

The Merry-Go-Round

He was alone.

Last year, he wouldn't have guessed that things would turn out as they had. And here it was again, the holidays. The calendar told him it was 2012 and his life had dramatically changed.

The change went much deeper than a turn in the seasons or aging another year. It went under his skin and pervaded soul.

Life was like that, he thought. Everything could be striped away in the blink of an eye. Yet everything could be restored. Things change.

He knew that now as he remembered his wife handing him the ticket.

For Michael, his life had hit bottom. His relationship with a colleague at work had violated his relationship with Michelle, his wife and his professional boundaries. He knew it was wrong and things went from bad to worse. Had he been in any other career than clergy, he might have been able to work it out.

The denominational officials thoroughly investigated and found no predatory behavior on his part. Just a brief and stupid consensual inner-office affair. Michael took full responsibility for what he did, resigning from the church and the denomination.

The Bishop, however, wanted to make his and his behavior an example and prepared to bring the whole matter to a public ecclesiastical trial. To save Michelle from further public humiliation, Michael defrocked himself from the ministry.

It also didn't help that the denomination fired the Bishop. Somehow there must have been clerical consensus that though clergy screw up, they can find the redemption they proclaim but now two clergy were unemployed.

Some fitting career ending for the owner of a Doctorate of Ministry degree who had once gone on a book signing tour with his new work on the



equality of women and men. Michael even had to quit his adjunct lecturer position at the university. No more feminist lectures there. "You want fries with that?" Michael was guessing to be included in his next career communication.

It did help, though, that he knew his way around computers and networks and was able to land a job. What really needed help, though, was Michael's remorse. He had made himself and Michelle victims of nothing other than his own mindlessness. As often as he had tried to figure out his insular mindset that irrationally separated his life from his wife and the community – there he was – himself, the hypocritical Elf.

Through the months, Michelle had forgiven him. That was miraculous in itself. But nothing could get rid of the remorse that lived within Michael. Nothing could exorcise this dark visitor inhabiting his soul. Michael knew he had committed the unpardonable sin – to violate the quiet, sacred, loving trust of his soul mate. He knew too much to rationalize otherwise.

When Michelle handed him the ticket to the merry-go-round ride at the local Zoo, he laughed, a little confused.

"Here," she said, "you need to take this ride. You've always been a merry-go-round freak!"

The next day, Michael stood in line at the merry-go-round. As parents corralled their excited children, he saw the unabashed joy on the parents' faces as they watched their children

fly through their air on their painted horses. They looked like cherubs.

Their joy, though, contrasted with the despair Michael felt. He was not standing next to his wife now, as they once had done in watching their daughter years ago. He was alone, in line, waiting to get on a merry-go-round like some kind of homeless outpatient looking like he was in between prescription refills.

The carney, boarding riders on this circle of brightly painted horses, looked a little rough. His beer-sculpted gut and missing tooth suggested he had experienced hard times of his own. Yet he cheerfully boarded the cherubs, their parents and Michael as the calliope music began.

Michael stood beside one of the stationary horses, choosing to stand and not sit as it began to move. He had always loved carousels. The movement. The colors and antiquated steam-driven calliope music from another time and land.

The carney was now standing in the unmoving inner circle of the carousel. As Michael looked ahead in the counter clockwise moving platform, the calliope music sounded like an old Public Television Masterpiece Theater song. When the tune suddenly changed to the old Rolling Stones Song “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” Michael thought something was wrong. Yet the parents and children in front of him didn’t seem to notice. He saw no one reacting to the shift in the music.

Michael turned around and looked behind him and then when it hit him. Seeing the fronts of their faces, . . . they all looked familiar. He somehow knew these people. He was looking back in time.

The one closest to him, riding on the next horse behind, was MaryJo. MaryJoe from high school. The first love of his life. Michael remembered how he dated her for months, only for her to declare she was interested in someone

else. It broke his heart and he drove home, that night, crying and feeling utterly alone.

He walked over to her and saw the joy on her face as she looked ahead past him, as if he wasn’t there. He could see scenes into her life beyond high school. She had married a football star who became a business owner and politician. He saw scenes of her collecting her children from the private schools. How she helped her husband on his campaign trail of conservative values and fiscal integrity.

