

## Advent Reappraisal, 2023: Excerpts from my 'religious' memoir, 'Lapsed Agnostic', (2008)

*John Waters*



**Bernard Hill as Yosser Hughes**

*Yosser, beaten now, finds himself in a confessional facing, of all things at such a moment, a trendy priest. His children, about to be taken away into care, giggle in the background. He has arrived at the last refuge of the bewildered in an attempt to find words for his situation, but is doomed to remain on his own narrow waveband. The priest is more concerned with putting him at ease, requesting that he drop the formalities. 'Don't worry about the "Father," he says, with blinding irony. 'I'm desperate, Father,' says Yosser, as he looks beseechingly into the priest's eyes.*

*Priest: 'Call me Dan. Dan.'*

*Yosser: 'I'm desperate, Dan.'*

*Yosser, caught between laughter and despair, headbutts the partition between himself and the priest. A crucifix falls on his head. The scene ends.*

**The moment I began to understand what prayer is** could hardly have been less holy, at least in the conventional sense. As a pious child I would have retreated from it, horrified. Even now I found myself torn between revulsion and a kind of wonder.

I was sitting in a room, listening to a man talking about his daily prayers. It was a large room, filled in that south side Dublin lunchtime with an assortment of human beings, the majority of whom were men. They were listening attentively to the speaker, a man in his early fifties.

The speaker was at pains to make clear that he did not believe in God. Let us call him 'Pete.' He was talking about 'the God thing.' His story in this respect was not unlike mine. He had been, or imagined he had been, an intense believer as a child, but had turned away in adulthood to pursue a more earthly flightpath. He too had taken to drink as a way of camouflaging his social awkwardness. He related a litany of atrocities much more spectacular than mine. And then he got to the point of transformation, his encountering of Alcoholics Anonymous and, broken beyond rebellion, his embrace of its programme for sobriety.

The God Bit, he said, had always caused him difficulty. He wanted to believe, but couldn't. Believing would have made his life simple, but his scepticism was too great. He was a film-maker, clearly well read and widely travelled. He talked about the values of the sixties revolution, his love of rock 'n' roll, his sense that God was part of the establishment. He had been brought up in the Catholic Church but had rejected it outright. He couldn't see himself ever going back. At this point I may have yawned at the familiarity of the story.

And yet, he said, he prayed every day.

I watched and listened to him carefully from the moment he said this. He was older than I then was, perhaps by a decade or so. His hair was short, but had the appearance of having been shorn under something of a protest. There are men who look comfortable with short hair and men who, no matter how they try to disguise it, communicate a wildness of spirit from underneath the severest of GI haircuts. He had a full head of hair which betrayed a hint of chestnut dye. There were bits sticking out, as though in a hurry to grow again. He wore a leather jacket and had a pair of shades hanging from the v of his open-necked shirt. I fancied I recognised him as a near stereotypical child of the flower power generation, and this was pretty much the gist of his self-description. But then he described himself getting down on his knees every morning and every night. This is what he had been told to do, he said, in spite of his unbelief. In order to overcome his alcoholism, he elaborated, 'they' had told him that he had to hand his will and his life over to a Power greater than Pete. He hadn't accepted this, still less understood it. In fact, he had rejected it with every bone in his body. How could he hand his will and his life over to someone or something that didn't exist? Because, they said, he had no choice: alcohol had beaten him, and, for as long as he remained alone and isolated, it would return, perhaps eventually to kill him. 'They' told him that he could choose anything that suited him to represent the Higher Power. He could choose the group to which he belonged and to which he was now speaking. He could choose his dead father. He could choose the lightbulb dangling over his head. But, if he was ever to achieve peace from the demons in his soul, he would have to find something on to which to unburden some of the responsibility for his daily existence. 'They' talked to him about their understanding of God, which they called 'God as we understand Him.' The trouble was, said Pete, that he didn't understand God hardly at all, and the bits he did understand he regarded with fear and loathing. Then, one of 'them' had suggested: 'Fake it till you make it': pretend that you believe in God, act as if you do, and note what happens. Think of yourself as a child again, helpless before reality, and go through the motions of asking for divine help. And this might work? he had asked them, incredulously. Yes, they said, it will work well enough to get you to the next stage. And what, he wondered, was 'the next stage'? Believing, they said. And after that? Calling what you believe in 'God,' they explained.

