

**AT
LARGE**

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK BALDRIDGE



What I LOST when I lost my FAITH: a karmic laundry list

by Mark Baldrige

I LOST FAITH

It seems stupid to say, but I did. Faith is an atrophied capacity in me. I'll never view the world through those pince-nez, the liberating blinders of belief.

It took a while for me to think I could ever be happy again, but from the beginning there was never any doubt: I could not go back.

Once shucked, some burdens refuse to climb back onto your shoulders. They don't want you anymore.

I don't recommend anyone lose his or her faith — but I wouldn't be too quick to get myself born again either, if I were you.

LOST: MY VIRGINITY

Actually, I know exactly where it went:

The first time I had sex, or shortly (very shortly) thereafter, the young lady present at the moment referred to the previous evening — when we'd done nothing more than roll around with our hands in each other's pants — as, "last night when we were making love ..." and my virginity vanished in a puff of insight.

Virginity? Hah! Where I'm from you can't give the stuff away!

**I LOST MY
SENSE OF
MYSELF AS A
SPIRITUAL
PERSON**
But I got that back.

I LOST HOPE IN THE RESURRECTION

Strangely, it seems I needn't have; Frank Tipler, a physicist who has had his picture taken with Hawking (now there's a credential!) offers this completely secular option:

Far in the future, a giant computer will have saved me as a program in its limitless memory banks where I will frolic, along with each of you, in a virtual paradise.

He presents this as a mathematical certainty.

Looks like this physicist has done more than his share of tipping!

... I LOST MY SENSE OF SELF IMPORTANCE

Actually, that's a bald-faced lie. I just said it as a jibe at the self-importance of Christians whom I blame for my own vast and over-reaching sense, mind-boggling-in scope, of self-importance.

I'm so vain, well, you know, I think that song is probably about me. I only make up for it by possessing a pleasant singing voice...

DAMN NEAR MY SANITY

I remember checking the keys in my pocket throughout the day. To be sure they were still there.

It wasn't obsession OR compulsion — just an abiding sense that, if God might not be real, how sure was I of the keys?

I remember meeting a guy, about that time, a piano player. He got no thumbs! Not even scar tissue as I recall, just these thin flippers. I never asked, but I suppose he was born that way, poor fella'.

I went around one whole day, trying to do without. Held the house key OK, between my first and second fingers, once I picked it from among the other keys on the ring (tougher), and it slipped into the lock just fine. But then, how do you turn it?

Does he use *both* hands?

... MY MORAL COMPASS

This didn't last long.

Someone cried, "Moral Relativism!"

I said, "Sounds good to me."

They said, "Situational Ethics."

I shouted, "Show me the way!"

I find I have little aptitude for evil, as I loathe all the instruments of control. But the boot print of bourgeois values will not have vanished too soon from the back of my neck.

At this point I'd like to add that among other things, I gained a new, open, non-judgmental attitude, which people who "knew me when" can hardly believe.

I think they find it appalling.

When I argued, loudly, that virginity was a fiction hanging from a flap of flesh, well, the room got real quiet allasudden.

I also got laid.

I LOST THE MUSIC

And this is serious and what took the longest to get over: I lost the singing. My "fellowship" was so ultra- so arch- that, well, they were what I call "-damental" cause there weren't no "fun" in it.

Not when I was coming up:

No dancing, no swearing, no gambling. Church three times a week!

My mother once told me, as I toyed with a fly I had caught in a jar, "They tortured Christ, too."

We wore our laces straight.

(They'll plead, "We're not like that anymore!")

"We wouldn't have killed the prophets like our fathers did!"

— This is a private joke, between me and them. You'd have to've read the Bible to get it.)

AND UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES WAS A MUSICAL INSTRUMENT OF ANY KIND TO BE ALLOWED ON CHURCH PRECINCTS.

As a consequence, we wound up singing, in perfect, four-part harmonies, the shaped notes of our grandfathers. And, Brother, when we all got to singin', it was like the angels up in hibbin praising sonny Jesus.

But except for singing, women were to keep silent in church.

At my best friend's funeral, his father had to read a message from Mom and sister, as they would not, by custom, have been allowed to speak.

Barbarians!

And even with all I lost when I lost my faith, even things I may not know about yet, I can say with true repentance that my only real regret is that I did not slip away sooner ...