

## FLARE-UP

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*This mount is such, that ever  
At the beginning down below 'tis tiresome,  
And aye the more one climbs, the less it hurts.*

—*Purgatorio*, IV.88–90

GIL ZEAMER, HUSBAND of our church council chair, Nancy, was the instigator behind the doctrinal investigation that had put me on administrative leave. He had once been someone I considered a friend but over the previous year or so had become convinced that I was a budding heretic or at least “doctrinally soft,” and our relationship, though cordial, became more and more coolly so.

I suppose you could best describe Potomac Community Church with the “moderate Evangelical” label, and Gil represented the most conservative end of our church’s spectrum. His little clique was vocal, and his influence was strong among them, although anyone outside the group didn’t take him too seriously—his argumentative nature put them off. He was one of those people that pastors learn to accept as a trial that builds character, a critic who keeps you on your toes but generally does so more or less good-naturedly: annoying, a little draining, but not vicious. He was happy for me to be a bit more progressive than he, as long as he could bark and nip at my shins whenever he felt I was drifting too far to the left.

“It’s that Neil Oliver friend of yours,” Gil said to me one Sunday after church, back in early September. “He’s a bad influence. You’ve got to stay close to the center. He’s way over on the liberal side. That’s why you need me on the conservative side, keeping you honest. I’m your watchdog.”

In this case, whether or not his centrist prescription was wrong, he was partly right in his diagnosis, as critics often are: my friend Neil had indeed been an influence on me. Anyway, Gil and some friends from his little clique had typed up transcripts of a dozen or so of my sermons, and then they had taken out selected sentences and put them in a table: sermon quote on the left side under the column heading “Dan Says,” item from our church doctrinal statement on the right side, under the column heading “PCC Says.” Through all of this, Gil was very businesslike, as if he were an enthusiastic referee who loved his job and I were a basketball player who just double-dribbled or stepped out of bounds. It was his job to blow the whistle and to do so with gusto. Nothing personal.

I had tried to keep my composure regarding Gil and his faction, but Carol, I knew, was struggling. She felt worried and maybe even a little ashamed when I was put on leave. “When people hear about this, you know exactly the first thing they’ll think, darlin’. They’ll wonder who she was and when it happened and what I am going to do about it. You know how church people can be,” she said. Her anxiety made me all the more careful to try to stay calm. Even so, sometimes in my dreams I’d find myself arguing with Gil, long and intense arguments about theology and church matters, and I’d awaken with a start from a shouting match with him, my heart pounding, muscles twitching and tense.

The feeling of Gil-focused hatred flared up again a few days after my conversation with Jess, on Wednesday night, when Ky Lang came over after a council meeting. Ky was about thirty, the youngest member of the council. He was Vietnamese; his parents were among the “boat people” of the early 1980s. He was tallish, lanky, stylish. He wore those black-rimmed glasses that looked nerdy years ago but then became very cool. Ky had a striking haircut too—Carol called it odd—short on the sides with a shock of unruly black hair on top that flopped down to his eyebrows. He was always brushing it back with his fingers. He was an environmental lawyer, a pleasant, cheerful guy, really bright, impossible not to like.

That night, Ky had been outvoted in a major decision—unprecedented in PCC history: to become associate members of the Biblical Evangelical Fellowship, a group known as the watchdogs of conservative Evangelical doctrine. He was livid when he came in, sat at our kitchen table, and told us what had happened.

PCC had always welcomed conservatives, but we took some pains not to be pulled into the more neofundamentalist orbit of the religious right. We tended to put adjectives other than *conservative* in front of our evangelical label: *open*, *mainstream*, even *progressive*. The fact that we had women on our council and had even elected a female chair tended to scare away the more fundamentalist folk who visited but never really settled in

long enough to become voting members and swing us back in their direction.

So Ky was shocked, and I even more so, at the news that night, that Nancy—no doubt under Gil’s influence—had introduced a motion to join the Biblical Evangelical Fellowship pseudodenomination. Ky objected and Nancy countered by saying they *needed* to make the move because the BEF offered “confidential in-church consultation” to help churches deal with “doctrinal matters and pastoral issues.” In other words, it was my fault the church needed to take this step. It appeared to Ky that Nancy had already conferred with everyone else on the council except Ky; they were silent, he said, perhaps a little embarrassed, until it came time for a voice vote, when all but Ky said, “Aye.” “This is an organized plan to get you out, Dan,” Ky said, slapping his palm on the table, causing a little tremor among the spoons and forks. “This is wrong. I can’t believe Nancy has become Gil’s puppet.”

At that moment, a surge of fury rose in me, rage about what was happening to me, to Carol, to PCC, and to Nancy—and I took the coffee mug I was cradling in my hands—fortunately it was empty—and I threw it against the wall; it hit with a bang and thudded down onto the vinyl floor. “That idiot!” I shouted, as the mug spun a few times before coming to rest under the edge of the dishwasher. It didn’t even give me the satisfaction of shattering. Only the handle broke off. “God, this is my life they’re jerking around!” I said, half-cursing, half-praying. I stormed out of the kitchen and out the front door and just paced for a minute or so outside on our front porch step, very literally to cool off in the January night air. Gradually my breathing slowed and my hands stopped shaking; beginning to feel cold, I came back in, apologized, picked up the mug and handle, which were still lying on the floor, and sat down again.

