

PNBA TALK

There have been times when some of the material in *God Laughs & Plays* was a lot scarier to share with the public than it is here tonight. The post 9-11 patriotic frenzy of 2002 took a lot of us by surprise. I didn't expect ever to write a book like *God Laughs & Plays*. I didn't think I'd ever have to. Here are two stories about the sort of America that changed my mind.

About a year after the Trade Towers fell, my novel *The Brothers K* was selected by the honors college at a major university to be collectively read by all students. I was then asked to come read from and talk about it. I had a large crowd that at first seemed very warm. Because the drums of war were pounding so loudly, I decided to give a cautionary reading that depicted some of the devastations of the Vietnam era, both in the war-zones and stateside. I wasn't flagrant: I read of subtle harms first. The way war separates and ravages young couples in love. The way war screws up the minds of young siblings left at home. The way war fucks up the game of baseball; if it weren't for war, for example, Ted Williams would probably have hit .400 twice. I said not a word about the current situation. I mixed comedy with tragedy. I read stuff audiences had applauded, a few years before. But this was 2002: the Iraq war-supporters in my audience began to shoot out the exits in droves. I was stunned. I read a scene about what it cost the Christian brother in my novel, Irwin Chance, to shoot and kill a Vietnamese man who'd been eating his lunch up in a tree. Because his scriptures said, "Love thine enemies," and "Thou shalt not kill." soldiering devastated Irwin. As I read the scene a middle-aged woman not ten rows in front of me literally squeezed her eyes and mouth shut and plugged her ears so hard with her hands that she was trembling with the effort. A bunch more folks shot out the doors. I was standing in a so-called "liberal" university reading an historical novel about the 60's and 70's in response to an invitation to do just that. Some of my audience was receptive. But much of it was so pumped by the pro-war media blitz, by Donald Rumsfeld's televised maps of Iraq accompanied by his bald-faced, "There are weapons of mass destruction here, and here, and here" that they couldn't wait to see Iraqis killed in revenge for a 9-11 attack for which no Iraqi had been responsible, and for their possession of weapons which they did not in fact possess.

When I was signing books afterward, a young man of impressive size and vehemence placed his fists on the table in front of me, leaned down into my face, and said, "Has anybody ever stood up at one of your readings and told you *you're completely full of shit?*" It took all the courage I had to tell this pumped up young fella that it was my understanding that he and I were both about 78% water, so that 22% full of shit was as full of it as anyone could be. He was no more amused than the people who'd stormed out the exits in response to scenes from a novel that expressed doubts about war, or reflected on its hidden damages. This was bigger than an angry young man and me. I'd recently read Rumsfeld, quoted in the 2002 National Security Strategy document, saying that you don't have enough support from the people for a war, you "use the media and generate it." So it had come to pass. A Bush/Cheney/Pearl/Wolfowitz-driven brainwashing campaign was negating the life's work of Tim O'Brien, Joseph Heller, Leo Tolstoy, Boris Pasternak, Mark Twain, or any of the thousands of other authors who have de-glorified war. I tell you: I felt *lonely* that day. I can't write a better novel than *The Brothers K*. I felt that, all over America, literature and truth-telling were losing, and Fox News and Rumsfeld were winning, the struggle for minds and hearts.

George Bush has no use for literature. The only image I've seen of him reading a book is the photo op children's book he abandoned when 9/11 happened. Bush prefers his religiosity as a source of inspiration for his policy and actions. He says his presidency, his diplomacy of belligerence, his war-making, his blatant earth-destruction, are based on his relationship with his "heavenly Father." It's relevant to mention here that the Bible is literature, and that if the president read it he'd encounter a character named Jesus who says, "Blessed are the peacemakers" and "Consider the lilies of the field." People accuse fundamentalists of being literalists. If only it were so! If the president used literature in even a fundamental way, he'd know a lot can go wrong between a believer and his heavenly Father. That's why Emily Dickenson said: "*They speak of Hallowed Things -- and embarrass my dog.*" It's why Amory Lovins said: "*In God we trust: everyone else, bring data.*" It's why Anne Lamott said: "*The opposite of faith is not doubt: it is certainty.*" It's why the contemporary biblical scholar and my Montana neighbor and penpal, Eugene Peterson, said: "*Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person is convinced that God is ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes. The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing and oppression is staggering.*" It's why John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in the year 1815 and said, "The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or

whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles.”

