my various characterizations. As I attempted to rehearse my material, the constant temptation was to revise the script. If I were to mount the show again, I would spend much more time on creating specific and fully alive people.

Staging

George Judy's insights were incredibly helpful. I placed an altar upstage center. A candle and tabernacle sat upon the altar. Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary were hung on columns on either side of the altar on a diagonal. Two benches sat below the altar.

Costume

I wore a black suit with a roman collar for my costume.

Lighting

My lighting scheme was general wash and came up slowly at the beginning of the play and slowly down at the end. During the performance it only changed once, during my dream sequence.

Sound

I had six sound cues: Gregorian chant, Bread of Life, Gentle Woman, Krishna Das, Wave/Wind effect, Gregorian Chant.

Conclusion

I am very satisfied that the workshop performance of Lucky Charms achieved many of the goals I had set for it. For future versions of the script, I would like to make the journey of my character more explicit. Although I made strides in moving my piece away from narrative into the realm of dramatic action, I do feel that my overarching spine is still a bit weak. I would also like to add more tenderness and vulnerability into my piece. I succeeded beyond my expectations in terms of the comedic content. What the piece is missing is heart. There was a lot of heartache that went along with the loss my religious worldview and I think the piece needs to show this side of the story.

A few takeaways from this experience: 1) This process has enkindled in me an interest in writing. Perhaps the most enjoyable part of this project was sitting in my room, typing away on my computer, discovering interesting way to tell the story. 2) The performance of the piece confirmed in me a growing realization about the importance of ease and simplicity. Having identified the experience of truly being “in it,” I have great hope that this experience will occur more and more as I develop as a performer. 3) Thinking about the relationship between spirituality and art has been invaluable. Since exploring the art of acting over the past few years, I have come to see it as a wonderful means by which to enter more fully into reality.

In stating what I believe to be true about human existence, I have given myself a kind of litmus test. When acting becomes for me yet another “immortality project,” it will cease to be art. When my acting career becomes about “the business of the business” and “marketing” and everything else that stands in utter contradiction to art, I’ll know that it is time to stop. For me, the only way in which I may keep this from happening is to keep contact with the depths of life through spirituality.

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Vita

Timothy James Moriarty was born in Seattle, WA. He studied philosophy at Boston College where he received his BA (2008) and MA (2011). After a nearly three year stint in the Jesuits, Tim taught High School while taking acting classes in the evenings. After performing in Shakespeare Northwest's production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* in the role of Puck, Tim decided to pursue an MFA in Acting. While pursuing this degree at LSU, Tim performed in a number of Swine Palace productions including, *Clybourne Park*, *Dove*, *Spill*, *Frankenstein*, *All My Sons*, *Book Club Play*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *School for Lies*.