



Where are all my Pagan Babies?

Hannah Draeger Ross

Years ago I was a third-grader at a small parochial school in New Jersey. It was the mid 1950's and America was still naïve compared to the present day. We had not learned to doubt what we were told.

There was a practice in those days of black and white TV to pray for Christian missionaries who were trying to spread the word of God. This was especially true in China where most of the so-called "Pagan Babies" lived.

The children of the 1950's were largely unaware that China was a huge country filled with majestic temples and religious beliefs that spanned centuries. We had only "The Map" to lead us.

There was a gigantic map of the world rolled up on the very top of our classroom blackboard. It was periodically rolled down to expose the countries on planet earth in different radiant colors. China was Red, America was blue, and New Jersey was a tiny area on the edge of the United States.

Older students told younger students that you could dig a hole through the earth and end up in China. We did not doubt any of it.

The fact was that our world history books left out quite a bit. We did learn that the adventurer *Marco Polo* had brought back spaghetti and fireworks from China. I loved spaghetti and fireworks but truly feared the Chinese.

I feared them because of what the nuns told us.

The nuns told stories of visiting missionaries who had been drowned, cut up and thrown out of moving trains, all by "the Chinese."

Yet, we took it for granted that our missionaries were supposed to go to places like China and baptize all the babies they could get their hands on.

“No-one gets into heaven without *being* baptized! “ Sister told us again and again.

We were told that those who died without being baptized ended up in a place called “*Limbo*.” At first I visualized all the little kids shimmying under a “Limbo stick” like they did in the popular “Beach Movies.”

But, my best friend Ralphie Esposito told me that “*Limbo*” was like “being at an Amusement Park without being able to go on the rides.”

Those poor little babies could see everybody else having fun but they couldn’t actually see “*The Face of God*.”

When Sister used the term, “*The Face of God*” I always envisioned the actor Lionel Barrymore, to me he possessed the perfect eyes, strong cheekbones and mandatory bushy eyebrows.

Then, amazingly I found out that by paying twenty-five cents I could baptize my very own pagan baby.

Any student donating a quarter could pick out a Christian name of their choosing that was then hand-printed on a cardboard cut-out of a head of a baby angel with cherub wings.

A detailed list of names was then somehow secretly delivered to our foreign missionaries who would then baptize the infants in a far away river.

The hallways of our entire school slowly filled with little angels each bearing names selected by the students.

Sister Joseph Michael said we could not use names like “Tammy” or “Sandy” as they were not truly biblical names.

Somehow one angel head bore the named “Rock”(after Rock Hudson I’m sure) but the nuns never noticed. The point was that baby “Rock” was going to see “*The Face of God*” some day.

I named all of my pagan babies after myself.

I was almost eight years old and the idea seemed perfectly wonderful to me. In fact, when my Mother attended a parent night at school at years end, she remarked:

“Look how many of the babies are named Hannah?”

“ Hannah is a *truly* biblical name,” I said.

“ I know, but look at all of them?” she said touching the little cutouts with her fingertips.

I proudly told her that they were all *my* babies!

“Where on earth did you get the money to pay for all these cutouts?” She said both shocked and amazed.

I told her I had used my lunch money and my birthday money and part of my allowance. I will never forget the look on her face. Instead of glowing approval, she was horrified.

Dragging me in tow in my little plaid uniform jumper, we proceeded to find my homeroom and my teacher Sister Anna Joseph.

This was to be the final day ever for my quest to re-name every pagan baby in China after myself.

In all, I had re-named almost two hundred children “Hannah.”

I imagined them all playing in a foreign field of daisies, all my tiny baptized babies! All saved from boring “*Limbo*” by me.

My mom was a single parent who worked nine-hour shifts in a Manhattan paper-box factory. Mom was also a staunch supporter of women’s rights and a member of a workers union. She was also a devout catholic.

I came to realize that she also held pretty strong opinions against using student lunch money for the religious conversion of foreign children.

The process of naming pagan babies at our school was soon to make a permanent change in direction.

“How could you use guilt to deprive our own kids of a much needed hot lunch?” she demanded of the Pastor and the concerned nuns who had gathered in my classroom.

The phrase “Shock and Awe” was born that day. All faces froze, and nuns grabbed at rosary beads hidden under layers of clothing as they faced my mother.

Mom's voice actually took on a *Maureen O'Hara* lilt as she made her case. Though she was born and raised in New Jersey she suddenly oozed the very essence of Ireland.

