

The Flickering Flame



Photo courtesy of the author.

Bruce McCullough

The two posters that were hung on people's walls as I was growing up were: 'Stoned Agin' with the melting head. Black light. Soft and satisfying to the touch, as scary as it was funny. The other one was 'Smile! Pass it on.' Corny, simple, but as time has gone on, perhaps not so simple.

I have not been offered any – nor have I required any – religion. Even in the dark times when belief would have given me comfort, the only truth that seems to flicker inside of me is “believe in the human spirit.”

As I walked through the streets of a bombed-out Baltimore, the day after the curfew was lifted,

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ed, I saw how savage things can be; drugs being sold in the open, cops too tired to care, babies being balanced on the hips of seemingly homeless mothers. I was reminded that there is a war going on. Positive versus negative. Dark versus light. What adds to it and what chips away at it. A war between what ravages the human spirit and what protects it. I think we are all an amalgam of everything we have ever done, seen, or thought. Then maybe it's important to keep seeking the light.

At night when I can't sleep, I no longer think about the garbage of the day, the to-do list for the next that never seems to get done, I imagine

flying. I rise out of my bed in my mind and go. Pajamas on without waking my wife, I float out the window. Up into the night sky, I move past the people I know. I stop and look in on them and see if they are okay. If they have fallen asleep with the TV on, I turn it off and tuck them in. I put my hand on their foreheads – exchanging our warmth, and I move on.

I move out past lonely people walking dogs or sleeping in cars. I imagine looking into the eyes of those I am afraid of that day in Baltimore and saying: “Buddy, we are all in this together. You are going to be okay even if there is evidence you won’t. I don’t know how I know that, but I do.” This is what I think humanism means. Belief in our spirit. Belief that we can carry on, no matter how tough the burden.

It’s nurturing our love for each other. Us with our little dreams and hopes that don’t usually come true. We all crave the same things; a place, a warm friend, someone to tell our secrets to, someone to know us. Someone to love us. What stops us from reaching out to each other? What are we afraid of? What do we know about ourselves that we feel we can’t tell each other? If we can only realize we are all the same; lost little kids waiting for Mom or Dad to come home or notice us. Carrying our indignities and disappointments as we go. Dusting ourselves off. Recharging our own hearts after loss.

But we can mutter “people are stupid,” or we can try to understand them, and in that understanding, for me there is humour, levity and love. We can enlist our love into the war against the human spirit that rages in every bar, office and home. We all know the world is chaotic and stupid but it is also beautiful too.

We all want to reach out, but we don’t know how. We wander around looking for connection,

busy and afraid, hoping our wit or money will protect us, but it won’t. We only have each other, even if saying that out loud will get us laughed at. We are all protecting ourselves. Life is too hard even for those who have it pretty good. And for the others? Of course it is easy to look away. It’s almost logical.

I have a good friend who (luckily, for me happens to be my wife) also looks at life not at what she can achieve, but as a series of small and large (mostly small) encounters. These encounters are what we give to the world. How

we treat people incrementally makes up our life’s world. A series of small exchanges that hopefully leave the world ever so slightly better than before. And us better for it.

As a young man I didn’t realize the power of a compliment. Of a “thank you,” of “I’m sorry.” But now I do. Even if it is at times hard. I don’t want to get ‘stoned agin,’ even if I know there are so many good reasons to. I would rather “smile and pass it on.” I would rather believe in the flickering flame that falters but does not go out. •

Bruce McCulloch is a Canadian actor, writer, comedian and director best known for his work as a member of the comedy troupe Kids in the Hall and as a writer for Saturday Night Live. McCulloch has written several one-man shows (including Two-Headed Roommate, Jazz Stenographers, and Young Drunk Punk) and released an autobiography titled Let’s Start a Riot: How a Young Drunk Punk Became a Hollywood Dad. He currently stars as Lloyd McKay on the television show Young Drunk Punk (City, CBC), while also serving as the show creator.

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