

Belief

Everyone sat on the edge of their folding chairs, flushed with self-righteous rage. Angry and poorly chosen words flew through the air, each one louder and more insistent, provoking more of the same. So compelling were the dozens of confrontations that hardly anyone noticed when Monica Winston finished her brief comments in favor of intelligent design and stepped away from the floor microphone.

From his seat behind the mahogany table at the front of the room, Scott Sanders looked out over the highly-animated audience, looked at his colleagues on either side of him, looked at his watch, then rapped his gavel. “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s have order please,” he said into the microphone on the table. He rapped the gavel again, and the unruly collective began to quiet. He looked at his colleagues one more time; each one nodded. “The motion has been made to table the discussion,” he said. “Is there a second?”

The woman to Scott’s right raised her hand. “I second the motion,” Carol Whitney declared in a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the cavernous room, even without the microphone.

Scott nodded. “The motion to table the discussion on mandating the teaching of intelligent design in the eleventh-grade science classes has been seconded. Those in favor raise your hands.”

Immediately, the right hands of all five members of the Barlow Township School Board went up, prompting another escalation in the noise level from the gallery.

Scott rapped the gavel to silence the two dozen or so conversations that had spontaneously erupted, challenging the meeting’s somber decorum and threatening to overwhelm the more formal proceedings. “Ladies and gentlemen, the motion to table the discussion on intelligent design has passed.”

Robert's Rules of Order dictated that he officially proclaim the result of the vote, even though the decision not to make a decision should have been perfectly obvious to everyone in attendance. He rose from his seat. "Since this is our last meeting of the year, the issue will need to be formally introduced again in the fall. So, since there is no other business before the Board and it is nearing nine o'clock, I declare this meeting to be adjourned. Thank you all for coming and have a good summer."

He switched off the microphone. "Have a good summer all of you; I really have to go to the bathroom," he whispered to his fellow school board members. Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned and hustled out the back door, leaving behind the cacophonous noise generated by the seventy or so members of the gallery. It was obvious from the tone and demeanor that very few, if any, were happy with the decision to table the discussion on such a contentious issue.

Scott thought about this as he slipped unnoticed into the staff-only men's room. He thought about it as he stepped into a stall to relieve himself. He knew very well that tabling the discussion on the teaching of intelligent design was only postponing the inevitable, that eventually a decision would have to be made, a decision that would, very likely, polarize the entire local community and generate unpleasant and unwanted publicity for the large suburban school district (in his mind, he could already see the headlines splashed across the internet).

In the end, it didn't matter which way the board voted, the people on the opposing side of the issue would react with anger and misplaced passion and no doubt call for the heads of all five school board members, with his head falling first. For an instant, he imagined himself as John the Baptist. Would his head be presented to the gallery on a silver platter? He dismissed the image. He was no prophet, and he certainly was no martyr—at least, not if he could help it.

But he was also well-aware that he risked being singled out as the principal architect of so much public scrutiny and angst. He didn't want any part of the inevitable and unavoidable fallout.

He slumped on the black toilet seat and thought about how he got talked into being on the school board in the first place. He was a sales manager, not a politician or any kind of activist. "It would be

good publicity for the dealership,” his boss, Don Kincaid, owner of Kincaid Motors, told him three years ago when the possibility of Scott’s running for the open school board seat first came up. “You wouldn’t have to do all that much, just go to meetings,” his wife Sarah said when Scott revealed what Mr. Kincaid wanted him to do. “And we could sure use the hundred dollars you would get for each meeting.” “It would be cool having the teachers answer to my dad,” his then-fourteen-year-old daughter Brittany said.

So, Scott ran for the open seat on the board and was surprised he was elected, even though he had ended up being the only viable candidate. Apparently, no other adult in the entire Barlow Township School District had been either angry enough or greedy enough or bored enough to want the position that year.

He had to admit that his first two years had been relatively uneventful, at least uneventful enough that he didn’t lodge more than a token protest when, this past fall, the other board members elected him president. The various school administrators were experienced and very competent, the teachers union was pragmatic and graciously nonmilitant in their contract negotiations, and the tax revenues were adequate, even in a tough economy. It wasn’t until the issue of intelligent design had been raised three months ago that he really felt the stress of being school board president. “Well, at least it’s over for this year,” he said to himself as he stood and pulled up his pants.

