

“What the Next Moment May Bring”

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Acts 9:1-31

The author Chad Harbach wrote a novel in 2011 called “The Art of Fielding.” It’s about baseball... and so much more.

One of the main characters, Mike Schwartz, is the catcher on the baseball team of Westish College, a small school on the shores of Lake Michigan. Schwartz was a strong athlete and a leader, but he was just as diligent in his studies and especially with the hours he put into writing his senior thesis, “The Stoics In America.” Not too many knew about those quiet, hard-working hours.

For those who knew him, and that was most of the campus, Schwartz was a fixture on the practice field, first one to arrive, last one to leave. If not on the field, he could be found in the Varsity Athletic Center, to which he was given a key because of his frequent after-hours visits. Truth be told, Schwartz was the glue that held the team together, consistent, reliable, and attentive to each team’s member’s fullest potential for the benefit of that person and the team. He showed little interest in his own stardom. It wasn’t his quest. He had plans for law school, as he didn’t see himself as a career athlete.

Schwartz couldn’t stand “phony,” and he couldn’t stand fault-finding for the sake of fault-finding especially if someone was over-critical of themselves, and unfounded criticism of others was not tolerated. Schwartz was a ‘salt of the earth’ kind of guy, wise in the ways of being human.

It’s amazing that he grew to be this way. When he was fourteen, his mother died of cancer. He never knew his father. When the woman from Children and Family Services came a month after his mother’s funeral, Schwartz’s “180-pound,” six-foot frame convinced her that he was eighteen, not fourteen. Baffled, the woman left and though it would not have taken much investigation to prove him a liar, she never returned. He went to Aunt Diane’s house for dinner sometimes, and he thought it was rather strange that she let him live alone. But she and her husband were busy with their own three children, and she knew that Mike’s mom had put away some money that would pay the rent, so she assumed he was fine.

His school on Chicago’s southside had metal detectors and armed guards in every hallway. The rooms had no windows, and the desks were bolted down. Schwartz felt that the whole purpose of the place was to keep three thousand “would be” maniacs sedated by boredom. Rather than baseball, Schwartz played on the football team of his high school, and that was the only bright light of the school year.

He hated everything else about school. Since the money his mom left him wouldn’t last forever, he stopped going to class after football season of his sophomore year and got a job at a foundry making \$13.50 per hour. He learned how to drive a forklift and lift alloys, but the whole scene was oppressive for the workers. He started drinking lots of beer and taking various girls to his favorite seafood restaurant overlooking Lake Michigan. He bought a rust-eaten Buick without a

rear bumper. He worked the night shift so during the day he would study the financial news hoping that once he saved a few grand, he could start day trading.

One Thursday in August before his junior year, as he finished his shift at work covered with sweat and metallic soot, he walked to his car, got in and prepared to drive home. He sat in a daze of fatigue from his night at work when suddenly he was startled into consciousness by this aggressive banging on the passenger window that wobbled the entire car. He looked and saw one of the assistant coaches of the football team. He didn't even know his name, hadn't had that much contact with him. "Let me in," he yelled as the banging continued. Schwartz unlocked the door and the coach jumped into the passenger seat and went to nose to nose with Schwartz. "What the heck do you think you are doing? Isn't it past time to stop acting like an idiot and get back to school?"

"School is a prison." Schwartz said.

"And this place isn't a prison?" the coach said, pointing to the foundry.

"This is a terrible place," said Schwartz, "But it's not a prison."

The coach shrugged, got even closer to Schwartz's face, if that was possible, and said, "Oh, but it will be for you... and there's no football team at this place." The coach got out of the car and slammed the door.

The next day Schwartz went to practice, and when the school year started, he went to class, the first day and every day thereafter until graduation.

Schwartz felt a visceral dramatic shift in his whole body from that encounter with Coach No Name. He said, "I think it was love... and if not love the possibility of love." The coach had not left him alone, came and found him, and hadn't for a moment assumed politely that Schwartz knew what he was doing. Instead, he banged hard on that window to get into Schwartz's life at that moment.

Nobody else, no relative, no teacher, no friend, no employer had ever done such a thing for Mike Schwartz. That day, Mike Schwartz vowed that he would do that for others.

It was a conversion, the daunting reality of being swept up by a power outside of one's control, a commanding voice that says, "Get up and go this way... not that way." Maybe it was the power of love or the possibility of love.

For Christians, but even those outside of the Christian faith, the very word "conversion" often connotes our story from Acts this morning, the conversion of Saul. It's the paradigmatic conversion story. The stunning "out of his control" reality that confronts Saul on the road to Damascus is a blinding light and a voice that basically asks, "What the heck are you doing, Saul?" and then commands Saul to "Get up and go!"

