

Memo to Worship Leaders: Shut Up

by Jeremy Lott

Waldman held balance-of-power that year (2.7 percent). FDR joked afterward that he was “the one-half-of-one-percent governor.” An astute political entrepreneur, FDR had good reason to co-opt Socialist planks. As David A. Shannon writes, “The story of the decline of the Socialist Party since 1933 is, for the most part, the story of the political success of the New Deal.”

It is difficult to imagine a Republican president conferring with such Reform Party candidates as populist H. Ross Perot or conservative Pat Buchanan or a Republican House leadership or Senate minority co-opting their issues. The Reform Party has held balance-of-power in only a half-dozen federal elections, including Kentucky’s 1998 U.S. Senate contest. Beltway strategists have argued that the Green Party is a greater threat to Democrats than right-wing third parties are to Republicans. Yet the Greens have not held balance-of-power in a single Senate race.

Beltway strategists are less credible when confronting Libertarian balance-of-power. Since 1994, the Libertarian Party has held balance-of-power in three Senate elections won by Democrats: California in 1994 (Barbara Feinstein); Nevada in 1998 (Harry Reid); and Washington in 2000 (Maria Cantwell). Libertarian balance-of-power, especially in the American West, grew in the 1990’s, as the party fielded more candidates. The same statistical trend is apparent in the history of the Socialist and Progressive parties in the early 20th century. Republicans, who lost the Senate to Democrats in 2001 and enter the 2002 election with a two-seat (51-49) deficit, should find this trend of some interest and co-opt a plank or two.

That, however, is unlikely to happen. Consider the treatment of Dr. Ron Paul, a cultural, pro-life conservative and the Libertarian Party’s 1988 presidential candidate. Dr. Paul, a former U.S. Air Force flight surgeon, was one of only three conservatives serving in the House in 1976 who endorsed Ronald Reagan against moderate Republican incumbent Gerald R. Ford. He re-entered the House in 1997, representing Texas’ 14th District as a Republican. Since his return, Dr. Paul has introduced 124 bills in the House, and not one has passed the Republican-controlled chamber.

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It is often said that former Princeton president Jonathan Edwards, the man credited with setting fire to the tinderbox that became the First Great Awakening, was a fiery preacher. His message was certainly incendiary, but by modern standards he was nothing of the sort.

According to minister Victor Shepherd, Edwards may have “thundered like a cataract into which there poured the streams of fathomless spirituality,” but he did so quietly and in a monotone voice. Edwards’ most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was read by the New England divine “word-for-word, hunched over the lectern, rarely lifting his head to look at the congregation.” Martyn Lloyd Jones rightly judged that “no man was further removed from the violence of a ranting traveling evangelist than Jonathan Edwards.”

If I read him correctly, there was a theological method to Edwards’ madness. He believed he was expounding God’s very Word, which needed no enthusiasm on his part in order to accomplish its purpose. Such distractions might even work at cross-purposes with what the Holy Spirit was trying to accomplish.

In this post-theological era, the one issue that can turn the most harmonious American church into a chest-thumping, hair-pulling, mud-wrestling wreck is worship. Whether or not to use an electric guitar seems, to me, a trifling matter. But let someone bring an ax on stage in any middle-aged congregation, and then set back and watch the generational fallout. Seniors are often pitted against (relative) youth in a nasty fight that they know they will eventually lose through attrition. The younger group, for its part, has to choose between compromise and evolution or outright rebellion and schism. My preferences are (slightly) more modern, but, while that older order may have been too formulaic, it at least avoided giving the “worship leader” the prominence that he (or, often, she) enjoys today.

Readers from a more liturgical setting

might wish to know what a “worship leader” is. He is not analogous to the choir director, the organist, or even the music director of yesteryear. Rather, worship leaders today occupy a new, more expansive role in the life of the Church. To state simply that the worship leader is responsible for picking the music, lining up musicians and singers, and leading worship is a little bit like saying that Beethoven wrote some music or that cheerleaders make a valuable contribution to team spirit. Worship leaders don’t merely sing; they emote. They determine when the congregation should rise and fall, and they try their very best to attune themselves to any stirrings of the Spirit. And they talk—oh, how they talk.

In the many, many cases that I’ve observed, nearly unanimously, the worship leader talks entirely too much. However much he may have rehearsed, his performance comes off as spontaneous and unscripted—and, therefore, rambling. Often, what he has to say amounts to a free-form sermon: *Live for God! Make a decision! Commit your life to Him! You, too, can change your life! Jesus loves you! No, really, He does! Exclaim! the good news of Jesus Christ!*

To doubt these people’s motives would be to do them a disservice. Still, at some point, it becomes wrong not to say that there is a person employed by the church to preach the actual sermon called a “pastor,” and he is probably better equipped than the worship leader to bring the Word of God to the congregation.

I am not calling for a return to the staid formalism that Florence King describes in stories of her High Church childhood. The congregation was not to sing too-vigorous hymns, she says, because, “after all, someone might get carried away and fall into religious ecstasy, and you mustn’t do that sort of thing in church.” But it seems to me that the Spirit can be drowned out as easily as He can be ignored. Put another way, everybody remembers Edwards’ famous sermon, but nobody remembers what hymns they sang that Sunday.

To worship leaders, I say: Please, I beg you, don’t talk. Just sing.