Ky and Carol seemed to have been sitting in silence since I left. I broke the silence and recounted how the council had elected Nancy as our chair because she seemed like a peacemaker—gentle, not pushy or opinionated. Deep down, we knew we were growing polarized on our church council, and we hoped she could keep us from splitting apart. We never anticipated how her gentleness would make her vulnerable to her husband’s behind-the-scenes manipulation and pressure. Nancy herself was a pastor’s kid, and I actually felt sorry for her, stuck as she was between her traditionalist husband and her reluctantly progressive pastor. “We elected Nancy, but we got Gil,” Ky Lang said. “This situation is so full of crap.” That’s about as profane as PCC folk get.

He wanted to organize some sort of congregational meeting to stop the process. I was grateful for the sentiment, but I dissuaded him. I was tired of church squabbles. Carol took my hand as I said, “No, Ky. I won’t fight.

I'm just going to quit. I'm sick of this whole business. I'm drained, and if I'm not careful, I'm going to start hating someone." Of course, I knew it was already beyond that.

"No, Dan, you can't quit. Not yet, anyway," he said. "Remember, a lot of us are at PCC because of you. We didn't join a BEF church; we joined a community church that isn't anybody's clone. This is really a hostile takeover. You can't just roll over and play dead. It's not fair that the majority of us who love your leadership should suffer because of—"

"It's not that simple," I broke in. "It's not like I stayed the same and they changed. They're reacting to changes they've perceived in me. And they're right. I have changed. And I'm not done changing yet. I can't blame them for being alarmed. Even Carol worries about me sometimes." She smiled and squeezed my hand.

"But what do they expect?" Ky asked. "Do they really expect that a pastor comes out of seminary at twenty-six or whatever and has all the answers? Do they really expect a pastor to never change or grow or re-think things? That's so unrealistic. It's worse than that—it's unhealthy. Gosh, when lawyers learn and change, they call it professional development, but when pastors change, they call it . . ." Ky couldn't find the right word, but Carol supplied it: "Heresy."

That launched us into a long discussion about churches, pastors, the spiritual life, and Neil Oliver, whom Ky had also gotten to know. Neil was in his late fifties, about fifteen years older than me. Born in Jamaica and raised in New Jersey, he still carried the delightful accent of the Caribbean. He had left the Episcopal priesthood after a divorce, years before I met him. He never remarried but went back to graduate school (to study philosophy and science, of all things) and eventually became a high school science teacher and girls' soccer coach. His friends began calling him "Neo" back in college, a nickname that was based on his initials. He begged us to stop using the nickname when the *Matrix* movies came out, especially the second and third ones, which, he said, were so bad that "they single-handedly stank up Western civilization, man!" Once he jokingly got down on his knees and said, "Daniel, I'm *kneeling* to beg you to start calling me *Neil!*" But the nickname was a habit none of his friends could completely break, even though we tried.

I once commented to him that the prefix *neo-* meant new, and he had certainly brought new insights to me. He put up his finger and said, "No, Daniel, *neo-* means a renewal of the old—you know: neoclassical, neo-conservative, Neolithic. If I've done anything for you, I've helped you see old things in a fresh way."

As I said, I originally met Neil at a low time in my ministry, back in the late '90s, when I was thinking about quitting. As a former clergyman him-

self, he understood my predicament and became my guide and friend as I went through a deep rethinking of my faith. Among other things, he helped me understand how faith must engage with the culture in which it finds itself but how it can become so excessively enmeshed with that culture that its power is neutralized—actually, *neutered* was his word. If a faith becomes enmeshed, not just engaged, with a culture, Neil said, people hardly notice—until a wave of cultural change hits. Then, when people want to move on from that fading culture, when they want to be part of the new wave, they feel they must leave behind their faith as well. Their only alternative is to try to disengage their faith from the fading culture, but this is one of the most painful things a person can do—mentally painful, spiritually painful, he said. In times of profound cultural change, he explained—such as our current transition from a modern colonial culture, with its emphasis on rational certainty and conquest and control, to a postmodern and postcolonial culture, which distrusts rational certainty because of the violence that confident people have inflicted on others in their striving to conquer and control them. In times like these, people, thousands at the same time, face this agonizing task of disengaging their faith from the culture it has grown with, like two trees whose roots are intertwined. The transition isn't easy for anyone, but it's especially hard for leaders.

For me, this meant I had to figure out which parts of my faith I needed to uproot, or *disembed*, as he put it, from modern culture and colonial thought patterns so that they could reroot in the new “soil” of the emerging postmodern world. At first, I had hoped that Neil could show me some kind of rootless faith that hovered timeless and pristine above any cultural engagement, but he told me that such a faith didn't exist.