It is an inexplicable “about face.” Think about it. Saul was a faithful Pharisee, instructed in the law by Gamaliel, the best of the rabbis. Saul had it out for the followers of Jesus in no mild-mannered way.

A few chapters ago, the apostles had to add to their number and one of those called was Stephen. He was full of grace and wonders and right there at the grass roots with the people in need and he was very wise. Stephen was also a great threat to the authorities, but they could not hold a candle to the Holy Spirit at work within him in wisdom and truth.

Stephen ended up being arrested and stoned to death. I did not preach on that text because I don't know how. But the point for this morning is that the scriptures say that Saul not only approved of the killing of Stephen, but after his death, Saul continued ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off believers in Jesus Christ to prison.

The stoning of Stephen is what caused the early church leaders to scatter and take their message to different places like Samaria and Damascus. Well, Saul got word and decided he would go to Damascus, breathing threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord.

Scriptures do not tell us exactly why this fire and this vehemence ruled Saul's heart. Perhaps as an expert in the Jewish law, he believed the long-awaited Messiah would never be crucified. A crucified Messiah was a cursed Messiah and worship of a cursed Messiah would be blasphemous. But we are never privy to Saul's intrapsychic conflicts because as Luke tells this story, he is not giving an account of what was going on within the man. He is giving us the story of the man who was encountered.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells this story of Saul's conversion three times, in case we didn't get it the first time. Interestingly, in his letters to the churches, which were written earlier than the Acts of the Apostles, Paul never tells the story of the road to Damascus. He writes that he had an encounter with the risen Lord which brought him to an about face, and he is clear about his life before this encounter. But he never writes of the drama told to us in Acts.

Hans Mol in his book “Identity and The Sacred” writes about the process of a conversion experience and places this experience in three stages. The first stage is a detachment from former patterns of identity. There is a breaking away from the way one has defined themselves.

The second stage is of time of meaninglessness, feeling unrooted and confused, not a very comfortable time. Have you ever had the experience of listening to a conversion story, and the person couldn't be more energetic, riding high? They want to jump into everything and tell their story repeatedly. But after a while they seem to fall off the radar.

Mols said that often those who have very dramatic conversion experiences expect the energy from that to be sustained. They don't deal with the confusion and sense of being uprooted that follows. It's interesting that after the road to Damascus story, we don't hear any more about Saul who becomes Paul for a while. Imagine his confusion and his inability to see clearly what happened. Saul was immersed in the world of Jewish Law in a Hellenistic culture, under Roman authority and now called to be a chosen instrument of God to take the Gospel to the Gentiles?

Who is going to believe that? What disciple is going to welcome this guy? Saul was highly regarded by his fellow Jews. But now there must be confusion and sense of uprootedness.

Mols writes that the third stage in this process of conversion is the transition from chaos to meaning. Conversion is not just a momentary, isolated event, but also what follows; the task we are called to undertake. Perhaps, we never read a detailed account of his conversion in Paul's Letters to the churches because Paul **was more focused and concentrated on the task that he was called to undertake**- spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles and laying a strong theological argument for crucifixion and resurrection.

I am grateful and respect that Mols has made this process of conversion very systematic. It provides a means of viewing conversion as far more than a single encounter. His process is helpful. But conversion is not amenable to a manual because it's so powerful and personal that one's experience is not going to be like another's.

The story of Paul's conversion does not set a norm or benchmark for what a conversion experience should be. There are many conversion stories in the Bible, several in Acts before we even get to the road to Damascus. The writer does not intend for Paul to be the main character, but one of the human characters who enact the larger story of God's faithfulness to all that God has promised. Remember, the focus of the Acts of the Apostles is **God at work** through the Holy Spirit.

Every conversion is not the same. Maybe there's been a dramatic "about face" in your life or maybe you're not even sure you can identify one specific moment or event. There's no sudden blinding light or aggressive banging on your car window. Maybe for you, it's been a glance down a new road, the faintest itching of the feet for a new direction, more of a slow underground conversion that gets you to the right place with God.

Paul comes to understand this encounter on the road to Damascus **as an experience of the resurrected one, the living Lord. The voice speaking is a living voice right there with him.** Saul isn't the only one who experiences conversion in this story. Ananias, a faithful disciple in Damascus never dreamed that he would enter the same room as Saul, lay hands upon him and call him "Brother."

Conversion is not an individual attainment or the possession of a dramatic experience to be told for its own sake. Conversion moves us into the care and nurture of God in the task of spreading the Gospel by word and deed. Taking the love of God into the world can be tough at times. Jesus never minced words about this. There were times, as devoted as Paul became, when he probably wanted to say to God, "You know, you could have left me alone."

But God doesn't do that. God is here with us, the living Lord, the light of the world desiring to give us the light in whatever way it takes. So, friends, stay alert. Pay attention. But even when we don't, God will find us, and we never know what the next moment may bring.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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