

**Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation**

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25 April 2008

It was sudden. My mother passed away this summer at the age of 59. This weekend, my father and I were discussing my mother's birthday, which was last Friday. As we spoke on the phone, we talked about what we did that day to remember her. I told him that I had gone to lunch with my best of friends, and that in the morning, I had handwritten a list of quirky little things I remembered: the Barney purple sweatpants she wore when she loafing around the house, the smell of her exotic cooking permeating all things we owned, the way she always choked on hot sauce but never learned and always took more, the way she'd leave the room while having a conversation with you, and come back expecting to know what she'd been talking about. The way her dry, always crackled lips hit my cheek when I'd leave the house. And when I'd come back, she was always there.

Those little things remind me of her. She is omnipresent. In my heart. In my mind. In the little things. She is still a soft whisper to my ear.

As people of faith, as human beings, we believe in God for a multitude of reasons. For me, God exists within the unexplained, the wondrous, the little things that affect our lives, the soft whispers that boom like welcome thunderstorm in our souls. God is a mystery. I ask myself, does He exist? And I think it's a valid question. I ask myself, what does this book tell me? And to tell you the truth, I have never trusted it. It reads like an over-bloated movie. As a moral guide, I feel it to be a bit dated, if you will. Let's remake it. Everybody's doing it! But this message is not about me, it's about us. It's about what connects us. God's mystery lies in those connections, those unexplainable yet wonderful happenings in our lives.

The other day, I was walking towards the GSC. I was walking slowly, it was nice out. I was in the process of opening up a Mr. Goodbar...you know, the Hershey's chocolate bite with nuts in it. And a squirrel stopped me dead in my tracks. It just stood there on hind legs, proud and hungry. And it was just us. I took a bit of the Goodbar and then knelt to the ground and held out my hand.

The squirrel, carefully but also with surprising determination, plucked the Goodbar out my hand. I was stunned. And didn't run away. It ran a few feet off, and then turned back to look at me. I didn't read much into it. Was it thanking me? Or was it saying "I know I'm cute" or "Fell for it again, human!" I don't know, but it was a moment that I will remember. Why did it happen? God is mystery. If you'd like to share anymore Close Encounters of the Rodent Kind stories after chapel, I'll be lingering by the Chapel Wine Room.

The Christmas of 2002. One of the defining moments in my faith journey. We were in Raleigh, North Carolina. My father and his best friend were liquored up on cheap Scotch, and my mother and my dad's best friend's wife were talking politics, and disagreeing vehemently

with each other. We all hopped in the car, and went to a midnight Christmas Eve service. It was one of those nights where the snowfall was thick but gentle, as if God was in some sort of pillow fight up there.

The service was small, but those who showed up sang up a storm. Those who know me know that I like to sing loudly in church, and I was sitting by a tall, fat, blind black man. And he had the voice of Pavarotti...puttin' the two together... when we sang JOY TO THE WORLD, the roof was lifted off that church.

When the service was done, everybody started filing back to the parking lot. As I stepped outside and the feathery snow surrounded my body, I suddenly felt like singing again. I straightened my head, and took a deep breath, and then: HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING! And then I stopped. And across in the parking lot, the tall, fat, blind black man responded: GLORY TO THE NEWBORN KING! And then we combined, and he took harmony: PEACE ON EARTH AND MERCY MILD, GOD AND SINNERS RECONCILED! And we started laughing. And I yelled "Merry Christmas, Sir!" And he replied "Merry Christmas and Peace on Earth, Son!" It was like my Tiny Tim moment. And I thought, YOU are mystery.

We've all had events that shape our lives, that affirm something vital within our soul. A reassurance. When Elijah was alone in that cave, cowering by a rock, disappointed at the world that was violent and negative. He was hiding. And when there was a wind, and an earthquake, and a fire, there was nothing. But the little thing, the soft whisper in the silence, was the voice of God. And Elijah knew that everything was going to be okay.

We may lose faith in ourselves and in our world when the worst happens, to us or to anybody. And it's not those big events in our lives that touch us. It is the soft whisper of a hungry squirrel or a tall, fat, blind black man.

I look at our world, the war, the poverty, the disease, the sadness, the madness, and I don't see God in those things. And I have a hard time seeing God in death. We say it's natural. We say there's Heaven. But death sucks. It's not little, it's big. It's a door slamming in the wind. It's a bang! And it hurts, and for me, it made me reevaluate my faith. When my mother died, God was the LAST thing I turned to. I didn't understand why he'd take a person that was so full of life, and then just chopped her down. Why? I feel like a Weeping Willow without a lake; a dog without anybody to companion; something's missing and something will always be missing.

But recently as I reflect on my mother and her life, I know God was there when she died and He's here now, and no matter how much I think I should still hate Him, I can't turn Him away. All those little things, those personal moments we love or that sometime annoy us. They are a soft whisper, and part of God's enigma. I remember the little things about my mother...the quirks... and they reaffirm my faith in something good, my faith in love and in community, and kind acts towards others. And no matter how I may falter, and trust me we do, that's how I try to live. That's what I know. Elijah found hope in a whisper; so keep listening... It's there, all around you, and whatever it is, it's a good thing. It is a good thing. Amen.

