

LAST CALL

From Serving Drinks to Serving Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

The Priest Club

I have been looking at this view for more than twenty years. In many ways, it has become a part of who I am.

I'm in my mother-in-law's den, overlooking Houghton Lake. It is the largest inland lake in Michigan. I have been coming up here every year for more than the length of my marriage, which as of this writing has been twenty-two years. It is one of the few places on the planet I can really relax and get perspective.

As I look on Carolyn's bookshelf, a book catches my eye: *Michigan Curiosities* by Colleen Burcar and Gene Taylor. It was the book my brother was writing when he died. He was 53. I'm 50.

When you "go home," things happen, whether you want them to or not. Your past collides with your future. You look for clues about where you are going next—if not the exact location, at least the direction. It is fitting that I am polishing up the last pages of this book here. I have returned to my past. It was at this desk overlooking the lake that I had the first discussion about AfterHours with key leaders back in 2011. I had a vision of a faith community where people could have a wider understanding of God and our relationship to him/her. I wanted to create a place where people could state what they believe and what they

struggle with. Freely. I wanted a community of people who know we don't all have to agree on everything.

I looked out on the water, having no idea if what I envisioned could actually work, but I truly believed it would. I knew I would have to work hard to sell it, but I thought if I got the word out, it would help a lot of people reconnect to God.

Three years later, we've grown to hundreds of volunteers, handed out Communion to more than 50,000 people and lunches to more than 100,000, gained multiple corporate partnerships, gone from one location to four every month, watched as people redefined what church is, and watched people's lives change from either serving or being served. But I'm still not exactly sure who is changing whom.

AfterHours doesn't have it all figured out. It is just one way of connecting to God. I think it is a good way. It is one model that will connect with a lot of people who have not found a way to "do" church.

I myself knew how to "do" church.

I grew up Catholic in metro Detroit. Went to Catholic School, mass six days a week, and was an altar boy. Whole nine yards. I didn't think much about it (I was a little kid), but early on I encountered something that would stay with me my whole life: banana splits.

Father Szczesny was a retired Navy chaplain and served our parish for a short time. On Father Szczesny's birthday, he gave away coupons for free banana splits. Free! To a third-grader, this was the most amazing thing I had ever heard of. Not only was he not asking for presents on his birthday—he was giving out presents! This blew my little eight-year-old mind.

I had a great experience being an altar boy. No horrific stories, no awful memories. Except that my altar boy

career almost ended before it even began. I damn near lit the church on fire within the first five minutes of mass.

It was my first time coming down the aisle as an altar boy, and I was to carry the candle-on-a-stick thing. (I'm sure it had a better name, but whatever.) It was going swimmingly well the whole way down the aisle: no tripping, no dripping, candle stayed upright, perfect. I even kept pace with the priest (harder than you would think; he would almost sprint going down that aisle). It was going great.

It wasn't till I had to actually get the candle *into* the candleholder that we ran into trouble. The base was old, and you had to jiggle the candle-on-a-stick to get it to go in. I must have missed that meeting. As I tried to force the candle-on-a-stick into the base, I came to the realization that everyone else was done and all eyes were on me. This didn't help. Finally, after much sweating, I was able to get it on the base, and it went in with great force—so much so that the heavy brass cap that was on the top of the candle flew off and went sailing across the front of the church. I chased after it, and after retrieving it, I put it back on top of the candle (which was now out with no way to relight it).

As I slowly took my seat and the adrenaline stopped, I realized just how embarrassed I was. I could feel hot tears slowly rolling down my face, which made me *more* embarrassed. It was hard to stop the tears but I dared not try to wipe them away, as that would cause even more attention. Mortified, I saw my altar boy career pass in front of my eyes.

In a moment of great compassion, I saw the priest lean over to the head altar boy and whisper something in his ear. He turned and whispered to the second-in-command. (I don't technically know if there was a second-in-command, but I knew I was on the bottom of the pecking order.) The second-in-command leaned over and whispered in my ear,

“Father says if you’re gonna cry, go in back.” (This is what we in the business call “pastoral care.”) I went in the back and cried.

This was my introduction to formal ministry.

Despite this, I pressed on. I enjoyed spending time with the other altar boys and hearing all I could about the church and the priest’s life. At this early age I got bit and got the bug.

I wanted to be a priest.

I assumed at this juncture that I couldn’t possibly be alone, so I approached my third-grade teacher, Sister Mary Ann. Sister Mary Ann was, as my dad was prone to say, a tough broad. (And my dad knew about tough sisters. He was raised by the priests and nuns at a boarding school in Canada from the time he was in third grade through twelfth. I can’t imagine.)