He flushed the toilet and glanced at his watch. “Maybe the crowd will have dispersed by now,” he said to the empty stall.

He washed his hands and opened the restroom door cautiously, praying that no one would see him as he attempted to make his getaway. After a long and careful scan, he was satisfied that the coast was indeed clear. He turned off the light in the restroom and started down the corridor toward the parking lot.

He was almost to the glass double doors when he very nearly collided with a small group that had gathered in an adjoining corridor. When they saw him approach, they stopped their conversation and turned to face him.

“Heathen!” a man wearing jeans and a black polo shirt yelled.

“Devil worshipper!” another man wearing jeans and a red t-shirt shouted.

“I hope you burn in Hell!” a woman wearing a long denim jumper added.

Scott was momentarily stunned and desperately tried to think of some appropriate response when a man in a black suit came up behind the group. “Leave the man alone,” he said in a calm but assertive voice. “And go on home.”

The three regarded the man for a moment, then, much to Scott’s surprise, opened the door and dispersed into the parking lot without saying another word or even looking back.

Scott took a deep breath and stepped closer to the man who had rescued him from the small band of what Scott considered religious zealots who would not be appeased or put off by empty promises or platitudes. “Thanks,” he said, keeping one eye on the parking lot just in case any of the trio decided to come back for another round of abuse.

The man smiled. “Don’t pay any attention to them,” he said. “They’re just a bunch of mindless sheep who don’t have any idea what they’re talking about. I imagine not one of them has read Darwin – or Genesis, for that matter.”

“Well, this whole thing has been rough on everyone,” Scott said, and he meant it as more than just polite conversation or an attempt to be gracious or conciliatory.

The man nodded. “It probably won’t get any easier next year,” he said. “But sooner or later, a decision will have to be made.”

Scott shrugged, not quite ready to think about next year, and then looked again at the man, a little more closely this time. “I saw you come into the meeting tonight; you sat in the front row,” he said. “In

fact, I've seen you at all the board meetings this year, but you never make a comment or ask any questions."

The man smiled again. "Nice to know you're paying attention to your constituents," he said. "I'm Mike Quinn, and let's just say for the moment I have my own reasons for being interested in what the board does."

Scott took another step closer. "I'm glad to actually meet you at last, Mr. Quinn," he said. "Since you have an interest in what the board does, just out of curiosity, how do you feel about the issue?"

"I thought you tabled the discussion for this year," Mike Quinn replied.

Scott chuckled for the first time all evening. It felt good to relax a little. "Good point." He held out his right hand. "Anyway, thanks again for rescuing me. I guess this issue has affected me more than I'd like to admit."

Mike regarded the extended hand, then lifted his own, a right hand that was both callused and very clean, as though it had been recently washed. The two men grasped each other's fingers and palms. "Do you have a minute to talk?"

Scott released the other's hand. He suppressed a scowl. "I guess so." He glanced into the parking lot; there were now only two cars left, and his silver SUV was one of them. The group that had confronted him a few minutes before was gone. "What's on your mind?"

Mike took a deep breath and fingered the buttons on his black wool suit jacket as if he meant to open it, then stopped himself. He looked at Scott, then looked away, conspicuously avoiding eye contact. The two men were about the same height and probably around the same age; however, Mike's closely cropped hair was almost completely gray, whereas Scott's slightly longer hair was still light brown. "I want to know," Mike started slowly, "what you believe."

"I thought we agreed that the issue was tabled for now," Scott said. More than anything else, he was ready to go home. Maybe his wife had saved some dinner for him; maybe he could still watch some of the NBA playoffs. He would even be willing to eat a salad and watch a silly sit-com with his daughter

– anything to get his mind off the meeting and his ambivalent feelings about the teaching of intelligent design.

But Mike’s expression was insistent. “I’m not talking about intelligent design,” he said with a hint of impatience in his voice. “Look, I’m a chemical engineer. I know that Genesis isn’t a science book.”

Scott sighed in resignation. “Okay. what do you want to know?”

“I want to know what you believe in.”

“Isn’t that getting a little personal, Mr. Quinn?”

“I don’t think so,” Mike said. “As a father and a taxpayer, I believe I have the right to know what kind of man is leading the school board.”

