

Kirk

The Potential Spiritual Story of Many Modern People

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier
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“I’m OK.”

“I’m OK,” he said, “why am I thinking about this again?” “I’m OK. Who doesn’t think I’m OK? I got a good job, and this house, and my car, and I go on vacations. And I have friends; they don’t think there’s anything wrong with me. And my family; I’m good to them; they don’t think there’s anything wrong with me. They think I am a good person.”

“I’m OK. Look at the crap I’m *not* into. I’m ‘there’ for people. I’m fun to be around.

“I’m OK. I’m fun. I have fun. I have a good life.”

Now there was a pause.

And then he started thinking a lot of things at once. Memories that were sad symbols. A lot of confusion. A little fear. A vague glimpse that life could be better. A vaguer glimpse that he could be better.

More pause. He looked deep into his coffee cup as if for an answer.

Quickly but not suddenly an answer took shape.

“I am not OK,” he said, and for the first time in his whole life he got up and went by his own choosing to church.

The Dream Dies Before You Do

His whole life began on April 21, in the Spring of one of those post-diluvian years when electronics already dominated the minds of men. Kirk's first memory was of watching television.

He was Jack and Judy's third child, and second son. They were nice people. They had grown up after the big war and before Viet Nam; they went to college locally, met there, got married, and went to work. They had their ups and downs, with each other, with their families, and with their neighbors on the block where they brought their first house.

They were of mixed origin ethnically, and mixed Christian background, and the result of this was that they were not really anything. Their children were baptized, but by the ministers of three different denominations, and no one could remember precisely which one baptized which child.

They were pretty good parents—*being* parents was the main thing they cared about, and the main thing they kept in common—but here again there were ups and downs.

Jack and Judy gave the kids everything they needed—and almost everything they wanted.

Jack and Judy had a pretty good sense of how kids should behave, and the kids were yelled at; but they were rarely

punished when they did not listen. Eventually, there was less yelling, and less attention to what the kids were actually doing.

Of course, the kids got less attention as they got born. The first one was much photographed. The second one was much less photographed. There were not many childhood photographs of Kirk.

But less attention was still a lot, and for while Kirk also got attention from his brother and sister. More or less on schedule he learned to walk and then talk, and after that it was hard to keep him quiet except with television.

The others didn't want to watch kiddy programs, so he watched what they watched. Because it was loud, they didn't talk much.

He had a couple of favorite shows for each night of the week by the time he went to school. Going to school wasn't such a shock; he had already been to pre-this and pre-that. His life was watching and being watched.

His first friend was a kid from school. His name was Timmy.

"Hi, Kirk," said Timmy.

"Hi," said Kirk.

"Did you see the Super-Rangers last night?"

"Yeah."

"Wasn't it cool when they went into the big black castle?"

"Yeah, I saw that, and then that green guy came after them."

"Yeah."

So it went.

Sometimes there was conversation at home. One time, he remembered, he talked to his father about something real serious.

"Why do people die, daddy?"

"That's how it is. You have to get old, and then you have to die."

"Then what happens?"

"Then you go to heaven?"

"What's heaven?"

"It's a much better place, far away from here."

Happily for Kirk, nobody that he knew died for the next few years.

By now he was a student who didn't like school, hated homework, but still loved television. And now he also loved sports. He saw sports on television, and he played some sports at school. He played some sports after school; there was a league. By then they had already put up a hoop in the driveway.

When his brother wasn't using it, his friends from the neighborhood would come over. They played two on two, three on three, and sometimes they just shot. This was their chance to just talk.

"You see that car he has?" said one of his friends referring to the shooting guard on the local pro team.

"Yeah," said Kirk, "but when I'm playing I'm gonna get a Lamborghini. They're fast and they're cool. I'm gonna get a blue one."

"I'm gonna get one of those giant Hoovers," said somebody else, "like The Duke has. And I'm gonna get the same tattoo, the one with the blade."

"That's cool."

Sometimes when his friends left, Kirk stayed outside and kept shooting. Many times he kept playing.... In his mind he was in the finals, two seconds left, down by one, dribble... shoot... SCORE! Everyone would scream. He would be famous. Everyone would scream when he walked by. He would be Kirk... The King.

Days came and went, and he never noticed. And he hardly noticed as the seasons changed, except that at certain times there were certain things you could not do. Cold and darkness kept you in. But then came Christmas.

Christmas was the best. Though he did not remember how he learned about Christmas, he definitely remembered believing in Santa, making his lists, waking up in the dark, and running downstairs on Christmas morning.

Even after he figured Santa out—no one ever actually told him anything—he still loved his childhood Christmases. There were still presents, and there was still a tree, and lights, and there were Christmas specials on TV. There were several they showed every year, and... well, this was Christmas.

Easter was something else. The bunny he figured out even before Santa, and after that... well, "Jesus rose from the dead" was probably important, but you really didn't get much for Easter, and there weren't even special suppers.

Vaguely, he was aware that other people took Easter more seriously, especially those people at the church down the street where sometimes he saw people outside marching around in some sort of parade, but the family just drove past these little parades, and no one said a word about it.

Once he asked his father who those people were, and his father said that they were Roman Catholics, and Kirk asked "what's that?" and his father said that they were people who believe in the pope. (Kirk had already heard something about there being a "pope"; it must have been on television.)

Life went on. Friends came; friends went—sometimes by moving, sometimes by fighting, and sometimes people just stopped calling.

He did OK in school, kept shooting, and spent more and more of his time dreaming. He got better, both at basketball and at imagining cool situations where he could star. He got better at imagining himself famous, on the news, giving interviews, having people line up to see him.

For the longest time there were no interruptions. Then his dad's father died, and they had to go to the funeral. He had known his grandfather well enough; they saw him every couple of months. But he never talked to his grandfather very much—actually, his grandfather never talked to anybody very much—and to Kirk the worst thing about him dying was that finally he had to go to a viewing.

He knew about viewing. His parents went to them every once in a while. And he sort of knew other people who had died. But this was the first time he was going to have to see a dead body and he was pretty nervous about that. He was close to nauseous when they walked in, slightly shocked to see a body (it was not his grandfather, it was a body), and he was basically relieved once he did what he was expected to do and was allowed to retreat to the back with his brother and sister. They didn't talk hardly at all. At the burial the next day, he tried to think about what it means to be dead but he found that he could not and gave up. The family went home and he did not think about death again.

At school they starting practicing for graduation.

He left grade school without giving it much thought.

He spent the Summer without giving it much thought.

Then came the day—tomorrow he was going to high school.

He entered as they all do: nervous. He established himself as they all do: imperceptibly, just by getting through the day, starting to talk to people, kind of making friends. By the beginning of November it was OK to go to school.

