

## POSTSCRIPT

*Only they are alive who reject their convictions of yesterday.*

—Kasimir Malevich

To avoid the so-called objective voice of the modernist researcher, I took care not to hide my biases as I wrote Dogs Playing Cards. In fact, to a degree my biases wrote the book for me. However, as the book progressed I sensed that I needed to offer pieces of the story that shaped my perspective. Here they are.

As a straight, white male in America, I learned early the commerce of oppression in two ways, both of which seemed within the natural order of things. In the repressed and isolated religious community of my childhood, the advantages, such as they were, were mine, although I often felt that I was looking at the wide, wicked world through a knothole in religion's fence. I was born into a religious sect called the Apostolic Christians, a group similar to the Amish. Our neighbors sometimes called us 'mechanized Amish'. For example, our farmers—my childhood and adolescence were filled with them—used tractors rather than horses.

The comparison to the Amish is historically accurate. Both sides of my family originate in the Rhine region of Switzerland. Their religious tradition is cousin to those of the Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites. If my ancestors had been educated and higher class, we would have been Lutherans. They were neither, so our roots trace back to Martin Luther's other offshoot—the Anabaptists. In the nineteenth century Apostolic Christians began emigrating to the New World. Some settled in Connecticut, while others moved on to the Midwest. I lived in Connecticut until I was fourteen, when my family relocated to Illinois. At one time Apostolic Christian children were made to drop out of school under conditions reminiscent of an automobile warranty—on their sixteenth birthdays or when they gave their lives to the Lord, whichever came first. Apostolic Christians choose to be simple folk, not always realizing that this choice is insidious to the degree that it is pastoral.



In mainstream culture, I was born to both advantage and disadvantage. I observed the advantages of my maleness, straightness, and whiteness. My association with a 'weird cult', on the other hand, was a disadvantage, and in my public school years it taught me the valuable but bitter taste of ostracism. I draw this taste into my mouth when I write, speak, and teach.

I recall being taught as a child that the blue flames on our gas stove were like the flames of hell. If I did not obey God—if I were a 'bad boy' who pilfered candy, practiced lying, or played with himself—God, in a snit of cosmic overreaction, would banish me to an eternity spent screaming in agony. Curiously, this was the same God who, I was assured, loved me. God supplied food to everyone I knew, yet denied it to 'the children starving in Asia'. Through intercontinental metaphysics only adults understood, the plight of those starving children was eased if I cleaned my plate. Thus I learned of a petty God, an insecure, grudge-bearing super-brat who, like a hulking, mentally disabled adult, had to be respected for his strength if not his behavior. Satan seemed more god's sidekick than his foe, more Robin than the Joker to God's dark and brooding Batman. Satan was not someone I wanted at my birthday party, but he held more appeal than God. After all, not only was it he who filled my adolescence with mood-altering women and sexy chemicals, but he was honest about where I stood—he held my worst interests at heart. I could cope with that. It was God, not Satan, who seemed more likely to tell me with a Gestapo smile that I was being led to the showers. As a child I believed in this, my first reality

The stress of this environment manifested itself in school. By seventh grade I was labeled a 'problem child', spending much time in detention hall—on the days when I went to school.

My earliest linguistic contribution to Western civilization was to name my gang of detention hall misfits The Zoo. By spring the name had made its way into the teacher's lounge, where my teachers teased each other about having Zoo Duty.

In eighth grade I was expelled from school following a string of the worst imaginable luck. The pivotal tragedy occurred during science when I found myself hiding a squirt gun, loaded and ready, under my desk. I sat separated from the class, pushed against the front wall beneath the chalkboard. This vantage point assured me the attention of my classmates, an honor for which I felt compelled to reward them. To their enormous delight, my hand seemed to squirt our teacher in the fly each time he shuffled past. His baggy pants made him oblivious to the dark, expanding blotch, which enabled me to tally several handsome shots before he noticed the streams of water jetting from under my desk.

