

# Of Bulls and Baptisms

A story by Lloyd W. Ratzlaff

Overthrow the importance principle, turn it upside down. Put down the mighty from their seats, and exalt them of low degree. Every throne a toilet seat, and every toilet seat a throne. (Norman O. Brown)

I lock my car door with a click of the key, check to see that I've parked far enough off the road, and turn toward the fence. Armed with a big plastic bottle of Diet Coke and a can of mosquito spray in a yellow noname shopping bag, I part the barbed wire strands like this... there, I made it without ripping the back of my shirt or skewering my crotch; and I walk into the heat along a scraggy downhill path in search of the old baptismal site, with swarms of mosquitoes coming toward me and as many grasshoppers jumping out of my way.

The remains of an old log barn sag there off to the right, walls slumped and half overgrown, roof long decomposed. I don't remember it being there thirty years ago, when I was fourteen at the time of my washing; but I do remember how we drove down here in cars, the whole community coming to watch the latest batch of teenagers being doused in the river. One other time I was here, before I was baptized, to go fishing with my cousin. That day we had to make our way gingerly around a herd of cows overseen by a malevolent old bull, but I don't think we caught anything for our efforts, and had to sneak back up again, cripes I hope there's no bull here now. I look around for trees and estimate my chances, now at midlife, of outrunning a bull and climbing a tree in front of a pair of pointed horns.

Here the path curves around a bluff, and I can see the way is clear. Another shot of mosquito spray, another swallow of Coke, and onward toward the myth

of my origins.

This need to be washed, to get clean. This wish to start over from scratch, to open your eyes for the first time on the first day in paradise with your first woman, that's what the baptism was supposed to be about, death to the old and birth to the new. How could they have thought, how could *I* have thought, that a fourteen year old farmerish boy who had yet to travel more than a few miles from his rural, ethnic, fundamentalist homestead, who had yet to see his first naked female body, had already become so jaded and soulsick, so hard-bitten and worldly that he needed to begin again?

Yet the crazy thing is, I *was* sinsick. Maybe I hadn't seen a naked woman, but I had cousins who had seen some men's magazines and told me so, and the prospect of seeing them myself made me go weak with desire. Until bedtime, that is, when abruptly the angel threatened again to appear as he had done to the old widow who lived in a shack on Railway Street. The widow claimed the angel had healed her arm one night as she lay in bed; look, she said, how I can move it up and down now where before it was all crippled up with rheumatism. But I was scared there would be no such goodwill shown me, that there would be only an exposure of my reckless lust and a command to atone for it by remaining celibate and going away as a missionary to Africa like two of my uncle's had done. I didn't want to see that angel. Such were the defects and desperations that drove me down the aisles of the revival meetings and into the waters of baptism.

Here the path takes another turn and the ground levels off. I look back up the hill where no bull is yet to be seen, and a wave of childhood nostalgia washes over me at the sight. It isn't much, this harsh blue-green prairie grass covering the land, not exactly what you'd call beautiful; but it has the starkness of home and the feel of many a boyish adventure, and it savours of safety. The prairie has its own kind of peace.

Well, get on with it Lloyd, down to the river. And now an old rhythm and blues tune begins playing in my head: "Take me to the river, river/Wash me in the water, water..." Yessirree it was a *real* baptism, not a few drops of water dabbed on a baby's head inside a warm church, wrapped in a cozy blanket in the consoling arms of parents who are still silly with adoration over it, and with no clue about what's happening.

"Hey what's happening, baby?"

"Uh, I donno, go away and let me suck my thumb."

No sir, this was wading through mud into waist deep water, kneeling down so your chin just cleared the river, and being ducked underneath a strong current that threatened to carry you off and deposit you on a sandbar somewhere a few miles downriver near Fort Carlton. They just aren't the same thing, these two baptisms.

So here I am. The place is only vaguely familiar, but I think this is the grassy spot where the baptismal tents were pitched. I sit down now on a big rock and remember how it was. First came the annual announcement in early summer of the church's intention to baptize. All interested persons—candidates, they were

called— were invited to contact the minister. The invitation rolled off me, just didn't penetrate because I was a late bloomer about a head shorter than most of my peers, and it had never occurred to me that I was old enough for this thing. But then came my discovery that all the boys including the cousin with whom I fished here, were going to do it. So began a turmoil in my head which led to a speedy decision, made with a good deal of internal quaking and quivering, to approach the minister. I didn't want to be left out now and have to do it next year all by myself, or with the younger crop of candidates whose turn it would be two summers from now.