Oh, for sure, there were a few bad moments. Like when he bumped into that tough guy, and the tough guy told him off, and he wanted to fight him but knew he would get beat up. That time when he missed a step and those girls laughed. That first surprise quiz when he got a zero. But other people got zeros too—thank God—and pretty quickly he learned how to stay out of trouble with his teachers. Most seemed bored, a couple were almost cool, and one he almost hated.

His first report card was OK, and it was obvious from the beginning that they would always be OK—never bad, but never very, very good.

Then they posted tryouts for basketball. The mere paper on the wall was like the terrible sound of an alarm clock ringing. Basketball. What was he going to do about that? When first he had entered school there was no time to worry about it. Trying out for football was never considered. But now it was time for basketball. If you're gonna be a pro, don't you have to be on your high school team first? The problem was: He had now been in school for a couple of months, and he had been to gym. With other people around, he wasn't nearly so good as he was in his driveway. There were a lot of other kids who were bigger, and not just bigger. There was no way he was going to make the team. He didn't go out.

Suddenly it was not so much fun to think about the future as sometimes he still did, especially when watching sports on television. Now, he had to wonder, where would the car come from, and the fame, and the fortune, and the girls?

Not going out for basketball didn't change his life much, only his language. Was it a coincidence? Was it exposure to how everybody else talked? Was it something else? Either way, his speech became vulgar. When he was with other kids, not a paragraph went by without the "s" word, or the "f" word (in many grammatical permutations), and other vulgarities as well.

Of course, this was not completely new to him. Sometimes he had heard some of these words at home—though he himself was not to use them. Then, by the time he was in the sixth grade, when he saw his first pictures of people having sex, he used some of these words in context, trying to show that he knew all about sex, and that he was maybe even having sex (though he was not). But now his speech was built on these words, and if the words weren't dirty, they were nasty—everything was to be criticized, or mocked, or otherwise put down.

By sophomore year he started to go to parties. (Permission was not an issue as long as he got himself home by midnight.) From the first there was booze, which made him sick before it could get him high. Later, he was kind of shook up by people who got really high and looked really sick, and he got tired of parties before the year was over.

Seemingly, his party year had had one good effect: interest in music. At parties there was always music, and it was always loud, and people talked about the groups and passed around their music, and he and a couple of friends thought that they could do it, and so they got instruments and started practicing, and then they decided that they had invented a sound of their own, which was better than anything else, and they were sure that they would explode on the scene, and everyone would be after them, and they would be rich.... This was the idea that they took together into senior year.

In the meantime there had been a little stuff with girls.

Actually, the stuff had started in seventh grade, with a certain amount of making out and it was nothing if it was not touching. His "love life" was mostly suspended when he entered high school, mostly because nobody he really liked was much interested in him.

Finally he got tired of that, made a couple of friends, and one wanted to do it, and so they tried it, and something happened, but it wasn't like in the movies, but he talked about it as if it were, and that's where things stood in the Spring of senior year. That's when people at school and at home started to push him about college. College was expected, not music. He protested.

"How will you get into music?" This was what they said. "Who do you know? How much will it cost? How will you beat out everybody else who wants to get into music? Which of you can even write music?"

In the end, he couldn't say what they were going to do in order to get into music and so he did what he was told. Kirk applied for State College. He got in. He would pay with student loans. He would study music—and business. "You need a back up plan," they told him.

"Life sucks," he was almost conscious of thinking.

Still Playing Games

It was a small room, about halfway down the hall. In it Kirk found two single beds, two little desks, too many chairs for the size of the room, and some clothes and other stuff that must have been left there by his roommate. There was also a TV. Kirk had brought one too.

The whole scene was a little sickening. It's not that he didn't want to go away to school; he surely did. But when you're home, "going away" is the promise of freedom and excitement. When you finally get to the other places... well, they're just other places... and they're never as clean as the brochures... and some are smaller and darker than others. Besides all this, Kirk had discovered something else: The dream of being on your own is not quite the same as being alone for real.

But Kirk was not completely alone for long. In came his roommate, "Daryll, with two ll's," he said. "What are you studying?"

"Music," said Kirk, "and business."

"I don't know nothing about music," replied Daryll, "but I knows about business, and I knows about money."

“Cool,” said Kirk, but this seemed a stupid thing to say, and it turned out to be first and last conversation he was to have with his roommate, though they were able to get along just fine by staying out of each other’s way.

Like it was for almost everybody else, although almost nobody admitted it, the first couple of days were rough. Kirk called home more times that first week than he had ever called home before, or even spoken to his parents affectionately in years. But soon enough, without noticing as this happened, he got used to things, and the joy of just finding a class was replaced by other emotions, depending on the class.

Most were boring, most of the time.

But in one class, World History I, things did get interesting once when this bible guy got upset about something the professor had said about evolution. “That’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says....”

“Just a second, young man,” snapped back the professor, “this is not a bible class; it’s a history class, and that’s what we are going to stick to.”

“So, we are going to ignore what God has told us about creation?!”

“No. We are going to ignore what *you* want to tell us about creation.”

“It’s not *my* word; it’s *God’s* word!”

“No, young man, it’s your *presumption*. You are presuming that your bible tells you all the truth you need to know, but this is a presumption. And it is a presumption backed up by no facts that I know of.”

“Jesus is the fact. Jesus told us that we are sinners, prideful sinners, and we better not think that we’re so smart, and accept him if we want to be saved.”

“And you got every word that you just said from the same book that you are presuming tells the truth. You are presuming this even though all you really know is that a long time ago some people preached some stuff, and other people believed some stuff and wrote some of it down, and somebody you know told you to believe it.... Sorry, sir, you are in a university, we’re going to need a lot more than that.”

“Jesus cured the sick; Jesus rose the dead.”

“Also from the book. Also from the book. And the Koran says that Mohammed flew to heaven on a horse. Do you believe that too? And if you don’t, why not? Because a fairy tale in the book that justifies somebody’s religion is no proof to you? How is your book different—it’s a lot older?! I’m sorry, sir, it sounds to me that you are believing what you want to believe, and this is not why people come to a university.”

That ended the discussion, and it made an impression. It made an impression that was confirmed many times over in many other classes in many different ways. If it wasn’t an explicit argument against the bible, it was an argument against some doctrine—“if God is so good, why is there evil; if God is so good, how is he OK sending his ‘children’ to hell?—and if it wasn’t about religion, it was about science: “Modern people use their minds. We support what

we say with scientific evidence. We formulate theories and test them... and only the fittest survive—to get the A's and the better jobs.”

This last thing was Kirk's problem. The study of music turned out to be hard. It was not at all fun like it was in his bedroom. What was worse, it was basketball all over again: he wasn't nearly as good as half the people in his classes. So it was that even before trying to cut a demo, get somebody to hear it, get a contract, not get ripped off, please the DJ's, get your shot.... Kirk saw that he was not going to be a famous musician.

