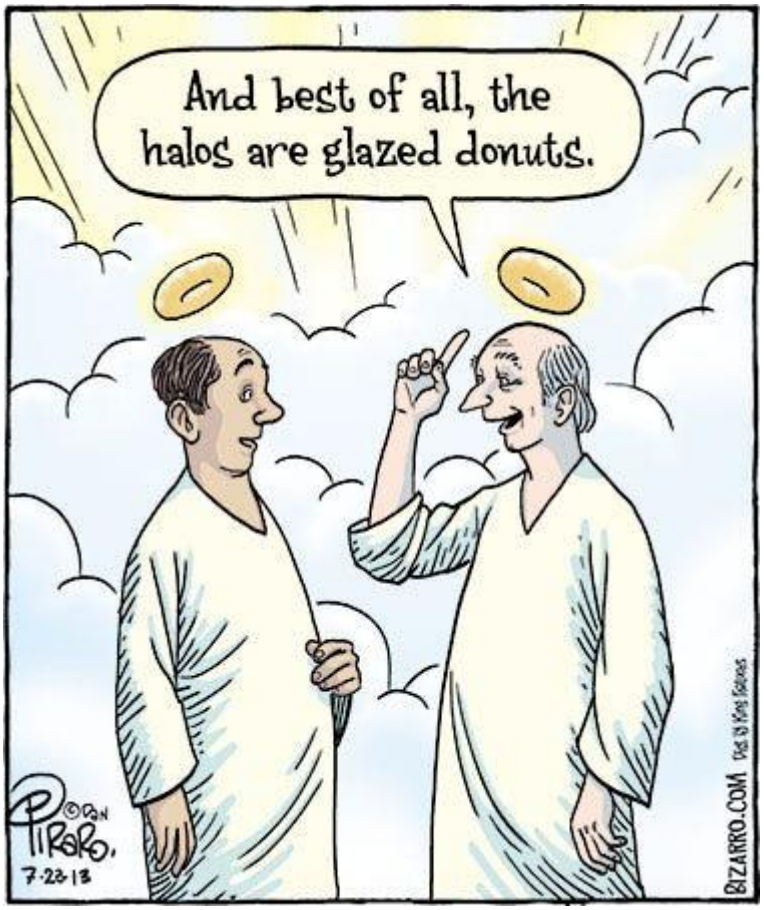
Free Donuts on the Road to Hell

And the Monster in My Mirror

Dan Piraro



Comic by the author; all rights reserved

Have you ever looked into a mirror and seen a different person looking back at you? When you're not tripping, I mean. I have twice, decades apart, and for completely different reasons.

The first time was as startling as something from a horror film. After years of seeing the same incrementally older me in hundreds of mirrors, when I stepped in front of my reflection in a public restroom one day, I'd been replaced by something grotesque, verging on horrific.

It happened at a summer church camp when I was fifteen. Let's start with why a cool, artsy kid like me was at church camp.

On my first day of high school in 1973, I met a very cool guy in my art class. He had cool hair, cool clothes, was a talented artist like me, and had the

intelligence, wit, and sarcasm I aspired to. Mark was two years older than me, which cemented my hero worship, and we became best friends.

A few weeks into our mutual man-crush, I learned his father was an evangelical preacher. I'd been raised Catholic, but my weekly attendance had been an obligation, not a calling, and I had become as disenchanted with the family religion as I was with my dad's flat-top and WWII-style patriotism. What did any of that have to do with a cool, Vietnam War-era, Sexual Revolution teenager like me? When Mark invited me to attend his dad's church with him, I was reticent, but he assured me there were cute girls in their youth group and free donuts. My parents' church had neither of those perks, so I went.

Unlike the boring local chapter of the Pope's club my family attended, Mark's church promised *MIRACLES!* Such as healing the sick, speaking in tongues, and answered prayers for everything from money to parking spaces close to the mall entrance. (And donuts.) And best of all, my interest in attending a non-Catholic church terrified my parents, despite both churches having the same resurrected mascot.

If you're not familiar with "speaking in tongues," it's an evangelical thing that most Christian churches don't do because it is beyond weird. It's a simple process: A person prays aloud improvisationally in front of the congregation, working themself into a spiritual lather, then begins to switch from their native language to what sounds like yammering nonsense syllables. It is professed to be a spiritual language, the parlance of angels and other employees of Heaven, so when the yammerer is finished, they interpret for the congregation what God was saying through them. You can find TV evangelists doing it online, usually moments before encouraging you to give your money to God via their P.O. box or PayPal account.

Like a MAGA rally, it's one of those things that is serious if you have faith and hilarious if you don't.

When I first heard the term "speaking in tongues," I had questions. Aren't tongues what *everyone* uses in speech, regardless of what planet their language comes from? Are the rest of us only speaking in *lips*? Or was the term meant to represent the opposite of "talking out of your ass"?

Holy babbling aside, the church had a fun youth group with cute girls, and I enjoyed scaring my parents, so I attended every week with my cool friend Mark through that school year.