“From beginning to end,” he said to me one day that first fall when we met, “our faith is *situated*. It's an unfolding story, and every story requires a setting. It's news—and not just news that happened but news that's still happening, and that means it requires a context. It's an ongoing movement and message that always take place in a medium. It's all about incarnation—about God entering and embracing our story. So if you want to abandon the story, if you want to get out of time and culture and into some timeless neutral zone above the fray, you're trying to get out of the very thing God is deeply into. Maybe some other religion or philosophy can deal with timelessness, but not real Christianity. It's forever timely, not timeless.” The difference between the two wasn't immediately clear to me, but as time went on, I found the distinction quite significant.

Neil's impromptu lectures—which he could launch into at a moment's notice—tended to leave my head spinning. Sometimes they bordered on annoying, unless you realize he's an educator not just by profession but in his soul. It's not something he can turn off.

Over the previous eighteen months or so, through some intense experiences I've written about elsewhere, Neil had helped me rediscover my faith not as a set of doctrines or an outline of propositions but rather as a story that he liked to call "the story we find ourselves in." We don't just hear the story or believe it, he said, but it *enters* us, and we *enter* it: "The story of your life is taken up into this larger story, so you inhabit it, become part of it, experience it, and extend it," he said. "It becomes your way of life, your life story." This story-oriented approach (*narrative*, he called it) to Christian faith had taken root in me and was transforming my whole understanding of what it meant to be a Christian—and a Christian pastor.

These changes in my thinking meant that I had a choice: to hide them from my congregation or to figure out how to express them, communicate them. I had chosen to be more overt than covert, knowing that it was a little risky for a "play it safe" guy like me in a setting like mine: my congregation by and large preferred the standard mainstream way of thinking, which Neil disparagingly called "radio orthodoxy," since it was bolstered by religious broadcasting.

This gradual but real transformation in my theology had been intriguing to many people in my congregation—among them Ky Lee and his Salvadoran wife, Leticia (typical of people in our D.C. area, also a lawyer). But to others—a majority or a minority, I never knew—my ongoing transformation was scary, unsettling. For people like Gil (an engineer, not a lawyer), faith was meant to be solid, bolted down tight, static, secured; in the midst of a turbulent world, it was one unchanging reference point, something from the past that we keep going back to, a place to escape the chaos. Christianity was a Sousa march, completely charted, with a strong downbeat, great for military maneuvers, not jazz, with all its swing and syncopation and improvisation and blues notes.

Ky, Carol, and I sat at the kitchen table, recounting what had brought us to this point. Then the conversation reached a lull, broken after a minute or so by Carol: "So Dan, Gil thinks you're skiing down the 'slippery slope' of the left, so he wants to jerk the congregation to the right through the BEF, as if there's no slippery slope on that side of the mountain. Here comes the chaos."

"Yes," Ky replied, shaking his head sadly but smiling at the same time. "I never liked the slippery slope analogy anyway. To me, we're starting at the bottom of the mountain, not the top. Dan's not sliding: he's trying to climb. Oh, well. Inquisitions happen."

Carol said, "Ky, do you think there's any hope? Maybe Dan *should* just resign now and not waste any more time. I reckon you're taking a lot of heat for being Dan's advocate."

“No, Carol, please don’t think that. You’re right—I think some of the council members are hoping that if the process drags on long enough that you’ll . . . that you’ll get the message and start looking elsewhere. Nobody has said that, but this thing is progressing at a slug’s pace, and the lack of urgency tells me a lot, and then, of course, this BEF thing is a really big load of crap. But so many people in the church—not council members but people at the heart and soul of PCC—they’re calling me and telling me they want you back. We’ve got to think about them. I’m certain that Gil’s faction is a small minority—less than twenty percent. The only problem is that the twenty percent might include ninety percent of the council. But please, don’t give up. Not yet. Not yet.” With that, Ky got up, gave us both a hug, and put on his coat. At the door, he added, “I think two opposite things are happening at once. Some people are opening up, moving beyond old ways of thinking, asking new questions. They’re restless, and they have hope that there are new and better answers out there. At the same time, a lot of people are tightening up, entrenching, backing into old corners where they feel safe. I guess that kind of drama is playing out all over the place.”

“Including here,” Carol said. “Now you drive carefully.” Ky gave us each a hug and ventured outside. It was snowing again.

Our conversation lingered in my thoughts. I reflected on it in my journal later that night before going to sleep:

Lord, shouldn’t faith be a way *through* the chaos, something calling us forward into the chaos, not back into some safe zone behind it? Shouldn’t faith give us courage to climb the mountain, even though the climb is hard? Faith should be a dynamic force in the midst of the turbulence. It beckons, calls, guides us through the turbulence, toward something ahead of us and above us, calling us higher up and deeper in and farther on into the ongoing adventure of life. Faith keeps us from turning back or digging in or giving up or breaking down. This is what your whole message seems to be about: a dynamic revolutionary force in history called “the Kingdom of God.” It is always “at hand,” always available, always coming to us from the future, always keeping us moving onward, straining forward, leaning, reaching, stretching ahead to touch it, receive it, enter it. So I face this chaos and seek to keep faith and climb. But tonight it is hard, very hard. And hate is crouching in the shadows, stalking me. God help me.