

Journey of a Young Artist: The Seeds of “The Mystery of Art” (Jonathan Jackson)

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Whoever wants to become a Christian, must first become a poet. —

Saint Porphyrios

*When I was young, they brought me to Babylon
And the night hung over my head
The smoke came into my dreams
In the valley of dry bones*

*It was under the skies of Babylon
Where my soul fell in love with God
My eyes were seared and my blood was bruised
But I was hidden within a song*

*All around were the sounds of Babylon
But all I heard, were the hymns of heaven*

*It was under the skies of Babylon
Where my soul fell in love with her
I was barely coming clean and she had already seen
A war on her innocence*

*I spoke of the Christ underneath the clouds
And woke her from the sleep of death*

*She took my hand and walked me through the crowd
Why, is anybody's guess?*

*All around, was the gold of Babylon
But all I saw, was an angel of heaven*

*You can shut me up but you cannot quiet
The silence of the Mystic Church*

*You can shut me up but you cannot quiet
The silence of the Mystic Church*



I would like to start with the journey of how this book, “The Mystery of Art” began. It was not an intellectual or abstract search. The questions and explorations on this subject were immediate and crucial for me growing up. I began working as a professional actor at the age of 11 on General Hospital. At The age of 12, by God’s grace I had a profound encounter with Christ. My father would give us cassette tapes of sermons to listen to and one night, I heard a sermon on “The holiness of God and the pride of the human heart.” I don’t know why and I don’t know how these things occur, but I was cut to the heart. I suddenly realized how far away from God I truly was. How prideful and full of selfishness and egoism I was. It scared me to be honest. And yet, paradoxically, in that very moment of feeling the weight of my sinfulness—how my supposed righteousness is like “filthy rags” before the holiness of God, as Isaiah says—a Divine Presence also overwhelmed me. I felt like a great sinner who was also mysteriously loved beyond comprehension.

Around the same time, I read C.S. Lewis’ chapter called “The Great Sin”, which is all about Pride. I read Matthew 25, the Last Judgment and Matthew 5 when Christ says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” I knew I could never impress God with my self-righteousness,

so I cried out for mercy, I cried out for grace. And the compassions of God washed over me.

This was a turning point in my life. Nothing was the same after this encounter. I began to hear and perceive my own thoughts with great clarity. This was frightening too because I was suddenly aware of all the judgments and horrible thoughts I had about people. But the Holy Spirit was so merciful in this process. He never made me feel condemned. Convicted, yes. But never condemned. He would always whisper, "I'm not showing you this to condemn you, I'm showing you this darkness, so you can be healed."

I began to think about God all the time. Throughout the following years there were many struggles and trials but the mystery of God became the most beautiful, the most attractive, the most intriguing and important pursuit in my life.

Naturally and organically, I had a desire to incorporate the Holy Spirit into the work I was doing. I had studied a few different acting methods but for the most part, my own personal method was being birthed through experience. Working with Anthony Geary and Genie Francis and other incredible performers like Michelle Pfeiffer and Sir Ben Kingsley. It was very much like Orthodoxy in the sense that I was a sponge, soaking everything in through experience and not through theory.

Within a short period of time after this initial encounter of grace, I was given some very heavy storylines to portray. I was about 15 years old and my character Lucky Spencer finds a young girl in the woods, who has just been raped. It is winter and the poor girl is freezing out in the cold, left for dead. He rescues her and they develop a friendship. He spends months taking care of her and being by her side as she tries to heal from this horrific event.

On a Soap Opera, you are on TV almost every day; especially when your storyline is prominent. In a more direct way than most artistic mediums, you are living the day-to-day story of your character. I was portraying this storyline for months. It was during this time that I first remember bringing God into my preparation as an actor. I began to ask Him, "How could you allow this innocent creature to suffer in this way?" "How can anyone be healed from such a wound?"



They were questions my character could have been asking God and questions most of us have asked before. What it began to do for me, was nudge my work towards something inherently spiritual and although I would not have known it at the time, something sacramental.

Over the following years I portrayed a lot of dark and tragic roles: someone struggling with suicide, a heroine addict, a murderer among others. It was around this time when I began to ask God, “How can I portray these dark and troubled characters dynamically and truthfully, without being consumed by the darkness myself?” There are many tragic stories of young actors who become drug addicts after playing one in a film. The stories of drug overdoses and suicides among young actors and actresses are too many. I instinctively steered away from “Method Acting” and sought a different path, even though I didn’t know exactly what that would be.

It was around this time when I discovered Dostoevsky. It’s amazing to me now, being Orthodox that I wasn’t able to comprehend anything about the Orthodox Church as I read his books. It was like a veil, I suppose. But what I did discover was a kindred soul. Here was someone who was writing about very dark and tragic characters and themes but from a place of beauty—from a place of the Light of Christ. Prince Myshkin, from the “The Idiot”, changed my life. I clung to Dostoevsky in my heart as I approached portraying these dark characters and prayed, “Lord,

please help me to portray the darkness of this world from a place of purity and light. Please, help me not to be overcome by the darkness, but to infiltrate the darkness with Your Light. Without you I can do nothing. I am nothing, I have nothing and I can do nothing without You, Lord. Amen.”

This is a snap shot so to speak, of the journey towards writing, “The Mystery Of Art”. These were the seeds, which by God’s grace, grew over time. There were so many important and profound spiritual realities that I wasn’t exposed to at the time, because I had not encountered the Holy Orthodox Church. I was grasping in the dark, looking for answers, feeling my way towards Christ, as best I could, but I always knew that something was missing; something significant and crucial to my relationship with God. There is a beautiful Scripture in the Gospel of John where Christ says,

“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (John 10:16)

I was one those lambs who was not of this fold. But through the grace of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and your prayers, He found me and brought me home. My journey to the Orthodox Faith took many years and was paved with blood and heartache. I carried all of these artistic questions and experiences with me as my family and I came into the Church for salvation, deliverance and healing.