

From the forthcoming memoir, Mercy upon Mercy. Andrew Galli was an atheist who was too smart to believe in God and only cared about success. But when his bookkeeper murdered their biggest investor, Andrew was pulled into an international investigation featured on America's Most Wanted. This chapter tells of God audibly speaking to Andrew in solitary confinement. Please note: The client has asked for his name to be changed because he's delaying publication for business reasons.

CHAPTER 10: THE ENCOUNTER

Jailhouse conversions are cliché, and I generally discount such stories because they seem born from a combination of fear and a desire to pray one's way out of a self-inflicted tragedy. That's what I saw in the inmates who clutched a Bible and quoted scripture in my face. As you can guess from my reaction to Aunt Gemma and Raul, their methods were counterproductive on me. My story, I think, is different than that. I don't see it as a jailhouse conversion as much as, in the words of Psalm 46:10, being forced by the Maker of the Universe to be still and discover "I am God." That is why, for thirty years, I kept the following story a secret, even from my wife. Does that stem from a little bit of residual pride? Perhaps. But also, I fear that people are going to think I'm either insane or delusional—so much so that I've repeatedly asked Josh, "Do you think this sounds crazy?" It's one thing to logically defend the reasonability of God; it's another to claim a mystical experience. But this event is the crux of my life. More than Dad's death, the murder, or my release, my entire life can be divided into two sections: before and after the "Encounter." So, all I can do is tell my story and let you judge it based on what you are learning about me.

This is what happened. About a year after my arrest, I was in my cell, still going through seemingly endless documents for hours at a time. By this point, solitary was wearing on me, and I struggled to keep my mind as sharp as it had been, but I was still a fully convinced atheist. I didn't believe in God. I didn't believe in superstition. I didn't believe in the supernatural. Then I heard an audible voice, a male voice, speaking as clearly as if I were wearing Bose headphones. It said,

Andrew, you will know sorrow, but only for a season.
Then no longer your will, your dreams, or your desires.
But only my will, my dreams, my desires.
And I will be near you and walk with you all the days of your life.

I leaned back in my seat and, being the logical person I was, thought, *I'm going batshit crazy. I just heard someone talk to me but there's no one else here. Ergo I'm having a nervous breakdown.* Even as my mind was reeling, I grabbed a pen and wrote what I heard, but I was too embarrassed to say anything about it to anyone. I didn't want anyone to think I'd lost my mind, but I could not deny the absolute reality of what occurred.

Over the years, I frequently doubted that God had spoken to me. I'd wonder if it had been a schizophrenic episode—I knew how absolutely convincing those could be. But I had never experienced anything like it before or since. Then I'd consider the words themselves. Throughout my sentence, I'd frequently think, *You were under a lot of pressure back then. Maybe you just heard something on TV or read it somewhere, and your psyche internalized and personalized it.* So, when I got out, I went online (an indescribably bizarre experience because the internet essentially didn't exist before I went in) and googled it, sentence by sentence, never finding an alternate source. But perhaps the clearest indication that these words didn't come from me was that they were not particularly meaningful to me at the time. It was only over the following decades that they would become in equal parts encouraging and prophetic. Rather, in that moment, the power of God's words was simply that he'd spoken to me.

There is one more event that I'm reluctant to mention because you may think I was looking for God in every little coincidence, but, at the time, I was still very eager *not* to see God anywhere. In my mind, he was still a fairy tale for the feeble. Anyway, not once in the entire year that I had been in my cell had I seen anything outside my little slat of a window. The morning after the encounter, a white dove—a biblical symbol of God's Spirit—landed just outside my window and stayed there for some time. The following morning, it returned. Then the day after that, and again after that. Every morning for the next two years, that dove visited me. Are there non-supernatural explanations? Of course, but the timing and duration are not reasonably explicable via naturalistic means. In spite of my logical drive, seeing that dove every morning warmed my heart and drove my hunger to further understand. When I later read Thomas

Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*, he provided a framework that made the dove more meaningful for me:

“The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God.”

My logic rebelled against my heart's instant warming to something that smelled of God. I'd look at the dove outside my window and think, *It's just a common bird that found a good spot to perch*. But the other side of me would respond, *Why a white dove? Why now and here? Why now every day since the Encounter? And why do I feel this warmth?* Again, I'm not entirely comfortable sharing this with you; I'm still afraid it makes me sound crazy. I must leave it to you to decide. If the dove was *not* a God thing, it still strikes me as an insane coincidence. Either way, I remain grateful for the hope that little dove gave me and the way it drove me to God.

Returning to the days immediately after hearing the voice—I realized that, if I wasn't going crazy (still a big “if”), I had to open my mind to the *possibility* that there was something bigger than me. I still didn't consider it *likely*, but I could no longer hold to my dogmatic assertion that the supernatural was super-stupid. The day after the Encounter, a Catholic priest named Father Oscar knocked at my cell for the first time ever. Again, I couldn't ignore this coincidence and told him—and only him—about my experience.

He listened without flinching, then said, “You had a mystical encounter with the Living God.”

His reaction, or lack of one, was very surprising to me, but I still was inwardly scornful. *Mystical encounter?* I thought. *Is that what the kooks call it?* Maybe 5 percent of me was willing to consider the possibility.