Michael was glad she had found happiness for herself and he understood. He was happy for her.

Michael was wondering if he was dreaming this magic ability to see people of his past and how their lives unfolded.

“No” the carney said, standing next to him, answering his thoughts. “You’re on this ride and I need your ticket. But keep looking behind for a while” he said as he took the ticket from Michael’s hand. He quickly stepped back into the carousel’s inner circle and disappeared in the arc of the moving ride.

Michael looked further back and saw his parents. They were in one of those brightly colored fixed benches.

Michael remembered when they had left him behind at his grandparents’ house, driving off and leaving him crying in the driveway. He remembered feeling abandoned, crying outside on his grandparent’s steps. When they soon came back to retrieve him, they were laughing, saying they were trying to teach him to be more prompt when they called.

As Michael moved closer to his parents, who couldn’t see him either, he saw snapshots of their lives. The distance between them. Their preoccupation with their jobs and he felt sorry to see their futile attempts to control so as to appear

good enough by those around them. Michael forgave them.

Michel was just starting to grasp the magic of this dream-like ride. As he looked to the center of carousel's hub, he saw the carney laughing as he looked over at him.

The carnival music tune changed to the Sam Cooke's tune of "Wonderful World." He moved further back and found a tall European-looking man he remembered to be Chris. He was the vice-principle of his high school who had violently slapped him in his face for running down the hall into class.

This administrator never knew that Michael would feel the reverberations of his slap as it woke him from dreams decades later. But Michael also saw Chris's suffering from traumas of his own military experiences. He felt compassion and forgave him.

One after another, figures from Michael's past appeared on the ride.

The calliope played on with the tune of the national anthem. This time it was the college Army ROTC sergeant teaching the class. He was explaining how the Army was placing artificial animal dung bombs along the Viet Nam trails to blow off the legs of hapless villagers. He said, "War is a nasty business and we've found this to damage their spirits so that we would gain a psychological advantage in the conflict."

Like the others, Michael saw the Sergeant had eventually liberated himself from his career. Michael forgave the ROTC instructor.

When the music tune changed once again, it was now playing the tune to Tracy Chapman's "The Promise." This time, Michael saw a dejected figure sitting on a bench. Unlike the others in his past life, this figure was sitting sideways with his feet on up on the bench with his head turned away, held by his hand.

"There's one more person to forgive, Michael" said the carney's voice beside him. To his surprise, it wasn't the carney standing next to him but was his Michelle. She put her arm on Michael's shoulder as they both walked closer to the seated figure. "It's why I gave you the ticket" she said.

The calliope organ softened and changed to the violin in the original Chapman song. Michael could hear the some of the words. "I'll find my way back to you" were gently sung as they moved closer to the figure. Michael leaned over to see the face of the figure. It was himself. . . . "Please say you'll be waiting . . ."

Michael stood, looking at himself. He realized that he could forgive all of the people in his own past but he couldn't come to terms with himself.

Michael sat down next to his own image. Scenes from his own life were already within him. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder and then his wife's warm embrace. She encircled his head with her arms. He felt the place where his own remorse had lived so many months had been vacated. Through her forgiveness, he had been released and could forgive himself. The waiting for forgiveness was over.

The music ended and the ride slowly came to a stop. As Michael and Michelle turned to exit, the carney said "Come through here" leading them both to the inner circle of the ride.

"But how do we leave?" Michael asked, looking at the carney and Michelle.

The carney had now changed in appearance, looking more like a kindly uncle. He said, "It's not a matter of how you leave but how you return. You can come here whenever you want."

Suddenly, Michael and his Michelle were surrounded by all the others who had been on the ride. As if participating in a centuries-old laying

on of hands ordination ritual – each one reached out their hand and touched Michael. As the calliope started again, the carney said to them, “What is sacred in this dimension is how we are connected. It’s forgiveness that heals us and makes us whole.”

Immediately Michael found he was standing off to the side of the merry-go-round, watching parents and their children enveloped by the joy. He knew Michelle was back at home, waiting for his return.

As Michael drove home, he couldn’t wait to thank her for the carousel ride and for everything else she had done. ■

. . . Philip Siddons