Sister Mary Ann asked me what I wanted. I asked her if I could stay after class to ask her a question. I was scared to death. (Once I saw her pick up a desk and hold it up over her head to empty everything out from under the seat because it was messy. Like my dad said—tough broad.) I told her about my desire to become a priest. Her look softened, just for a second, and then she asked what I needed from her. So I told her.

“Well, I figured if I want to be a priest, others must want to be a priest too. So I wanted to see if I could start a Priest Club after school.” She just stared at me. Then she said music to my ears: “If that is what you want, let’s do it.” I was so happy. For the next four weeks, I was allowed to go around to the other classrooms and announce, “Hi, everyone. My name is Jerry Hershops. I want to be a priest. If you want to be a priest too, meet me in Sister Mary Ann’s room after school and we’ll talk about Priest

Club stuff.” I had no idea what “Priest Club stuff” was. I just knew there had to be some kind of stuff to talk about. For four weeks, I made the rounds, and for four weeks, I showed up after school.

No one came. Ever. Not once.

And that was my first attempt at trying to start a faith community.

Between breaking down in my first mass and logging a zero for attendance in the Priest Club, it wasn’t looking good. (Plus Father Szczesny told me I had to read the Bible and I couldn’t get married. I already liked girls.) This was bad news all the way around.

I didn’t entertain the idea of ministry again for thirty-two more years. I was a late bloomer.

At one time, I had bigger dreams than anyone I know—and they were crushed. I was going to be big—big enough that all those years tending bar to make ends meet would be just a funny sidenote in my Emmy Award acceptance speech. When those dreams came crashing down, I heard God calling me to ministry—a whisper in the rubble.

I barely got through seminary. I worked for my denomination’s biggest church in a five-state region one day, and the very smallest the next. I find myself getting pissed off at the church more days than not. I heard someone say once that the good news is that 100 million people go to church on Sunday, and the bad news is that 200 million people don’t. Here’s the real kicker: I am not convinced God cares.

Over the last ten years I’ve realized a few things.

1. Jesus never said, “Sing and pray and tell me I’m great once a week.” Can’t find it. I’ve looked.

2. Jesus *did* say, “Do as I do,” “Feed my sheep,” “Go now and do the same,” “Love one another as I have loved you.”
3. There are more than four hundred verses that ask us to care for the poor. I think this was a major talking point for the Good Book. God wants us to get this one. If highlighters had been around then, I think he would have used them on those passages.
4. It is easier for everyone, clergy and congregations, to put on great events on Sunday than it is to go out and care for the poor.
5. All these comments tend to really piss off people who go to church.
6. These comments never piss off those who don’t go to church and are often listed as among the main reasons they don’t.

I think it’s ironic that the more I talk to people outside the church, the more I realize they are just looking for something bigger than themselves. They want community and a way to serve the world and give back. They could not care less about our preaching, hymns, and fancy buildings. Declining church attendance and numerous polls are evidence that support this.

The very thing people want is (ironically, perhaps) the very thing Jesus told us to give them: Serve and love others. Create community. Follow Jesus. Instead, we give them boring sermons, music they don’t know (and don’t *want* to know), and—wait for it—building campaigns.

And we wonder why no one shows up.

Not only are we not giving them what they want, but I don’t think we are giving them what Jesus wants.

By most conservative measurements, I am a heretic. No question. They thought Jesus was too. And that's why I got into ministry. I was told a long time ago that there was only one way to do the God thing and if you didn't like it not to let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.

I didn't let it. I left the church for nearly ten years. Never set foot in one.

When I found out there were a lot of ways to connect to God, my first thought was, "Does anyone else know about this?" I was pissed.

Looking for people who were actually talking about these other ways of thinking, I enrolled in seminary. There (and in many conversations since), I've learned that most pastors are actually more progressive than we think. Most of them don't say what they really think in regard to hell or gay marriage or the Virgin Birth, or even their own struggles with depression or addiction, because they are afraid they will lose their flock—and a ton of money.

To hell with that.

Chapter 1

BRIGHT LIGHTS, SMALL CITY

A thousand people a show, six shows a day, five days a week. Twelve shows on Saturdays. That's forty-two shows a week. Forty-two thousand people a week. For two summers. That was my first professional job as an entertainer. I performed in front of more than a million people *before* I moved to L.A.

And on top of that, I met the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Twenty-eight years in, I still do.