Shortly after this, they threw another inmate into my cell, also for the first time ever. After having been in solitary for so long, I'd gotten accustomed to being alone and felt like it was my space, so having another person come in and “take over” the tiny cell felt oppressive. Worse, the man was homeless—his jail uniform was probably his first change of clothes in years—and his stench filled the tight space. When he took off his shoes and stretched out, I saw filth-caked toes and nails that curved into gnarled, yellow tips. I had a visceral reaction born out of the arrogance that marked my life. *Jesus! Of all the people to put in my cell*, I thought. *Can*

you get this offensive person out of here? It wasn't really a prayer, but God took it as one and answered it in his own way.

The following day, I had a court appearance and found myself riding the Department of Correction's (DOC) bus. We came to a stop, and I recognized it as the same intersection where I'd been so contemptuous of that inmate with gilded teeth. Looking down, I saw a yuppie in a convertible Mercedes staring back at me like *I'm* the piece of shit. I slumped back in my seat and broke down. For the first time, I saw the blackness of my own heart and felt ashamed. I finally recognized that I, Andrew Galli, was not a good human being. I was the offensive person. This convicted the hell out of me (and I mean "hell" in the proper sense) and was how God began to answer my prayer—by removing the offensiveness from within *me*. I still get emotional when I tell this story and feel afresh his great mercy toward me, the "chief of sinners."

The next day, something in me had changed. I came down from the top bunk and engaged my cellmate as a human being. I learned his name—Hollis. As we talked, one man to another, I learned Hollis's story and experienced compassion for him (a novel experience for me). The jail did not provide basics like toothpaste (or deodorant) so I bought him some things he needed. By the time he left, two weeks later, we parted as good friends, and I genuinely missed him. I later came across the story of St. Francis and the leper, in which St. Francis was disgusted by lepers but knew his disgust was wrong. He prayed to see Christ in the leper, and that changed everything. In the same way, Mother Teresa has talked about seeing God in the poorest of the poor. How great the mercy of God that he would answer St. Francis's prayer for one who wasn't even asking, and do it overnight.

At this point, I hadn't had a conversion experience and was still pretty much convinced I was batshit crazy because I heard a voice. But I couldn't shake the feeling that all the coincidences had some larger significance. The priest visiting me. My new cellmate. Seeing the yuppie at that intersection. My emotional response on the bus. This is what I find so interesting: God did not start with my mind. That would come later. He started by melting my heart. This was when I started to recognize the Encounter as a God thing: when my heart started to bleed. I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. I was always the guy who never cried, even as a baby. Yet, my eyes watered at my own shame.

Father Oscar came back a week later with two books, *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross and the aforementioned *Seeds of Contemplation*. These books gave me some context

for what I'd experienced, and I was down to only 70 percent sure that I was having a nervous breakdown. If you're already a Christian, you may be thinking, *Just believe already!* But you have to understand, that meant breaking with fifteen years of deep-seated atheistic beliefs—and conceding that Aunt Gemma and Raul might not have been such kooks after all. And yet, reading Merton and St. John encouraged me to be still and know that God was God. I began to equate prayer to sitting in silence and feeling his warmth fill me. But, to someone who was so driven by rationality, this just took me back to “I'm batshit crazy.”

On another visit, Fr. Oscar brought me some writings from Blaise Pascal, a French seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and philosopher. “You may know of Pascal as a scientist,” he said. “But you might want to read about a religious experience he had because it sounds a lot like yours.” When Pascal was thirty-one years old, about the same age I was at the time, he struggled with faith and reason and God's place in this world. Then he had a life-changing mystical experience and wrote words now called the “Memorial.” It was so pivotal that he kept a copy sewn into his coat so it could always be near him. I knew him to be one of the most brilliant minds of his generation, but it was the passion and wildness of his words that slipped past all my defenses. I think they're worth quoting in entirety so you can see why.

FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob

not of the philosophers and of the learned.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

GOD of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Your GOD will be my God.

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD.

He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel.

Grandeur of the human soul.

Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have departed from him:

They have forsaken me, the fount of living water.

My God, will you leave me?

Let me not be separated from him forever.

This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified.

Let me never be separated from him.

He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel:

Renunciation, total and sweet.

Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.

Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth.

Not to forget your words. Amen.

My eyes teared up as I read this, which really bothered me. But that wasn't a one-off event. Someone could mention anything about God and my eyes would inexplicably water. As I said, I was never known for being emotional, so something was clearly happening to me. On another level, Pascal's statement dumbfounded me. He was far more brilliant than I, yet had also experienced the Encounter. Clearly, he wasn't insane, and (maybe) neither was I. God finally had me in his grip, and I acknowledged that he existed. God had spoken to me, and that changed everything.

Before I continue my story and explain how I went from general theism to becoming a follower of the resurrected Christ, you need to understand that what I'm going to share in the next chapter didn't happen overnight, and I still can't point to a singular moment of conversation when I said the "sinner's prayer." It was more of a drawn-out process, lasting all seventeen years that I spent in prison. During this time, I continued to correspond with my Aunt Gemma. For whatever reason, I initially avoided telling her what was happening in me. Instead, I said, "I'm finding it easier to believe in God." She read between the lines and basically responded, "Andrew, you remind me of Jacob, who wrestled with God all night long. You've been fighting against him your entire life, but he's been fighting for you."¹ It took me years to understand what she meant, but now I can see how God was pursuing me like a jealous lover (as the Bible describes him), doing whatever it took to get me. Throughout that entire time, God was working

¹ Genesis 32:22-32.

on and in me. Teaching me to depend on him. Developing my compassion. Quieting my hyperactive mind. I left prison as a very different man and, in so many ways, my success is a direct product of that experience.