

An elderly woman is shuffling towards me shouting, "I want to see the face of God!" I recognize her but cannot recall her name. She is wearing a wrinkled pale-blue hospital gown. She turns away and yells, "I want to see the face of God!" The strings of the gown dangle in the back. She spins around and runs towards me with tiny rapid steps. Her legs are wobbling. Her voice crescendos, "I want to see the face of God!" I still cannot remember her name. I look around. I am in a dimly lit hallway of a nursing home. A Filipino woman steps into the hall carrying a half-eaten dinner tray. "It's time for bed, Mrs. Anderson." The patient strikes out and knocks the tray onto the floor. She bends at the waist and screams full volume, her voice emanating from deep within her chest, "I want to see the face of God!"

I wake from the dream. It's 4AM. I'm lying in my bed. My eyes open onto the view outside my bedroom window. In the foreground is the silhouette of a redwood, it's branches undulate and beckon. The lights of Oakland glimmer off in the distance, giving way to the velvet gray of the San Francisco Bay. The sky is chalkboard black with a dusting of moonlit clouds. A voice echoes inside me: *I want to see the face of God! I want to see the face of God!* It's the voice from my dream, but it is more than that. It resonates within and elicits a feeling, something old and familiar, like a forgotten friend from grade school, someone I haven't thought of for many years. *I want to see the face of God!* The words buzz in my chest, coalescing into a thrum under my sternum and next to my heart. The vibration moves up my throat and explodes in my head with each repetition. *I want to see the face of God!* The resonance of the words becomes something I can see, something I can touch, and smell, and taste. I want to see the face of God! Like Proust, *"I am filled with a precious essence; an essence that was not just in me, it is me...whence did it come, what did it mean?"* ...

Twenty years ago, my life ended. It had been deteriorating for many years. I married young. After we had children, my wife and I grew into different people. A happy couple that had started out in unison split into two discordant and irreconcilable parts.

In 1996, after 14 years of marriage with a two-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son, I decided to move my family to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to take a new job. I hoped that a fresh environment would set everything right. I was exhilarated by the possibility of reconciling and creating a new home, one where I would find my place. But during the months of arranging the move, it became clear that it was over and we needed to split. We packed for the move, dividing our belongings into boxes marked with initials, “M” for my wife, and “K” for me.

I had married in the summer of 1982, between graduating from college and starting medical school. My wife ached to be a mother but agreed to wait until I was finished with my education before having children. My son was born eight years later just two weeks after I completed my residency in Psychiatry. My wife quit her job to be a stay-at-home mom - she argued that most of her income would go to daycare, anyway. Our daughter came three years after my son. Shortly after her birth, my wife decided to have our daughter sleep in our bed so she could breastfeed uninterrupted through the night. My daughter slept between us. My son eventually discovered his sister was not sleeping in her crib. He was invited to join us.

My wife read a book titled “The Family Bed” that advised adopting the parenting practices of indigenous cultures. According to the blurb on the cover, “*Western Society is wrong in placing taboos on children sleeping with parents.*” She found articles in magazines with titles like “Parenting” and “Mother and Baby” that also advocated *co-sleeping* with the children. These magazines also recommended breastfeeding your child for a minimum of three to four years. One opinion piece that I recall argued that breastfeeding into school was ideal, written by a woman who had weaned her child at age nine.

After my daughter was born, my wife regretted weaning our son and decided this time to breastfeed for at least three years. She worried about splitting her attention between the children, so we hired a nanny to play with our son so he wouldn’t be neglected while she sat with our infant daughter, looking into her eyes, and feeding her at will throughout the day.

I told myself that this was right, that our daughter should be breastfed past the age when she could speak and form memories, and that we should all sleep in the same bed. But it didn't feel right. I began to develop insomnia and have episodes of panic anxiety as I tried to sleep in bed with my wife and children. My insomnia and the restless confusion that accompanied it confused me. I carried a leaden mantle of failure that pinned me down, entered my body, and became the core of my existence. I did not fit into the triad that my wife had created between herself and the children.