Fictitious miracles. *Saddam did the Twin Towers and has WMD's here and here and here.* John Adams' priests are now presidents and the kings are corporations, but the question before the human race is the same as in his and Jefferson's day.

Another event that inspired me to write *God Laughs & Plays* involves a writer many of us love. Robin Cody and I both began our careers with coming of age novels in which rivers feature heavily. Both novels did well. Both were later attacked by so-called “conservative Christian” censors. A couple of years ago Robin's *Ricochet River* was removed from high school reading lists in Oregon because its loggers swear and two of its teenagers fall in love, have sex, and worse yet, enjoy it. *No cursing or sex in our high school literature*, demanded the Evangelicals. Again, if they were literal and consistent, that'd be all she wrote for that compendium of cursings and sexual activity, the Holy Bible! Consider King David for godsake.

Having been raised by fundamentalists, it is my ferociously held view that though they are our *neighbors* and relatives and must be loved as such, to allow them to police us is fatal to art, to literature, to culture, and to government. Jesus told the moral police of his day to love and serve their neighbors, not corral them. He repeatedly defied pious edicts and fictitious miracles in order to serve others, ultimately at the cost of his life. He appalled the goody-goodies of his day by hanging out with prostitutes and tavern keepers, healing on the Sabbath, countermanding the “family values”-spouting clergy. And, Jesus aside, Americans of all faiths, and of no particular faith, have died by the thousand and sacrificed by the million to win our freedoms of speech and of literature. If America's literature is to continue to serve -- if it is to generate the accuracy, inspire the imaginative identification of readers with characters, and portray the empathetic catastrophes and breakthroughs that entertain, inspire, and *improve* human nature -- that literature must be based *on our actual natures*. Suppression doesn't cut it. Men still have penises even if fundies ban the word. The disastrous shadow lives of Jimmy Swaggart and Ted Haggart are utterly relevant here.

Our friend Robin, being a gentle soul, chose to work with his censors, clean up his novel, and so keep it in the schools. I'm a different sort of animal. I grew up under the watchful eye of an extremely matriarchal fundamentalist grandmother. I fell in love with novels when I was 16. That love, for me, was salvific. My matriach hated the notion that anybody but Jesus might save anyone, and she was raised in a logging camp where the language had not been sanitized. One day she dropped by the house and saw me seated in the shade of a tree,

lost in a Kazantzakis novel, *St. Francis* as I recall. She hollered, "I'd just as soon see you sitting there masturbating." You don't become a writer, with a matriarch like that, without defiance.

When *The River Why* was censored I wrote an essay in response called "What Fundamentalists Need For Their Salvation." An essay in defense of all of us who love literature. If the enraged man at my *Brothers K* reading is right, every booklover in this room is completely full of shit. An indefatigably Christian lover of nonChristian literature disagreed. C.S. Lewis held that access to uncensored literature is crucial to our spiritual and cultural well-being because humans are not meant to be imprisoned in a single, isolated self -- however pious. "We demand windows," Lewis wrote. "(And) literature is a series of windows, even of doors. Good reading can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. And that is an old paradox; *'he that loseth his life shall save it.'* We therefore delight to enter into other men's beliefs even though we think them untrue, and into their passions though we think them depraved. Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Here -- as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing -- I transcend myself, and am never more myself than when I do."

In 2002 I unknowingly wrote another chapter of *God Laughs & Plays* called "When Compassion Becomes Dissent." This time my motivation was threefold: a defense of literature; a defense of clean water for everyone, everywhere; and a defense of the lives of children, everywhere. The Orion Society published it in a short book with a Wendell Berry essay exposing the viciousness of the 2002 National Security Strategy. The president's approval rating when our book came out was 81%. When we won the American Library Association's 2003 Award for the Preservation of Intellectual Freedom anyway, Wendell and I were heartened to realize the ALA's values are not effected by public opinion polls.