I may have been merely suspended had I not earlier that day had the misfortune of tossing a lit firecracker in the locker room at a naked classmate's feet with the command, "Dance, Tom!" Tom danced splendidly and I was expelled. My best friend Gary, who lived across the street and attended the Catholic school, happily skipped school so as to share in my adventures. Our first three days were spent in exquisite idleness. In the mornings we looked at our Playboys as we mixed Pepsi and aspirin, trying vainly to get high while pretending to each other that we were. The first two afternoons were filled with TV game shows viewed over glasses of Gary's dad's Mogen David while we waited for our envious friends to walk home from the bus stop.

The third afternoon was a Catholic holiday. Gary and I rode our bikes to a haymow rendezvous with Midge and Nancy, two lovely classmates of Gary's. I got to third base with Midge, an accomplishment that my culture had taught me was both a sin and a badge of manhood—a combination as irresistible as it was incongruous. This particular week—at that point the most splendid of my life—represents my second reality. Thinking I was rejecting the unhip values of my religious heritage, I was in fact embracing the dictum that the only respectable emotions a man will express are anger and lust. Drinking, drugs, sex, gangs, and petty criminal activity appeared to me evil rather than stupid, and therefore desirable. Floating from one sensation to the next, I was easy prey for religion.

On the following Monday, Gary and I, now dreading another idyllic week, decided to resume our formal educations. Midge, to whom I had pledged undying love, forged respectable "Gary was ill" and "Dennis learned his lesson" notes, and back we went. Mr. Harned, the principal, accepted my note without comment. I sensed that the matter would die quickly.

It was during Mr. Bement's language arts class that my name boomed from the intercom. Still captain of my fate, I headed for Mr. Harned's office, rehearsing the blend of charm and penitence with which I would absolve myself. However, God, vengeance monger that he was, had chosen this moment to exact his due. There in Mr. Harned's office sat my mother. So it was I who was to die quickly. God's instrument had been my cousin Wayne, who was in my grade and had never been kicked out of anything. He had tattled to Aunt Esther. I sat down and thought fast as Mr. Harned and Mom discussed me as if I were not there—to which I did not object.

Then Mr. Harned turned to me and asked, in a voice dripping with concern I had never heard from him before, "Why did you do it, Dennis?" Seizing the moment, I slowly raised my hands and began to massage my temples. I rocked from side to side. I rolled my eyes way back into my head. Time stood still.

"I think . . ." I stammered, ". . . I'm losing my mind!"

I was readmitted and the matter died quickly after all. God's vengeance lust, however, was not satiated. It happens that my mother is a gentle soul. It is terribly hard to cross the line of a gentle soul, but if one is fool enough to do so, one does not cross back without penance. My mother exacted mine not with wrath, but sorrow. Neither she nor my father ever spoke of the matter. (I don't know if she even told my father, and I'm still afraid to ask for fear she might.) She did, however, sigh—those horrible, barely audible sighs against which I had no defense. I remember her working over the stove, preparing a meal for her prodigal son. Her shoulders rose and fell under the weight of having borne such a child. I ached for her to beat me to a pulp. But no, she chose to let me writhe at the kitchen table. There would be other days when I got into trouble at school, but I made sure that it was never bad enough to get expelled.

Mom saw me graduate from eighth grade. Her eyes shone as she watched me walk across the stage and achieve educational parity with her. I soon passed my father's educational level as well. He had earned his graduation equivalency diploma in the Army, which Apostolic Christians join only if they are drafted, and under which circumstance they refuse to carry weapons. Both of my parents, deprived of educational encouragement by their parents and church, have earned my respect for supporting my years of academic endeavor.

Apostolic Christians, to validate their faith, insist that their youth join the sect of their free will. The way to insure this is to shelter them from the World, to shelter them from Ideas. At fifteen I succumbed to no-longer-bearable pressure, fearful that tomorrow I would be hit by a train at one of rural

Illinois' countless cornfield crossings and begin my rendezvous with that eternal blue flame. Vulnerable to this strategy of terror, I gave my life to Christ, but not to worry—I got over it. At that time I entered my third reality—a more sophisticated version of my first. As my sixteenth birthday approached, I decided to stay in school. I would continue rising early to do as many of the farm chores as possible, and finish them in the evening. My parents not only agreed, but to their credit, supported me. Then, in the twelfth grade I took my first art class. And I did better than I deserved on my American College Test (which made up for my class rank), and squeaked into the University of Illinois. I majored in accounting for two—well, minutes, and then transferred to art.