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In the Dark

by George McCartney

Bitten and Smitten

Where would we be without *eros*? Would Antony have thrown away an empire? Would Dante have written *The Divine Comedy*? Would Bill Clinton have scuttled his ambitions so shamefully? Would Peter Parker have become Spider-Man? Depending on our character, *eros* can lead us to greatness or reduce us to squalor, as this month's films amply illustrate.

In *Spider-Man*, director Sam Raimi understands the role *eros* can play even—maybe especially—in a comic-book fantasy. He proved this 12 years ago with his low-budget *Darkman*, a wonderfully stylish and inventive compendium of superhero tropes. In *Spider-Man*, he has been given a much larger budget and the special effects to go with it, but it's his comic-book hero sensibility that really carries the day. Take the scene in which the 17-year-old orphan Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) is about to be spider-bitten into a wholly new existence. Until this moment, he's been a dutiful ward of his loving Aunt May (Rosemary Harris) and Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson), an honor student and a feckless nerd, mooning over Mary Jane or MJ (Kirsten Dunst), the girl next door for whom he's pined since the fourth grade. During a class trip to Columbia University's science lab, he manages to steer MJ into his camera range for a school-newspaper photo opportunity. She coyly begs him not to make her look ugly, and, for once, he's not too tongue-tied to risk a gallantry: "There's no chance of that with someone as beautiful as you." You know it's his first romantic line, and the expression on his face tells us he's as surprised as we are to have delivered it with such *savoir-faire*. As he does so, however, a genetically altered lab spider spins itself down onto his hand and sinks its pincers into his flesh, sealing his fate. He's smitten and bitten.

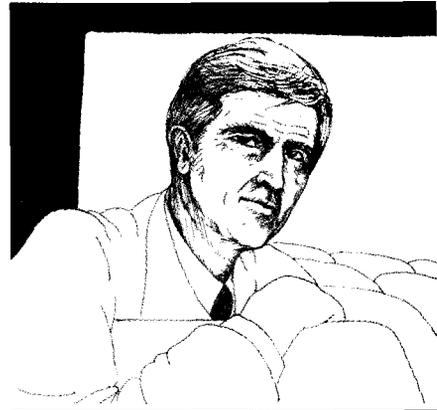
Two scenes later, we see him awakening in his uncle's modest house in working-class Queens. Standing in front of his mirror, he's astonished to see his formerly slight torso bulging with muscle. He's equally surprised to find he no longer needs his nerd glasses to see himself in the mirror or, for that matter, to see MJ through her bedroom window directly across from his own. He's so thrilled with

his changes, he runs downstairs and, with a perfectly timed handspring off the hall wall, leaps the banister and heads for the door. Uncle Ben urges him to have some breakfast, but this kid's got no time for flapjacks. Not with MJ within his super sight. Ben smiles at his wife. "Teen-agers," he says with mock exasperation. "Their raging hormones; it's always the same."

Here as elsewhere, Raimi is a master storyteller packing his scenes with visual shorthand that vividly connects all the dots. In this sequence, he gives us a scaled-down dissertation on comic-book appeal. The advent of superpowers has typically been the genre's metaphor for the passage from boy to man. That's why 12-year-olds are especially drawn to comic books. Their bodies are poised for great and unsettling changes, and they're understandably ambivalent about leaving the safety of childhood. In comics, they get to see guys have it both ways. In their civvies, they're quite ordinary, usually rather sheltered. When they don their spandex, however, they become fearless heroes capable of dealing with anything the world can throw at them. And, when they take off their costumes, they get to go home, safe and sound once more. Can you think of a more appealing fantasy for a kid facing the trials of puberty?

So Peter goes into the world with his uncle's admonition ringing in his ears: "With great power comes great responsibility." This is delivered, tellingly enough, outside the New York Public Library. On the other side of the street is an illegal extreme-fighting arena where Peter intends to put his new powers to use as a paid participant. He wants to raise enough money to buy a car so he can impress MJ. It's a cleverly staged moment. Standing between a hall of disciplined reason and a venue of brute force, Peter must make his choice. Will he be a man or a punk? This is the question all late adolescents must answer, usually more than once. Under MJ's spell, Peter will answer it heroically. It's *eros* ennobling.

Although Raimi knows how to set up his themes, he also knows what's expected of him. He gives us the all-out special-



Spider-Man

Produced and distributed by
Columbia Pictures
Directed by Sam Raimi
Screenplay by David Koepp

Y Tu Mamá También

Produced by Besame
Mucho Productions
Directed by Alfonso Cuarón
Screenplay by Alfonso
and Carlos Cuarón
Released by Twentieth Century Fox

effects treatment, but somehow he keeps it lighthearted. The pyrotechnics are almost human scale. As we follow Spider-Man's looping web swings through Manhattan's corridors of stone, we hear Maguire's voice yipping and yodeling with unaffected glee. He may consider his transformation as much a curse as a gift, but whenever he's in the air, he's all boy and entirely irrepressible.

Still, it's in the small moments that Raimi excels. Take a composition he repeats throughout the film: He places Maguire in the extreme foreground looking toward the camera as the background fills with one dire disturbance or another. We watch his face as he takes in his latest challenge and, with slow deliberation, decides how he'll deploy his powers to deal with it. Without a word spoken, we realize that Peter Parker hasn't changed after all. He's still the respectful, dutiful young man we first met. He's merely learning how to master his superpowers so that they will become an extension of the decency his guardians have instilled in him.

There's much to admire in this de-