Now *that* was a good job.

Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, is one of the oldest and most successful amusement parks in the country. It is famous for its roller coasters and at the time also had a strong reputation for its live shows, of which there were more than half a dozen throughout the park—none of which used recorded music.

I performed there for two summers in the IMAX theater. I was actually part of the preshow before the IMAX theater show. We were in the covered but still outdoor theater attached to the indoor movie theater. There were doors at the end of every row, and the people in our theater would just stand up, walk down their row, go through their door, sit down inside, and watch their movie. The rumor was that

the theater designers consulted with the military on how to move a large number of people. That always struck me as odd, unless there is some division of the armed forces that specializes in watching films. At any rate, ten minutes after the house was loaded I would do a fifteen-minute comedy show highlighting things to see in the park. At the end, the doors would open, the guests would file into the IMAX theater, and I would relax for about fifteen minutes till we opened the house and did it all again.

I got to do the forty-two shows a week for \$210 a week. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I still don't know when I have had that much money and those few cares.

The show that I did every day, day in and day out, was unbelievable training for my future years. I learned how to handle almost every kind of situation, including performances where the rain was coming in *sideways* and I was still on stage, convinced I would be electrocuted. It was work, but I had a ball. I loved it so much in 1985 that I went back in 1987.

It was the one time in my life when I dated a number of people, especially when I first got there. (The unofficial slogan of Cedar Point's mainly college-aged employees was "When the park closes, the rides don't stop.") I was a little more reserved than that, but it was still a fun summer. When I went back to school that fall at Western Michigan University, I was ready to keep my dating life alive and well.

I could not find a girl to save my life. Nothing. Nada. Not a single date.

I learned something that stuck with me for a long time: At Cedar Point, people were not dating me; they were dating my job. Although it was as small a pond as you could have, I was still a big fish; working in the "entertainment

department” and having a one-man show carried some cache, as silly as that sounds. It was my first exposure to the power of “celebrity,” even in Sandusky, Ohio. It was a hard lesson to learn.

When I went back two summers later, it was different. I was months away from pursuing my dream. I couldn’t be distracted. I was driven and laser focused. There was a singer/dancer in one of the other shows that every guy had their eye on. A tall, leggy redhead named Laura Ballard, she was not very interested in “dating around.” I was getting ready to leave for L.A. at the end of the summer to take over *The Tonight Show* (at least that was the plan) and had no interest in being tied down with a girl. After hanging out as friends, we started hanging out, well, more. We thought it would be perfect; I could be her “date” to things so that other guys wouldn’t bother her and I wouldn’t have to worry about getting attached to a “girlfriend.” Whew! Sure glad we had that all figured out.

Laura and I had an amazingly romantic summer, but I was determined to move to L.A. When I went to leave that morning in October, she was there to say good-bye. I drove away and didn’t think about her again . . .

. . . till about Lincoln, Nebraska. I remember calling her that first night away, just to “check in,” no big deal. I remember saying, “Hey, it’s Jerry.” She responded with, “Jerry? Jerry? I know the name.” Funny girl.

Five years later we were married.

Anyone who tells you that marriage is easy is either lying or single. Anything worth it, especially if it’s long term, is hard. So? Those are the things in life that are worth it. I have still to this day never met anyone else I want to spend the rest of my life with.

And she has put up with the ultimate switcharoo. I told her I was going to be a comic, and then a game show host, and then a talk show host, and then the day would come when I would take over *The Tonight Show*. (I could prove it because I had it all written down on a piece of paper with one-, five-, ten-, and twenty-year goals—in *pen!* I was not kidding around.) Twenty years later, we were in Denver. I was graduating from *seminary*, working in a church, preaching, and starting to spend time with drug dealers, junkies, homeless folks, and hookers (okay, that last part was a lot like L.A., but the rest . . .). I totally pulled a bait and switch. She thought she was marrying Johnny Carson. She ended up with Billy Graham. I didn't mean to. But at some point, I started listening to God's plan, not mine. God didn't even write it down!

LIVING WITHOUT FEAR

“Never, never, never give up.” This is a famous Churchill quote. It was also my mantra for all those years in L.A. and beyond. I simply refused to quit. Maybe that's your mantra now too. We are a society that applauds stick-to-it-iveness. Tenacity is always revered. The problem is that this same desire to not give up can blind us to other opportunities that are opening up around us. Designer Paul Smith wanted to be a professional cyclist before an accident laid him up in bed. During his recovery, he picked up a sketch pad. Billy Crystal always wanted to play professional baseball for the Mets. He decided to do comedy instead after watching his other dream die. Jack White of the White Stripes was a drummer till he formed an early band with a friend who was also a drummer, so he picked up a guitar.