I kept trying to join in the family bed. But every night, my sleep miscarried and my heart pounded me out of bed. I retreated to the couch where I spent my nights watching TV and chatting on AOL and trying to sort out what was wrong. The answers were beyond me, outside my reach. I retreated into myself and waited for a metamorphosis, a shedding of the carapace that encased me. I was living in a home where I no longer felt I belonged. I blamed myself.

My wife decided that we should not tell the children about the divorce until after we moved to Pennsylvania. They were not told that we would be moving into separate rentals, a dilapidated row house for my children and their mother, and a bland townhouse for me. After everything from our home in Dallas was loaded into the moving van, my son, not quite 6 years old at the time, found a stray Marks-A-Lot on the floor of the living room. He went into the nursery and drew a large "K" with a circle around it on the wall.

After the divorce, I tried to understand all that had gone wrong, but the rational part of my mind failed me. My thoughts spiraled and skipped across the grooves of my mind. Memory shifted from its usual resting place in the background noise of my mind into the front of my consciousness. It became a constant rattling of rumination that interfered with my ability to function. Work became my only solace. Assuming the role of a doctor, in the presence of patients and nurses, everything snapped back into place. I could deal with other people's lives with practiced ease. But as soon as I left the hospital and returned to my rented condo where boxes

from my move remained stacked and unopened, my past took over, breaking into waves of regret and loss. My mind raced, replaying the stories of my life, trying to imagine a different outcome — something other than a failed marriage and a shattered home. My life had blown up out of my control. It felt like an act of God.

I did not know God. I turned to Buddhism, Shamanism, Sufism, Christian Mysticism, astrology, Tarot, chakras, rattles, drums — all of the irrational parts of human belief that I had previously dismissed as bunk.

~ ~ ~ I'm standing in the Spirituality section of Border's Books, pulling volumes at random, scanning the pages and reading anything that I would have previously rejected. I feel the need to push the boundaries of my life. The books speak to me. "We expect a rational order to divinity." I don't even believe in divinity. "The whole purpose of a spiritual path is to not have order." Am I on a spiritual path? "What if mystery is the answer?" What if confusion is the answer? ~ ~ ~

Early on in my search, I learned that there were two events of the mid 20th Century that transformed our culture: the Dali Lama being driven out of Tibet in 1951 and Vatican II in 1959. The occult knowledge of the spiritual world flooded into Western consciousness. Mysticism went mainstream. Housewives were now asking the question, "What is the meaning of my life?" while being stuck in the mundane responsibilities of the profane world.

As a child, I remember coming home from grade school to find my mother vacuuming and crying — a silent flow of tears as she swept the carpet. I knew to leave her alone as she thrust the vacuum back and forth in wild arcs, her eyes damp and blurred, robotically sweeping back and forth, like a blind person parsing the room with a cane. The carpet was covered with something I could not see, intangible crumbs, damn spots that won't come out.

My mother was a child of the Great Depression. Her father built their house on Bellaire Avenue in the Brookline District of Pittsburgh, creating a home with his own hands which he finished in time for mom's birth. Her mother's first four pregnancies ended in miscarriage. Her fifth attempt went to term — my mother was born. One month later, the stock market crashed.

Her father of Scotch-Irish heritage had quit school in the 9th grade to work with his father as a plasterer. Her mother was a first generation American of Czechoslovakia immigrants. My mother never heard the story of how they met.

Her father struggled to find work during the Depression. In early 1935, they lost the house. They found a new home a few blocks away on Birtley Avenue. The backyard had a large apple tree that became the heart of the neighborhood in the summer. All the neighborhood boys would come over to play and swing in its branches. My mother describes a normal childhood, with a loving mother and a younger sister and baby brother and many friends. She and her sister taught the neighborhood boys games such as *Mother May I*, *Statue*, and *Simon Says*, and they joined the boy's games in the street, *Kick the Can*, *King of the Hill*, *Red Rover*, and *Cowboys and Indians*. Her family was poor, but my mother did not know it at the time. She would hear her parents whispering about the Depression over dinner, but she thought they were talking about the blue glass bowl that sat on the dining room table.