He had found this wildly implausible but still he had done as they said. Except that he had never quite made it to the next stage. He was stuck, he thought, halfway between unbelief and belief. He prayed every morning and every night to a God he didn't believe in. He found it useful but couldn't overcome what he called his 'rational' impulse.

Then he proposed that he would share with the group the nature of this paradoxical prayer. He paused as though waiting for acquiescence, a moment of something that might have been taken for reverence. 'God,' Pete's prayer began. 'You bollox.' The room went

pale. 'If you exist, which you clearly don't, get your finger out and give me a dig-out today. Amen.'

Several people in the room laughed raucously, others giggled nervously, and not a few looked horrified or disgusted. I was shocked, less by what Pete had said than his willingness to say it out like that in front of a mixed group of people. I didn't know how I should react. Laughter didn't seem the right response, not because what he had said was verging on the sacriligious, but because I gathered from his demeanour that he was trying to get to something beyond humour or sensation.

Then Pete told how, although sceptical to begin with, he had found these 'prayers' to be effective, He didn't quite know how or even if there was a direct connection, but from about the time he started to get down on his knees twice a day and utter this — to my ears, blasphemous — ejaculation, his life had gotten better. Even as I was thinking that Pete had uttered a blasphemy, I was aware of the intrinsic ludicrousness of the thought: How can you blaspheme against a God that doesn't exist? But perhaps it struck me — I don't recall now — that this was no more intrinsically ludicrous than the idea of being helped by the same non-existent God he didn't believe in. I was also taken by the fact that, although Pete was doing something that contradicted his 'rational' impulse and had found it to work, his 'rational' impulse had remained, at a conscious level at least, resistant to the idea that what was happening might, by virtue of its success, have acquired the right to a 'rational' status of its own.

Pete went on to outline in detail the complex mechanism by which he initially managed to get himself onto his knees. This had been an important part of it, he said. Every fibre of his being, he recalled, had at first rejected the idea. His very limbs revolted at assuming a posture which implied, for him, subservience, weakness and domination. His knees would not bend for prayer. But 'they' had an answer for this as well: He should throw one of his shoes under the bed so he had to get on his knees to retrieve it, and while he was down there he should say a prayer or two. I laughed out loud at this, but thought it strange that nobody else did. Later I came to realise that this was because it was a line that the rest of the group would have heard many times before.

I listened to Pete as he went on to emphasise that he still didn't believe. He had found that what 'they' had told him was true: His life had begun to get better and it seemed, as though by what he would have regarded as coincidence, to have started to change from the time he began again to pray in this outrageous manner. His life became more manageable, The compulsion to drink disappeared. He was happier than he had been for a long time. But still he could not overcome many years of prejudice and scepticism. Moreover, the piety of religion scared the life out of him. If there was a God, which he again emphasised that there wasn't, he fancied such a Being would be able to tolerate a little jocular abuse. Maybe, he concluded, one day he would arrive at the pearly gates to discover that the God of his childhood actually existed, and was just as humourless and power-hungry as he had been led to believe. But he would continue to

take his chances. It didn't worry him all that much.

When people ask me if I am religious, I almost always say no. I anticipate what I think they mean by that and decide either that saying Yes will give them a false impression, if it doesn't altogether close down their sense of who I am, or that, in the sense that they mean, I am not religious at all. These alternatives appear to amount to the same thing, but they don't quite. In one case I am anticipating prejudice, in the other misunderstanding.