What kind of opportunities could you be missing right now because you are scared to quit the old dreams and move on to new ones? Maybe it is just a matter of redirection: making a slight tweak here or a small change there. It takes bravery to stick to your dreams regardless of outcome. It also takes courage to evaluate where you are and to adjust your sails when the winds change.

I have a tattoo that says *sine metu*, which is Latin for “without fear.” I think fear is the opposite of love and that fear is what holds us back most of the time. What I *didn't* know until a bartender pointed it out to me is that *sine metu* is also on the family crest of Jameson Irish Whiskey. If I have to have something written on my arm that's also on a bottle of booze, it beats Goldschlager.

I think learning to live into who we are is one of those things that is easier said than done. One of the biggest victories of getting a tattoo in the first place was being able to squelch the voice in my head that said, “What will people think?” Those four words are poisonous. They have kept more people from singing karaoke and dancing like a fool than almost any other thing. We become so consumed with what people think that we stand paralyzed on the sidelines, never getting into the game of life. Sadly, I think this kind of fear affects most of us.

It isn't easy to let people see the crappy stuff in your life, the demons you've been fighting for years and just can't beat, or just the quirks you'd rather hide. For me, it's my obsession with my weight, my vanity, my ego, and my addiction to Diet Coke. It's ugly stuff.

There has not been a day in the last four decades when I didn't think about how many calories I was putting in my mouth. From third grade on, I knew I was “the fat kid.” It has shaped and formed my self-understanding

and self-image ever since. I was the kid who *always* ate two Burger King Whoppers (with cheese, minus pickles). My family would say, “Give it to Jerry, he’ll eat it.” And I did.

I have yo-yoed my whole life. In the last year alone, I weighed 190 at one point and am now up to 215. Three years ago I was at 230.

The irony is that I preach about loving yourself the way God loves you: without judgment, without qualification, without condition.

Physician, heal thyself.

I do think we are called to love ourselves. Jesus said to “love your neighbor as yourself.” That assumes we love ourselves and shows that loving ourselves is a prerequisite for loving anybody else!

I think if I had one wish for the world, it would be self-love—not the one-handed kind, but real self-*love*. A love where we forgive ourselves more quickly. A love where we *know* we are train wrecks but that’s okay. A love where we accept ourselves when we have love handles or have a keg for a stomach instead of a six-pack.

We need better self-talk. We need to talk to ourselves and think about ourselves the way Jesus thinks of us—as if each of us is the most awesome person he knows. The thing is, it’s a tie. Everyone is exactly that awesome. It’s the best kind of tie.

We need to know that Jesus loves us unconditionally, imperfect as we are. And when we have the courage to show the world our imperfections, we find that others will show us theirs as well, and we can limp along the road together. It is always an easier journey with someone next to you. You can find a way back to yourself, to be fully who *you* were meant to be—complete with foibles, tattoos, and love handles.

This is the brilliance of AA or any of the 12-step programs. Before anything else, there is an admission: “I’m an alcoholic.” That is a no-bullshit statement right there, claiming your stuff. I have had people say to me that keeping the secret is harder than the addiction itself. I believe it.

If I get another tattoo (we’ll see), it will be the words “To be nobody but yourself,” part of a quote by ee cummings: “To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

And make no mistake—it’s a battle. It is a constant contest to see if the voice saying, “Do you know what people will think if . . . ?” will win. This voice keeps you from singing and dancing and writing and ordering dessert and getting a tattoo and . . . You have to shut that voice down—every single time.

By the way, sometimes you will still get the shit kicked out of you. So what? Get up, curse, cry if you have to, *and try again*.

This kind of living will make you an outsider. In the words of Thoreau, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Most of us are cowards and are comfortable living life in the theater seats rather than being on stage in the play. Getting out there and facing the fear, trying again and again, will get you labeled unique or different or just weird. And it’s lonely—*until* your idea catches on. Then people will label you (as they did throughout history to those who did the same thing) “innovative,” “brilliant,” “creative,” or “genius.” The irony is that *anyone* can reach this point if they are willing to take the slings and arrows of being different in the early years. I have been unique and

different and have marched to my own drummer my whole life. I am far from these labels, but at least I am beginning to get used to being different. I am getting more comfortable with the idea.

Whatever it is you're dreaming and planning and trying to be, be nobody but yourself.