

FR. MARK BEARD

Caught in My Own Trap

I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where there are two types of weather, humid and less humid. Most people in southern Louisiana are Catholic, but Louisiana State University football is the largest religion by far. Along with tailgatin', the Louisiana lifestyle involves crawfish boils, eatin' gumbo and jumbalaya, shootin' skeet, huntin', fishin', and Mardi Gras celebrations. The rest of the United States thinks our southern twang sounds funny, but we can't hear it, 'cause we're too busy speakin' it.

My parents are, to this day, my greatest blessings. Quite a site together, Pop is two times Mom's size—a powerhouse of a figure. To me, he's the quintessential John Wayne, a straight arrow who has no problem tellin' you what he thinks and where you sit in the world. An electrical and chemical engineer with an intellect that flies off the charts, he is a national expert in electrical distribution and power systems around the country. While he kept his strong belief in the Catholic faith to himself, he made sure my brother and I were raised in it. In all my years, I only saw my father in one light, positive. I loved him to death, and loved him even more as I grew, if that were possible.

Never was there any question about who the head of the household was, but neither was there a doubt of who the heart of it was. Sweet, intelligent, and about five feet tall on a good day, my mother is a little plow horse who performed all the household duties, worked in the family business. Mom shared her faith openly and prayed the Rosary constantly, and I never understood the significance of it because, what's the point? You're just prayin' in a circle.

My parents grew up in the depression. For them, hard work was a necessity, somethin' you put all your effort into. For me, nothin' was a priority. Since I found no reason to apply myself or bother to read, my parents came up with their own runnin' joke: "If you can't pour it directly into Mark's head, he'll never know about it."

Throughout my Catholic grade school and all-boy's Catholic high school, I was nothin' impressive, just Mark Beard, makin' his way through the woods. In college, I felt like I'd entered the Promised Land since it was coed and nobody was takin' role. Comin' in at five feet, eight inches, and 130 pounds, I was no imposing specimen, but then I added fifty pounds and turned into a "gym rat"

or “plate head.” No need to date anyone exclusively now because I’d be limitin’ myself.

The first semester of my second year in college was when they invented beer. I was unconscious much of the time, and my grades showed it. The day after I reluctantly let my father see my report card, which registered barely over a 1.0, he brought me up to his office for a proverbial father-son talk, where he talked and I listened. Lookin’ powerful behind his big desk, he told me straight up that my behavior was not only unacceptable, but that it would not continue: “You failed at your job. Your job was to go to school and make the grades. This won’t happen again on my nickel. You need to tell me right now what your plan is to fix the problem.” My dad’s approval meant a lot to me, so I actually started to read. From then on, I never got less than a 3.0.

During my third year at Louisiana State University, guest speakers came in and shared their business success stories, which cornered my imagination. The way the world was spinnin’, success in the United States was predicated on your balance statement, and I wanted a part of it. Money became my goal and my grading tool.

In December of 1983, I graduated with a degree in business and that same year, my father, who had owned and run an engineering business for some twenty years, approached me and my brother, five years my senior, about startin’ another business in waste water treatment. “Look,” I told him. “I’d love to do it; but I want to because you want *me* there, not because I came from the right womb.”

“I’m askin’ you,” he said, “because I do want you. And I’m also askin’ you because you are my son. Do you want in or out?”

“Yeah, I want to be part of it. Absolutely.”

Ever since the sixth day of creation, the Good Lord didn’t give us any more water, just ways to clean it, so my father got to work quick designing water plants for cities so that sewer water could be reused for things like carwashes and golf-course lawns. Of the twenty-somethin’ patents we ended up with, 98 percent were in Pop’s name.

By the year 2000, seventeen years later, I’d accrued over one year of vacation time at Beard Engineering and United Industries. I liked what I was doin’ so whether I was workin’ or not was immaterial. I wasn’t a good vacationer. My enjoyment came from a purposeful product: makin’ good water. The business was doin’ well with about thirty in-house employees and fifty independent sales reps around the United States, and we were expanding overseas. I was earnin’ a sizeable income, flyin’ around the world, and comin’ home to a plush home, a maid, a 20,000 grand Harley, and a rag-top jeep. But my father, the chairman of the board, had grown concerned about my well-bein’. He saw me goin’ down a path he feared I wouldn’t recover from and wanted to see more faith in my life. I

was in my thirties, bullet-proof, and married to money, power, and “datin” for medicinal purposes: the unholy Trinity. I did avoid drugs or alcohol, but that was because I was too busy chasin’ women. I’d bought into the adage of Ben Franklin that God only helps those who help themselves, so that’s what I’d gotten busy doin’, helpin’ myself.

One day, my father stuck his head into my office, stepped in, and said, “Did you know the Blessed Mother is appearin’ in Medjugorje?”

I just stared at him. “Okay. What are you tellin’ me this for? And what do you want me to do . . . fly all the way over there?”

He answered, “If I were you, I’d go check it out.” Then we both froze and stared at each other.

On one end of my desk was the company’s cash flow statement; piled on the other end was a breakdown of all of our lawsuits from people “borrowin” our patents; starin’ up at me were the projects I needed to get personally involved in across the United States. The last thing I needed to talk about was what was goin’ on with six people who thought they were seein’ the Blessed Mother, two thousand miles away in a country I knew nothin’ about. It was completely immaterial. “I can’t leave,” I finally shot back. “I’ve got to take care of all these things.” Then my dad walked out.

“This is the day I’ve dreaded,” I thought to myself. “Now our best player, our patriarch, my own father, has lost it. How am I gonna hide this from the shareholders, the board of directors—from my mother?”

On a work break, I called up my buddy John to talk about what my dad was askin’, and he said, “You should get the book, *Queen of the Cosmos*.” I ended up reading the whole thing while standin’ up in a bookstore. “The Blessed Mother? I mean really. She’s talkin’ to people on Earth? C’mon, now.” The whole thing struck me really hard. “God sent prophets, disciples, and his only Son! So why would he be sendin’ his mother? Ain’t no way it’s happening. Ain’t no way.”