Scott tried to think through the fog that had engulfed him for the past two hours. As a sales manager, he was more used to asking questions than answering them, extracting as much information as he could from potential customers in order to make the best possible deal. And during the negotiation, he understood that the customers don’t really want to know what a car salesman believes in because they all just assume it is selling cars and making as much money as he can.

Scott thought his beliefs went deeper than that, but sometimes he wasn’t sure. After all, when all the exterior trappings and niceties were stripped away, his job really was selling cars at a profit and earning his commission in the process.

Mostly, he didn’t consider the question. But when he did, he knew he believed that free enterprise and capitalism form the backbone of America. He knew he also believed that a man’s highest priority in life is to provide for his family, a lesson he had learned from his own father. Finally, he believed that anyone who didn’t believe as he did was either hopelessly naïve or some kind of bleeding heart. He had little use for either, although he didn’t discriminate when it came to selling—all beliefs and believers acceptable, as long as they had the resources to buy a car.

However, now, as he looked at Mike Quinn, Scott understood that the other man wasn't really interested in his economic or social views but rather, in an unsettling sort of way, wanted to know what was in his heart. "Well, I'm Catholic," he said at last, hoping that this simple declaration would settle the issue so he could finally go home.

But Mike just shook his head. "That would make you a Christian, more or less," he said as he stood gazing at Scott. "Did you grow up Catholic? Do you still go to church?"

This is ridiculous, Scott thought. But he didn't say it, because he was now a politician, whether he liked it or not. And as a politician, he had to at least pretend to be patient with his constituents—patronize, always patronize; just don't be too obvious about it. Besides, there was something about the way Mike looked at him that Scott found unsettling. "I'm a cradle Catholic," he replied. "And my family and I go to St. Mary's every Sunday. Are you Catholic?" He knew he had never seen Mike in church and wanted to turn the tables, put the other man on the spot as much as possible. Or at least divert the attention away from himself—always a useful sales tactic.

"No," Mike said. "I go to Victory of Christ...although I didn't always."

Great, an evangelical, Scott thought. He had to consciously suppress the urge to roll his eyes. His patience was wearing dangerously thin. If he had been selling a car, he knew it was way past time to end this getting-to-know-you stage and close the deal.

Mike continued his hard and persistent stare. "I'm not an evangelical," he said as though he could read Scott's thoughts. "But I do read the Bible, especially the New Testament. And I have come to believe in the Word. What parts of the Bible do you read?"

Scott considered this new question, uncertain as to how to answer. It was true that he attended Mass every Sunday with his family, and he knew that the Liturgy of the Word usually consisted of at least three or four readings from the Bible, including one from the Gospels. Thus, doing the math, in the past thirty or so years, he had probably heard most of the New Testament and a good deal of the Old Testament. He remembered very little of it. He couldn't remember the last time he had actually looked

at the Bible he received at his confirmation. He didn't even know—or particularly care—where it was. Neatly packed away in some box of keepsakes, probably, along with his rosary.

However, he had been challenged, and he had to say something. He at least remembered that Easter season had recently passed. In fact, wasn't last Sunday Pentecost? He wasn't sure. Still, he did seem to recall that the readings had centered around Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John. "We're reading quite a bit of Acts at the present," he said.

Mike nodded again. "I thought so. Do you ever read Revelation? How about St. Paul's Epistles?"

Scott shrugged. He felt very tired, and the fatigue was quickly eroding the little that was left of his patience. "Look, Mr. Quinn—"

"Call me Mike."

"Okay...Mike...It's been a long day. I'm very tired and my brain is shutting down. I probably couldn't tell you what I read this morning in the newspaper. I'm perfectly willing to concede that your knowledge of the Bible is far superior to mine." He paused and glanced again longingly at the parking lot. His car was still there, right where he left it, waiting patiently for its owner. "Right now, I just want to go home."

"Well put," Mike Quinn said. "And no doubt honest. The truth is, in the end, we all want to go home."

"Amen to that."

"Where is home for you then, Scott?" Mike's manner was calm yet insistent. Once again, he fingered the buttons on his jacket. "And, the home I'm talking about is not a three thousand-square-foot colonial on a cul-de-sac in a quiet upper middle-class subdivision."

Scott's chin dropped slightly and his eyes widened as he processed Mike's last sentence. "How do you know where I live?"