If someone asks me if I believe in God, it becomes a little simpler, though not much. I always say Yes to this question, but generally tend to be less definite when answering an Irish person, even, perhaps especially, a Catholic cleric. With foreigners, including Catholic foreigners, I say Yes and then go on to explain the precise nature of my belief. With Irish people I am more circumspect. If the questioner is someone I recognise as a 'traditional' Irish Catholic, I may equivocate a little for fear of implying a fellow-feeling that, in truth, fills me with a subtle form of unease. It is nothing personal, just the accumulated effect of several decades of conditioning and reaction. If I am talking to an Irish secularist, atheist or agnostic, I may pronounce the Yes with more certainty, but only for bravado. The only people I am completely happy discussing God with is other members of AA or, latterly, members of Communion and Liberation, an odd and interesting Catholic organisation founded in Italy in the 1950s by Father Luigi Giussani, which brought itself to my notice a couple of years ago and continues to intrigue me. With AA members, in particular, I find a common sense of the purpose and meaning of words. In AA, it doesn't matter if someone remains an atheist or agnostic, which, in spite of everything, many members of the fellowship do. There are so many levels of understanding in AA as to the meanings of words like 'God,' 'spirit,' 'faith' and 'morality' that conversations between alcoholics tend to be looser, less prescriptive than conversations in the outside world. AA members may not agree about the final meaning of things, but they have a guaranteed mutuality of understanding in respect of both the context and purpose of the language associated with God.

My faith, such as it is, is new and raw. It is not something I can wave about because it is fragile, tentative and full of doubt. It is not a faith I have received from anyone or anywhere but one forged in the white heat of my own experience. It is mine alone, like my nose.

If faith depended on holiness, I would be damned. The idea that I have a faith or a religious dimension has no obvious implications for my personality, at least not in any of the ways that it would be expected to have in the conventional understandings of what is, to a large extent, a post-Catholic Ireland. I swear, I try to evade paying at parking meters and look around at beautiful women in the street as much as I ever did, possibly more.

Concepts such as that one 'believes,' 'is a believer,' has 'the faith,' has 'returned to the faith,' 'goes to Mass,' and other related notions, all

have gradated meanings in the culture of modern Ireland. Each is pregnant with meaning and, upon delivery in respect of an individual, immediately begins the writing of a cultural profile which hardens like concrete and can be revised with the greatest of difficulty. People who believe but want to avoid this tend to use evasive phraseology, such as 'I'm a spiritual person,' which means nothing and everything, and, because it has acquired such common usage, is rapidly becoming just as limiting as any of the old terminologies.

What I am, religiously speaking, is not just difficult to pin down — it is positively dangerous to articulate. I believe in God, though not necessarily all the time. It's not that I any longer have the immediate necessity to believe in order to save me from the lash of alcohol, but that my experiences in that regard have alerted me to something I previously had no insight into. My belief is therefore a choice I make, indeed remake all the time, rather than something I have been told is right or good for me, though one of my few certainties in this regard is that it is overwhelmingly a good thing. I don't know what this God of mine looks like, though sometimes I realise that, at the back of my mind, I have an image of an old man with a bald crown and long white hair. I don't worry about the patent absurdity of this, because I know my mind needs stuff to build with. I'm also reminded of the belief in AA that a journey back from agnosticism will almost inevitably take you back to where you started, to the faith of your childhood.

A strange thing: After I began to edge my way back to belief, it was with God the Father that I found the greatest ease. One of the amazing pieces of advice handed around in AA, for example, is that when you have to face an ordeal of some kind — for example a court case or a job interview — you should pause at the door before entering the dreaded building or room, stand back momentarily to invite God as You Understand Him to enter the room before you. I know how ridiculous it sounds. The reason alcoholics have found themselves able to try these bizarre strategies is because they have arrived at a place where, knowing what it is like to have nothing much to lose, they find themselves regaining things they imagined they'd lost forever. Having clawed your way out of the gutter, opening the door for God seems like a small price to pay for the return of your life and dignity.