Yet something the youngest visionary, Jacov, said in that book about how Mary told him gently that she wasn’t happy with the way he was acting at school—it nagged at me. “She’s watchin’?” I wondered. “She knows? If she’s aware of what we’re doing, that means HE must know. Then I’m accountable for my actions . . . and I might not settle up with him too well at the end of time.” I’d always been an obligatory Catholic. If the priest didn’t bore me at Mass, I’d stay. Since I ain’t killed nobody, I was good enough. I worked hard and figured as long as people did their job right, they could worship trees.

I needed to go across the world to put this animal to bed. By meetin’ the visionaries, I could debunk the hubbub. My folks were pretty happy to hear I was goin’—my dad in particular: “Well, let me know what they say or what you see.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

International jetting had never been a problem for me, but when traveling to Medjugorje, I encountered nothin' but problems. It all started when I lost my entire pilgrimage group. The plan was to meet up with them in Paris, but my plane arrived two hours late, and they'd already left. Stuck in the Paris airport, where everybody speaks English but nobody wants to, my blood started to boil. Bein' as I made a LOT of money, and I was therefore IMPORTANT and deserved to have a BIG chip on my shoulder, I started "makin' friends" wherever I went. Long story short, I got into an argument with the Delta people and somehow paid a lot more money to end up in Germany.

Sittin' and stewin' in the terminal in Germany, I decided I wasn't about to waste any more of my time or money. My next flight was leavin' within the hour, but I'd had it. I was goin' home. So I stood up, grabbed my carry-on bag, and started to walk out. Immediately in the corner of my eye, I noticed about nine North American-lookin' ladies sittin' in a semicircle, wearin' pins with the face of the Blessed Mother—the same face I'd seen on the cover of *Queen of the Cosmos*.

In a boomin' voice, I spewed out hours of pent-up emotion, like a fire hose: "Oh, my God! Are you goin' to Medjugorje?"

One lady shot me a fearful look, and the next thing I knew, she was yellin' for her husband. Then the woman next to her started yellin' for *her* husband, and then men started comin' out of the woodwork. "Oh no," I thought, "it's gonna be a free for all," so I said, "Look, all I want to know is if y'all are goin' to Medjugorje."

"Yes, we are," responded one of the men.

"Well, if you don't mind," I said in a calmer tone, "I'd like to tag along 'cause it's in a communist country, I've already missed my flight and my group, and it'll be easier to get through the check points with you than if I were goin' by myself."

"It's not a communist country," they replied.

"Well, let me put it this way, their guns are still smokin'."

"Sure, you can travel with us," they obliged, so I sat down and found them to be quite congenial if they weren't yelled at. There was one man in the group with whom I clicked immediately. From the get-go, I felt like I could trust him. He was a hard-to-miss figure: a six-foot-three, two-hundred and fifty pounds, stocky and clean-cut gentleman with glasses and brownish-blond hair. His manner was genuinely caring toward his wife, and he had one quality that most people don't: the ability to listen. His eyes, his stance, the movements of his arm, the placement of his hands—all of him revealed that he was listening completely.

He shared with me that he used to be a prominent pastor for a large Protestant congregation. Then one day as he was drivin' down the road after havin' given a talk on the woman in Revelation, clothed with the sun, he looked up and saw a vision in the sky of the Blessed Mother. The impact of the moment

was so great that it changed him almost instantaneously. Mary had not been part of his life before then, as far as he'd known. Eventually, he left his congregation to embrace the Blessed Mother, and later, Catholicism. It took him a long time to walk away because he knew the cost would be great, and not just economically. When he finally left, he was hit with a lot of flak and lost many family members and friends. What he gave up and endured pointed to a genuine religious encounter with somethin' so beautiful that he couldn't live without it.

"Man," I told him, "you walked away from a lot."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "but I'm very much at peace with it." Later, in the course of our conversation, he pointed out, "You're a single guy. Why are you coming all this way?"

"Well," I hesitated. "I just need to see it."

"You don't believe it, do you?"

"Not really. I just have a lot of questions, a lot of doubts."

"There's got to be more to why you're here than that."

"Nah, that's pretty much it." The complaining to the whole group, I said, "Man, I've travelled all over the world. It's part of the business I'm in, and I've never run into this many complications in my life."

The tour lady, who had led over twenty pilgrimages to Medjugorje, commented, "Lucifer picks one in every trip to make sure there are trials and tribulations."

"Ma'am," I said. "I'm the pick of the litter."

From Germany, we flew to northern Croatia, where I had to buy another ticket to go to Split. In Croatia, the tour lady held up a neat, orderly, typed-up list of names and told me, "We've gotta get your name on this list that we show at all the security check points."

"Are you sure I need to be on that list?"

"Oh yeah, if you're not on it, then they'll know something is amiss." So she wrote down my name on the list—in pencil.

"Oh, sure," I thought. "They won't suspect a *single thang*. Why don't you just put a bullet sign on the back of my head?" Who ended up bein' the guy they searched every time we stopped at a check point? Me.

Despite the relief of gettin' to tag along with a new group, my frustration level continued to climb. I couldn't make sense of what I was doin'. I was traveling with people I didn't know to meet up with other people I didn't know to a country that didn't speak my language in order to somehow talk to people whom I didn't believe were speakin' to the Blessed Mother.

After a two-hour bus ride from Split to Medjugorje, I accompanied my "faux" tour group to a house where we all had soup. My luggage was somewhere in Paris, Germany, Northern Croatia, or Split. All I possessed was a carry-on bag with a pair of jeans, underwear, and socks. It was 2 o'clock in the mornin', I

hadn't slept for about eighteen hours, and my anxiety meter was about pegged. I said to the tour lady, "Look, I'm gonna sleep here."

"No," she said, "you have to go to your house."

I said, "Ma'am, I don't have a house."

