

I'm not a big fan of the way God answers my prayers. I tell him I need help, he sends me a catastrophe. I tell him I need a blessing, he sends me trouble. It's a very annoying way to run a Universe, in my opinion. I keep pointing this out to our Heavenly Father, but so far he doesn't seem willing to change the policy.

Mind you, I'm not saying that, in the end, I didn't get help, and that I didn't get a blessing. Sure I did. But was all the rest of it really necessary? Is a simple, no-frills miracle out of the question these days? Give me a break, O Lord, for yea verily I am sick of this.

At first I thought it was a gift, or at least a really cool byproduct of the coma. Now I'm not so sure. I had one of those weird near-death experiences you hear about on Oprah, or read about in The Enquirer. I had always thought those stories were a complete load of crap. In fact I kind of still do, but for the annoying but undeniable fact that it happened to me.

What happened to me was that I could see through people. I don't mean like they were all the sudden made of plexiglass or something, so that I could literally see through them. No, it's more like I can see through their facade, their mask, their false front. How many times a day do you see someone and say something inane like "Hey, how are you doing?". Yeah, me too. A million times a day I say this, and I don't think I've ever once gotten a straight answer. In fact, most of us would be offended if we got the truth in reply.

"Hey, how you doin'?"

"Well, my wife just left me, my kid is dealing heroin, and I've got this lump-lookin' thing over my left nipple."

Whoa! Who wants to hear that? That's a little too much info while I'm standing in line at Starbucks, you know? I think we are conditioned to ask, simply out of courtesy, as a way to acknowledge that we see the human being in our co-workers, acquaintances, or fellow bus-riders or what-have-you. That's a good thing – it's a sign that we don't see others as either an obstacle to our happiness, or a means to our ends, both of which are attitudes that lead to callous indifference, which

leads to dehumanization of the other, which leads to, well, name your evil. I get that. I think I always got it.

Asking someone how they're doing is the oil that keeps the engine of society from overheating and blowing up. Common courtesies are the glue that holds a society together. I really believe that. But that doesn't mean I ever once wanted a literal answer to what is clearly the most rhetorical of all rhetorical questions.

Lucky me, huh, to have the good fortune to get knocked on the head, fall into a coma, and wake up right smack in the middle of a Stephen King plot.

I don't even like Stephen King. Hey, thanks God.

So, it took me about a few days to figure out what was happening. I stayed home most of the first week after I got out of the hospital, and I live alone, so there wasn't a lot of interaction with other people. Then I went to the bank.

It was the scariest trip to the bank anyone ever had this side of *Dog Day Afternoon*.

The first person I saw was the security guard. I have a nodding acquaintance with him, so, you know, I nodded. And, naturally, I said the usual: "Hey, how you been?".

Well ... this was a mistake.

Because immediately I saw every horrid thing that was going on in the man's life. His wife has emphysema. His house is in foreclosure. One of the bank managers is suing him on a bogus sexual harassment claim. He's pretty near suicidal. Yet every time I see him, he's got a smile and a kind word for me. It made my head spin.

And it just got worse. Every person I encountered in line, I got the same thing. Very pleasant, polite people. Kind, generous, quick with a smile; lending me a pen when the one chained to the counter wouldn't work, or letting me go before them because they had a ton of transactions and all I had was a check to cash. Every single one of them, at the very same time, burdened beyond my comprehension with the worst things you can come up with: divorces, betrayals, violence, insanity,

emptiness, hopelessness, financial ruin, loss of intimacy, and death. Every person, right down to the little girl who was so thrilled to get a sucker from the teller, dealing with monumentally crippling horribleness. But there wasn't a hint of it on their faces, or in their posture, or in their words. No one could have known. I surely would never have suspected. Except for this “gift” from God, in answer to my prayers. Curse is more like it.

And it didn't stop. That's one of the things that bugged me the most. Hey Jesus, the whole bank experience was an eye-opener, thanks. I get it; can I take my lesson and go on with my life now? No? Really? More?

Yeah, more. I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't do anything to escape it. I couldn't even watch the television, THE TELEVISION, without being immediately present in the mystery and misery of each person I saw.

I wish I could convey to you just how disturbing a thing this is.

“So what was the point?” I hear you asking. Don't think I didn't spend most of my timing asking myself, and my higher power, this very selfsame question. Why? Why was I of all people exposed to this peculiarly miserable way of seeing the world. What did I do, so to speak, to deserve this?

Well, I prayed.

Yeah, that's the best I can figure it. All this was in response to a prayer. They say that God cannot ignore a prayer made at the consecration of the host during the Holy Mass. I'd always hear that, but never tried it. Usually during Mass I'm trying to keep my mind from wandering, or carrying on imaginary conversations with atheists about whether or not God exists. Sometimes I win, sometimes not. But that one particular Sunday I prayed, just kind of right off the top of my head, as the priest elevated the host and as the bells rang, “God, help me to love people better.”

Really, to be perfectly honest, I was hoping for a reply that was a bit more instantaneous, a bit more uncomplicated. You know, like just having more love for my fellow man kinda planted in my soul. Maybe in some supernatural quasi-magical God-way; perhaps a way that *didn't* involve a near

fatal accident and a creepy psychic power. That would have been nice. That would have been okay. At very least, I can guarantee you that was the way I meant it when I prayed it.

And even though I categorically dislike the way he went about it, I cannot say that God didn't answer my prayer. Yeah he did. Six whole months of feeling and knowing the internal pain of every single soul I encountered. I don't know if I could have survived anything longer. But now, as a result, I can't meet anyone without immediately loving them, because I know they're suffering and fighting some terrible battle in their life, and it somehow makes them immediately precious to me. I see them the way God sees them, I guess is the easiest way to say it. It sounds kind of sugary-sweet and dopey, I know. But that's not how it is. It's fairly aggravating if you want to know the truth. But there it is. I'm a regular Mother Teresa these days. I won't get in to the details, because it would sound conceited, and you wouldn't believe it anyway, but I'm a charity machine these days. My life, as I knew it before – gone. I'll probably be up for canonization after I die or some crazy thing; maybe be on one of those prayer cards you see at church. I'm not kidding, that's exactly what's going on in my life. I'm a frickin' saint over here. I can't help it.

Thanks God, thanks a lot for that. No, really.

I'm not saying I regret what happened or anything like that, because I don't. I'm more than happy to be a conduit of God's grace and all that. But come on. I didn't sign up for this. Love is hard, you know? And don't fool yourself, God is a God for grownups, not half-assed dreamers. I learned the hard way.