

The Smedley Review

Summer, 2002

Vol. XIV, No. 2

Welcome to our Summer 2002 newsletter.

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Gospel According to Superman

An amazing percentage of our cultural experience is Jewish in origin. The 20th century bore the marks of Freud, Einstein, and Marx, for example. Kirk, Spock, and all three stooges, are Jewish. The Hollywood dynasties of the Meyers, et al enriched popular culture. Samuel Goldwyn made family-friendly movies because, he said, "It is better to sell four tickets than two!" I suspect that he was also motivated by a lingering respect for decency.

In 1933 two 17-year old friends, artist Joe Shuster and writer Jerry Siegal, created a pop culture icon. Inspired by the story of Moses, they invented the original comic book super hero -- wondrously saved from certain death as an infant, then appearing from obscurity to wield extraordinary powers and defeat evildoers ... you know the story. (Joe drew the art work on a breadboard, except for Thursdays, when his wife kneaded the Sabbath challah!) A later industry giant, Stanley Lieber, is better known by his trade name Stan Lee. Stan has a picture in his home of Ben Grimm dressed in full Chassidic regalia. His Amazing Spiderman can be seen in a new super hero chick flick of that name, if you want a benign way to relax a few hours.

Now every adolescent boy dreams of being bigger and better than he is. Behind this universal longing, however, the super hero also demonstrates the traditional Jewish messiah concept: big, brawny, righteous. Supernatural in ability, victorious in strife, defender of the weak, confounder of powerful evil.

But hey, the Jewish people can't assume they'll have the messiah market to themselves forever! For a thought-provoking meditation on the Hindu messiah model (personified transcendent intervention into human affairs), see M. Night Shylamayan's film *Unbreakable*. Shylamayan's American roots show in the movie's feel for gritty blue-collar Philadelphia. *Unbreakable* examines the super hero motif on several levels, and ends up with a counterpoising evil avatar, who deviates as far from the norm as the Bruce Willis protagonist, but in the opposite direction. The Hindu godhead can't do without Shiva, destroyer of worlds, who "gives balance to the force." Not an ultimately hopeful perspective, here!

Meanwhile, there's my Messiah, if you can Handel a reticent savior. *The Gospel According to Superman*, published in the 70's, made one memorable point.

Throughout the decades of his storied life, Superman responded promptly to the urgent summons of his friends. And his associates have remained the same. No evidence of personal growth. No maturing, ripening, developing of character. As any Christian will tell you, it's those times when our "signal watch" does not bring the expected deliverance that we grow up.

Consider the contrasting components of the mission statement Jesus received: "Thou art my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." The term "Beloved Son," from Psalm 110, speaks of a triumphant King. The expression "in whom I am well pleased," from Isaiah 42, speaks of a suffering servant. Majesty in mufti. Power in plainclothes.

Life with a reticent Savior is interesting to the max. We walk by faith and not by sight. Our Lord does not issue impersonal directives from a distant throne in Jerusalem. Rather, He sits at the right hand of power in heaven, and reigns in our hearts, no matter where we live. We share a regular fellowship meal with Him. We read how He handled situations when personally on the scene, and when acting through His agents. We gradually see the program, we get with the program, we pour our energies into our assigned duty stations, and we expect to be surprised. Since we are not God, 75% of our efforts might go to waste (fall by the wayside, etc.). Since He is God, we expect 30-fold, 60-fold, and 100-fold returns on the projects that do pan out. But we do not know ahead of time what the future holds. Which misfires will break our hearts. Which off-the-cuff responses will bring inconceivable blessings.

Life with a reticent Savior is purposeful, passionate, and adventurous. Knowing that our God wants our lives to succeed gives zest to our risk-taking and our labors. Being in on what God is up to is the ultimate "piece of the action." Prayer is an adventure, since every request can reveal new plot twists in the stories of our lives. Having omniscience at work on the other end of the "request line" guarantees surprises.

Contrast this to the experiences of non-christians who attempt to manipulate reality through witchcraft, psychic powers, or contractual agreement with some entity offering "three wishes." Said a valued mentor,

While covenant breakers sometimes invoke incantations or other formulaic appeals to the occult supernatural realm, their requests suffer from these major defects: their own covenant-breaking status, the implacable hostility of their wish-providing sources, their own lack of omniscience, and the lack of omniscience of their wish-providing sources.