"You need to stay with your tour group."

I said, "No, you don't understand. I don't know those people. I don't know that house. I know y'all. I'll just stay on the floor in this little spot right here."

She said, "No really, you need to be with your group."

"No, I don't," I said.

"Yes, you do, really."

"No, YOU really."

"No, trust me, just go. It'll be okay."

"Look," I said, "I don't have an address. All I have is this lady's name and a list of people I've never met before in my life."

"Well, we know who that lady is. I'll take you to her home," she offered.

Like a fool, I agreed. The tour guide took me in her car, drove me about thirty yards, stopped at the only four-way stop in all of Medjugorje, pointed her finger, and said, "That's the house right over there with the light on outside."

"Good," I said, "just drive your car right to that home."

"No, there's no paved road."

Like a bigger fool, I actually got out of the car, thinkin' she was gonna at least wait for me to walk over there. Now, Croatia had just finished a civil war. I didn't know if they'd lost, they'd won, they'd paused, they'd signed a peace treaty, or they'd simply run out of bullets. All I knew was that I was watchin' the one person I knew at that moment drive away.

Left standin' in the middle of the intersection, holdin' my little carry-on bag, I considered marchin' back to the house where I at least knew some people, but realized I didn't even know how to get there. Lookin' over at the house with the outside light on, I started to laugh as the thought crossed my mind: "CNN headline: Cajun Man from South Louisiana Ends Up across the World Searching for Visionaries and Gets Shot."

Inchin' forward, I wondered, "What if I knock on the door and they think they're bein' robbed? Am I gonna cause a problem? What am I s'posed to do? Maybe," I decided, "I should just stand outside here for a little while." But then I realized that it was just too cold.

Hesitantly, I walked up to the house, knocked on the door, and took ten steps back down the front stairs so I could be seen clearly underneath the porch light. Rollin' up my sleeves so they could see I had nothin' in them, and puttin' my bag down by my side so they wouldn't feel threatened, I braced myself to hear screamin' in Croatian and then guns blazin'. Then I saw the lights turn on from inside. Tremblin' from raw nerves and fatigue, I watched as the front door

slowly opened. In the doorway appeared the kind face of a woman who looked down at me and said in broken English, “You must be Mark Beard.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I guess I have to be. Those are the best words I’ve heard all day.”

She stretched out her hand, and on her palm, written in ink, was my name. “We have been looking for you. Where have you been?”

“You have no idea. There just aren’t enough hours in a day,” I said, relieved not to be in the middle of a gunfight.

The lady turned to me and said, “Your friends are here.”

“Ma’am,” I responded, “I have no idea who you’re talkin’ about.”

“The people in your group.”

“I ain’t never met ‘em.”

“Oh, dear. I see. Well, your room is upstairs. Can I help you with your luggage? Where is it?”

“That’s a fine question.”

Continuing to offer me hospitality in the middle of the night, she made sure I was settled in: “We have a little kitchen, and try to get some rest because we’re all going to get up early in about three hours.”

“No kiddin’.” I walked upstairs, threw down my carry-on, and started to pace around my little room. Never had I felt anxiety as tangible as it was that night. My gauge was redlined, my motor runnin’ over maximum speed. I swear I could have lit up the entire town with my nerves. Needin’ to move and unable to sleep, I went downstairs to get some water and after pourin’ myself a cup, was startled to see a lady sittin’ at the kitchen table. “You must be Mark Beard,” she said.

“Yes, Ma’am, I guess I just have to be.”

“Where have you been?”

“I don’t have the time to explain it.”

“Nice to meet you. Are you tired?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Then she said, “You don’t believe, do you?”

“No, I do not.”

“You wait until you meet the visionaries. In four days you’re not going to want to leave. You’re going to love it.”

“Ma’am, if I could leave right now, I would.” And I wasn’t lyin’. Truly, if someone had come by right then and said, “Let me take you to the airport,” I would have left—no mind the travel. The devil had me on the ropes, and he knew it. Gettin’ myself some more warm water, I bade her good night . . . good mornin’ . . . or whatever it was: “Look, I’m gonna go back upstairs.”

With nothin’ else to do, I stared out the window into pitch black. Until that moment in my life, I didn’t know what an anxiety attack was, but I must have

been havin' one. After a failed attempt at lyin' down, I got up after an hour, realizin' there was no point.

Bein' a control person, I liked to know where everything was, where it was gonna be, and what was gonna happen. I ran the business that way, with my fingers in every detail, leaving nothin' to chance. Now here I was, thrown into a situation where I had absolutely no say, no understanding of where I was going or what would happen, and it was infuriating to me.

The next mornin', I nibbled a little at breakfast to take the edge off my nerves. Everyone else appeared peachy happy and very nice; but then again, they'd had a good night sleep. Bubbling with excitement, they chirped, "We're going to meet the visionary Vicka this morning!"

"Yeah, I do need to meet this one." I remembered readin' about her in *Queen of the Cosmos*.

We left the house and started walkin' toward the visionary Vicka's parents' home. Along the way, I ran into the group I had spent the last day and a half with, which made me feel a lot better. At least I knew them. We stopped and stood across the road from a little bitty, concrete house, like a peanut. Pilgrims were multiplying everywhere, on balconies, in driveways, spilling out into the street. On the cement stairs leadin' up to the home stood four women speakin' Italian, English, Spanish, and German, in turn. Though I didn't know one speaker from another, I could tell right away which one was Vicka. There was somethin' very different about her. She definitely glowed, and it wasn't a happy-go-lucky, I've had a good day look. I'm talkin' the woman was radiant.

Takin' my leave the group, I crossed the street and waded through the crowd. My intense scrutiny demanded close proximity. When I got within a few feet of Vicka, I heard her speakin' a sentence or two at a time in Italian, followed by the translators. She began to recount the time the Blessed Mother showed her heaven, hell, and purgatory, and my first thought was, "That's exactly how she described everything twenty years ago when she was twelve years old. Now in her mid-thirties like me, she's still stickin' to the same story: she ain't changin' it, addin' to it, or detractin' from it."