In the late 1930's, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her illness progressed despite three surgeries — two radical mastectomies and a hysterectomy. Through the initial years, she continued to take care of the household. When she suffered post-mastectomy weakness of her right arm, she adapted by switching to her left to beat batter for cakes and fudge. She moved the furniture to clean the house. She taught my mother how to use a vial of Spirits of Ammonia to revive her when she fainted while she worked.

I asked my mom, "Did you ever have to revive your mother?"

“Yes. She would get off the floor and go back to her housework. You have to think in terms of those days. She was a good housewife and Mother.”

In the winter of 1943, her mother became too weak to climb the stairs to the bedroom and took to sleeping in the dining room. She was hospitalized at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in January 1944 where she agreed to experimental Radium treatments in exchange for free hospital care. My mother and her sister went to free art classes at the Carnegie Museum on weekends, after which they would go to visit their mother in the hospital. It was against the rules for children to enter the hospital without an adult. The nurses would sneak them in by the back stairwell and let them see their mom.

“Mother got yellower and yellower but each week the nurses combed her hair and put in a blue ribbon to match her eyes and she was propped up in bed smiling and laughing. She would say that when she came home she would ‘Sit on a cushion like a fine queen and dine upon strawberries, sugar and cream.’ I loved that and pretended it were so. I recall the day in February when Dad told me she was not going to live and that I would have to be mother to the family from then on.”

She died on June 11th, 1944. My mother was 14.

“After the funeral, I was at our home with all the relatives. I remember the crowd walked out onto the back porch. I stood close to Aunt Stella, my mother’s sister closest in age who somewhat resembled her. We stood not talking when suddenly a rabbit darted across the backyard. I had never seen one there before. It was a sign to me that life went on or so it seemed. It gave me a kind of hope and courage. It may sound strange but that is actually what I thought at the time.”

“Dad had hired a little old woman to take care of us but he must have stopped paying her for as soon as she had finished all the liquor he had in the cupboard, Mrs. Noble left. That is when my duties took over. I was fourteen. I never told my friends at school and only told my art teacher

what was going on. She gave me some hand-me-down clothes which were too big on me but I cut them down. I learned to make things over for my sister Nancy and me.”

“I did the laundry and cleaned somewhat and cooked the meals. I had no preparation for this and ended up with my many varieties of meals with hamburger, chili, sandwiches, meatloaf, skillet meatloaf, etc. Dad seldom came home while we were still up in the evening. Many is the night that I saved the meal till 9:30 and then put it away and went to bed. Doing the laundry was scary for our basement had low, dark ceiling with broken glass jars embedded in them for some reason. Maybe to give them strength. Mother had made her own soap and boiled clothes in a copper kettle. I didn’t do that, but used bluing and starch and hung clothes on the line with big long poles that sometimes fell down and dirtied the clothes. Start over time. Because it was so dark in there I sang loudly as I washed. All the operettas I could remember, songs from Brigadoon and Desert Song, were belted out loudly. Good thing we had empty lots on each side.”

Her father retreated further from the family and disappeared into bars.

“Several times I walked back up to Brookline Boulevard to Joe’s Tavern where I knew Dad was and went in to bring him home. I realized later that he would hide in the back while the bartender told me he wasn’t there. One time the bartender even bought me an ice cream cone to distract me. I would think of the old song, ‘Father, O Father come home with me now, the clock in the steeple strikes one,’ but it really wasn’t funny.”

“One day I came home and dad said we were being evicted and we had to move. Then he left me in charge. All our belongings had to be out of the house within 72 hours, and we had nowhere to move them to. It was a horrific experience getting rid of all mother’s things as well as our own in that big house. The basement was full of storage junk. Everything was stacked on the side yard and we were evicted. Most of all I regretted leaving the piano and the dog whom Dad turned loose in the country.”

My mother was 16. They moved into her grandparents house for a while. All four of them slept in the attic, two to a bed. They had to move the beds to the dining room when winter came and the attic was too cold. Her grandparents had little income. She began to realize that her father was not contributing any money for food. Her grandmother began to talk about wanting her to quit school and get a job. Her grandmother, having come from a small village in rural Czechoslovakia, never understood my mother's desire to finish school and go to college. Mom took a job after school in a bakery to earn money for the household. Her Aunt Blanch, the youngest of her mother's sisters, also lived in the house. When Aunt Blanch got pregnant, they all had to move out.