He saw it, but he didn't say it—not to anyone else, not to himself. Instead, he started again to go to parties. There were plenty to go to, and they were always loud, and the routine was always the same:

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“How's it going?”

“It's OK.”

“Do you believe that ass ____ Kopfholtz?”

“He IS an ass ____.”

It was really too loud to say much more so he drank some, tried to get some girl's attention—any girl, any pretty girl—made sure he stayed past midnight, and then went “home.”

He went home for real at Christmas. He had been anticipating this for about three weeks before he actually went home, even though he was calling home much less frequently. He had survived on his own, and now he wanted to show it. It was cool when he walked in the door, and everybody was happy to see him, but everything looked smaller, and by the next morning being home was not how he imagined it would be. (It was how it used to be.)

He did get to see some friends from town, but they were into different things, and it was hard to find times when everyone could get together, and really not that interesting when they did. Christmas, itself, was kind of routine. It was like everyone was going through the motions because this is what you do. And he was really quite ready to go “home” to school well before the day came.

But he was happier going than arriving. Daryll still didn't have much to say, and their room was still small, and it seemed that some of his school friends had come back from a better Christmas. (So he said that his was “great” too.)

Pretty quickly he got back into a routine, though he dropped his second semester music course and picked up a course on marketing. It was kind of interesting, and even though he didn't find himself dreaming about doing it, he did think about the money and the things you could get with money. It wasn't the playoffs in an arena, or a concert in a stadium, but it was something.

Actually, he wasn't thinking much about his future these days. He just didn't know what to think. He thought

mostly about getting his work done, getting out of that room, and getting a girl.

His first college score came at a party, that is, after a party, and he was a little drunk and she was a little drunker, and they messed around to mutual satisfaction, and it was weird to see her later.

There were to be a couple more of these scores in the next couple of years. At least it gave him something to talk about.

Then he met Debbie, Debbie the do-gooder, that's what he called her when he first got to know her in the Fall of his last year. They had met in a course in accounting which met at night and so there was always time afterward to talk or even get a coffee. She was pretty—at first he considered her an “8”—and she was pre-law.

“But not to chase ambulances,” she insisted, “absolutely not. I'm on the other side. I want to defend against all those whiners and liars and greed mongers.” She had a little fire in her when she talked, and he liked it. It seemed that she was interested in a little bit more than herself. “This country is drowning in lawsuits. Now we're spending money to stop kids from using their sleds in a public park. It's sick.” Yes, she had a little fire in her when she talked, and he liked it, but he wasn't sure what kind of a fire he could show her. Not even when she asked.

“So what are your goals?” she once asked him.

“I'm gonna have a career in business,” he said. “I expect to do pretty well. Live good. Travel.”

They talked about travel sometimes. She had been to more places, but he knew more about sports, and music. Once she asked him about his music, and he started to tell her about his dream, but he was not sure what to say, and so he talked again about his favorite bands.

Time went on and the coffee got to be a regular thing, and he really started to look forward to it. She always had something: comments about something, and it was usually something that made her a little mad, and this was fun to see, and she was fun to see. Kirk was not alarmed when he realized that he “liked” her. He had an easy opening when they came to the end of the semester and he suggested that they celebrate by going out. She said “sure.”

Although this date was a big deal to him, he was not especially nervous, he noticed, probably because Debbie was so easy to be with. They talked about next semester and what they would be taking. They talked about their families and what they would be doing for Christmas. He laughed and smiled, and was so happy to be out with Debbie, and for the first time apart from his prom he paid. Then he asked her if he could ask her out again.

“You're a great guy, Kirk,” she said. “But, you know, I'm really into my plans and this is not a good time for me to be in a relationship. You're a great guy, and...”

“That's OK, that's OK,” said Kirk. He had to stop her from talking. “I was just talking about going out once in while, but if that's not what you want to do, that's OK.”

What else was there to say? He walked home fast, even though he didn't want to go there, and he got himself to sleep fast. He woke up the next morning feeling... something. He was sad, that much he knew, but why? He liked her and

didn't get her, that was one reason. He had been rejected—no way to feel good about that. But there was something more. He felt that there was something more.

That day, after classes, it was already dark and he went for a walk. He went in the general direction of town, but he was going to no particular place. He needed to think. He played out the situation in his head. He went over it again. Finally he let himself see what he had seen in her eyes. *He wasn't good enough to go out with.* That was it. She was going to make a difference. He was not. She was gonna be somebody. He was not.

What was he gonna be? Who was he gonna be? What was worth being? Who could say? Who could not mock whatever you choose? Life sucks. What the hell is it for?!

Now he noticed that he was far from the campus, just about in town, and if he didn't want to be a bigger loser than he already was, he had better turn around. As it turned out, he stopped in front of a church, in front of a sign that listed several "Masses," and below that he read this:

How many of the following seven sentences strike a chord in you?

Nothing makes me happy for more than a few minutes.

I am almost always a little nervous, and never really at peace.

What might happen is too terrible to think about; and what is certain to happen is worse.

Nothing really matters.

No one really cares.

The world doesn't think much of me.

I am no good.

"Crap," he said to himself.

He walked home, finished the semester, went to his family's for Christmas, came back, and started on his last semester. He was not recruited by any company but did manage to line up a couple of interviews. He marched around at graduation, took a few pictures, and went home happy that his family still had the big TV and he still had a couple of old friends who liked to drink beer.

Things That Cost Money

They had taught him about interviews at school, and so he had a sense of what to do. His first interview was with a clothes company. The head of sales needed an assistant. He felt real phony pretending to care about clothes, real disappointed to see what they were offering, and real embarrassed when he heard back that he had done well, “but we’re going with someone with more experience.”

His second and third interviews were one day and the next, and the first of these was not so bad, and the other was just a bore.

In the end, he was offered a job from that second interview, and he took it. He was to be a helper in the publicity department of the power company. The pay was pretty good for a first job and this meant that he could get a apartment, and as quick as he could find one, he did. Most people would have considered it small but it was so much bigger than the dorm—and there was no Daryll.

He was early to work his first day, and developed good work habits that helped him please his boss. He was treated well, and people generally liked him. (What was not to like?) Thus began this new phase of his life.

Now that he had money in his pocket he wanted not so much to buy things as to do things. But for this he needed people, people to do things with. Fortunately, right there at work, he found two fun-loving guys—Derek and this other guy who called himself Da Gangster. The boys liked going to sports. They liked going to clubs. They went to a couple of concerts.

They went to this one concert to which they had to travel, and when they got there they couldn't find a room, they had to sleep in the Da Gangster's car. It was cold but they didn't dare run the engine. In the middle of the night, Da Gangster kicked Derek in the head. Derek thought he was being mugged and woke up swinging and punched the windshield, and it was a big laugh.

Yes, they told that story to someone, or to one another under the title "remember when..." just about monthly.

