

CHAPTER 5

BRING HIM ON!

JOHN TERLAZZO

AGE: 41

WE HAVE BEEN LOVED BY GOD
FROM BEFORE THE BEGINNING.

~ Julian of Norwich

John Terlazzo is a poet and musician. I met him in the early fall of 1995 at a weekend poetry retreat he led on the organic farm where he and his family lived. I was one of nine participants that weekend. It was a rustic, community-oriented event where we all slept in our tents in the back field and helped do dishes when we were not playing with words in creative ways.

I enjoyed getting to know John as he gently pushed and prodded us to express our voice on paper. He was a short, intense but gentle man who took his art very seriously. He had memorized many of his poems, and when he recited them, his depth and presence awed me. It was clear that he was a true artist with a passion for expressing himself.

John was an artist who did 'bread and butter' work to support his creative efforts. Sometimes he was compensated for a music concert or poetry reading, but mostly his income came from house painting and commissions for

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murals, among other odd jobs. When we first met, his wife was fighting breast cancer and was working only part time, so there was more responsibility on John to bring income in. John and I stayed in touch after that retreat. We collaborated in a reading at one of the Baltimore poetry spots later in the fall. I felt that it was quite an honor to be reading my work alongside such a talented person.

During the retreat, I had told John about the book, and he expressed a desire to be interviewed, so we set it up after our reading.

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If I gave you God's phone number, what would you do with it?

Well, I'd have to call. Partly it would be curiosity. But another part would be the idea of hooking up to some natural voice speaking in English for the God Energy. There is this thing about God Energy. We're swimming in it. It's swimming in us. I'd have to see if I could really talk with this.

What do you think you would say?

Hmm... [pause] ...That would depend on when you asked me. If you asked me today ~ this may be too mundane ~ but I would want to ask God why so much of our lives, my life, are ruled by money. I do five different things for a living, and the ones that I do the very best are the ones I don't get to do often enough and don't get to make enough money doing. I've been asking this God Energy this question a lot of times. The last couple of days I've been painting the roof of a barn. I make my own hours and all that, but it's not what I do. It's not who I am. I want an answer to that question.

If this God Energy gave you an answer, what do you think that answer might be?

You know...I guess the answer's pretty obvious. It would be: "Hey, I didn't design it that way. Other people did that, and I may be able to tell you how it's going to turn out, but this is your trip. You've got to do this. You've got to figure it out."

I guess that's always true. But it's strange to me that there are so many great poets walking around on the Earth, and only some are making a living. There are so many that are struggling so hard. Yet the number-one-grossing business in this country is weaponry. There's something there that's really out of whack.

Would you want to ask God about this?

I wouldn't ask God why it is that weapons are such a popular business. I know that that's not God's doing. I think I know the answer ~ it is that profit is more important to this culture than God.

A whole culture can be based on profit because people are unhappy. Somehow they think that attaining more will change that and make them happier. Maybe I would ask God what could I do about it. But I don't know. [Deep sigh]

I could do what the Berrigans did and go into weapons plants and destroy those guns and get thrown into jail. I don't know if that would answer anything. I really honor them for having done that, but I don't know if that changes things.

I can try to find time and space to make more art. I do think that a person making a poem, speaking it out loud, even if it's in their bedroom and nobody else is around, is a very healing thing. I think it's a very mystical thing.

There is an energy to speaking our poetry, really Speaking with a capital S. I think we have to ask ourselves

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what is this stuff, this energy, and also really revel in the mystery of what that is.

Is this what you call the God Energy, this stuff that you are talking about?

I think it is. This spirit is in everything. It's in you. It's in the bricks. It's in the trees. And it's so much more than that. And yet, I really get tongue-tied at this point because it's... [pause] ...this Being, the Big Being is all around, and we're in it.

When we get caught up in the daily struggle of paying bills, it's real easy to lose track of that. To not recognize that you're eating miracles all the time.

So I have a mixed feeling about someone's saying, "Here's God's number, you can just call up." On one hand I feel like I'm already right there in the middle of it. I should be able to get all the answers. They are internalized. They're here.

And then again, there's a part of me that says, "Yeah, I want to not only get the phone number, I want the address, fax number...email. I want to look into this face and see the face that's behind the face."

So many times in my life I've wanted to see that face in a really joyful way. I'm doing some great dance, and I really want to be grateful about it. Then there're times when ~ I've been there a bit lately ~ I want to see this face because I just want to say, "Come on, you know, what is this? Give me a break and make it clear!"