There was a sense of peace about Vicka that radiated to those around her. If a person couldn't feel peace, love, and joy when they looked at her, they could surely see it on her face. She had an absolutely beautiful smile that came from somethin' internal. Nothin' in this world could have produced it. "There's somethin' she knows that the rest of us don't," I pondered. "And it's not a small thing."

One of the translators mentioned that Vicka wasn't feelin' well due to the flu, but you would never have known it by lookin' at her. Even so, at the end of the talk, Vicka said she would like to pray with everyone present. Lookin' about, I thought, "Man, there are about a hundred people out here. Ain't no way."

Then the translator invited people to come forward two-by-two. “Oh, great,” I commented aloud. “We’ll be just like the animals in Noah’s ark.”

A woman standin’ nearby said, “You don’t believe, do you? You’re like Thomas.”

“I make Thomas look like the rock.” Surveyin’ the scene, I started thinkin’ to myself, “Vicka is gonna cut her losses. Here’s what she’ll do. She’ll pray over about ten people in order to put on a good show, and then she’ll send everybody home.” So I began to time her. If she was serious, she’d spend an equal amount of time with each couple. If she spent less and less time with the couples, then she was fakin’ it. After about forty minutes of standin’ in line, my calculations showed that each time two people walked up to her, she prayed with them for about a minute and ten seconds. Determined to catch her at her game, I left my post about half-way forward and walked to the back of the line. I knew she wasn’t gonna finish the race. She was gonna get tired and quit since most of the spectators were gone. Then there’d be no point.

When I reached the front of the line, I stepped forward thinkin’ Vicka would rest her hand on my head, but she squeezed it like a grape. “This woman’s got a death grip,” I thought and looked down at my watch to time her. At one minute, ten seconds, she removed her hand, and with it, my major defenses.

That woman had been standin’ out there for over an hour prayin’, or believin’ she was prayin’—not kinda, not sorta, not half-way—but just as passionately with the first person as she did with the last. This wasn’t what I had expected. As I walked away, the lady I’d met at two in the mornin’ in the kitchen stopped me and said, “So, do you believe now?”

“The jury is still out. But that was pretty impressive.”

The tour guide then announced that the visionary Ivanka would be givin’ a talk, and we could either walk or take the bus to get to her home. I chose to travel on foot, needin’ some time to think. Confused and unsure of what I’d just witnessed, I looked back over my shoulder: “What did I just go through? Did I see what I saw? Is this really true or just a show? And if so, a show for what?” I could have spent a month of Sundays picking Vicka’s brain. I wanted to get the skinny on why she was doin’ what she was doin’. “Where was the book deal . . . the movie . . . the car . . . the money? This must be a seven-digit deal, not just a three- or four-digit one. . .” But the dirt road under my feet and the cracker-box houses to my left and right humbled my spirit. The people of Medjugorje were clearly doin’ the best they could.

I was tryin’ to be logical but couldn’t get there, so I stopped along the way to talk with whomever would listen—cab drivers, owners of shops, hostels, restaurants—anyone who might help me unmask the charade: “What do you think of all this? Been goin’ to Mass a lot?” I was lookin’ for “It’s all a scam, but I sure need the money.” But no one had the signs and tales, nuances and

mannerisms of someone whose interest was just monetary gain. The townspeople were obviously very much in agreement with the phenomena of the apparitions. They were at peace with it in their beings—spiritually, socially, emotionally, intellectually, physically. The Blessed Mother appearing in their midst seemed very much a way of life for them.

Along the way, I got the attention of the tour guide of my “faux” pilgrimage group, and it came up in our conversation that she had been a classmate of the visionaries. “Are they the same as before or are they different?” I asked her.

“Exactly what are you looking for? You’re talking to everybody.”

“I’m lookin’ for inconsistencies,” I confessed.

“What you see is what they are. They’ve been living this way ever since day one.” That was the answer I most feared.

I could tell we were approachin’ Ivanka’s when I caught sight of several tour groups millin’ about and gettin’ off of buses. Steppin’ a few feet back from my two tour groups in order to observe the scene, I could see Ivanka’s house, which was only slightly bigger than Vicka’s parents’. A modest yard surrounded her home and was bordered on all sides by a little fence of rocks loosely stacked on top of one another. Ivanka stood in the front yard alongside several translators, as her children played on a rusty swing set. I could tell by the way she held herself and kept an eye on her kids—all the while tryin’ to be a gracious host to the translators and the pilgrims—that she was very much the introvert. To sum it up, she seemed like a normal, everyday mom. “Does this happen a lot to her?” I wondered. “Do the visionaries draw a crowd everywhere they go? Did they choose this life or was it thrust upon them?”

One of the translators said in English that Ivanka was somewhat shy and would prefer answerin’ any questions we might have for her, instead of talkin’ extemporaneously like Vicka did. Seizin’ my moment, I shot my hand up in the air. “I really don’t have a question, I just have statement,” I said brashly and proceeded to play back to her a story she had related in the *Queen of the Cosmos* book twenty-years earlier, when she was fourteen. But I altered the account in ever so slight and subtle ways, hopin’ she wouldn’t catch any of the changes and simply nod and smile in agreement or say, “Yeah, you’re right.” Then I could walk away knowin’ it was all a lie and go back to my life.

“Ivanka,” I said for all to hear. “I read one time where you had mentioned you lost your mom. I haven’t experienced that yet, and I’m sorry. You asked the Blessed Mother about your mom. She said she’s in heaven. The Blessed Mother left and came back the next day. You got to visit with her, and then the followin’ day she brought your mom who looked different than the way you remembered her, but even so, you knew it was her. And you actually got to hug the Blessed Mother, and you got to touch your mom. And I just think that’s a remarkable

story, and I really appreciate you sharin' with everybody so long ago, and I just want to say thank you."