I have given a great deal of thought to the fact that, even yet, it is God the Father I see, rather than His Son. Even though, in theory, Jesus would seem like the perfect companion with whom to develop a fourth-dimensional relationship, I resisted Him for several years, perhaps because His very name is burdened with so much baggage that I'm not sure I can extricate him from the cultural left-luggage department. I am only now beginning to encounter, as though for the first time, the utterly staggering dimensions of His earthly life story, to grapple with the idea that, just once in history, God came among us to tell us that everything would be alright. I am only beginning to glimpse the possibility that this story may answer my most fundamental questions in the way nothing else has ever done.

I know almost nothing of theology. What I believe, most fundamentally, is that I know as much about God as anyone who has ever

drawn breath. Why? Because I was born charged with the question whose answer juts deep into Mystery. Because I am part of this Mystery. Because I am awe-stricken by the wonder of the world. Because I did not make a molecule of myself. Because I do not know anything and the more I learn the less I seem to understand, which is to say the more I advance into the Mystery. 'Only the hypothesis of God,' wrote Father Luigi Giussani in his brilliant book, *The Religious Sense*, 'only the affirmation of the mystery as a reality existing beyond our capacity to fathom entirely, only this hypothesis corresponds to the human person's original structure. If it is human nature to indomitably search for an answer, if the structure of a human being is, the, this irresistible and inexhaustible question, plea — then one suppresses the question if one does not admit to the existence of an answer. But this answer cannot be anything but unfathomable. Only the existence of the mystery suits the structure of the human person, which is mendicancy, insatiable begging, and what corresponds to him is neither he himself nor something he gives to himself, measures or possesses.' This, for me, was a startling concept: that the appetite for God was not only part of my essential structure as a human being, but that the elemental nature of this structure was that it could not be satisfied by anything other than God. My thirsting, therefore, had been an expression both of the insatiability of my human appetites when directed at earthly things and of my deep need for this one thing that could quench it.

The Mystery informs my life, and without the Mystery that life has no meaning. Even when I deny the Mystery, it impels me in spite of myself. All my longings are ultimately directed at this Mystery, and anything else I seek to settle these longings on will turn to dust. Nothing of earthly life should be allowed to settle, to form itself into an ultimate meaning, because this will kill both the thing in question and the spirit I invest in it. Only by acknowledging the unknowable can I remain alive — but not, as I was told, because it is my duty to pay homage to the God Who Made Me, but because the unknowable is where my home is, where I come from, and where I am returning to. I am of the unknowable and, therefore, in denying God I deny myself.

From time to time I have found myself in the throes of some intense emotion and being baffled by both the enormity and the disproportionality of it. It might be disappointment over lost love, or sadness, or fear, but when I try to equate the dimensions of it with its object, there usually seems to be this mismatch of cause and effect. It is as though there is something missing, something behind the feeling that comes from somewhere else. I read in Father Giussani's wonderful book that sadness — for instance — is 'a spark which is generated by the lived "potential difference" (to use an electrical term) between the ideal destination and its historical unfulfillment. To be aware of the value of such sadness is to be conscious 'of the greatness of life and to intuit life's destiny.'

I have come some distance but am only really beginning a journey that will, I am certain, have no ending. The further I advance, the more space I open up before me.

In the beginning, as Pete had advised, I faked it. I acted out the ritual of belief, getting down on my knees each morning and night, asking for help, summoning the presence of a Being I didn't believe in to help me in whatever way He felt appropriate. But I took careful note of the outcomes, which I found to be remarkably counter-intuitive.

For a start I found that my prayers were answered. One of the complaints I'd had about God when I was a child was that He never did what I asked of Him. This had contributed in no small part to my sense of religion as a meaningless husk, a miserable pretence that added the misery of solemnity to life's staple stock of hardship and calamity. But someone in AA suggested to me that my prayers should, ideally, limit themselves to one word: 'Help!' My childhood prayers had themselves carried the essence of my erroneous understanding of God and my own burgeoning desire to take His place in my life. If I avoided being prescriptive, I was advised, God would respond with a solution that would defy my own modest capacities to untangle my problems. It seemed implausible but I tried it anyway. Time and again, it worked. Whenever I encountered an intractable problem or an insoluble fear, instead of working out the solution I wanted, and then asking God to support it, I would simply surrender and ask to be rescued. And rescued I would be.

