

"Ye must be born again."

This is not an opinion piece nor a discussion of a theory. Nor is the concept of this paper drawn from popular religious or Christian theology. It's my attempt to clothe an experience, as I understand it, in language. The experience I refer to occurred in Fresno CA near the exit of a FoodMaxx store on West Shaw Avenue in Fresno, California a few years ago. My description of it has evolved over time, but the event remains unchanged.

But first, what did *not* happen between the checkout stand and the store exit. I did not see a light or hear a voice like Saul on the road to Damascus, nor did scales fall from my eyes like Saul's. I did not fall to my knees or utter a sound. I heard nothing and saw nothing. In other words, a person standing beside me would have no clue that something went on inside me at that moment.

As best I can describe it, I suddenly felt a presence I have no name for. For years I had believed God was everywhere, but what happened was not a new idea, concept, or tenet of faith. It was a personal reality. One metaphor I use is that the Omnipresence dropped from my head to my heart.

I have lately been using the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in the gospel of John, Chapter 3. He told Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom, a person must be "born again." Typically, during a church service and in response to the urging of the speaker, a person in a congregation might declare his faith in Jesus to be "saved," I would have said, and become a follower of Jesus. At that time, "born again" meant a declaration of faith.

But now I think of "born again" differently. A fetus is dependent on the mother for nourishment and survival. Its world is free of taxes, parents, siblings, housing, education, insurance, reservations, down payments, or vacations. When a fetus comes to term, we say it is *born*. It enters a new world. It must take in nourishment from an outside source. It breathes in its first germs and takes its first step to death, its mortality, gets fingerprinted, inoculated, wrapped, and fed. It has a lot to worry about. It is in a new world.

To continue the metaphor, my first birth came in 1931. The experience I had in FoodMaxx many years later was like a second birth, like scales dropping from my mind. I saw everything, everything, everything, nothing omitted, in a new light, things religious and secular, noble and base, human and alien, heaven and hell, good and evil— everything looked different. It still does.

Imagine a man who was in a five-car pile-up on a freeway in stormy weather. There were the dead and the injured, yet, dressed in a suit wearing a tie, he was unscathed. He felt his face and body. He was fine. He could not believe his good fortune, and he could not stop telling people about it. That man and I are similar in that something happened to both of us, and the results were so astoundingly transforming, we must talk about it. In both cases, the experiences were not something we sought or wished for. They just happened.

In the case of the man in an automobile accident, he got a lot of attention; the police asked questions and camera clicked away. Following his good fortune, the man in the accident didn't begin recommending that others get in a car accident so they too could enjoy the euphoria he was experiencing. Accidents are not pathways to good feelings. Nor do I recommend that people shop at FoodMaxx to have a "spiritual" event. They will likely come away with an armful of groceries and nothing else.

I am still trying to metaphorize my metamorphosis:



"Free as a bird"
In my little universe
For nine months.
Dark, warm, comfortable.
Fed through a tube.
Parts appearing like magic,
An occasional flinch,
Hear, but do not see,



Then—
Air, oxygen, light,
hunger, germs.

My new wall a blanket.
Bathed, fingerprinted,
Inoculated, cuddled.
Masked faces!

Welcome to a world of
Good and evil, right and wrong,
War and peace, workers and desk jockeys,
Rich and everlasting poor, respected and abused,
Overlords and underdogs, oxygen and pollution.

THEN,
A new birth
Takes my breath away,
Leaves me speechless in the awe of the Presence.
In the world, the universe, both good and evil,
In the light and in the dark.
Right and wrong, all in all,
For me
It happened
In FoodMaxx,
In Fresno
California.