Mom took her younger brother to The Milton Hershey School for orphan boys. She was 17 and had to lie about her age on the papers to sign him in. Her Aunt Mary helped her sister Nancy find a home with a neighborhood family. After Nancy left, my mother remembers standing in the cellar, crying hysterically. She went to live with Aunt Mary. She does not know where her father went.

"Don't be afraid to tell this tale with a little schmaltz, and humor. The three of us siblings shared black humor or Galgenhumor for years without knowing what it was. That is the best way to survive an idiotic world."

She finished high school and got a scholarship to Carnegie Melon where she studied art under Samuel Rosenberg in the same class as Andy Warhol.

"He was a strange fellow. He had acne and wore trench coats to class. He was very gifted but chose strange subject matter such as a drawing of a young boy picking his nose. He had much potential. Too bad he stopped painting and wasted his talent."

I grew up hearing my mother's stories. Her descriptions were so evocative that I created pictures in my mind of the scenes and her memories became mine. When I was in kindergarten, I remember standing at my bedroom window in Dallas and knowing, somehow, that I was facing north towards Pennsylvania. I knew that was my birthplace. And I felt a sense of longing, and relief that our difficulties had been left behind.

I think she told the story of her past in order to put it to rest in her own mind. But I also feel that she told her stories to teach me about life, about how hard work can overcome challenges, about the importance of finding beauty in life, about believing in yourself and ignoring what other people think. She told me and my three sisters that we were all smart and creative and could do anything we wanted in life, no matter what happened. She told me that she wanted all of her children to be independent and not feel we had rely on her so that we would be OK if anything ever happened to her. She raised us to not need her.

But mom's favorite subject was art. Mom smiled when she talked about how her mother saved butcher paper for her to draw on. She told me about how Jackson Pollock splashed house paint on canvases to make art and she had dripped black, gold, and white paint on the barren concrete floors of the tenement apartment in Pittsburgh that we lived in when I was born. Her description and her joy at turning ugliness into beauty was so vivid that I developed a memory of that floor, I can still see it in my mind, even though we moved from that apartment when I was one-year-old. She put a four-by-eight piece of quarter-inch plywood on the wall upon which she painted a window looking out onto a bay with sailboats. She kept the wooden panels and put them up in our house after we moved to Dallas when I was three. In our new home, she painted another window with bay view on the entry hall wall and lemon trees on the wall in the dining room. She used artist oils to craft fairies on the walls of my sister's room. She painted the walls of my room sky blue and then free-handed lines with white acrylic to turn it into a wall of bricks. She read *Harold and His Purple Crayon* — a story of a boy who creates fantastical worlds by drawing along the wall as he walks — and told me I remind her of Harold.

When I was in grade school, Mom had a calendar with photos of European towns which stayed on the wall well into the following year, open to one particular month — a photo of a magnificent tree growing in the center of a town plaza. When she took the calendar down, I remember her looking at the picture one last time and talking about how beautiful it was. She found a Magic-Marker in the drawer and began to sketch on the living room wall. A piece of the image materialized on the wall. The marker ran dry. She found another one in the back of a drawer. The tree grew a bit more across the wall. After all the markers in the house were spent, she went to the store and bought a half-dozen more. By that evening, a three-foot wide reproduction of the photo was completed. I was in awe of her ability to create like that, without a single errant line, free-handing permanent marker into a beautiful scene.

I'm living alone in Pennsylvania. My children visit on weekends. I have a new job as medical director of an inpatient psychiatric unit in St Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, PA. It's a quaint town that exists sideways in time. It was founded by German Moravians in 1741. The original stone-crafted homes still stand sturdy and habitable. Nearby is Bethlehem Steel, a senescent factory that was once a powerhouse that ran 24 hours a day, churning out steel for ships and skyscrapers. It's ghostly structures haunt the landscape, enormous grayish-brown factory buildings with menacing smokestacks that silently scratch the sky. There has been controversy over what to do with the blight. Plans to restore the buildings and preserve the past have given way to a decision to bulldoze and build a casino — The Lehigh Sands. The radiance and roar of the coke furnaces will be replaced with the glitter and chatter of slot machines and video poker.