Once they traveled to a resort in Mexico and the truth is that they drank a lot and the lie is that they all got girls.

The boys continued to go to things, and Kirk noticed that he still had money. Thus it was that about a year into his life as a working guy he started to buy things. It started with technology, a big screen super-picture TV. Then came a computer (where he did not spend that much time looking at porn because he was afraid to give them his credit card number). Then came a digital camera (which he ended up using only once).

Surprising himself a little, he started to get into clothes. "Too bad I didn't know all this when I went for that first interview," he thought. He spent big bucks on jackets, and sneakers too.

Then he started to spend to use his sneakers. He joined a gym and, *not* like a lot of people, he went more than twice. He sort of liked working out, and he definitely liked how he was starting to look. It was then that he started to get a little serious about what he ate, but not about what he drank—on Friday and Saturday nights, and on Sunday afternoon.

By now he had moved up at work. Better than that, he found out that moving up meant doing less, and having an office of your own, and getting to go on long lunches. It was at one of these lunches that one of his vendors told him about a position opening at a supermarket chain. It was more money. Kirk applied. He got the job. He made more money. And he didn't really mind that he had to look busy.

He didn't mind because he also looked important. This got the attention of Suzy. Suzy herself got plenty of attention. She was built, and she had this look. (Was it makeup? Who knows? Who cares?) You could see that she liked fun.

Kirk started to hit on her at the copy machine. He had a line. She had a comeback. It became a conversation. Then came lunch. Then dinner. Then those first crucial follow-up phone calls. And then they were going out without ever having said so.

This went on for a while—like a month. Then, after he spent his first night at her place, he suggested a trip—Mexico, to the same place he had been with the boys. They went. They messed around about half as much as he expected; got

mad at each other more than he expected; and he came home in a relationship.

Being in a relationship meant that now they were connected by cell phone. Call on the way in. Call on the way out. Call a few times any night they did not see each other. There was some fun. There were some fights. They got to make up. And still he noticed that she was flirting with other guys at work, and that salesman from the cleaning service, and that big shot from HQ. It ticked him off when sometimes she didn't pick up when he called. She always had a reason but she was never sorry about it. His mind began racing. He began to picture her doing this and that, and things really got worse when he figured out that that slob upstairs was one of her former boyfriends.

Kirk had not counted on these kinds of emotions. What was it? Was it love? Was it jealousy? "And what the hell do you do about it—especially these god-damn former boyfriends?"

He tried to talk to Suzy about it but she did not help at all. She seemed to be insulted about everything, and nothing she said made him feel more secure—just the opposite. He got angry at one point, and called her a couple of pretty nasty names. But she replied with worse, and he slammed the door behind him as hard as he could.

It wasn't worth it—she wasn't worth it, he said—and he meant it.

It was uncomfortable being at work, pretending to ignore her. Of course, she was doing her best to make it worse—looking good, turning it on for everyone else—and so just two weeks later when a position at HQ was posted, he applied even though it meant that he would have to move. Actually, he was thinking that it would be good to move, to get out of here, to try someplace new.

He got the job, which paid more money, and he also found out that things were cheaper out there at HQ. He found that he could afford to buy a house, and so this is what he did. It was a nice house, not a mansion but not a doll house either. Of course, it had more bedrooms than he had beds, but having a house was an investment, and now he started to think about investments. He got into the market. He even started thinking about retirement, and how he would swing it, and what he would do. But retirement was still a long way off, and Kirk did not have the faintest idea of what he would do.

He had checked out the action at HQ—there wasn't much—and so he just worked, joined another gym, and then went home.

He realized he was drinking too much when he fell in his bathroom one night, and then later that same week threw up in his bathroom one morning.

He was alarmed but not scared, and resolved to bring things under control. He was smart enough to talk to someone about it—Maria, at work, married Maria, who was a nice and happy person.

"You're so smart to be honest with yourself, Kirk." Those were Maria's first words about the problem. "That's half the battle right there."

“So what do you suggest for the other half?”

“Rules... and prayer.”

“How’s that?”

“Rules. Give yourself a limit. Perhaps make the rule that you will never drink alone. Keep a diary of how you’re doing. If you want, you can also tell me. And I also think that you should pray. I pray the Rosary... every day.”

“I’m not Catholic.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s a rule that you have to be Catholic, but if the Rosary won’t work for you, try something else. At my church, our priest is always telling us talk to God out of your heart—you will feel that He is listening. I do!”

“I’m not sure I would really know how to do that. Truthfully, I’m not sure I really know what I believe.”

“Then talk to God. Get to know him. He will tell you the truth. And if all of this seems too much, try spiritual reading. I can give you a book or two.”

“I am definitely not ready for books.”

“That’s fine,” said Maria smiling. “So pray.”

As it turns out, this is what Kirk did. He turned the TV off. He sat and he thought. It was hard at first; he thought about all the bad things—mistakes, embarrassing moments, Suzy. Eventually, however, he got the idea that he was gaining some kind of control over his life. He had definitely gotten control of his drinking. But there was more. There was the idea, the hope, that maybe he could figure out life. Maybe he didn’t need to be famous to be somebody. Maybe there were some answers. Maybe there was some purpose.

Then came the call that his mother had died.

Death and Life

Apparently, she had developed a hole in her heart. The end was sudden and unexpected. The family was shocked and confused, and by the next day everyone was medicated in one way or another.

This was the situation as Kirk returned home. Just the sight of him started everyone crying again, and he cried too, and got sick thinking about the viewing. It was one night only, and unreal, and not quite so terrible as he had feared. The next day they closed the casket—now *that* was pretty terrible—and then they went directly to the cemetery. Someone said a few words but nobody listened and the family did not wait for her body to be lowered. Back home they sat around and tried to talk to Jack about what he would do, but he didn't want to talk about it, and so they watched television.

Kirk noticed that his father had aged. Maybe some of this had happened since he moved away; maybe some of it was caused by mom's death, but either way, it was there. "He's next," thought Kirk, "and if he goes slowly it will probably be worse. I gotta get out of here."

Two days later, this is what Kirk did.

He left the scene, but the scene didn't leave him. He tried to grasp the idea that his mother was "gone." "Gone, and what does that mean?" This was a question. He envisioned his father going next, and then his brother.... Life began to look like a cheap painting: flashy here and there but worth nothing. What is it for? Then, finally, for the first time in his life, he began to think about his own dying... getting some bad diagnosis, watching the seconds slip away, no way to stop it, and then... what? Nothing?! Nothing, forever! "Why the hell be born?"

He needed to talk to someone—who better than Maria?

Maria was straightforward: "Your mom is with God, Kirk. She is happy. And you are going to see her again."

Mark, from a different church, was not so sure: "Did she believe in Jesus?"

"And if she did not?" asked Kirk.