Mike put up his hands, palms out. "I don't actually," he said. "I was simply describing what has become the great American dream." He took a deep breath and fingered the buttons on his jacket yet one

more time. “And there’s nothing wrong with it—I had that dream myself once. And then, I realized it’s only temporary.”

“I’m sorry,” Scott said. “But I’ve had a very long day and you’re way ahead of me. I’m just not prepared for any kind of intellectual or philosophical conversation or debate.”

“It’s been a long day for me, too, and I’m more than ready to go home, believe me,” Mike said. “And this is not an intellectual or philosophical dialogue. Rather, it’s a matter of simple theology.”

“What do you mean?”

Mike shrugged. “You say you’re a Christian. Therefore, you must believe in salvation, eternal life. You know, as stated in John, chapter 3, verse 16.”

So, this is what it all comes down to, Scott thought, as he put together the Bible reference – John 3:16. He had seen the reference printed on crude poster board at practically every sporting event he had ever attended or watched on television. He had even seen it occasionally written on the back of eighteen wheelers. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Mike smiled. “Of course, there’s more to it,” he said. “‘For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He that believes in him is not condemned.’ Salvation and eternal life. Do you believe it?”

“Of course. We say it every Sunday as part of the Apostle’s or the Nicene Creed. What’s your point?”

Mike gazed at Scott for several seconds, then glanced away. “I didn’t used to believe it.”

“What changed your mind?”

“The death of my daughter two years ago.”

Suddenly, Scott realized why Mike looked familiar. It wasn’t just because Mike had sat in the front row of all the board meetings. Mike’s daughter, Elizabeth, had been one of the two students who had been killed in a fiery car crash while on their way to school on a snowy day in February. Their car

skidded on a patch of ice only two blocks from the high school and hit a truck head on. “I remember now,” Scott said in a near whisper. “Look, Mike, we were all very sorry about your daughter and the other girl. But we took care of the problem with the ice.”

“I don’t blame you,” Mike said. “It was an accident. But I had to make some sense out of it. Beth was a good girl, the best. And she believed, even when I didn’t. And I think, in her own way, she was ready to go home, so God called her home.” Mike now unbuttoned his jacket and opened it, giving Scott a full glimpse of the butt of the gun tucked in the waistband of Mike’s black wool pants. It looked like a .38 revolver. “You look very tired, Scott, like a man who really wants to go home. That’s why I asked what you believe. You can’t go home unless you truly believe.”

Scott took a step back, not knowing what to say or do. This has to be a dream or some kind of hallucination. He tried to will himself to wake up.

Mike took a deep breath and put his hand on the gun. “My wife and I had some rough moments with this issue of belief, let me tell you. But, in the end, I convinced her to accept the truth, and now she is home with our daughter. They’re waiting for me, and I’m finally ready to go and meet them.” He pulled the gun and looked at it, studied it. The black metal shined under the overhead light.

Scott wanted desperately to run, but he didn’t dare. “Mike, murder and suicide are mortal sins,” he said. He knew it sounded weak, but it was all he could come up with, as his escalating pulse pounded in his head.

Mike huffed as he directed the gun toward Scott’s chest. “Only if you’re Catholic,” he said. Then he lowered the gun and scowled. A few awkward seconds later, his lips curled into a tight smile. “You know, you may be right about murder. Plus, you don’t really believe, do you?” He gave Scott a long hard look. “No. I can see it in your face, in your eyes. You say the words, but you don’t actually believe them. What a pity. You will have to live with your pain until you finally understand and accept the message of salvation. Only then may we meet again in a better place, God’s own palace. I will be waiting there to welcome you into paradise.”

Mike raised the gun again, this time directing it upward toward his throat. He pulled the trigger. The sound of the gunshot echoed off the walls and violated the stillness of the corridor. The gun slipped from Mike's fingers, and he crumpled to the floor, blood trickling from his mouth and neck. His eyes, still wide open, rolled slightly and stopped moving.

Scott recoiled away from the scene, staggering backward until he hit the wall. Then his legs buckled, and he too slumped to the floor. He closed his eyes against the aftermath, against the horror and shock of what he had just witnessed. In the part of his brain that could still function, he understood that sometime soon he would have to deal with what just happened, with what almost happened to him. He would have to make some phone calls, figure out what to tell the police, his family, the community he had been elected to serve.

But for now, he was just content to sit with his back against the wall and breathe and wonder.