The following summer, he enticed me to attend something called “church camp” with youth groups from several local churches. It was just like regular summer camp, he explained, with cabins, canoes, and swimming, but with the added element of Bible studies and prayer groups. When he saw that I wasn’t yet sold, he assured me the religious stuff was inconsequential, and described it as a veritable singles bar in the woods, where the cute girls would be wrapping their raging hormones in short shorts and swimsuits. I ran home to pack.

Comic by the author; all rights reserved

We all met in the church parking lot at dawn and took an old school bus to the camp, a lovely wooded area about an hour outside of town. There was a rustic central lodge made of stone and heavy timber beams, a couple of long, clapboard barracks — one for boys, one for girls, where we happy campers slept in long rows of cots — and another smaller cabin for the

counselors. There was a lake nearby and a large pool on the property where we would swim every afternoon during peak heat.

Our day started with a cafeteria-style breakfast in the big lodge. If I were to attend at my current age, I'd give an elaborate critique of the cuisine, including a follow-up on how it affected my digestion and elimination. But in those days, all Mark and I cared about was flirting with the girls by being cool and sarcastic about church camp, and avoiding slopping globs of food on our clothing or getting anything stuck in our teeth.

Breakfast was followed by a morning Bible study outside under the trees, led by the youth minister, Charlie. He was youngish and affable, but exuded the air of a person who would never achieve the status of employee of the month at a minimum-wage job. He sat on the edge of a stone picnic fireplace, while we sat on the ground surrounding him like little disciples. He'd read a few passages from the New Testament, then interpret what God's King James mumbo-jumbo was trying to tell us, usually something like, "Barring sacrificing a human baby to Satan, the quickest route to eternal damnation is to have sex before marriage." We'd then have a short period of silent prayer, allowing us time to ask the Lord to give us the strength to resist both of those powerful temptations.

Then we'd pretend to play softball or volleyball for a bit, while flirting with the girls by being cool and sarcastic about church camp. That brought us to lunch, which proceeded a lot like breakfast.

After lunch, we'd stroll around the grounds flirting for a while, before returning to our respective barracks to change into our swimsuits for pool time. Through our windows, we could see the girls' barracks across the way, and the thought of an entire building full of girls changing into swimsuits was almost more than we could bear. Mark and I admitted that we'd be willing to sacrifice a human baby to Satan to be a fly on their wall.

Unsurprisingly, the afternoon swim sessions were the highlight of church camp, as the flirting was turned up to eleven, noticeably raising the temperature of the water to near boiling. Mark had warned me to wear two pairs of tight underpants beneath my swimsuit to control whatever tectonic activities might occur, and it was good advice.

After swimming and a short rest period, there was yet another Sermon on the Barbecue under the trees with a similar message: *Blessed are the*

chaste, for they shall keep their hands out of each other's pants. The afternoon sessions also included a role-playing game of some sort that was clearly designed by someone who had never been a teenager or met one.

After dinner in the big lodge (flirting, sarcasm), we'd gather in a makeshift chapel for a sermon from the Holy Head Honcho, Mark's dad. He'd slather us with "thees," "thous," "doths," and "shalt nots," then weave them into a tapestry of reasons why we should refrain from premarital sex.

The brighter kids were beginning to spot a pattern.

By the end of the second day, I was starting to make progress with my unholy temptations regarding a super-cute girl named Kelly. She exhibited all the signs of being similarly tempted into damnation by me, by which I mean that she giggled at my snarky comments rather than roll her eyes and walk away, as other girls had.

That evening, as dusk was descending on the camp and the counselors were starting a campfire around which we would be further convinced to remain virgins until marriage, then encouraged to sing godawful songs, Kelly and I snuck away for a few minutes to hide behind a tree and awkwardly press our bodies and mouths together. A casual observer might have mistaken us for two starving teens frantically searching each other's mouths for scraps of food, and clothing for loose change.

I remember that kiss to this day, five decades later. It rocked me to my soul and convinced me I had found my soulmate for life. It was closer to a religious experience than anything else I got from church camp.

Wiping the saliva from our faces and shirts, we returned to the campfire in time to be led in songs that I could only imagine God found as cringeworthy as we would have had our heads not been swimming in dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and whatever other hallucinogens our brains had in stock.

Kelly and me, 1974

The next day, we flirted and giggled through breakfast, used our eyes to fornicate through the morning Sermon on the Barbecue, barely kept our hands off each other during some half-assed version of softball, and anticipated pool time as though it were our honeymoon in the Caribbean.

When it finally arrived, I emerged from the boys' locker room and saw that Kelly and her "maid of honor," Lisa, were already in the pool chatting. They waved eagerly to get my attention. I was anxious to join them, but the testosterone coursing through me mandated that rather than squatting and slinking into the water, I should dive like an Olympic swimmer at the sound of a starter pistol. I did so, intending to trace a graceful arc downward, then back up, bursting through the surface next to Kelly; my Tarzan to her Jane.

I dove perhaps a little too heroically, and at the bottom of my arc, I felt a jolt that produced a smattering of stars before my tightly shut eyes. As I rose to the surface and stood up to face Kelly, I wiped the chlorine from my eyes and saw that hers were wide open in horror as she covered her mouth and gasped. Lisa was also clearly horrified, and said slowly, "I think…you

better…get some help." Puzzled, I reached up to feel my face and noticed something was missing.