I believe I picked the worst possible time and place to speak to the Reverend. It was in our smalltown curling rink, where every summer a missionary conference was sponsored by several local fundamentalist churches—as it seemed to me, to tide over my guilt and fear until the winter revival meetings—and I pushed through crowds of people in the aisle to get to him as he made his way toward the exit after the service. I really was a little guy, because in my mind I can still see how far back I had to tilt my head to look up into his face, a gentle and kindly face which smiled at me as his hand patted my head in response to the determined blurt in which I made my wish known to him. I suppose he said it would be all right for me to be baptized, though I don't remember his words.

I hurried outside, enormously relieved. And there one of my cousins met me with some news he had just heard on the car radio—that Marilyn Monroe had died, had checked off the roll, as he put it. What a waste, I thought sadly and with genuine shock, and wondered at his heartless way of announcing it.

But it wasn't up to the Reverend to admit me to the baptism. This was a decision of such weight that it had to be made by the entire church membership, so my name was duly added to the list of those who would appear one evening very soon before the members to be examined for suitability. There had been no such thing as catechism classes; we had been left to our own devices to pick up as best we could what this affair was all about. And the entirety of my formal baptismal instruction came about like this.

That fateful evening as we drove out to our little country church, Father and Grandfather and I sat in the front seat of our car—that old jalopy of which I was so acutely embarrassed, which spoke so painfully of our poverty, hence of our inferiority—while my younger sisters sat in the back seat with our Mother and an aunt who still lived with Grandpa. Not much was said for a while, but by and by Grandpa felt constrained to instruct me. He had been born and baptized Lutheran, but had converted to the true faith when he married my Grandmother, the daughter of a South Dakota Mennonite minister. So now he pulled his little German New Testament—translated by Martin Luther—from his suitcoat pocket and read me the account of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.

"So if they ask you why you want to be baptized in a river," he concluded, "you say, 'Jesus was baptized in a river too.'"

That was it.

He thought he had done me a service. What he had actually done was confirm to himself once again his own timeworn rejection of his infant baptism in some little parish in Poland before the turn of the century; but tonight it did double duty as my catechism.

We parked in the churchyard, cemetery to one side, outdoor toilets to the other, empty old horse barns behind, and ahead of us the church which now I entered with great trepidation.

The minister called the meeting to order. Promptly all the candidates were bidden to withdraw into the vestibules, girls in one and boys in the other, to await their summons. One by one we were called in, to stand clutching our flappy black Bibles in front of a crowd of humourless faces in that unornamented church, men on our right, women on our left, any of whom had the privilege if not the duty of interrogating us. About anything they liked. For example, about when and where and under what circumstances had we been converted? Or how adequately did we know the Bible? Or what our views on sin were, particularly the ones of substance like dancing and smoking, though I never heard of any member having the jam to inquire openly about our sex lives, such as they were. And so on.

It was a hard evening. I, for one, had broken down and cried before it was all over, and it was one of my own relatives who had driven me over the brim of my courage into the humiliation of public tears. In response to his question about the meaning of baptism, it seems I had quoted a text from the letter of St. Peter, whereas he had much preferred St. Paul's ideas, so he set himself the task of making my ignorance clear to me. My text, from the approved King James Version, said something about baptism not being "a putting away of the filth of the flesh," but being rather an indication of a good conscience toward God. I can't say I knew what it meant. It just seemed as good a text as any other, not because I felt I had a good conscience (Tillich said you can't have both a sensitive conscience and a good conscience, but I hadn't heard about this at the time); it was because this text seemed subliminally to leave just a bit of room for a few private thoughts about Marilyn Monroe's body, and maybe a few more furtive glances at those pictures from her unfinished movie printed in *LIFE* magazine.

But eventually they approved of me. After being properly scrutinized, I went back into the vestibule wiping my tears and trying not to look too ashamed in front of the boys, and waited there with them until the vote was taken. Yes, a vote by show of hands. At the end of the evening the minister announced that all the candidates, and I too, had been accepted, with what degree of reluctance or strength of majority we never knew. The minister himself had not interrogated me, he just sat and observed; and a couple of Sunday afternoons later he baptized me.

Here on this spot, I started to say, is where the tents were pitched, one for the girls, one for the boys. While the curious onlookers gathered over there by the river's edge, we stood nervously by. At the appointed hour a hymn of some kind

was sung, and we waded through the mud into the current, I at the head of the line just behind the minister. The black and white photos I've seen of this occasion show that we were taken in ascending order of size; how small I looked there at the head of the line, wearing another one of my Father's bad haircuts; how much deeper the water was for me than for the others.