Getting down on my knees seemed an important part of it. At the beginning, I resisted this with all my mind and heart. The idea of making myself subservient to any other being, even a Supreme Being, filled me with distaste. Why should I bow and scrape before the Almighty? Even if He did exist, why couldn't we just sit down together and have a man-to-man conversation? Perhaps from His point of view, we could do this, and perhaps for some people this is the way to do it. But in my experience, the act of getting to my knees was a profoundly important part of the process, which was fundamentally about me rather than to the Being I was addressing. .

I had been bringing to the occasion of my prayers a set of prejudices born of the onset of agnosticism, more than twenty years earlier, focusing on the idea of a surrender to a vain and capricious God who needed to have me bowing and scraping before Him before he would condescend to help me. It was something I heard at an AA meeting that caused me to turn it around. A man was talking, again, about prayer, and how he achieved it. 'The only proper posture for a human being in relation to his God,' he said, 'is on his knees.' It would have been easy to hear this in an old way, but something in his appearance or demeanour struck a chord of recognition. Again, he did not strike me as a Holy Joe. What he was seeking to articulate seemed to go deeper than the conventional pieties I had grown up with. I asked him about it after the meeting and he briefly regarded the intensity of my question with the amusement of recognition. 'Kneeling down isn't primarily about God,' he said. 'It's about you. You need to kneel in order to understand your relationship to reality.' It was a mind-blowing idea. I didn't need to hear any more but wanted to go home immediately and start trying it out. That what? That the source of All Power in the universe could become available to me, but only if I began to acknowledge my own



smallness. *Woh!* I began to pray with this in mind. That I was nothing, or almost nothing, and yet a part of Everything. That the meaning of my getting down on my knees had to do not with a crude idea of adoration, but with dramatising the nature of my relationship with Everything. That out of a willingness to acknowledge abject powerlessness might emerge a connection to the Source of All Power. It was the most sensational thing I had ever heard in my life, and I was certain that I was hearing it for the first time. After that, I began to focus not on my position but on the process I was engaged in. There was something exhilarating about it, if only, in the beginning, its novelty after two decades of refusal. I was intoxicated by the idea that I could change myself in this fundamental way. But then it struck me that the most salient element of this change was that I was adopting a posture in which it was implicit that I was no longer the one in charge. The act of getting on my knees was symbolic of a new relationship with the world, in which I accepted my relative insignificance. I was abdicating from the throne I had stolen from God.

At first I did it reluctantly. I never had to descend to the recommended strategy of throwing a shoe under the bed, but there was, for a long time, a stiffness in my joints that did not come from any physical condition. But then things began to change. First I stopped worrying about the subservience suggested by my posture. So what? I asked myself. Nobody could see me. Then I began to feel in my 'subservience' a sense of freedom.

At first I didn't really think about myself as adoring a Superior Being. I thought of myself as engaging in a dialogue with Something or Someone that could help me. The kneeling bit became, in the initial stages, simply a way of marking the occasion out from other activities. I knelt to pray in the same way that I sat down to have breakfast or lay down to sleep. It began to suggest itself as important for me to have this different posture, if only to distinguish the procedure and mark it as having at least as much significance as eating and sleeping. It was some time before I was able to understand it in a different way, but eventually I began to feel that the kneeling posture was less about God than about me.