"To be saved you have to believe in Jesus. The Bible says this very clearly."

"Or what?" asked Kirk.

Mark did not want to say it but he held up his hands and Kirk knew what he meant. "I know my mother's not in hell," he said.

"I don't want to think so," said Mark, "but the Bible says we have to accept Jesus in order to be saved. Are *you* saved?"

"Are *you* nuts?" Now Kirk was getting angry.

"Man, I'm sorry," came the reply, "but I don't make the rules. God makes the rules and our job is to abide by them."

"So God made up this game and then makes us and makes us play, and if we lose we go to hell. That would be most of us, I guess."

"It's not a game. We are sinners. God is righteous. Justice must be done."

"Nobody asks to be born. Where's the justice in that? And if God wants us to go to heaven, why doesn't he just show up and take us there?"

"We had paradise, man. God gave us everything. But we disobeyed Him and blew it."

"We had paradise? When was that?"

"Eden."

Discussion over.

Later that day Kirk found himself talking to Patrick, who was raised in a religion but wasn't anything now. Mostly, Kirk wanted to blow off steam from his conversation with Mark. "Those guys are all full of it," said Patrick. "I don't know what there is, but it isn't hell, and either way I'm gonna have fun when I can, and I can't wait 'til I retire."

Kirk knew about Patrick's kind of fun—he had been there himself—and he knew it was not much fun. Now he was thinking he had never had much fun. Even when things seemed fun, there was always something missing, and he was happy when it was over. Nothing ever lived up to expectations. No other place was ever much different.

And retirement. What was that to hope for? You are already old—and what are you going to do that hasn't already come up empty? "My frigging life is empty," he thought, and the thought startled him. "Enough of this!" he said. "What are you doing to yourself? You're OK." He went home for the weekend.

He got up late on Saturday, drank too much coffee, and decided to walk some of it off. He walked fast, too hyped and too tired to think about much. He turned left and right for no particular reason. Then he spotted Maria's church, at least he thought that it was Maria's church, Our Lady of Somebody, or something like that. He kept going in that direction. Only a second before he could read it he got the strange feeling that it was something he had seen before. And half of it was, right there under the schedule of "Masses."

How many of the following seven sentences strike a chord in you?

- *Nothing makes me happy for more than a few minutes.*
- *I am almost always a little nervous, and never really at peace.*
- *What might happen is too terrible to think about; what is certain to happen is worse.*
- *Nothing really matters.*
- *No one really cares.*
- *The world doesn't think much of me.*
- *I am no good.*

Faith offers the response of seven very different sentences:

- *God made us for life in heaven.*
- *The way to heaven is a life of faith and love.*
- *God guides us according to His plan for everything He sends into our lives.*
- *We are going to share heaven as a family where all of us are going to be richer for the holiness of each of us.*
- *Jesus was sent to teach the truth, to found the Church, and to accept the cross on which he taught and showed us love.*
- *The Eucharist is the meal we share to be God's family, and it is also God's way to show us again and again the love He showed us first on the cross.*
- *The rest of the life of Jesus was planned to show us that faith can conquer any adversity.*

"Crap," he said.

The next morning he again got up late.

"I'm OK," he said, "why am I thinking about this again?"

“I’m OK. Who doesn’t think I’m OK? I got a good job, and this house, and my car, and I go on vacations. And I have friends; they don’t think there’s anything wrong with me. And my family; I’m good to them; they don’t think there’s anything wrong with me. They think I am a good person.”

“I’m OK. Look at the crap I’m *not* into. I’m ‘there’ for people. And I’m fun to be around.

“I’m OK. I’m fun. I have fun. I have a good life.”

Now there was a pause.

And then he started thinking a lot of things at once. Memories that were sad symbols. A lot of confusion. A little fear. A vague glimpse that life could be better. A vaguer glimpse that he could be better.

More pause. He looked deep into his coffee cup as if for an answer.

Quickly but not suddenly an answer took shape.

“I am not OK,” he said, and for the first time in his whole life he got up and went by his own choosing to church.

The service had already started. Someone was reading something. He found a seat (it wasn’t that difficult), tried to figure out if anyone was looking at him (no one was), tried to see if Maria was there (he didn’t see her), and by now people were standing. There was another reading, something about Jesus, and then people sat down, and the guy in the outfit started to speak. Apparently, he was an amateur mountain climber, and for some reason he was explaining how climbers use ropes, and how the rope helps the person in the lead.

“It’s easy to see how the rope might help a person if someone is above him holding it. But how does the rope help the person who has to bring it up?”

This is how it works. The person in the lead has the rope attached to his waist. He begins to climb. As he climbs, he looks for cracks into which he will put an “anchor.” An anchor is piece of metal in one of various shapes and sizes. Attached to the anchor is a strap which is itself made of metal or some other strong material. At the other end of the strap is a metal ring (called a “carabiner”) which has a gate that can be opened or closed. Finding a good crack, the leader places an anchor into it so that the anchor will jam as it is pulled downward. Now he snaps the rope at his waist into the ring. Since the other end of the rope is in the hands of another climber, he is now safe.

Of course, once the leader climbs above his anchor, he becomes less safe. And because the farther above it he goes, the farther past it he must fall before it can hold him, climbers wisely place new anchors every few feet.

I learned this lesson the hard way.

It had been an easy climb. I had already gone about fifty feet before putting in my first anchor. Even then I was sloppy about it.

Now I had gone another seventy-five feet and had run into a problem. I had reached something of a fork-in-the-cliff. To my right the going seemed rather difficult—with no hope in sight. Though the route to my left also appeared quite difficult, it did seem to lead to a wonderfully spacious ledge. To reach it, I would need to stretch my right leg up to a tiny but adequate edge in the rock, haul myself upward, and jump up from there. I could grab the spacious ledge and soon I would have a seat. All would be well.

To be smart, before undertaking this operation, I did put in a second anchor. Thereupon I reached, I stretched, I hauled, I jumped and, to my surprise, there was no ledge to be grabbed. The ledge had been an optical illusion. My hand had come crashing into rock and now I was holding myself up with no more than the pressure of my palm on a bump on a fairly smooth rock wall.

What was worse, the motion of getting myself into this predicament put a tangle in the rope which, pulling the wrong way from the wrong side, let loose the safety anchor I had just put in.

Somehow this unhappy motion also loosed the first safety anchor I had put in. Because both were still connected to the rings, I watched as they rode the rope all the way down to my partner.

I sized up the situation quickly. There was nothing to do but to attempt to return the way I had come—to undo the jump-up which had put me in this predicament. And, as we all know, it is much harder to come down than to go up.

I called down to my partner. “I am in big trouble,” I said, “you’d better get out of the way; there’s no reason to take you with me.” (And, since there wasn’t, he did.)