I figured nobody would know where I was headin' since few people had likely read the book or remembered it in such detail. But when I looked around, nobody was standin' anywhere near me. I felt as if I were on a lone island, and everyone had said to one another, "Let us slowly back away from him. There's gonna be a big patch of lightnin' debris where this insolent man once was."

Ivanka looked directly at me and responded in Croatian, which took several minutes; then the translator began to speak in English. The expression on Ivanka's face was that of a loving mother who wasn't angry or upset, just disappointed in her child's action or words. She gently corrected every lie, every supposition, every false innuendo, every misstatement I had made. Then she started to take other questions, as if to say, "You've been told. I don't know what else to say to you."

Someone came up to me and said, "Do you get it? Do you believe her now?"

"Oh, my God," I thought, "she's tellin' the truth." Tryin' to get my hands around it all, I left the crowd to walk down the hill toward the center of town. The visionaries didn't have any of the "traffic" I was lookin' for. I knew Ivanka had to have lived what she described in order to have retained that much detail from so long ago.

Followin' a dirt path, flanked by vineyards and small houses, I walked and walked, not in any particular direction. "Things are so different here. The locals are goin' to church to pray for *three hours* every single evenin' from six to nine, and the church is filled to overflowin'. *Everybody* would have to be lyin' or buyin' the lie, and there just ain't no way that's possible." Passin' by a man who was addin' onto his house, I reflected: "Man, those visionaries have got to be tellin' the truth or he's gonna go broke. Look at what he's givin' up. He's sellin' his children's inheritance, their education and their future. He's not gonna be able to plant crops if this is all a lie because he's done chewed up all his farmland."

Then it hit me hard. "My God, this is all real." As I accepted that thought, a tangible sense of glorious calm came over me. The peace of Medjugorje that everyone else seemed to be experiencing was finally able to filter in. Before that moment, I had been a shell of a person. The world had built up so many layers of crust on top of me that I really didn't feel in life, I just reacted. But now a sense of joy and excitement began expandin' in my heart, and the crust of that shell started to crack and break away.

When I reached the main road in town, I tried to find a pay phone, which was like lookin' for God and country. Finally, I spotted one.

"Chief." I said, as my father picked up the phone.

"Son, all I want to know is, what do you think?"

“Pop, they’re tellin’ the truth. They got nothin’. Nothin’. If they’re lyin’, then the whole town is lyin’. Either the Good Lord’s mother is here, or she’s not. You can’t just believe the visionaries part of the way—you can’t just go 50 percent or 80 percent. And there’s a sense of peace here that you can cut with a knife. It’s . . . it’s unbelievable.”

The peace of Medjugorje was makin’ me feel like the Blessed Mother was not only present and alive, but somebody I could talk to—somebody I could love. “Blessed Mother,” I asked her tentatively, “well . . . now what? The Good Lord surely didn’t bring me 2000 miles to have me disprove this. So why am I here?”

That night I slept like a child, and the next mornin’, I woke up in the day. For most of my life, I never woke up in the day I was supposed to be in. I woke up in yesterday or five days ahead, worryin’ what was comin’. The greatest gift I could ever think to ask for was given to me because I woke up in peace. It was nothin’ short of nirvana.

On the third day of the pilgrimage, the story from *Queen of the Cosmos* of Mary tellin’ Jacov about his poor behavior at school kept comin’ to my mind: “I need to circle the wagons here and think about where I’m goin’. I didn’t know why I was in Medjugorje and findin’ it odd that I was the only single guy in the group. By that point, the former pastor and I had become close friends and were constantly havin’ little conversations about faith, the world, our lives. Every chance I got, I would walk over to his “house” to visit with him, and the previous evenin’, my group had invited him over to our “house” to give a talk about his conversion to Catholicism. That night, he struck me more than ever as the quintessential Protestant minister, always speakin’ about God and bein’ blessed, while jumpin’ back and forth from one Scripture passage to another. He closed his testimony with a song to God that was absolutely fantastic, full of passion and praise. Man, the boy could get it out there. I give him his due. But what still impressed me most and let me know I could trust him was all that he walked away from.

Feelin’ the need to talk, I moseyed over to my new friend’s “house” and knocked on his room door. “Hey, can I come visit with you?” He was lyin’ in bed in his little room, not feelin’ too well. “Look, I don’t want to take up your time.”

“No, C’mon in. Tell me, what’s up?”

Now, I didn’t share with a lot of people what went on in my world because that’s not what you do in business. Show somebody your feelings and you could be six feet deep before you knew it. Havin’ spent all of my twenties and most of my thirties runnin’ a corporation for many years that operated in a number of countries, the stresses of increased success—cash flow worries, litigation problems, personnel issues, family concerns—were weighin’ heavy on me. As I

sat at the bedside of this man, I realized I fully trusted him like I trusted no one else. Without plannin' on it, I began to vent for the first time about all the pressures in my life and about my lack of faith, and tears started to form in my eyes. Finally, I was able to let my guard down and explain to somebody what I was under. "Am I supposed to leave? I'm not sure where I would go. Maybe I should teach, or get married, or have kids. . ." Lettin' myself break down for the first time in years, I cried, "This can't be it. . . This can't be it. . . This life just can't be the answer." Perhaps there was no other man to whom I would have been willing to say that because no one could understand how hard it would be to walk away from it all, except somebody who'd already done it.

I'll never forget what he said next: "You mind if I tell you something?"

I said, "No. What's on your plate?"

"I just feel I need to tell you this, like the Holy Spirit is prompting me."

"Okay. I'm here. It's your nickel."

"You sure you're not supposed to be a priest?"

"God Dang! Where did that come from?" I thought. "No money, no women, no fun, no thank you." His statement put me back on my heels, and my anxiety meter picked back up from zero to maximum.

"Man," I mumbled, sittin' back in my chair. "That's a pretty . . . Man, I don't know about that. Man, whew. . ." And to myself, I'm thinkin', "A priest? What the Sam Hill am I supposed to do with that?"

