

# The Waning Age of Accidental Saints

by Joe Bissonnette (July 2016)



Stephen Fry as Malvolio

“Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.” *Twelfth Night*

It is the most memorable line in the play, placed in the mouth of the least attractive character, the puritanical Malvolio whose name means ‘ill will’. But it is in our response to Malvolio that Shakespeare turns the screw. Malvolio is unbearable, but he is treated terribly; manipulated, humiliated and ruined to our shameful delight, and so it all ends on a note more tragic than comic and we wince as we realize that our sympathies are for the malicious in their persecution of a fool.

But Malvolio sort of deserved it. Unless you are Alexander the Great or Abraham Lincoln, to speak shamelessly of greatness is ridiculous. Even the first Joseph, who goes on to save his brothers and his people from famine, is as distasteful to us as he was to his brothers when he told them of his dream in which their 11 sheaves of wheat bowed down before his twelfth sheaf. If someone has the temerity to speak out loud of their own greatness, they are despicable to us.

But Christianity replaced greatness with sanctity. To be a saint is the greatest greatness. And unlike classical greatness, sanctity is the opposite of a zero-sum proposition. To speak of the pursuit of sanctity is not a boast which belittles, it is self-deprecating and it is an invitation which ennobles. What then are the conditions that lead to sanctity? To paraphrase the bard, “some are born holy, some achieve holiness and some have holiness thrust upon ‘em”.

Some are born into conditions which in themselves confer sanctity; think of the severely handicapped and those for whom to live is to suffer. Just to be, requires a heroic Yes to God. Other saints work out their salvation in a crucible of their choosing. When St. Thomas Aquinas was asked by his sister how

to become a saint he said simply: "will it". But the third path to sanctity, having it "thrust upon 'em", is the path for most of us.

It is often the things we didn't plan, the accidents of our lives which prove to be occasions of grace. There are great comic depictions of the importance of chance, like Peter Seller's Chauncy Gardner in *Being There*, or Bill Murray's Wallace Richie in *The Man Who Knew Too Little*. Maybe the apparently sloppy world in which accidents abound is the necessary condition for God's grace and our sanctification.

*Sleep Walkers* by Arthur Koestler is a fascinating history of discovery and invention as accident. Though not exactly stumbling about in a trance, scientists and inventors often discover what they weren't looking for. And this too is a reflection of God's ways.

In the very beginning of Genesis, God creates a "formless wasteland" from which he separates light and darkness, the waters above from the waters below, dry land and sea, and so orderliness is rightly reflective of God's creative action, but the undifferentiated chaos is also created by God. It is the stuff from which He differentiates and articulates. God is pure act and so there is no difference between what God wills and what is. The formless wasteland then, was not merely some transitory state which was undesirable but necessary. God willed it, perhaps because there is vital potentiality in formlessness.

One of the great accomplishments of the Roman Empire was its imposition of lines and boundaries and more than 400,000 kilometers of roads. The severe orderliness of the Roman Empire could almost be described as a secular sacrament. A sacrament is "a sign which achieves what it signifies," and the roads of imperial Rome and the centurions who marched upon them both signified and achieved a new reality; organizing, systematizing and drawing down upon the world a much lower horizon of spiritual possibility. The cruel efficiency of the Roman Empire provided some of the earthly material for St. John's Book of Revelations.

Many may be feeling an almost daily increase in affinity for the unveiling of the Apocalypse, as it seems there are inexorable forces, powers and principalities, leading us where we do not want to go. The players who have taken center stage are certainly bad enough, but even if it wasn't them, but

others more to our liking, there is a sense that at best it would be the slowing of something bad beyond our power to stop. There is a spirit of the age which seems to be foreclosing on the happy accidents which are the stuff of dreams and the hope of accidental saints.

While the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution drained the world of grandeur and romance, while psychology reduced us to primal drives and modern philosophy cast doubt on the autonomy or even the existence of the self, there remained a common sense realism within which we could live lives which included unforeseen adventures, albeit in miniature. But this seems to be less and less the case. Our politics and culture are in a nightmarish freefall, but at an even more basic level, how we experience our lives is changing.

Our lives are becoming virtual. The world around us and the people in it are disappearing into the background. We are becoming disincarnated. In this [rather bizarre interview](#) Elon Musk posits the probability that we are already artificially suspended within virtual reality.

But to be sure we are being surveilled, mapped and manipulated to a terrifying degree. Google has become the largest corporation in America not by providing us access, which is the means, but by tracking and mapping our searches, providing deeper and more refined profiles to marketers who can tailor more specific seductions and entrancements. We are less subjects, acting, and more objects, acted upon. Huge data caches containing every keystroke of our search histories provide a window into our subconscious and allow unseen Svengalis, or rather the algorithms they have devised, to zero in on subterranean hopes and fears, giving shape, color and texture to those hopes and fears before they have even dawned in our conscious minds. What appeared to Malvolio as accidents of fate, through which “greatness was thrust upon ‘em” were in fact deliberate orchestrations designed for his ruin. It seems this is becoming the case for us as well.

Twelfth Night is a play written for the close of the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, the feast of The Epiphany, when Wisemen from the East followed a star in search of the King of Kings. Though little is said of them, they seem like perfect examples of clear-eyed spiritual freedom open to the accidents through which God so often beckons. The play itself is set among the Moors of Iberia, at the time at war with England. There is a strange interplay of suspicion and sympathy. It’s a parable, that is, a story about us, the audience, wrapped up

inside of a play. Circumspection which brings the revelation of our own cruel delight in the ruination of Malvolio is the final lesson. And circumspection, that is, the quiet plumbing of the depths of our souls, is the thing which is lost as we are over-stimulated, monitored and managed and the accidents which were so often the occasions of grace are either eliminated or rendered sterile by our increasingly justified paranoia.

---

To comment on this essay, please click