There I was. But not for long. A person of limited strength, I knew that I would not be able to hold on indefinitely. I had no more than thirty seconds before I would have to do something. I had that much time to make my peace.

“Please God, get me off of this,” I started to say. I considered making a deal. “If You get me off of this, I’ll...” But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Somehow, at this moment, it came into my mind to ask myself “don’t you believe in heaven?” “If there is no heaven, does it matter if you live?” “I thought you didn’t believe that prayers can change God’s mind.” Ten seconds left, I thought about it. I decided. I said to God “I accept this” and I jumped.

I beat the odds. And my partner and I now took the other fork and we finished that climb.

But my life was changed. I found out I did believe. And I have never forgotten.

All this happened because I had to decide. This, as it turns out, is how we get faith.

Unfortunately, we resist this decision. We also know that if we decide we do believe, we will have to live differently. We know that we will have to let people see that we believe. This is scary. It seems safer to hang on to a vague faith that asks for little. The problem is, a faith that asks little offers little. It does not give the gifts we get if we really believe.

Therefore, we need to decide. And how do we do that? We look at what faith says. We consider the alternative. We see what makes more sense.

Does it make sense that we are just here—yes or no?

Can it be that we were made for death—yes or no?

Is it imaginable that we are here to just kill time? Isn't growing in love that makes us greater—yes or no?

When God made the world, did He know what was going to happen—yes or no?

It was cool enough story, but yes or no. Could it be that simple? Kirk thought about it. He decided that he did not have enough information to say yes or no to these kinds of questions. Nonetheless—and this was a surprise—he felt comfortable where he was sitting. Important things had been talked about and so he did not feel that he was wasting his time. A collection basket was passed around. It passed Kirk because he had walked out of the house without his wallet. Then some sort of ceremony started. Kirk figured it out. It was the bread and wine thing that churches do. There was more movement now but he basically followed what everyone else was doing, and—another surprise—found himself comfortable on his knees. The “this is my body... this is my blood” part was past him before he could react to it, but he did hear when the guy in charge said: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are we who are called to his supper, and now are called to receive him.”

“Called?”

On the way out Kirk asked one of the men at the door “what's the “boss man's name?” “You mean Father Mike?” this question being his answer. Kirk waited until everyone else had passed by and then approached this Father Mike.

“Excuse me, sir, er... reverend. I have some religion questions and I thought that maybe I could talk to you.”

“Sure,” said Father Mike. “When.”

“Whenever. At night if it's OK. I work.”

“How about tomorrow? At 8.”

“That's good. Where do I go?”

“Right there,” said Father Mike, pointing toward the rectory. “I'm happy you want to talk.”

The Conversation

A One Scene Play Within This Story

The scene is the study of a parish house. The walls are wood and there are two comfortable looking chairs arranged cater-cornered around a coffee table on which several magazines have been arranged. There is a crucifix on the wall. There is also, stage right, a desk, behind which is seated Father Mike. The phone buzzes. It's clear that someone has come to see Father Mike. He says "send him up" and walks stage left to open the door. He shakes hands with a young man who enters.

Father Mike: I am so sorry I forgot to ask your name. I do that sometimes.

Kirk: It's Kirk.

Father Mike: I'm Father Mike. Please, come and in and make yourself comfortable.

(Kirk and Father Mike sit down.)

Father Mike: So you have questions. That sounds good.

Kirk: I really don't know where to start.

Father Mike: Do the best you can, and we can sort it out together.

Kirk: I never talked to a father before.

Father Mike: Don't worry about that. I don't think I ever talked to a Kirk, which is too bad because... you know what Kirk means?

Kirk: Means?

Father Mike: Kirk is Old English for church.

Kirk: Sh...oot!

Father Mike: (smiling) Why don't you shoot me a question?

Kirk: OK... life, what is it for?

Father Mike: Life is about getting ready to live with God.

Kirk: That's it?

Father Mike: That's it? That's everything!

This is how it works. God is God. He's cool; He's God; and He could have been perfectly happy being God forever but He says to Himself: "I have a lot to share. I could have kids and they could share all I have. Then He says to Himself, but if I just make 'em, they had nothing to do with it. No, it's better if I make 'em so that they can be involved in making themselves who they want to be. They'll feel better about being who they are, and that's giving them the most I can give them."

So God made the world and put us in it, and He's giving us the opportunity to be involved in making us us. And we do this by growing in faith, which means growing in love, which makes us more like God, and gives God more to work with once we die.

When we die, God takes the seed we made us, and He makes us all that we can be.

Kirk: And what if you don't do it?

Father Mike: Don't do what? All of us are born as babies and all of us begin to grow. None of us ever becomes perfectly faithful or loving, or anything else, but we do the best we can with what we're given, and God does the rest once our work on earth is over.

You see, this is where our faith in God's plan comes into play. I mean it's obvious that we don't choose everything that affects us. We don't but God does. When He made the world He knew what would happen. He knew that things would have come out differently if He had made them differently. So, you see, when God made the world He put into action a plan for everything that would ever happen, and that means everything, and that means everything that has ever happened to us—knowing how we would

react to it! This way He gets us to be people He can love forever, and we get to be involved in our own creation. (It was a great idea.)

Kirk: So, God planned it when people do bad stuff?

Father Mike: God planned it for us to grow. People grow through their sins. Sometimes it takes a while but every experience is part of the process.

Kirk: So, if God has planned everything how are we free?

Father Mike: This is a good question and I am going to give you a good answer, but you have think it through with me, because the answer is not where you expect it.

Kirk: I'll try.

Father Mike: Freedom doesn't mean—it never meant—that we can just choose things that surprise even God. Freedom means that our decisions come from *us*. They come from us being us, me being me, you being you, seeing something, thinking it out, making a decision that expresses “me.” And since everything we decide and do affects us—and who we will be tomorrow—that's how we participate in our own creation. The fact that God makes sure that we become people He can love, instead of something else... well, thinking about this gives us peace and it helps us to do our best.

Kirk: OK, does this mean that it doesn't matter what I do?

Father Mike: Sure it matters. If you love you grow. You give God more to work with when you die. And besides, the idea that God will love you no matter what you do will never make you feel free to do evil. Just the opposite. When we believe that we are loved for who we are—not because we behave the way another person wants—we are always inspired to love back. And what we do is really love, based on the choice of our heart, and not out of fear.

Kirk: But it still doesn't seem fair. I mean some people get lots of help to do good, and other people are born into bad situations and never stood a chance. And what about disasters, like the Trade Center, or the Tidal Wave, that cut short the lives of people who had nothing to do with it?

Father Mike: Fair question. And this is where I need to ask you again to think it through with me, because the answer is not where you expect it. Try to understand: **NOBODY IS IN THIS ON HIS OWN.**

Everybody owes who they are to many other people—their ancestors, others around them now who affect them one way or another, really in one way or another, everyone who has ever lived.