The last couple days of the trip, I experienced a gamut of emotions. As soon as I had come to realize that God had another reason for me bein' in Medjugorje, I'd asked what it was; but if this was his answer, I didn't want it. Nevertheless, the great peace I'd been feelin' returned. That lady in the kitchen my first night of the pilgrimage was right. When it came time to leave, I didn't want to go. If they'd given me a job sweepin' the streets or ploughin' the ground, I would've stayed.

Yet as I got on the bus, I knew I needed to go back home. My world was changin'; I just didn't know to what extent. But I did sense that I wasn't leavin' as the same guy who came. When I arrived at the airport, there was my luggage, but the old me was gone. Lookin' back on it, that was the big turn in the road of my life: Medjugorje.

For the next three years, a day didn't go by, whether it was Monday mornin' or Sunday mornin', without my mind barkin' at me, "Maybe you need to be doin' somethin' else." I wasn't gonna stop datin'—there was no question about that, and I wasn't givin' the thought of priesthood any credence, but my faith was now a desire, not an obligation. With God suddenly a part of my life, I knew my understandin' of Catholicism had to change, so I got to work learnin' about the Faith.

Success, as I was taught in school and by the world, was predicated on what you did and what you earned. Despite my new religious fervor, that was the stick I was still tryin' to measure by, and I'd finally made it to the top. In the beginnin', when Beard Engineering and United Industries started, I was the first guy not to get paid. There were times I made less than minimum wage and had to stop all my spendin', periods when things got so tight I had to give money back to the company, years when we broke even at best. Now the business was affordin' me a lifestyle of pickin' from the best part of the tree. Tailors would bring out choice fabrics for me to choose from for my custom-made suit selection. My walk-in closet contained a ridiculous number of ties, shoes, shirts, and suits, which I had no ability to match, so everything had to be numbered and charted, like Garanimals® for adults. I wanted people to think this self-made guy had it all.

Eventually, I got tired of bein' tired. We were in litigation seventeen of my twenty years in the business, and it was really startin' to wear on me. Pop was retirin', and I knew I'd miss the heck out of his company. Mom had already stopped workin', so gone were her daily hugs for me and every employee. Enjoyment on the job just wasn't there anymore, and I didn't want to give up hope of the peace I'd found in Medjugorje. One day I walked into my office, unlocked a confidential file drawer, and pulled out a resignation letter signed with my name and a date a year old. Rereadin' it, I thought to myself, "I was here a year ago. If I don't do this now, I'll be in exactly the same place next year and the year after that." Drawin' up courage, I sat down at my desk, opened up the letter on my computer, and typed in a new date. Later that day, called my folks up and said, "I need to stop by."

"Chief! You in?" I called out, steppin' through their front door. In the family livin' room, my mother and father were planted comfortably in their favorite recliners. I was tremblin' inside and out. My greatest fear in life was disappointin' Pop. He had started the business for his family so that we could have a good future, and now I was comin' in to tell him I was quittin'. I expected him to be upset, and if he showed any displeasure, I was gonna turn around and march back into hell for love of him.

My father got up, turned off the TV, and sat back down. "Look," I said, "I need to bring y'all this. Extending my arm, I handed him the letter, and time stopped. He looked down through his readin' glasses, and I followed his eyes. He always read only the first line of every paragraph, but I noticed that after he did that, his focus returned to read each line. I tried to read his expression, but that was impossible. He had the consummate poker face. Backing away, I sat down across from him in a state of frozen terror, bracing myself for what might come next, full-well knowin' that when Pop shoots, he shoots from the hip, but he hits what he aims at.

Then he handed the letter to my mom who started readin' every sentence, probably twice. About a paragraph in, she began to smile, and my father peered at me over his readin' glasses: "Man, what took you so long?"

"Oh, thank you, Jesus," I exclaimed, lettin' out a lot of air. "Man, you took a thousand pounds off my back, you sayin' that."

"Son, it is time for you to move on."

"Yeah, Mark," added my mom. We've been knowin' this for a while."

Smilin' together, they asked, "Where are you gonna go from here?"

"I don't know what I want to do."

"Whatever you want to do, we're behind you 100 percent."

I left their house with no direction, no plan, and no path, but feelin' a lot of relief.

Well, that feelin' didn't last long. For the next ninety days, there was a gapin' hole in my chest, big enough for a passin' train because the world had been pulled out of it. Suddenly, the emperor was naked. Bein' a problem-solver by nature, I couldn't resolve a dang thing, so I started to experience a lot of anxiety, and I had nothin' to do and all day to do it. A guy can only go to the coffee shop so many times a day.

Around that time, I started datin' a woman I'd met through work and friends. The relationship wasn't serious because I was tryin' hard to take discernment off my plate, but it wasn't *laisse faire* either. She was a remarkable woman, always upbeat, with the greatest disposition in the world. If she lost an arm, she'd say, "That's okay, I've got another one." She had all the traits that'd make for an excellent wife and helpmate. Our best times together were *not* goin' out: watchin' a movie, stayin' up almost 'til mornin', talkin' and cuttin' up. We didn't need to dress to the nines or put on the dog. (That's Louisiana speak for puttin' on a show to impress.) It didn't matter what we looked like or what was revolvin' in the world outside. We would just enjoy the night.

To feel my way in the dark, I began to attend Mass and Adoration more frequently, and as I did, God pulled me closer and closer to the seminary. My girlfriend could tell I needed to check out the priesthood or I'd never be at rest. "If you don't go, there will always be a barrier between us."

After a year of hemmin' and hawin', I finally, I moved myself into Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans and made sure I brought the essentials: a TV, a reclining chair, and plenty of clothes. When the guys saw what I was haulin' in, they broke out laughin'. The dorm room closet was about three-feet wide and two-feet deep. Ain't nothin' fits in that. My big recliner ran into the desk, and my clothes spewed forth everywhere.