From then, it seemed as if the entire world had started to move in a different way. Solutions to seemingly intractable problems would come, not directly in terms of a solution to whatever problematic situation I found myself encountering, but usually out of some extraordinary alteration. The difficulty would simply dissolve, sometimes leaving no logical explanation behind. I would pray as best I could, withholding all prescriptions, I would get on my knees and admit my inability to resolve my difficulties. I would recite stock prayers which I learned by heart, prayers about acceptance and surrender, and would go to bed at night resolving that I had exhausted my personal capacities and had put myself at the mercy of something far, far greater than myself. Always, always, the circumstances would begin to change. It was as though, in prayer, I was prising myself through some chink into the fourth dimension, into an

incrementally enhancing harmony with an invisible, infinite reality. But the invisibility of this reality did not in any way render it spooky or airy-fairy. Experience, time and time again, told me it was there. There appeared to be a logic to it, but not one that I could work out in my head, rather a logic that could only be apprehended by a process of feeling, of intuition. I could feel when it was working and when it was not. Always, too, its failure to work when it did not work had to do with me, with my inability to stop worrying the problem with my limited consciousness. Sometimes, I would be able to predict not the precise outcome but the general configuration of the solution. Some vague sense would arise out of my experience that everything was going to be alright. I would know from the way I felt in advance of the event I'd been in dread of that none of the things I feared would come true. And they would not. The scenes cloistered in the darkest recesses of my negativity would never be played out. Always things would change, sometimes suddenly and shockingly, other times subtly and slowly. After a time, it was as though my intellect had discovered a new form of rationalism, one based not on logic and what seemed plausible, but on the often impossible outcomes of my own experience.

Out of this I intuited several things. That Something undoubtedly existed which I did not understand, beyond luck or coincidence or superstition; that this Something was not far away, up in the sky, or in any other sense remote from my reality, but immersed in that reality, or perhaps immersing it; that this Something might be said to amount to another Reality, one sharing space with the one I was familiar with but adhering to different rules. The logic that revealed itself from the workings of these rules and the behaviour of this different Reality made no sense in terms of the thought-processes of the 'real' world. To try to explain it to someone who wished to remain unreceptive was a fool's errand. To observe it was to manifest two opposing responses even within oneself. One response was that this was utterly unbelievable, that the effects that appeared to emanate from the alleged alternative reality were in fact the consequence of coincidence and nothing more. The other was that this pattern of effects had about it a certain level of irrefutability. It was consistent and consistently logical on its own terms. It seemed to obey some amorphous principles which remained slightly out of the range of rational definition, but which seemed to define themselves nonetheless by virtue of the patterns they repeated. The results became, if not predictable, in a certain sense inevitable. It was possible to tell by the quality of the connection I felt at any particular time with this other Reality how certain and definitive would be the solution to whatever the problem happened to be.

The only requirements concerning my own inputs appeared to be that I asked for help and did whatever I felt was essential in terms of my duty or capability. A principle I heard often in AA rooms showed up to be tested: *If I do God's work, He will do mine*. The corollary of this, it was pointed out to me, was that I should do the things I was able to, and then stand out of God's way. This involved a process of calibration with regard to acquiring some kind of intuitive understanding as to where God's work began and where mine ended. It was not a perfect science — it was prone to error, to underachievement and excess of endeavour. The strange thing is that this hardly

seemed to matter if the intention was right. I don't mean 'right' in some objective catechismal sense, but right in the sense that, at that precise moment, to the best of my ability, it was the best that I could think to do. Intention, honest endeavour and naked pleading appeared to be the only essential elements of any petition in order for that petition to succeed beyond my wildest dreams.

There appeared to be no requirement that my supplications be pious. I could speak to God as though he were from the same culture as myself. I never took to calling Him a bollox, but some of our encounters could be quite robust. I would express impatience, frustration, anger with the apparent unwillingness of the situation to yield to His intervention. Was there some problem? What was He waiting for? Was He losing His touch? Invariably, it would emerge that the solution had already been in train, that the apparent failure of the situation to submit had to do not with a failure or negligence on God's part, but on my inability to let go of my prescriptiveness.

I accept that this will all sound ludicrous and cringe-inducing to rational ears, and axiomatic to everyone else. This is why there's almost no point in saying it, other than saying it. And this is not unimportant, because, at the risk of sounding even more ludicrous, I feel obliged to say that the process works better when you're prepared to bear witness to it. God, it seems, likes those He's helped to advertise His services. I'm just reporting the facts.