You're talking about being in the throes of the trials and tribulations of our human existence...I really wonder if having such a number would make our trials any easier. I don't know.

Well, I think the big mistake that's been made about God

in so many church philosophies is that they think they understand God. They think they know what and who God is and what God looks like. And I think that's a big mistake right there.

We're not supposed to get this. It's supposed to be a mystery. And the fact is that it's the mystery that I really love. I really love the fact that we can spend all of our lifetimes trying to figure this out and put a name on it. And it can't be done. At some point, when we see the real vision, there's just no way it could be explained in human terms. No name would make it. No words could describe it.

It might actually be that if we dialed the phone number, the top of our heads would completely explode!

Hmmm...It sounds like it would be very problematic for you to consider that there is such a phone number because your perception of God and God Energy is beyond what any phone line could reach.

Yeah, that's clearly true. Although it's still a great fantasy. I'd like to be able to call up God and really ask him about my life and what it is about. I like to think that it could be some sort of very friendly, warm, intimate conversation.

I guess my wide-open vision of God is so far outside of any artificial constructs that the phone number concept is hard. I envision that when I truly see God, at the end of this life or however many lives it takes, at that point there won't be any need for me to make conversation. In that space everything is answered.

When I die, I don't see heaven as some really boring space. Instead, I see an endless chain of clarity, understanding and wonder. Maybe like the best imaginable art, and it just keeps happening. Every corner you turn, there is more of it happening.

Some people may think my vision is very naïve. I guess

I would ask them the question: "Why would you seem to think that, given the amount of miracle that exists around us all the time, why would you think there would be such a thing as limits?"

I think our scientifically based society has done us a disservice. Now that we have scientific definitions for things, we cease to realize how incredible these things are. Look at water. Water is liquid energy. It's always been there. It cleanses us. It's a phenomenal substance. Yet we take it for granted.

We just turn on a faucet, we wash and then we turn it off, and it doesn't really mean anything to us. Yet, if you think about it, washing your face alone can be an incredibly sacred act ~ if you can just be with it while you do it instead of thinking of twenty other things.

And I'm not pretending that I'm really good at being with it. But there's incredible mystery in that. To just say it's two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen, what a disservice we do not only to the water but even worse to ourselves. We dismiss this phenomenon, this natural spiritual reality as if it were the paper we wrap around burgers at McDonald's.

Even the paper around the burgers could be a mystery, too. It's a great concept that all of this is God Energy here on this plane. And when we leave here, it can only get better. Can't get worse ~ or maybe it could?

I don't think so. I don't adhere to any one system of belief, but reincarnation makes sense to me, the individual spirit moving in and out of physical forms. Some may think of it as bad news. But I think we just have to work through whatever suffering we have again and again and again until we get it figured out.

But ultimately there's got to be a space where there is clarity. I don't mean that in a desperate way, like I'll fall

down now and cry if there isn't. I just mean, given all the miracle that's going on around us all the time, there's got to be more wonder than what we can perceive at this time.

A couple of months ago, a guy with Jesus pamphlets stopped me in the street saying, "Are you ready...Are you ready to meet Jesus?" And it would have been real easy to get aggravated and brush the guy off. But I thought about it and I said, "Well, yeah, you know, I'm really ready. Bring Him on! It'd be really great. Let's do it!"

I don't remember if we got into much of a conversation. I've had this conversation with a lot of people. But Jesus, Krishna, Vishnu, any name you put on it, it's the same stuff, just bring it on! You know, I want it!

What I mean is I want the clarity. But of course I know I have the clarity. There is always that dichotomy. A Zen teacher I had in New York would teach, "You know, it's not something you have to get to, to be Buddha. It's not that you have to sit zazen for fifty years and then maybe you get to be Buddha: the minute that you sit zazen, you're Buddha. Twenty years sitting is twenty years Buddha. Twenty minutes sitting is twenty minutes of Buddha."

He wasn't saying when you get up and then walk away you're not Buddha because you're not doing this form of practice. He was just saying that in the conscious act of doing zazen, or Tai Chi, yoga or any other discipline, you are Buddha. You are clarity, complete clarity. It's all right there inside.

It's just there's some part of us that's considerably unbalanced. Consider how a few businessmen get together and say to each other, "If we sold guns to this side and sold guns to that side, then we couldn't lose." The fact that they couldn't comprehend that all these people would die means everybody loses, including them. This type of human action shows that we're really out of whack.

But at the same time every one of us, including any one of those businessmen, could stop and realize the clarity.