We live in a supernatural universe, fallen, but originally good. We have the earthly and heavenly resources we need to nudge it back towards its original specifications. There's no guarantee of immediate success, or even of our lives. Still, this is the only life worth living!

Uncle Sister Ant

Dori and I set out for the grocery store one night for what turned out to be an unexpected odyssey. She was driving her "new" car with more flair, panache, and comfort than I'd seen her exhibit in the van. As we headed down Revere Road the cell phone rang, and a lady with a kitten returned Dori's persistent calls. As we chatted, I got directions and directed the new driver down 54, Garrett, and across 15/501 -- locally famed high-traffic roads. She performed like a champ.

On the way back, with kitten, accoutrements, and gratitude, I drove, Dori bonded. We now have a new pet. It's about time -- Laura had re-invented the pet rock, and was naming the ants. The big black one was "Uncle Sister Ant." Timothy now has two "peers" to play with, who are not supposed to pick him up or invade his bathroom sanctuary. He also has a "momma" with carte blanche to convey and caress. Dori seems to have that domesticating touch -- I still recall a fierce bad tomcat who was rolled around in a doll stroller, looking astonished!

Joining the Conversation

Language has instrumental, phatic, and liturgical use, one researcher decided after spending time with Melanesian islanders. It's interesting to watch a child move from the instrumental level, of using words to meet basic needs, to the phatic level, using words to build a sense of community. One day Laura was pestering Dori with question after question, and finally explained why: "Maybe if I ask the right questions Sissy will talk with me." We chuckle to hear how carefully and precisely she enunciates her declarations. "Now I am going to pretend that ... " One time, when I asked Laura what she was doing with my tape measure she replied, "I am measuring something big and invisible."

Two sad, too sad, foreign films

Censorship is good for the arts. Searching for the right and kosher metaphor to carry across your point (after all, that's what a meta is phor!) stretches your creative muscles. After the Russians left, the Czech republic elected a truth-telling playwright, Vaclav Havel, as prime minister. In the aftermath of independence, though, the vibrant live stage in Prague lost much of its audience, its elan, its raison d'etre.

(more)

Iran is filled with people who love Americans. On September 12, 2001, vast crowds in Tehran lit candles and grieved with our shocked nation. One reason for this affection is the hatred their ruling mullahs hold for the USA. A pundit I loathe said in a rare moment of insight,

The legacy of the war with Iraq is an Iranian population in which two-thirds of the Iranian population is under 25 and where the average age of the mullahs who conducted it is somewhere around 75.

Most of the generation of students who launched the revolution are dead. Their children view the revolution as a catastrophe that killed their parents and has stolen their freedom.

Meanwhile, the Iranian cinema is flourishing.

If you enjoy seeing universal human themes played out against an exotic background, be sure to rent Majud Majudi's film *The Color of Paradise*. The filmmaker obviously loves his country, and spectacular rural scenery frames the human melodrama. Keep in mind the theme of generational conflict as you watch a lad who longs for familial connections. A venal, self-centered, shame-ridden man trying to distance himself from his blind son. A traditional matriarch who worries about what her son is doing to his own soul, by his refusal to do right by the grandson. I found it interesting to note how this Muslim filmmaker used a Christian metaphor -- the father is repeatedly shown washing his hands.

Finally, take note of which characters actually get to "see the face of God," the stated goal of life for Muslims as well as Christians.

Japanese legend says that fireflies are the souls of combat casualties. Critics acclaim *Grave of the Fireflies* as the epitome of Japanese anime. Some call it the greatest anti-war movie ever made. When you see it, note the contrast between the lovingly detailed landscapes and the comic-book line-art human characters. The ground-level view of incendiary bombing raids on a civilian town pleads the cause of the noncombatants who pay the price for military machinations. Fireflies, and lots of them, feature prominently.

The male characters wear westernized garb. The females, with one exception, traditional Japanese clothing. Towards the end of the film the absent owners of the town castle come home, dressed like American flappers, blithely indifferent to the ordeal of the peasants.