The young priest agreed that my mother made perfect sense to him.

The pagan baby project was “*not* to use student lunch money in the future.” he said sternly to the startled nuns.

My mother had a triumphant glint in her eye as we left the classroom.

Habits rustled as the nuns retreated down the school hallway.

One angry mother with a “made for Hollywood” accent made history at St. Michael's Elementary School in Union City, New Jersey.

Years later, my own divorce made me realize that life could prove a hard journey. Many times I wondered just how my mother had done so much with so little? She had made the hills look so easy to climb.

There were always so many people at our dinner table, how had she fed them? Where did she find time to breathe?

How many people had she personally helped?

Our home became a place for neighbors to pour out their hearts in our kitchen. My mother would make tea and offer a cookie or two and suddenly become a “Missionary” in her own right.

She had little time for her own enjoyments like the *Loretta Young Show*, *Molly Goldberg* and of course, *The Bishop Fulton J. Sheen* program.

The mesmerizing Bishop with the deep-set blue eyes is gone now. My mom died a few years back, feisty to the end.

Yet, I can still conjure up the memory of her watching his program while completing the ironing.

“ Now there is a *good* man,” she said sprinkling a mixture of starch and water on my round-collared uniform blouse.

I looked up from my *Mighty Mouse* comic book and agreed with her as only a small child could.

“ He’s really neat and I like his cape.” I said trying to impress her. She ignored my lame comments and continued.

“ He would never take lunch money from little children for foreign missions!” she muttered.

That *one* event became a part of our family history. She told the tale to numerous friends and relatives over the years. They would all listen in apparent horror and then look over at me as if I needed a hug. I would simply smile at them and glare at my mother.

“The nerve of that school.” she would trail off, with that hint of an Irish accent.

My own children and grandchildren are now my pride and joy. I hope they will keep the image of my mother hugging them and telling them her stories.

I will remember that I was steeped in faith and determination like a little teabag left in a china cup.

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After the September 11th attacks I heard from an old schoolmate now living “La Vida Wealthy” in New York City. I felt a sense of pride in her success as an attorney and soon to be circuit court judge. She asked me if I still wanted to write and paint and live on the Left Bank in Paris?

I told her that I planned on “Reaching that goal one day.”

She smiled and ordered an expensive bottle of wine. Our years as schoolmates soon came into the conversation.

She asked me, “ Are you still a Catholic?”

Considering that she is currently a mix of Kabala and Buddhist with a splash of Mid-Town Manhattan, the question was not a big surprise to me.

“ I still practice the faith.” I said. Sounding as if I were suddenly before the House Senate Committee.

Of all the things in the world to surface, she asked me if I remembered the Chinese babies that we used to adopt. She laughed as she recalled my walls of “Hannah babies.”

I guess this was the part where I was supposed to laugh back.

Instead, I stated that I still “prayed for my babies. “

She was silent for a moment or two and then simply said,

“ Hannah...you are joking aren't you?”

“ Nope” I said almost defiantly.

Please understand this, I am not backing any current “Pagan Baby Adoption” programs.

I support a person's right to believe in anything they desire. Hinduism, Judaism, Catholicism, Muslim, any “ism” they choose.

Even if some of us want to believe in *not* believing. I hope everyone finds some contentment as they march around the planet.

As for me, I remain a “Jersey Girl” at heart; I still find contentment in my own beliefs and a good strong steaming cup of tea.

The thought crossed my mind that I will probably never hear from my old classmate again.

I probably became a quaint antidote for her next *Taebo* class *or* a “Can you believe that story” to a politically correct acquaintance at some Martini bar.

All I know is that we should be what we are, and not try to be what other people want us to be. It has become fashionable to strive for a chameleon-like existence.

Every day we *morph* through life trying so be everything to everybody. We strive to be accepted and want to appear super *cool* and sophisticated.

I have never bought into that philosophy. Money and power can't buy what I experienced in the fall of 1955.

Somewhere in China or maybe around the globe, there are almost two hundred people that I baptized and they are all named after me.

And, on every St. Patrick's Day I feign an Irish accent and try to sing my mother's favorite song; “*The Rose of Tralee.*”

“The pale moon was rising upon the still waters...”

Then I raise a glass to toast Honora Margaret Donovan, my mother, my friend, and the woman who stood up to the nuns.

Hannah Draeger Ross

Post Office Box 2885

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina 29578

843-450-2690 e-mail: hannahd@mindspring.com