Goin' from my world where I could control the heater and the air conditioner without gettin' out of bed, into a ten-by-ten room with a leaky faucet, one window with bent blinds, and a bathroom down the hall I had to

share with thirty of my closest seminarians, I thought I had done somethin' terribly wrong to someone in a prior life, and this was payback time.

That first night, as I lay on my small, substandard mattress, starin' up at the paint chips comin' off the ceilin', a terrible panic swept through me: "My God, what have I done?" At ten o'clock, I got up, unable to sleep. I wanted to pace, but I couldn't move around my room because I'd stuffed it to the gills. Filled with terrible anxiety and feelin' the walls closin' in on me, I asked a young man passin' by, "What's the record for leavin' early?"

He said, "Twelve hours. A guy came one day and left that night." Then he asked me, "Sir, you're not going to leave are you?"

"No, I'm too tired now, but I'll think about it in the mornin'."

My first semester in seminary was a quagmire. Time and choices weren't mine anymore. My new salary was 100 bucks a month. "God Dang. I was makin' six figures." When I got my first check, I told them they missed a decimal point. Meanwhile, friends were callin' up and askin', "Do they know you? You know . . . your datin' past?" Some of them thought I was makin' the biggest mistake of my life givin' up wine, women, song, and success, and I didn't have an answer to justify what I was doin' in their eyes. I didn't even have one to justify it in my own eyes. Hell, I had no money, couldn't date, and lived in a box. A day didn't go by that I wasn't searchin' for somethin' to anchor my identity, to say I was still a part of the world, to tell me there was still somethin' out there for me. I was in a round room, lookin' for corners.

Adding to that, I felt like I had to answer the priesthood question, every day. I was under the wrong assumption that the hundred guys I lived with, most of them a decade or two younger than I, had already figured it out. In fact, the seminarians averaged a year to a year and a half to discern three things: were they called to the priesthood, were they acceptin' of the call, and were they acceptin' of the gift of grace that comes with it of bein' a chaste celibate? Meanwhile, the secular world was pullin' very, very hard, makin' the battle a constant one for all of us.

One day, the rector, a priest my age, asked me, "What's your biggest fear?"

"That you'll lock the doors behind me, and you won't let me out."

"Well, we have to lock the doors. We live in New Orleans. But that's not to keep you from leavin'." His attitude helped me 'cause I didn't need any outside pressure to help me discern. I was puttin' enough of it on myself. He was kind and patient with me, as were a lot of my instructors.

Among them was a man whose kindness and patience emulated that of Jesus. A little younger than I, he was the instructor for the very first class I took—philosophy. When I sat down at my desk for his first lecture, he took off discussing the word "being," and I wondered, "*What is that man talkin' about?*" The room started soundin' like Gattlin' guns were goin' off. Lookin' up from my

legal pad and my pencil, I saw that everyone was typin' away on their laptops like they all got it. The class lasted a little over an hour, and the only thing I had in my notes was my name.

The teacher called me up afterwards and said, "You must be the new seminarian. I'm Dr. Jacobs."

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"What do you think of my class? Did you keep up?"

"Well, I lost you right after you said, 'Good mornin'. Buddy, I ain't got nothin', and the board up there looks like a weather map."

Dr. Jacobs started to laugh and soon became my closest friend and instructor. He could tell philosophy just wasn't my mindset and ended up generously givin' me his time, stayin' with me a half hour to forty-five minutes after every class to help me along, basically teachin' me the whole class over again.

During his final exam, I was addin' up my points because I needed to pass. I didn't want to repeat the dang thing, and I needed more points since I couldn't tell if I was gettin' any of the essays right. So smack in the middle of the exam, I asked Dr. Jacobs if he was gonna have a bonus question.

He looked at me, exasperated. "You want a bonus question, Mr. Beard?"

"It'd sure help."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I just added up my points."

Meanwhile, the students have stopped to watch the conversation play out.

"Well, I need to think about it."

I said, "Okay," and put my pen down and folded my arms across my chest.

A few minutes passed and he asked, "Well, what are you lookin' for?"

"What about a five-pointer? Why don't you put a bunch of quotes up there and ask who said it?" I was hopin' he'd write down some obvious ones like, "Give me liberty or give me death" or "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes."

"All right, I'll think about it."

"Okay, you think about it," and I sat back and stared at him.

Eventually, he walked up to the board and wrote down five philosophical quotes, but that wasn't helpin' me none because I didn't know philosophy.

"Well, what do you want me to do with that?" I blurted out.

"Just say who said it."

"You mean, you're not gonna give me a word jumble, like on the side, so I can figure this out?"

"Are you kiddin' me?"

"No, just mix up all the answers and put 'em over there on the side—right there."

The guy behind me was egging me on at this point: “Don’t stop now. I need the points, too.” It wasn’t just me dyin’ on this cross out there.

So Dr. Jacobs wrote five names on the board. One of them was St. Augustine, and only one of the quotes was very Christian, so I figured that was his. Of the other four, one had to be Socrates since he was popular, so I wrote him in four times. That was how I got my two points and passed the class by the skin of my teeth.

After a semester in seminary, I doubted I’d return. When summer came, the formation directors sent me to the Institute for Priestly formation at the University of Creighton in Omaha, Nebraska—an eight-day spiritual direction program for men discerning the priesthood and laity discerning their callings. I didn’t know what the words “spiritual direction” meant, so when they told me, “You’ll be assigned to Monsignor John Esseff as your director, I responded, “No, I really don’t need one. Just tell me where I need to be and the time I need to be there.”

They must have wondered if I was for real. I soon learned that my hour of spiritual direction each day meant that somebody in the program was there to help me follow the Good Lord and navigate through any self-imposed minefields, and that nobody was there to make me or anyone else into somethin’ we didn’t want to be. The classes were well done and the atmosphere very positive—and Marian, somethin’ I quickly realized I’d been missing in the seminary. At IPF, the Blessed Mother decorated the walls and the grounds; she was discussed in the classes and called upon through Rosaries danglin’ from hands; even the IPF logo had a prominent “M” in it, which made me feel at home.