The movie is based on an autobiographical novel. The filmmaker chose to use anime in order to avoid the cross-references human actors bring to any film, and to keep the focus on the story. Warning: this movie focuses on children, but it is not a children's cartoon. Gregory strongly

endorses it, Dori prefers not to see it.

On Learning Italian

Before lifting the rear of a VW beetle, warm up by lifting the front.

My first attempt at Hebrew fizzled, impaled on the bizarre vowel points. Hey, it's still on my list of things to do, since Hebrew is the language God used to lay down the law for humanity. And if I ever want to do business with a civilized middle-eastern nation, major linguistic choices are Hebrew or Turkish!

As compensation for this temporary setback, I pounced on a language closer to home, within the Indo-European family tree. After all, I'm documenting equipment made by Italian firms. Italy is an overlooked industrial powerhouse. Were it not for southern Italy, Northern Italy would be the 3rd or 4th richest nation in Europe! Reason enough for a dude who hates opera to *parlare italiano*.

Bootstrap loader

When you turn on the power to your personal computer, the CPU is hard-wired to read its orders from a "boot ROM." This semiconductor memory device contains just enough information to tell the CPU where to look for the rest of the information -- to "pull itself up by its bootstraps." You see a few cryptic words flash on your monitor, then the hard drive goes clickety clickety clickety until the operating system is on board, and you are ready for business.

So what does this have to do with learning Italian? Well, a primary resource book for this endeavor is A.G. Hawke's *The Quick and Dirty guide to Learning Languages Fast*. Hawke, a US Army Special Forces veteran, lays down a lean, mean, stripped-down, go-for-the-jugular approach to mastering a foreign language. How much to you need to do what you want to do? In what order should you absorb it? And how can you do it in a week?

Surprisingly, Hawke makes sense. Get yourself the "bootstrap loader" subset of the target language, and you'll (a) know enough to get by, and (b) know enough to download additional vocabulary and grammar as needed. And yes, it can be done in a week, if you are more disciplined than I am!

Another resource I strongly recommend is *Italian by Association*, a "Link Word" system book by Michael Gruneberg. (He also has versions available for French, Russian, German, and Spanish). This memory researcher makes it easy to accumulate a 300-400 word vocabulary in the target language in the course of a single weekend (9 hours), by using a well-organized system of mnemonic techniques. I've tried it, it works!

Finally, download the freeware flashcard system Vocatude from <http://www.vocatude.com/uk/> and

have fun. You can structure the drill several different ways, including multiple choice. In a language with a lot of cognates, you can usually guess the right answer, or see a connection to the right answer if you guess wrong. Another 20 minutes, another 50 words under the hood.

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?

One, but it must really WANT to change! Learning a foreign language is work. No two ways about it! Yes, stacking up stuff in short-term memory can be fun. Pushing it into long-term storage, however, takes a significant amount of energy. Rote repetition. Drill. Mastering and applying paradigms.

There are resources for getting past the boot-up stage. The Barrons *Learn Italian the Fun and Easy Way* books are good. The *Italian in 10 Minutes a Day* is also helpful. Berlitz tapes give you basics plus pronunciation. I checked *Just Listen and Learn Italian* (Book + three CDs) out of the library. The subtitle calls it *The Fastest Way to Real Italian*, and the CDs feature real Italians speaking real Italian at normal speeds. The founding pastor of our last church, who had been a missionary to Mexico for 12 years, says hearing and repeating a language live, on the hoof, is the best way to acquire good pronunciation. The folks who painstakingly pre-assemble phonemes, then blurt out their phrases, never really do sound fluent.

How close am I to being able to add the word "Italian" to my resume? Now, the colloquial nexus of any language is a moving target. A native speaker who's been away from Italy for ten years amuses her family on a return visit with her quaint, and dated slang. So no, I'm not seeking native fluency!

Maybe after I read through the New Testament twice, and complete a book or two of grammar, I'll lay claim to Italian. This seems doable within the next year -- Italian has cognate words from music, foods, French, dimly remembered ecclesiastic Latin, and New Testament Greek. Italy was our primary source of immigrants in the early 20th century, and a sense of how Italian sounds is part of American popular culture.

I trust this brief essay will encourage any friends who've been wanting to add another language to their repertoire.

No man can estimate what is really happening at the present *sub specie aeternitatis*. All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success -- in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in." (J.R.R. Tolkien)