That would be a great strategy. But how to get them to do it?

How to get me to do it! I know I could access this clarity. I know that God dwells inside me, and I know that I have the answers to any question. And yet, I walk around all the time banging into doors, tripping over steps, kicking myself again, feeling angry over something that's meaningless, jealous, arrogant or greedy.

Somewhere at the center ~ there's a seed, there's a real gift. I just have a hard time finding it while I'm feeling wretched.

You're not the only one. Hmmm...If you really could call, is there anything you'd want God to say to you?

[Long pause] ...The tender answer is probably one that I'd need to hear the most. I would want God to tell me that I'm loved ~ that I'm really loved. I would really like that.

Beyond that I would want God to say: "Yes, you're right about poetry, just go forward and do it and don't do anything else. And everything you need will be there. Yes, you're right to believe that poetry is inherent in all human beings, art is inherent in all human beings. And yes, that it is a worthwhile thing to spend your life trying to encourage people to make flesh out of their words, to encourage people to understand that they hold this spiritual wonder inside them and they can Speak with a capital S. It would feed them to do that."

That's very thoughtful. You're really speaking some of your passion.

Yeah. Thanks for giving me the opportunity. I have read that there were shamans in tribal cultures that wrote poetry and healed people with those words. I mean, that's not

some fantasy, it's a very real thing and that can exist now. I've seen it done.

There is something very mystical about the poem. People don't usually applaud after a poem. It's usually silence until the person finishes at the end of the night and walks off the stage. I think there's a sense of the sacred around poetry. There should be, I mean.

Where do you think poems come from?

Well, if you believe that creation is unfolding all the time and you're part of it, as I do, as opposed to a very literal theological idea that creation happened in seven days' time, you start to understand that you are doing this thing interdependently with the Great Being. You're not just along for the ride. Then you can understand that when you go into a poem or piece of music or a piece of art as an experience, it becomes mystical.

It can be done with anything: scat jazz music as much as saying the rosary at a former concentration camp. There is just as much God in both places, and we can connect with it. And it gets filtered through whoever we are at the time. Sometimes I go through some of my old poetry and am surprised that at the age of nineteen, I actually understood something.

I love some of Nikos Kazantzakis's work. He wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It was made into a movie, but unfortunately many people misinterpreted his work. His notion was that it wasn't God's responsibility to save Man. It was Man's responsibility to save God. What he meant by that was that it was our joy and also our duty to live life in such a way that the passion within us would contact the passion within all things. Our passion would contact God and pull the spiritual world into the physical world and make it evident in front of our eyes.

What I hear you saying is that it is for humans to remember God, to bring God back.

Yes ~ to want God so bad that we burn away the layers of those things that keep us from God. A lot of those things are very obvious. I mean, if you really want God, smash your television. If you really want God, start to honor the body and feed it well.

I'm not pretending to be the master of all this stuff; I screw up all the time. But if you really want God, I mean, don't...

[Long pause]

I just get to a point where I can't talk about it.

That's okay. Can you tell me a little about your upbringing? How were you raised?

Catholic. I feel very grateful for that. I know that a lot of people have suffered a lot at the hands of the Catholic Church, but there's been some greatness there for me. I really loved all the mystical stories as a kid in Catholic school. They really filled me up, stories about St. Francis and people like that. It was so obvious to me that when somebody like St. Francis would come forward and talk about the wolf being his brother, he meant it. He meant that we clearly are not above anything else in nature, we are one.

In the Middle Ages there were lots of wonderful, incredible monks who were very much tuned in to the essence of their tradition. Monks like St. Francis and people from other beliefs. The Sufis as a part of Islam and those in Judaism committed to the Kabbalah, and in Shinto and Taoism ~ the essence is there in all these different traditions.

The real mystics are the guys who meet each other on the road, no matter what tradition they are from, and they

know. They know they share the truth. It's unfortunate, though, that they usually are a small percentage of the larger group. So you have fundamentalist Christians and you have fundamentalist Muslims and they want to kill each other. It's incredible.

So anyway, I was raised Catholic, but I've read a lot and I've looked into a lot of spiritual traditions and philosophies, and again what I see in all of these things is the same essence.

Interesting. So you were raised Catholic and then you basically just started exploring on your own beyond that.

Yeah, and I see all the threads that pull it all together that show me that God is one being and It's in everything. There is only God. There is no devil. And anything that is screwed up in the world and bitter and evil and uncomfortable, it's just us being out of balance. And it's a matter of us getting our act together and becoming responsible.