During the writing of this chapter, I got an email from a woman who had attended a talk I'd given a short time previously in New York. She described for me an incident which had happened with her the previous weekend, walking with her two little boys along the Boardwalk by the ocean at Coney Island. 'I was so happy, and was looking for another happy face to pass as I strolled along. I thought, surely someone will at least smile at my two beautiful children, sitting side-by-side in their double-stroller. No way. Just one stern face after another. I began to feel very lonely, and I had no other choice but to cry out, "Jesus, please show me your face!" Not even thirty seconds passed when a rather dishevelled man stopped and started waving his hands in front of my children's faces. He said, "This always makes em' laugh. It's no fail." I must admit, if I hadn't asked for it, I might have been a little afraid of the guy. I asked him, "Do you have any children?" He replied: "No, I'm alone in the world. My only son died of a drug overdose in 2002 and then my wife of 41 years died of a broken heart two years later. But you know, the good Lord doesn't want us to go backwards. He wants us to go forwards, so that's what I'm doing!"'

What the woman described is typical of a phenomenon that happens to me almost every day now. I often find that I get a 'sign' or an 'intervention' at moments of importance that are impossible to predict and difficult to pinpoint or analyse. But there is nothing portentous about these moments. They simply happen. They are not like moments in a movie when I am seeking a *deus ex machina* to move my plot along. They are ordinary moments when nothing much is happening. You can come very quickly to take them for granted.

Maybe in a part of your brain, no matter how often it has happened before, you think of it as coincidence, but there is a saying in AA for this also: 'Coincidence is a miracle in which God chooses to remain anonymous.'

In some ways, this woman described a casual moment, in another sense a pivotal one. It was casual in that there was nothing planned or calculated about it. She had not been looking for anything, least of all for herself. She was happy, in touch with reality and yet unburdened by it. But suddenly her spirit was overcome by weariness and loneliness, though mainly for her children. She did not think of asking for anything but merely gave vent to a deep need within her. This, I find, is how it generally happens. In focusing on our daily wants and needs, we forget the deeper need and how much more important it is. Our daily wants and necessities make this need seem all the more acute, but we are not conscious of it. One of the things I have to keep remembering is that, having abdicated from the throne I once occupied as the god of my own existence, I will constantly, if opportunity offers itself, seek to steal back and reinstate myself. Having resigned as the architect of my life, I am constantly seeking to interfere in matters which, strictly speaking, are no longer my responsibility. Then an event occurs which triggers me back into a connection and the feeling overwhelms me, all the more because I have been keeping it at bay. A moment will arise when I am brought beyond my routine struggles and the kinds of calculation and wheedling that tends to emanate from them. Sometimes it will happen when I am content, at harmony. At other moments it will happen at the other extreme of my emotional spectrum. I will reach a kind of 'last straw' or 'rock bottom' moment, triggered perhaps by something that, in my routine mindset, I regard as trivial. I will spill my coffee down my jacket on top of a series of 'misfortunes' that have dragged me back to myself and my self-obsessions. But the training I obtained from AA prompts me not to respond to this added calamity in the predictable way, but instead to use it as a trigger to surrender. So instead of plunging further into the opening vortex of self-pity, I suddenly find myself laughing at the absurdity of my own catastrophising. And then the moment of grace will arrive, prompted by this 'trivial' incident. Of course, it is not trivial at all, but touches on what is truly important. Then, always, the phone will ring or someone will turn up — a 'coincidence' will occur. The 'trivial' has brought me beyond myself and my crude everyday-functional view of reality, into what is vital.

I think of this as my 'Help!' moment — when I get beyond my immediate agendas and desires to a point where I am confronted with a much deeper sense of need in myself. I then utter this one word, 'Help!,' and help always comes. And that 'Help!' is always set off in me by something apparently unconnected to my concerns of the moment — some added imposition, some tiny grain of worry added to what is already on my plate, as though its very triviality is part of the understanding I need to get to. I am presented with a choice: I can worry about this extra trifle or I can remember that there is One who has all Power and that He is available to me at the blink of an eye.