I wanted to think the right religious thoughts as I waded, but I admit I was a little preoccupied with the thought of muddy water going up my nose, and the sense of suffocation I would feel underwater. We immersed forwards, not backwards as certain other denominations did. I remember the issue being debated exhaustively by the men of the church, whether the death of Christ was more authentically pictured by the *forward* dunk, in token of his head's having slumped forward on the cross when he gave up the ghost; or by the *backward* dunk, in token of his being laid on his back in the sepulchre. Forward was the right way, they had discerned, and now as I waded and then knelt, and felt the mud at the bottom of the river shifting under my knees, I wondered whether the current at my back would tilt me all the way forward when I was being dipped, and carry me off. And hadn't we heard so many warnings about the whirlpools and sharp dropoffs in that North Saskatchewan River?

And then all of a sudden it was over and done. I withdrew to the rear of the line and gave my head a shake to remove the water from my ears and nose, and watch the others going under. When it was finished we waded back out and retired to the tents, the minister joining us in the boys' tent where we all sat on the ground and got buck naked so we could dry ourselves and change clothe. I couldn't resist one shifty glance to check out the size of the Reverend's genital equipment. I won't say much about it, but I doubt he would have won any trophies, if you get my meaning. (Nor, for that matter, would I, and I hastened into my dry shorts with a speed that severely compromised the nonchalant yet pious countenance I endeavoured to display up above.) But that minister had baptized me, God bless him, without humiliating me in my ignorance and confused motives.

That Sunday evening back in church, we were given our first communion with real home-made bread and Welch's grape juice drunk out of a common cup. I should say, we were given communion after we had washed each other's feet in big enamel basins in further demonstration of our humility—another ordinance practiced, like baptism and communion, at the command of Christ. And then we formed another lineup where the old members came to shake hands, finally, with the new ones. Welcome.

A pelican wheels slowly overhead. Another mosquito stirs me out of my reverie. Another shot of spray, another swallow of Coke before I go.

So what was it all about? Did they mean to scare the devil out of us? That was partly achieved in my case, at least for awhile; but if it had worked well, I wouldn't be so tempted to feel scornful about it now. "The faith that justifies," wrote Thomas Merton, "is not just any faith, or even the faith that, at revival time, *feels* itself justified." This is the thing about the fundamentalist mentality

(which can, of course, be found within any group whatsoever) which goes beyond its simple baloney, which is so toxic and sometimes lethal. "In the end," Merton said, "an insufficient faith is only a question of believing we believe because we are found acceptable in the eyes of other believers. Truly the great problem is the salvation of those who, being good, think they have no further need to be saved." Those who have had one bath and then go through the rest of life saying "I'm clean."

I had no idea what I was doing there in the river, any more than the blanketed baby in front of an ornate altar. It's not enough for my head to understand that this baptism was no good literally; I have to feel a washing within myself, a cleansing at the source of life. When Adof Eichmann was interrogated by the Israeli police about his Nazi war crimes, he said, "I obeyed. Regardless of what I was ordered to do, I would have obeyed. I obeyed, I obeyed."

The baptism was something which had to be done; I obeyed. In patristic times, some waited until their deathbeds to ask for baptism, fearful of committing more sins after baptism and thereby damning themselves, frightened of living after once getting clean. Who *ever* knew what they were doing, infant, adolescent, or old-timer, when it was being done to them?

So farewell to this place. A few tears roll down now as I go, perhaps a sort of baptism of desire, which some traditions also acknowledged as valid along with those of water, fire, and spirit; perhaps it's at least as good as that one thirty years ago. I let it go. Now maybe it will let me go.

A little bird flies past my nose. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," William Blake said, "everything would appear to us as it is, infinite." Everything would happen again for the first time; I would be born and born again for the first time, have a fresh God who walks and talks with me and my woman innocently naked in the evening in the garden, name everything in the world again for the first time. Sometimes it happens, with or without baptism; when it happens, it *is* the baptism.

I'm back at the foot of the hill now, about to begin the ascension. First I sit down on a log beside a little grove of trees where some cattle are lying in the shade. If there's a bull among them, he's busy switching mosquitos with his tail and chewing his cud like all the others.

Somewhere some crows are making a great commotion. And somewhere behind me other little creatures are twittering in reply.