I got out of the pool and hurried to the mirror in the boys' locker room. The face I saw there was not mine.

It was the mangled face of a very bad boxer, or a character actor from a gangster film, but it was certainly not mine. The last time I'd looked, I had a prominent, Mediterranean nose. Now I did not. There was a fold of skin with nostrils pressed flat against my left cheek and two streams of blood pouring from my chin, but nothing resembling a nose.

Counterintuitively, I was not in pain or particularly upset. If that happened to me now, I'd be panicked and furious at my own stupidity, worried about health insurance and recovery time, not to mention the degradation of my already unremarkable looks, but back then, my youthful idiocy led me to see it as an intoxicating cocktail of adventure, sympathy, and attention; a Munchausen syndrome injury.

Within moments, camp counselors whisked me off to a rural hospital in the nearby small town. The ER doctor took one look at me and, after pushing some gauze into my off-center, collapsed nostrils, washed his hands of me like Pontius Pilate and recommended I be sent to a bigger hospital in the nearest city. I was told to lie down while I waited for my parents to pick me up.

When my parents entered the room an hour later, my dad, the ex-Marine, winced at the sight of me, and my mother burst into tears.

A couple of hours later, at the big hospital in the city, the ER docs examined me and said I was lucky not to have a concussion before reporting that they did not feel competent to put my face back into a shape anyone might recognize as human, and called in a plastic surgeon.

He rushed over as soon as he'd finished the back nine, drugged me, recreated a nose near the middle of my face as best he could, stuffed it with gauze soaked in opiates to hold it in place, and sent me on my way high as a kite.

When we arrived home that night, my three sisters were waiting for us as we walked through the door and marveled at the sandwich-sized bandage

dominating my face. My older sister stepped closer, looked into my eyes, and said, “Dude! You are trippin’!” She was right.

Dad angrily barked, “*How would YOU know?!*” Mom started crying again.

A couple of days later, I convinced my parents to let me go back to camp for the final weekend. I longed to bask in the attention of the wounded hero returning from battle, and hoped Kelly would welcome me with open arms and moistened lips.

It was a glorious reunion, and I became the star of church camp for the final two days. On the eve of the last day of camp, after our final sermon had reminded us of what the Bible has to say about premarital sex and honoring thy parents, to a swell of inspirational music, Mark’s dad encouraged anyone feeling the Holy Spirit stirring within them to come forward and be baptized.

Unable to resist the additional attention, and under the influence of some highfalutin painkillers, I walked to the front to be reborn to a thunderous ovation fit for a Hollywood finale.

Now, I’d already been baptized into Catholicism as a baby, but I’d learned from my year in the evangelical church that it did not count for several irrefutable reasons.

1. As a baby, I could not make the decision for myself.
2. I was *sprinkled* with water, not *dunked*, which, according to the Bible, is the wrong way to perform the magic. “He was John the *Baptist*, not John the *Sprinkler*.”
3. Catholic churches have statues, violating one of the Ten Commandments about graven images, so Catholicism is automatically disqualified from the True Messiah Club.

When I returned home the next day, I informed my parents that I had been “born again,” and they nearly melted before my eyes like the Wicked Witch after Dorothy doused her with water. That alone made the whole week worthwhile.

Sarcasm aside, I was a spiritually oriented teen and believed in some of the things I was making fun of. After camp, I maintained and nurtured those beliefs as best I could for a few more years as I watched Mark’s church

descend into the inevitable cabaret of carnality in which human institutions so often end up.

During my couple of years at that church, I never witnessed anything close to a healing or any other kind of miracle, and eventually, all hell broke loose, soap-opera style. Several deacons, ministers, and a couple of their wives were expelled from the church for various misdeeds, including skimming from the church coffers and becoming "one flesh" with the spouses of others. Sadly, Mark's dad was among the ousted, though he adamantly denied the charges.

Could this have been why so much emphasis had been put on *pre*marital sex at camp, and none on the *extra*marital variety?

Much to my mother's relief, my nose turned out looking very much as it had before it met the devil in the form of the pool's concrete floor.

Kelly and I dated for a while, happily forgetting what we'd been told multiple times each day at camp, then broke up and moved on to the next objects of our temptations. Mark and I eventually drifted apart, too.

In the following years, I gradually became agnostic, then atheist, and spent the next several decades bitterly criticizing organized religion as a toxic combination of gullibility and politics. But in my early sixties, partly as a result of a mystical experience I could not explain, I awakened a more mature version of my spiritual side through meditation and the study of Buddhism and various Eastern philosophies.

It was after that experience that I once again saw a different person in the mirror. It sounds precious, I know, like something from an inspirational greeting card, but in its way it was just as strange as that first time at the pool, and much more profound. I'll write about it in a future essay soon.

Though I've returned to a spiritual orientation toward life (sans religion and donuts!), and I've lost interest in teenage girls in bathing suits (thank God!), apparently I still think it's cool to make sarcastic comments about church camp. Some things never change.

My wife and me in front of a real sign at a real church in a real town called Flippin, Arkansas