This kind of thing, what I have just outlined, used to make me shudder with embarrassment and unease. How could an intelligent adult think in such a way? The answer: only if experience has shown you that this is a reasonable way to think; only if this kind of thing happens so often in your life that it no longer strikes you as odd. The situation this woman described seemed plausible to me because I had encountered similar moments in my own life, many times in the previous decade. It had in many ways been a difficult decade, largely because of the circumstances surrounding the birth and early life of my daughter, which became a focus of media interest intermittently during the second half of the 1990s. I don't intend to go into it, partly because it is private, partly because it would cause unnecessary pain, and partly because I am prohibited from discussing the details by the in camera rule which applies to all family law matters. Suffice to say that it was a difficult time, in which I awoke on many a morning wishing I could go back to sleep. The overwhelming sense I had in that time was that I had gone to a place beyond human intercession. As many men who become fathers without benefit of marriage were discovering around the same time, I was encountering a culture for which I had no preparation, a system in which the tacit denial of the humanity of single fathers was all but absolute. Those years caused me to question utterly every single value I had absorbed from childhood concerning justice, truth, decency and fairness. Confronting the legal systems of two jurisdictions, I very soon came to realise that there was no earthly place I could go to ask that the truth be vindicated or decency upheld. For a while it seemed to me that there was only me, that I could rely on nothing but myself and my own resources, wherever I might find them.

I call it my Yosser Hughes period, after the legendary character from *The Boys From the Blackstuff*, Alan Bleasdale's epic television drama from 1982. It was assumed at the time that Bleasdale was writing about 'unemployment', but really he was dealing with redundancy, obsolescence, male despair. At the time I first saw the series I didn't think that the character of Yosser, in his long black coat, followed by his three children, reciting his insistent mantra 'Giz a job! I could do tha'!' could ever have anything directly to say to me, but now I found myself thinking of Yosser every day. Yosser was the end of the left-wing illusion, the embodiment of the man who believed that his own essential decency, and the culture of solidarity and social justice which it had tried to create, would be enough to see him through. Having come to manhood in the surge of the Sixties, he was now stranded on the sandbank of his own optimism. Now he was brought face-to-face with the limits of what he believed, the failure, essentially, of right-on thinking.

There is a moment in the series when it is possible to say that the hope of those who believed in fellowship, community and togetherness finally died. Yosser, beaten now, finds himself in a confessional facing, of all things at such a moment, a trendy priest. His children, about to be taken away into care, giggle in the background. He has arrived at the last refuge of the bewildered in an attempt to find words for his situation, but is doomed to remain on his own narrow waveband. The priest is more concerned with putting him at ease,

requesting that he drop the formalities. 'Don't worry about the "Father," he says, with blinding irony. 'I'm desperate, Father,' says Yosser, as he looks beseechingly into the priest's eyes.

Priest: 'Call me Dan. Dan.'

Yosser: 'I'm desperate, Dan.'

Yosser laughs madly and momentarily. He then headbutts the partition between himself and the priest. The scene ends.

It is hard to imagine a more concise or devastating enactment of the despair of a man, or rather a generation of men, caught in the searchlight of their own knowingness, their own cultural cleverality, but unable to save themselves.

For most of the second half of the 1990s, I was the demented guy in the long coat. I had a few friends to whom I talked regularly, but most of the people I'd previously associated with began, whether through embarrassment or a sense of awkwardness with the changing nature of my political demeanour, to avoid me.

In that period, I found myself invoking God as I Understood Him on a daily, often an hourly, basis. I cannot put together a sketch of how it all worked out, but work out it did, and I have not the slightest doubt that it worked out because I stopped trying to run things and invited God to take over. My daughter lives in Ireland now, having been born and brought up for the first three years of her life, in London. She spends half her time with me and not a day goes by when I don't see or speak to her. She is happy in a way that renders mysterious the foggy events of those years when everything seemed so hopeless. How we got to where we got is a mystery to me, but get here we did.

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