God made it this way. He made it this way so that we would be a family of people who cannot be separated one from another. God, you see, is a family. He is the family we speak of as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What this means is that God is more than a person like we are persons, He

is more than what one person can know by himself.

This means that, in heaven, we are going to share God's life *with each other*. Each person is going to share what they see with everyone else. This way everyone will share all that all of us can see in God.

And this idea, by the way, makes sense of God's plan when, for instance, a baby dies. What's going on according to God's plan?! The baby didn't grow much, it's true. But the baby's death affects history. Countless things will now be different. People will be different. In the end, our family will see God better. And we will share what we see with the baby what the baby made possible by his or her death. Because of what happened, we will be the family best suited to share God's life.

And here's something else: According to God's plan, we are sure to become the family best suited to share His life, BUT how good is our best? That's still to be decided—by us!

Think about it. We don't know what God's plan has for us tomorrow. And today we have to make decisions. Our thinking, and our decisions, will affect the future. Only *after* things have happened that we cannot change... only then do we say "that was God's plan."

You see, we have every reason to fight to do our best, and every reason to live our lives with peace.

Kirk: That sounds nice, but how do we *know*? I mean... a lot of people talk to me. A lot of people talk *at* me. And they don't say what you said. Excuse me, but why should I believe you?

Father Mike: It's not about believing *me*. Basically, it's about believing you. Believing yourself. God knew that lots of people would talk at us. And He knew that we would never get anywhere unless we could see the truth for ourselves. It's there for you too, if you look for it in the right place.

Kirk: I'm willing to listen.

Father Mike: OK Kirk, but you asked a big question. You're going to have to sit still for a big answer.

It all starts with creation, how we know we came from somewhere. Actually, it all starts with knowing, how we know anything.

Try to stay with me on this.

Kirk: I'll try.

Father Mike: Stay with me...

Everyone is born a baby, right?

Kirk: I guess so.

Father Mike: Now, when a baby is born, it is not only ignorant, it is unconscious; it does not consciously feel what it wants; it does not even see.

Now the baby is bombarded by experiences. People hold the baby, feed the baby, all kinds of stuff.

And these experiences cause the baby to develop. And slowly but surely the baby begins to become conscious; the baby begins to see. Now, notice: No one experience makes the baby see. No, this is the result of his whole life's experience so far.

(Now Father Mike puts one magazine on top of another)

But it doesn't stop there. With more experiences, the baby starts to become self-conscious, conscious of himself.

One day the baby can say "I, as in *I WANT...*" It's kind of shocking. And it's something new. It was not there when the baby was just conscious.

(Now Father Mike puts another magazine on top of the pile.)

But it doesn't stop there. With more experience, slowly but surely, the new little person becomes conscious that he exists in a world which is "out there."

But you know what? He knows it but he can't prove it!

Hasn't it ever occurred to *you* that the whole world might be a dream?

Kirk: Actually... yes.

Father Mike: And how do you prove to yourself that it is not? What can you do? Pinching yourself won't do it. What can you do... to prove that the outside world is really outside?

Kirk: (silence)

Father Mike: But you still *know* it.

(Father Mike puts another magazine on the pile.)

But it doesn't stop there.

You keep having experiences. You keep developing inside. And slowly but surely you become aware that the world is not only "out there" but it is "dependable." In other words, the world has its ways that you can count on. It is governed by certain rules. The sun goes down; it gets dark.

Isn't this the basis of science and of reason itself. But, this idea is not itself "rational." It is not scientific.

There is nothing that you can do to *prove* what must happen tomorrow.

But you don't worry about it—and you don't quit being a scientist. You just *know* that the world is dependable.

And this *knowledge* is based on your whole life's experience.

(Father Mike puts another magazine on the pile.)

But it doesn't stop there.

You keep having experiences. You keep developing inside. And slowly but surely you become aware that the world is not only “out there” and “dependable” it is also “dependent.” In other words, it must have come from somewhere.

Now, notice, no one experience teaches us this. Like all the other big ideas that our knowledge is based on, it is the result of our whole life's experience.

Our whole life's experience has made us grow up and see more deeply into the truth. Too bad too many scientists don't understand how knowledge works and so they are blocked from seeing what is more or less obvious to everyone else.

Are you following this?

Kirk: I think so.

Father Mike: Listen, I know it's a lot but I have a few more things I'd like to present to you.

Kirk: Go ahead.

Father Mike: OK, once we know that the world is dependent—that it had to come from somewhere; that there is a God—we can see the truth of everything else we believe.

Think it about. God has to be a person because God has to be at least as great as anything He has made, and of all the things that God has made—that we know about—a person (who can think, feel, etc.) is the greatest thing. Right?

Kirk: Keep going.

Father Mike: God has to be a person who loves because love is certainly the best thing about us. Right?

Kirk: (somewhat uncertainly) Yes.

Father Mike: God must have made us for heaven because a God who loves would never have given us life just to take it away. OK?

Kirk: Keep going.

Father Mike: We know that we're here to get ready for heaven because we're *here*. God would never have asked us to

live, and struggle, and suffer, and die here for anything less.

We know that the way to heaven must be love because, again, love is the best thing we can grow into. Isn't it?

Kirk: I'm still listening.

Father Mike: OK, we know that God has a plan to guide us as we grow—so we will be the people *He* wants us to be—because... well, isn't it obvious that we do not choose everything that affects us?

Who chooses their birthday? Who chooses their parents?

Every day we are affected by things we do not choose, and cannot control.

If we are not in control, surely God is. Would God have made the universe any other way? And can you really imagine a God who *doesn't* know what He's doing? Can you?

Kirk: I'm still working on God period.

Father Mike: (smiling) Fair enough. But if you finally get this far, I think you'll also see that we are going to share God's life as a family because... well, first of all, in a family of people who love each other, isn't this the way it already works? And isn't it obvious, once you think about it, that everyone's life *is* owed to everyone else? And doesn't this idea make perfect sense of God's plan even when some really hard things happen? And we can take it further. Are you OK?

Kirk: I'm OK, I guess.

Father Mike: I hope you feel OK. But anyway... Since we are going to be a family in heaven, isn't it obvious that we ought to be a family here? (This is what we folks call the Church.)

And if God really wanted us to be a family, did *He* have to start that family? I mean... if God doesn't send somebody to speak for Him... who should we listen to? Whose Church should we join?

You see, this is where Jesus comes into the picture.

And doesn't it seem right and beautiful that Jesus would give up his life to teach us the truth?

And doesn't the cross itself—and Jesus' resurrection—*show* us the truth that he was teaching?

And doesn't it seem smart of God to make sure that Jesus had a last supper so that we would have something we could easily repeat where we could see when Jesus committed himself not to run, to take the cross... so we could get the message of the cross "live" without actually having to crucify someone every Sunday?