I fall into dreamless sleep each night, alone in my King-sized bed. The mornings come too soon. The brief caesura of unplumbed awareness upon awakening each morning is quickly flooded with emptiness. It is not the emptiness of possibility, it is the emptiness of loss — a vacuum filled with an ethereal specter of grief. It consumes my body and weighs me down. I push

myself out of bed and slouch through Bethlehem to the hospital. The days repeat. I don't know where I am headed. The future eludes me.

The image of my mother pushing the Hoover and crying persists on the periphery of my consciousness, floating somewhere in the back of my mind, like a silent Oracle asking an unknown question. I wondered what my mother might have been feeling as she cleaned. She had dreamed of having a family of her own. She had created the family that she had wanted but was still haunted by the grief and loss that defined her childhood. She picked herself up, and made dinner, and did the laundry, and cleaned the house. I imagine she was questioning her life, pondering why things happened the way they did. I wonder if she was asking to see the face of God.

These memories aren't in me; they are me. And I know them by feel. Like in a dream, the vast unending story exists within a few moments of time. It's 4AM. I should go back to sleep. My thoughts slip loose and drift in space. Each impression unfolds into a kaleidoscope of memories, a swirling Mandelbrot fractal of recursive layers, each node expanding and leading deeper, unfurling and revealing. I hear the siren-screech of the woman's voice from my dream, repeating, *"I want to see the face of God!"* As I slip away into the bog of sleep, I wonder, *what is the face of God?*

I'm back in the nursing home. It is the next morning. The hallway is empty. The rooms along the hall are dark. As I approach one of the doors, the room brightens with the beginning of dawn. The woman is sitting alone in the room. I ask her, "Did you see the face of God?" She smiles but does not speak. I ask, "Do remember last night? When you were asking to see the face of God?" She turns to the window. The sun is cresting the horizon, the room is filled with a golden glow. The Filipino nurse enters the room carrying a breakfast tray and announces, "It's time for breakfast Mrs. Anderson." Mrs. Anderson is still looking out the window as if transfixed by something off in the distance. Without turning, she replies, "Thank you, dear."



*1042 Bellaire, Pittsburgh, PA. circa 1929, before my mother was born.
House built by my maternal grandfather, James Addis. He is standing on the porch with
my maternal grandmother, Julia Eva Addis*

searching lost time



Czechoslovakian Village by Julianne Biehl, 2012

My mother returned to her art full force after all the children left the house. She still lives in Dallas with my Father in the same house that we moved into in 1963. She has often said that she wants to be a tree.



Me, age three, asleep, perhaps dreaming

searching lost time



Köt Biehl

March 24 · Edited ·

In a dream last night, I approached an elderly woman apparently suffering from dementia who was agitated, pacing, waving her arms, and screaming "I want to see the face of God!"

The following day (in dream time) I returned to the nursing facility to see her. She was at peace, sitting in a chair, looking out the window with a slight smile on her face. I asked her if she had seen the face of God. She looked at me blankly then turned away, mute. I wondered if she had been granted her wish, if she had seen the face of God, or if, more likely, she had forgotten yesterday and had no memory or understanding of what I was talking about. Perhaps both.

I woke with the admonition "I want to see the face of God" reverberating in my mind. I fell back asleep into that realm of conscious sleep where a veil of observing awareness remains. The thought repeated loudly in my mind, "I want to see the face of God!" Over and over and over. I woke again two hours later with the thought still repeating in my mind. It is midday, now, and I am still hearing the echo, with its accompanying reply, "What is the face of God?"

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Julianne Biehl Did you look in the mirror?

March 24 at 12:07pm · [Like](#) · 1



Köt Biehl Yes, and I saw an elderly woman who appears both wise and perhaps a little bit crazy.

March 24 at 12:44pm · Edited · [Like](#) · 2



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