If we recognize that all is God, then the manufacturers of weapons have no chance of making a profit. You don't shoot God. You don't go over the hill or over the ocean and put a machine gun in somebody's chest and kill them. These manufacturers will go do something else for a living.

I don't feel pessimistic about these things because if I can have these thoughts, then there have got to be millions of other people who have thoughts that are a lot more powerful than this. So there's a lot of hope.

It just takes more of us trying to figure it out and trying to encourage more conscious living. I'm feeling like maybe you're reaching a resolution here. Is there anything else you want to share regarding this phone number?

I think I'd want to know where to go with all this stuff that I feel so strongly about. Why am I filled with such

powerful feelings and beliefs if I'm not to be called upon to set them free? Why are people like me made to burn so much?

Yeah, I can give some poetry readings here and there, and that sets it free. And God willing and me willing at the same time, I'll get to do a lot more of that.

But there are some days when I think, "Okay, if this is all there is, if You're not going to let me set this stuff free more than I've been able to, then maybe I'm ready to lie down and die. Maybe it's okay."

And that's not like me to feel that way. I don't want to lie down and die. I really want to dance and dance and dance and then dance some more. If I die, it's okay, but I don't want it to be because I'm dissatisfied that I haven't been able to get my words out. And I've known that dance a lot of my life.

And you're ready to dance more. This is what I really hear. So how would God respond to that?

... [Long pause] ...Appropriately.

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John Terlazzo's interview was a powerful one. There were so many things he said that prompted me to think. For one, I admired his courage to step up to the evangelist on the street and state forthrightly that he was ready to meet Jesus ~ right there in that moment.

I'm not always sure that I'm ready to show up in front of Christ or God and have them see me completely. Perhaps part of me is ashamed of some of my weaknesses, my fears, my idiosyncrasies. But John's life and his poetry exemplify someone who has not been afraid to be present. And I could picture him standing right up to Jesus Christ and

openly conversing and then probably basking in incredible love. People who have had near-death experiences talk about the intensity of the love that they felt after their consciousness left their body ~ so much more than anything they have felt before. I do wonder if I am afraid of being bowled over by such intense love, as I imagine God and Jesus Christ have for us. But what a silly fear.

John did seek answers about why his life is so hard. I imagine that most artists might ask this question since life seems to be so much more intense for them with their sensitivity and passion to create, often in a world that does not appreciate them.

It has also been said that deeply spiritual people face more challenging life experiences generally. Some of the most spiritual people I've met have lived extremely hard lives, starting with child abuse and being physically assaulted in their adulthood. These people are truly tested. And John was both an artist and spiritual so it could well be that his path in life was not destined to be simple.

One compelling belief that John had was that poetry, all art, can come from that divine place within us where a part of us is merged with God. I do believe that each of us carries a piece of it. And when we create from that place within us and release it into the world, we send our love that is God's love that resonates universally. I loved how John expressed this.

His statement that we are not supposed to get the mystery made me laugh since I was trying so hard to understand. Here I was pounding the streets trying to talk to people so that I can figure it all out, and John is saying that I'll never get it in all of my lifetimes until maybe...who knows when? And at that point, I imagine I could not even put it into words. I guess I'm stubborn enough to still try.

I could really resonate with John's term "God Energy." In 1992, I went to India to study yoga for several weeks. One of the teachings that the Indian instructors impressed on us

was that everything is divine. Everything embodies God.

For weeks after I returned from India, I would look at trash cans on the streets of Ann Arbor and imagine them as divine. It was quite a switch from seeing them as dirty, smelly containers for our waste. I remember arriving at my office feeling like I carried more of the divine with me each morning. But as the weeks passed and life's distractions stole my attention, my perceptions of the objects around me returned to the mundane.

One thing that I did not agree with John about was that there is no devil and that all the screwed-up aspects of the world are our fault. Certainly humans can and have created some nasty situations, but I believe that there are negative entities, some more powerful than others, that are constantly trying to trip us up and push us to do dark deeds. I remember talking with a friend years ago about the concept of "possession." This man had known a Catholic priest in France who witnessed an exorcism. According to the man I spoke with, invisible forces had pulled up the priests conducting the exorcism along with the possessed woman twenty to twenty-five feet above the pews in the church. They were all dangling in mid-air near the front of the church. For how long, I do not know. The story was very unsettling to hear. I can't remember whether they considered the exorcism successful or not. I now believe that some of the most difficult people I've met were probably possessed. It may not be that uncommon.