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Theme Essay by Jeremiah Horrigan

A Journalist's Search for His *Karass*

There was a time when I could hardly imagine a world without faith. It was something I took for granted, like blizzards in my hometown of Buffalo, New York.

Buffalo was my hometown only in the strictest sense of the word. I grew up in a place that didn't exist on any municipal map. I grew up in a parish. St. Martin's Parish. The Catholic faith, as it was practiced, understood, misunderstood, and enforced in the late 1950s and early '60s, was my daily bread.

I sometimes describe St. Martin's as a Catholic ghetto—all-white, working-class, first- and second-generation Irish, Italians, Poles, and a few Germans, the sons and daughters of World War II vets who built the suburbs if only to provide a place to raise all the babies that boomed from a dearth of contraception and an abundance of Papal edicts.

I loved growing up in a neighborhood crawling with kids living in newly built two-story wood-frames, cottages, and Cape Cods on streets that had been laid out with geometric precision, every curbside plot of grass planted with an American elm.

It was under those elms I would run at dawn, half afraid of the winter's dark, my pure-white altar boy's surplice snapping in the wind on a wire coat hanger slung over my shoulder. In five minutes, I'd have slipped into the church sacristy, donned a black cassock, stuck my head and arms inside the surplice, lined up with three other boys my age, blessed myself, and, at a nod from the priest, rung the bell that would begin my day with words as ripe with mystery as the Mass itself:

"Dominus Vobiscum," the priest would say.

"Et cum spiritu tuo," I would answer.

Growing up Catholic, in a community of faith saturated in mystery and ritual and the promise of eternal life, was as close to heaven as I ever expect to get.

God Almighty, it was great while it lasted.



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Faith is a word I use sparingly, some fifty years after my altar boy days. It's not a word you often hear on the lips of smart, sophisticated people. But I've found that the more I write about things that matter to me, the more I yearn to regain that faith, in what I'd call its original form.

The faith I grew up in was a place provided me by the Church. Within its confines, I could look out on the world around me and feel safe. These days, faith still feels like a safe harbor. But the safety I seek is not that of walling myself within the confines of doctrine. Rather than gazing outward at an "unsafe" world, I want to participate fully *in* the world. Attaining such faith is a lifelong process, yet it feels more necessary than it ever did when I was a kid.

Back when I started my career in journalism, in the wake of the Watergate revelations, I thought I'd found that harbor. I came to journalism thinking I'd bring understanding to chronic problems. Expose wrongdoing. See justice done. After all, hadn't journalists just brought down a crooked president?

Turned out, as more than one editor had to remind me, journalism was a job. It had everything to do with other people's stories and next to nothing to do with my own.

"Who cares what you think?" was one guy's way of telling me to cut the romanticism.

The answer was "I care," although I never answered that question aloud. But I've always believed that I would one day prove to myself that what I cared about could also be of interest, even of value, to others. And I found the means to do

so in the writings of a forgotten teacher whose messenger is revered among believers and nonbelievers alike.

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Lionel Boyd Johnson, otherwise known as Bokonon, divvied up humanity in a way I recognized. He said humans were organized into teams that do God's will without ever discovering what they are doing. He called each such team a *karass*.

"If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reasons," he wrote, "that person may be a member of your karass."

Readers who know *Cat's Cradle*, a book that took root in me in the mid-1970s, will recognize Kurt Vonnegut's hilarious and still-timely creation. A karass ignores every national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundary. It is, Bokonon liked to say, as freeform as an amoeba.