

Just As I Am

Dale H. Easley

First published in *Gallery 2019*,
Dubuque Area Writers Guild,
vol. 41, pp. 71-73.

“According to our beliefs, Grandpa is in hell,” the young college student responded. She clearly loved her grandfather, as her essay showed. I wanted to scream at her, “Get the hell out of that church as quickly as you can.” But I sat quietly, didn’t stand up to tell her she was wrong. Still, I wished I could sit down to talk with her, to tell her of my own journey.

In my head, I heard the echoes of fiery sermons, passionate entreaties, and fervent confessions—all from the many hours spent in First Baptist Church, Walnut Cove, NC, often playing the piano for services. Always, always, the sermon’s foundations were John 3:16: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life* and John 14:5 *Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.* That pretty much summed up all Baptists needed to know—as interpreted, only Baptists were assured of being saved and going to heaven. Most others were surely not.

Looking back, I wonder how a group of people can put such burdens on others, especially young people. Oh, I’ve heard the arguments—the requirements of free will or justice or sacrifice. But really—is God so thin-skinned that if He feels rejected, He consigns you to hell? Even adolescent boys usually handle rejection better than that.

We young irreverants sometimes called being saved *cosmic fire insurance*, the only way to quell the fear of burning in hell. Most sermons stoked that fear—and then offered the only way out. (Kind of like current politics, eh?) I even heard Pascal’s wager used—you might lose a little if the Baptists were wrong, but you’ll lose eternal life if they are right. Cost-benefit analysis applied to theology.

So each week we waited at the sermon’s end for someone to walk the aisle as I played the piano and we sang together—

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Sometimes we’d go through all the verses and repeat them a second time, as if a bit more singing might trigger a trudge down the aisle for the one or two people in the church over 12 who had not yet gotten saved.

I was one of those unsaved. The peer pressure and emotional manipulation were oppressive, something I was proud to resist through high school. Yes, I was up front playing the piano

without being saved, but not for the church's lack of trying. I was visited at home by church members, obviously uncomfortable with having been pushed into proselytizing visits but persistent nonetheless. They used all the arguments they could think of, all the emotional manipulation they knew, but I had been inoculated at an early age by the bullying of my neo-Baptist peers and was assured that they were not a clique I cared to join. But I continued playing the piano on Sundays, wanting to be a part while feeling apart. Once, as I sat on the piano bench, half-listening to the droned prayers, I heard my own name listed by a Deacon for special prayer for my salvation. "Persistent buggers," I thought, as I shook my head in disbelief.

I particularly remember a Sunday afternoon, fall of the year, cool and sunny. Mom and I were working on the hillside below our corncrib. The corncrib was made from a jet-engine crate my father had brought home from the airport where he worked, lining it with chicken wire and initiating a war with the ingenious-bastard squirrels who constantly found a way in, requiring one more patch. Other discards from the airport littered the hillside, including an old three-wheeled vehicle that we never got to run and a front-end loader that had accidentally killed its previous owner, leading to my mother's despising our use of it. Many a Baptist in the rural South had such yard-art.

Earlier in the fall, we had placed walnuts in the corncrib to dry so that we could easily remove their outer black husks. Mom and I sat in the sun, hammering open the rock-hard nuts as they rested in pits in a boulder. We worked carefully, striking just hard enough to crack the shell but not smash the innards. As we focused intently, two preachers found us on the hillside—our usual pastor and his visitor. Our pastor was relatively young, I realize now, trying to live the kind of life he thought a Baptist pastor should. His visitor was older, more experienced, more invested in the entire Baptist enterprise. Years later, our pastor left his wife and the church, marrying his childhood sweetheart. But on that Sunday afternoon, what were the two of them to do for entertainment? Certainly, I could think of better things for them to do than trying to convert me. At least one of them probably wished he could go for a drink, but that wasn't going to happen, not in Walnut Cove, so they gave me their best shots, saying things like, "Don't you want to have eternal life?" and "Your family is worried about you," though Mom and Dad never told *me*, and Mom was sitting nearby, saying nothing, as usual, when it came to religion. I suppose having an agnostic piano player had become a thorn in the preachers' flesh. But I just kept my focus, hammering away at walnuts as two preachers hammered away at my soul.

But in a way those two preachers were correct—whether you accept it or not, if this is the system of thinking you're brought up in, walking away from it is not only a loss of identity and community but a loss of ability to take seriously the fervor of this minute's cause or the claims of any religious group, all far watered-down compared to Baptists. Addicts often substitute one addiction for another—running from problems to running for distance, from alcoholic to workaholic. But escaping the Baptist addiction without becoming self-destructive is in some ways worse—you're also stuck creating your own meaning, your own purpose, your own community, maybe even your own family. So there's a certain comfort in being *right*, of being surrounded by people that think the same way you do.

But such a world view can bring much unnecessary pain, as I believe it did to the girl who thinks her grandpa is in hell. As it did for one of my best friends while growing up. Joe had a little sister who died young.

“She died before she got saved,” Joe said.

We sat in another friend’s garage, the three of us being as vulnerable as teenage boys allow.

“I don’t think God would punish her for that,” I said.

Though we sat in the dark and I could scarcely make out his face, I could hear a tremor in his voice.

“It’s not punishment for anything specific she did,” he replied.

I could hear his tennis shoe rolling gravel on the dirt floor of the garage as he sat on an old crate turned on end.

“We’re all born sinful,” he continued. “The only way past it is to get saved.”

He paused for a moment.

“And she didn’t.” he said.

At that age, I didn’t know what to say. I just sat quietly. We hadn’t gotten to know anyone who believed anything significantly different. Not yet. At that time, I had nothing to ease his pain.