

Mule's Change of Heart and Mind

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by Tom Peters

Bartholomew got his nickname in grade school. He was in third grade, attending public school going to catechism on Monday nights. It was confusing time for him. In fourth grade, teachers were making a big deal about Abraham Lincoln and nuns in catechism about another Abraham. Bartholomew got the two confused. He eventually found himself questioning a nun. The kids in catechism and in his elementary school class started calling him Bartholo-MULE due to his stubbornness. The nickname Mule stuck.

Mule tried his best to fit in the two strange worlds of public school and the Catholic Church.

Mule tried to squelch his constant urge to speak up and question everything. Mules' parents, the nuns and teachers called him Bart, a name he hated.

Mule's father loved sports and was in WWII. So quite naturally young Mule cherished his GI Joe collection, played baseball all summer long and joined the Cub Scouts. He loved WWII movies and believed in the American dream. When JFK was elected, his patriotism reached a crescendo.

In eighth grade he shared the nation's grief and loss when JFK was assassinated. The American dream seem to be wilting. Girls and Bob Dylan replaced GI Joe and baseball. Mule continued to try his best to please classmates around him using humor and daring, stupid stunts for precious attention.

Where his father cultivated a fear of black men in the nearby big city; Dylan pulled his attention to human injustices in a world he knew very little about. His parents, the all-white public schools and television fed racism into Mule's psyche while Dylan and other songwriters and poets started scratching at the same discomfort and confusion, he felt in grade school and Monday evening catechism classes.

Mule believed in the American dream and God. By the end of Junior High School, cracks began appearing in these two beliefs.

In high school, these cracks deepened, and the result was Mule's discovery that being docile at home kept his parents' content. On the street, rebelliousness took over his persona and his newfound popularity was stimulating. However, by choosing edgy friends, skipping classes and basically becoming a juvenile delinquent; Mule came up one credit short of graduating with his high school class and soon after ending up working at the same auto factory his father worked in.

Without a college deferment in the late 60's, Mule was drafted, and Vietnam bound. The sobering reality of assembly line work and the U.S. Army exposed him to a bigger world, full of contradictions and complexities. Mule met and befriended many men and women of color and other religious outlooks in the auto plant and Army. These relationships helped to make a dramatic change in his perspective. He began to read with a passion. Marx, Engels, Baldwin, Frankl and Vonnegut opened his eyes to the profound contradictions and complexities of present-day life.

Mule would survive combat in Vietnam and use his GI bill to go to college and further expand his new profound awareness of his young self. He faced and examined his white privileged upbringing and accepted his embedded racism and questioned his spiritual state of mind. He truly embraced his own form of personal enlightenment.

Years later, snuggling with his wife and their two toddlers, he beamed with the joy, feeling his journey toward positive growth. The American dream was no longer an abstract, 1950s Pollyanna view. No, the American dream was the ongoing struggle to strive and give witness to this country's attempt to face its scarred past and begin to realize its collective, diverse potential. Mule also found a somewhat comfortable fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist community that helped open his heart to embrace a loving higher being that lived within all living beings.