I didn’t know that Msgr. Esseff was the spiritual director of St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and that his spiritual director had been St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, and that he was the top exorcist in the United States, with bishops callin’ him when things got out of hand. All I understood was that he knew way too much about me, things he shouldn’t have known—family concerns, business problems, my personal life, relationships—and he was right on target. My first three sessions with him fractured my world and put me on my heels: “Who in the Sam Hill is this guy, and how does he know all this? Is he psychic or psychotic?”

During my second session, he asked, “What’s your biggest worry?”

“I don’t know if I want to be a priest or not.”

“That’s not what you should be thinking about.”

“What do you mean?”

“The only thing you should be concerned with is whether or not you should be going back to school. And when you’re in school, the only thing you should be worried about is praying every day and doing well in school. The discernment

of whether or not you're called to be a priest will take care of itself over time. You're trying to determine that every day, while you should be focusing on living in the moment and taking care of what's in front of you." His words have reverberated through me ever since.

When Msgr. Esseff discovered in our third session that I was devoted to the Blessed Mother due to my experience in Medjugorje, I found myself prayin' a daily Rosary at his insistence. By our fourth session, I realized that he wasn't a clairvoyant charlatan or a scary psychic. This man could read my soul. He was just that holy.

Another spiritual surprise would rock my senses before my short time at IPF ended. In one of the classes, students were discussing religious moments in their lives. One of the guys, in his forties like me, stood up and explained how he'd been captivated by the presence of a woman holdin' her boy child in her arms, who was sittin' in front of him at a local Mass. In remarkable detail, he spent thirty minutes describing the tint of her brown hair, the blue of her eyes, the gentleness with which she held her child. Somethin' deep within him was tellin' him to look at her, makin' it hard for him to focus on anythin' else. He asked the teacher, "Do you think that could have been Mary and the Christ Child?"

"It could well have been," he answered. "I don't know."

All I thought was, "Whatever. Things like that always happen to everyone else, never to me."

Later that afternoon, I started chattin' with one of the founding members of IPF, Sr. Mary Andrew, whose presence in the program was ubiquitous. She and I clicked immediately, her havin' an absolutely fantastic sense of humor and bein' one of the greatest listeners I'd ever run across. I told her how I'd recently been askin' the Blessed Mother for somethin' very specific: a picture of her—a special one just for me that came from her, through Michael the Archangel, and confirmed that she had been in this journey with me from the get go. I was startin' to feel that I was on the right track, but I wanted to know for sure.

Sr. Mary Andrew invited me to ride with her to a particular bookstore in town, and it took us an hour to find the place. We almost gave up, but when we finally got there, I started lookin' for images of the Blessed Mother. Buried in a stack was a picture of her like I'd never seen. She was striking; I couldn't take my eyes off of her. She was holdin' her Son tenderly, and her intense focus on him revealed her submissive role; yet at the same time, she looked very strong and independent, able to accomplish whatever he needed her to do. "Sister," I exclaimed. "This is beautiful! The way she's embracing her Child—the look on her face. This is *real* special."

As we drove back, somethin' kept tellin' me that I needed to bring this picture to the guy who shared his story in class earlier that day. "Sister," I said, as we pulled up to the Institute. "I know it's late, but would you mind walkin' with

me over to his dorm?” She obliged, and when we met up with him, I told him, “I’m gonna show you this picture, and I want you to tell me the first thought that comes to your mind.”

“I can do that.”

“Now look,” I added. “Don’t elaborate, don’t pontificate. Just look at the picture and tell me what you think . . . the first word that comes to your mind.”

“Okay.”

I held up the picture to him, and the first thing out of his mouth was, “That’s her. That’s the woman I saw at church this past Sunday. I’m tellin’ you. That’s her.”

“Oh, shit.”

“What’s wrong?” Sister asked.

“I’ll explain later.” At that moment, I realized the guy’s name. “Thanks, Michael, for your input,” I said, barely able to speak.

The next night, all three of us went to see Msgr. Esseff at my insistence. I wanted to understand from him if I was really seein’ what I was believin’. We explained the background story to him, and then I asked, “Do you think I’m readin’ this right? Was the Blessed Mother really tryin’ to get me this picture of her and her Son?”

“You got everything right, minus one thing,” he responded.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Lookin’ me in the eye with a piercin’ sincerity, he said, “She’s not holding the Christ Child. She’s holding you.”

My head dropped. “Oh, my God!” I cried out silently. “Has the Blessed Mother been that involved in my life? Was she, and now is she, callin’ me to be a priest for her Son? Man, this is just way too much. Here I am thinkin’ I’m in control of my life, and I actually have no idea what’s goin’ on around me.” I knew the Blessed Mother was talkin’ to the visionaries in Medjugorje, but I didn’t think it was probable, even possible, that she was talkin’ to me.

St. Thomas had to put his hands in the side of the Savior, and I had to get a picture from above. Now I wouldn’t be able to handle the guilt of walkin’ away. And I didn’t walk away the following semester or any semester after that. It took me a total of four years of seminary to accept the call and the gift, but when I did, I felt a great peace enter my soul, a peace like I’d only felt in one place before: Medjugorje. On May 30, 2009, I was ordained in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and today I am a happy priest. I absolutely love what I do, and I tell people so all the time. Was I called earlier in life? Yep, the phone was probably ringin’, but I was so caught up in the world that I not only didn’t answer it, I couldn’t even hear it. The Good Lord had to send me to his mother through Medjugorje to get my attention, and then to seminary, to Creighton, to Msgr. Esseff, and to the picture, which hangs on my wall as my special relic to

this day. I may be late in gettin' here, but I'm here nonetheless. To be a priest for Holy Mother Church is what I was made to do, and I couldn't imagine doin' anything else.