And besides the cross and the last supper... don't you see that the rest of the life of Jesus—the stuff we know about—was meant to inspire us no matter what we might have to go through: maybe being born poor, not having a human father, being betrayed, being lied about, being rejected?

Is this making any sense to you?

Kirk: I guess so. But why doesn't everybody buy it? Doesn't it bother you that most people don't buy it?

Father Mike: It doesn't *upset* me. Think about what I said. We were made to be a family. The family has to grow up to get to be with God. The lifetime of this family is called history.

I think of this as kind of the beginning. I know we have a long way to go. But I can't imagine a better way to explain life, a way that makes sense of life and still lets God be as good as He must be.

Our job is to do *our* best *today*, and to leave history in God's hands.

And when *my* job is done, I will see from heaven how things came out. And I will see how *you* came out.

(Now there is a long pause.)

Kirk: What would the Church think of me, I think I've done a lot of bad things.

Father Mike: (smiling) Welcome to the club.

(curtain)

The Aftermass

Kirk's head was spinning by the time he left the rectory. He was there for three hours and had asked the hardest questions he could think of. But, in the end, even the problem of evil didn't seem like such a problem. This is what Father Mike explained to him:

If we had been made perfect, we would already be all that we could be. We could not grow. We could not participate in our creation. We could not do what we are here for.

God had to make us imperfect... really imperfect. That's why we are born like we are—ignorant and selfish. This is the reason that we can fail; we can make mistakes; we can be misguided; we can become "sick." This is the reason we can be hurt; and when we're hurt we suffer.

But even in our mistakes, and in our pain, God is at work. He is making us into the family we were meant to be.

When finally he was exhausted from listening, Kirk said "good night" to Father Mike and asked whether he could

call on him again if had more questions. Father Mike said “absolutely” and also gave him something Kirk thought he called a “cataclysm.”

It was a catechism, and Father Mike suggested that he read it and write down whatever questions he might have. “Don’t be embarrassed by any question you might have,” he said. “And I promise that I’ll do my best to give you a straight answer.”

Father Mike also suggested that Kirk keep coming to church and this is what Kirk did. Then he came back with a marked up catechism and a list of questions.

As it turned out, Kirk’s questions came in three categories: questions about moral teachings he didn’t agree with, questions based on bad things he had heard about the Church, and a big question about why God made believing so hard.

Father Mike took on the moral questions one by one but not until he had said this:

“We can’t talk about right and wrong until we are clear about why we are here—to become more like God so that we can live with Him better forever. And we can’t talk about moral teachings until we are clear about why we have moral teachings—to guide our human family to the greatest holiness that it might have.”

Now, one by one Father Mike addressed Kirk’s issues, sometimes surprising Kirk with the reason for a teaching, and sometimes surprising him with the news that the actual teaching was not what he had heard.

Father Mike addressed most of the “bad” stuff about the Church and Church history by talking about history, and the fact that the Church is made of human beings—“quite imperfect in every way”—and the idea that the Church is meant to grow just like humanity, and stuff like that.

About believing Father Mike did more sharing than explaining.

“I understand your question, for sure,” said Father Mike. “For me, too, it seemed a little wrong that believing should be such a leap.”

“Exactly,” said Kirk.

“But having faith still seemed right,” continued Father Mike, “so I had to ask myself, What is God doing? And you know what?”

“What?” asked Kirk on cue.

“I didn’t really get an answer. Not then. I stuck with faith because, as we always say, it sure makes more sense than the alternative... and it offers so much more hope and peace... not to believe offers nothing. So I stuck with it and it grew; and I grew into my answer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said! You grow into it. What I’m trying to say is: as you live your faith it grows; it gets more sure;

it looks less and less like a leap, and more and more like what it is—a person growing up. I grew. I understood. Does this make sense?

“Working on it,” said Kirk.

“It will make sense if you stick with it.”

Kirk kept thinking. As became his custom, he kept walking. Faith got closer. It was clearly better than the alternative, and, in the silence of his searching, Kirk definitely detected that someone was there. He wished things were a little surer but he realized that he could hope for this forever. Finally, he came to his conclusion: “I got one life; I’ve got to take a stand.”

Kirk made another appointment with Father Mike and asked him about the procedure to “join up.” They talked about the options and it was decided that Kirk would be received into the Church in private, with just Maria and her family present because it seemed the natural way to do it.

At the ceremony, Father Mike told a story. It was a story about a Good Friday procession, most likely one of those “parades” Kirk had seen at that church where he grew up. “That year”, said Father Mike, “I was thirty-three, Jesus’ age, according to tradition, when he was crucified. I figured I would only be thirty-three once, and so I assigned myself to carry the cross.”

The cross was real. The crown of thorns was made of real thorns. I had to carry it about a mile and a half. People lined the street and they stared at me as I passed.

It was quite an experience; and more so once I realized that the real crucifixion must have started out quite the same way.

Within a couple of stations, however, the cross started to get heavy. Carrying it began to be a burden and I began to look down, struggling to take it one step at a time. I started looking again to putting it down, and to the shrimp scampi supper that I knew was awaiting me.

Then it hit me. When Jesus finally got to put this down, they nailed him to it.

And if Jesus—God’s beloved Son—had to go through this to get to glory, what should I expect? After all, Jesus was a much nicer guy than me. If he had to go through so much to get to glory, what should I expect?

Thinking this changed me. It has helped not to feel sorry for myself when hard things happen. It has helped not to be angry when I have to deal with problems that in my mind I did not deserve. It has spared me from thoughts that life is unfair.

And it has helped to be grateful for the times in life when things do not go wrong, and to build up strength for those times when God has other plans.

Father Mike went on to explain that the ceremonies that receive people into the Church are supposed to inspire this sort of experience—but rarely do. Now that Kirk was looking for it, he felt it.

Kirk had called his family to tell them about his decision and they said it was “nice” and not much more. He invited them to come but this did not work out. Kirk was disappointed but not discouraged because he was so much happier with his new life.

He had faith without ignorance, purpose without damnation, love of self without conceit.

Because he had learned to love himself, he no longer felt the need for fame, or to compare himself to others, and he was more open to others and less judgmental. He started to like people for real and many started to like him, and look to him.

This included many girls, and nothing in his newfound faith discouraged him from liking it.

Now he was natural when he talked, and when he got a chance he talked about his faith.

He was especially interested in talking with Cindy who was really pretty, and never nasty, and whose company he enjoyed as he had not enjoyed the company of another person before. Of course, he was very eager that she like him too, and that she know him, and perhaps too eager because when they had finally gone out for dinner and he was telling his story, he must have said something that provoked her to say..., he had heard it before..., “I’m OK.”

If you would like to read about what happened next, just go back to the Kirk menu of www.thefaithkit.org/panorama and download “The Four Phases of Falling.”