I'm equally heartened this recognition tonight. I have been known to call awards "honorific hoohaw." But this is a book of sermons, and any good sermon -- "churchless" or otherwise -- is only half of a passionate conversation. There is no sense of completion until you hear a response. I am thrilled by this award insofar as it symbolizes the Northwest's book-lovers' response.

The founding fathers' victories are not automatically ours. Franklin, Adams, Jefferson and Paine have been dead a long time. If it's freedom we truly want, we have no choice but to continue to be its founding mothers and fathers. If it's free story-telling we relish, *we ourselves* must keep freeing it. I'll close with two pages of my own small efforts to do so, written during

a recent autumn when merely reading from *The Brothers K* caused me to be defined by certain patriots as “full of shit.” (From the essay “When Compassion Becomes Dissent” in *God Laughs & Plays*):

In 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King may have felt like a minority of one when he spoke up, at the Riverside Church in New York, against the flag-wavers and opinion polls of the day. He still had the courage to say, “A time comes when silence is betrayal. Men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government’s policy, especially in time of war. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness so close around us... We are called upon to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers.”

To abandon the words of Dr. King is to let the bullet kill him a second time. I believe, based on his call, that no matter what happens in the next war with Iraq, we lose. We lose because we already lost. We lost when we flew 110,000 sorties over Iraq in 42 days, dropping 88,500 tons of ordnance, more than in all of World War II, on an unsortable tangle of military installations, palaces, power plants, communications sites, mosques, schools, homes, civilians, soldiers in arms, soldiers in retreat, soldiers in postures of surrender, soldiers too shell-shocked to do anything but stand in the road and accept annihilation. We lost when we characterized our slaughter of the retreating Iraqi army as a “turkey shoot” and the incinerated bodies of fathers and sons as “crispy critters.” We lost when Colin Powell, asked for the number of Iraqi dead produced by this blitzkrieg, responded, “Frankly that’s a number that doesn’t interest me very much.” We lost when the first Bush Administration researched the destruction of Iraq’s water systems, read predictions of mass death to children, and destroyed the systems anyway. We lost when we urged the U.N. to ban chlorine and medicines, witnessed the ensuing epidemics, and refused to ease the sanctions. We lost when we scattered tons of depleted uranium over Iraq that will go on assaulting all life-forms for eons. We lost when we were apprized of studies showing such cancer increases as lymphoma (four-fold) lung (five-fold), breast (six-fold), uterine (nearly ten-fold), skin (eleven-fold), liver (eleven-fold), ovarian (sixteen-fold), but still denied the connection, still make and deploy DU, and in 2003 nixed, by pressuring the U.N., a World Health Organization study of DU in Iraq. We lost when we allocated \$355.5 billion toward more such “defense” activities

in 2003. We will go on losing so long as we go on pretending to prevent evil by inflicting these abysmal “strategies.”

There is no man or woman, no nation, no mortal power on earth capable of quote “ridding the world of evil” as George W. Bush has vowed to do. The desire is preposterous. To act upon preposterousness with vast military might is evil. To acquiesce in such evil is somnolence.

1.25 billion Muslims share this world with us. Bush/Cheney seem to seek their mass conversion to American corporate “values.” I seek, in the face of my own or anyone's failure to live by the Gospels or the Koran, to “make it up so truly,” as Hemingway said, “that later it will happen that way.” I seek to make up and live Dr. King’s and Greg Mortensen’s sense of brotherhood and Nurse Gerri Haynes’ sense of sisterhood with people who surrender five times a day “to the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

To define compassion as dissident does not alter the Compassionate. To define mercy as unpatriotic or nonstrategic does not change the eternally Merciful. Nurse Gerri placing her palms out to the mother of a dying child, that mother falling into her arms, their joined tears--- this is a victory over evil.

The child died even so.

Jesus. Muhammad. Allah. God. Help our “strategists” and “patriots” make up our neighbors more truly.