My wish to become an artist had been opposed by the church, resulting in my brief but terrifying brush with accounting. I recall, for example, disapproval of my 'having' to draw naked women. My maternal grandparents' attitudes toward art was clear: art objects were graven images, idolatrous and vain. This extended to family photographs. My parents did, however, display some art. Images that graced our home included an oil I painted of a beached anchor silhouetted against the sun to form a dark cross, and a print of a gargantuan Jesus tapping on the United Nations building as if knocking on a door, reminiscent of King Kong scaling the Empire State Building. In fact, my parents are self-taught artists. My father's magical transformations of blank paper into likenesses of Beetle Bailey and Dagwood formed my introduction to drawing. My mother's crocheted clothes hangers, pot holders, and Christmas ornaments taught me of our human need to make the world more beautiful.

At the university I encountered Ideas. They ripped the blinders from my face with a stinging slap. My cosmic belief system, unable to withstand the scrutiny of thought, crumbled. My salvation at fifteen had freed me of nightly dreams of hell. At nineteen I became free of my salvation. (I remain the only member of my family who is not a born-again Christian.) I thus entered my fourth reality—fundamentalist atheism.

Extricating myself from the snare of religious fundamentalism was not easy. Replacing the certainty of heaven with the stress of a cosmic question mark was a bit much for my nineteen years. Ken, my college roommate, who was raised as I was, had recently come within a hair's breadth of giving his life to Christ. His insight, however, had enabled him to withdraw the night before he was to be baptized into the fold. This withdrawal hurt his family and caused a scandal. These were the prices Ken paid to march to a different drummer. He informed me that he was going to drop out of college and hitchhike his way across the country. I was invited. I sensed that my acceptance symbolized the discarding of two decades of belief. This I was not yet able to do. It

a frantic effort to reclaim the security of my childhood, I chose instead to marry a 'sister' within the church.

The tradition of mate selection among Apostolic Christians is a curious one. The initiation of the procedure is the task of the male. When he reaches a point in life (usually early adulthood) at which he desires a mate, he beseeches God for a sign identifying the woman God has chosen. A particularly tragic consequence of my conversion to Christ had been celibacy. By the time I was nineteen I was so overwrought with testosterone that I contemplated the coital act night and day, usually minute by minute. I don't precisely recall God's sign that I should seek a wife, but it may have been that I could count my pulse in my swelled eyeballs. God revealed my bride's identity in a dream. In a state of fitful sleep I heard the name of a 'sister' I had met twice, briefly, at church socials during the recent year. The sound of her name woke me. That was a sufficient enough sign for me. I had only to follow this divine recommendation and all would be well.

The next step was to approach Brother Henry, the Elder of my congregation. I explained my 'revelation' to him. He agreed that it was the work of the Lord, and passed my proposal by mail to the Elder of this sister's congregation in Michigan. That Elder passed it on to her father, who took the proposal to her mother. Together they took it to her. Not surprisingly, she barely remembered me. However, she felt compelled—based on church custom and my tale of faith—to say yes. Julee and I were married a few weeks later. Our wedding was the fifth time we had seen each other. This travesty occurred with the blessing of every church-connected adult in my life.

Julee was comfortable in her Apostolic Christian life. She felt that the subjugation of her sex was part of God's wise plan. She was eager to play out her helpmate role, and she expected me to play what she perceived to be my role, the only male role she had ever seen—that of a 'working man', a man who respected solid American values, a man who brought home the bacon so she could fry it up and put it into his lunchbox the next day. Above all she wanted a man who, like her, believed in his Apostolic Christian childhood.

She got me instead.

The Apostolic Christian stamp stains the corners of one's soul. I needed thirteen years to acknowledge to my family the reality of my marriage. Yet, the marriage was worth it. Our union produced twin daughters, Shannon and Shenoa, both of whom have followed me into the teaching profession. We love each other openly and effusively, the way parents and children are supposed to.

In 1993 my then-wife Kris gave birth to our daughter Lauren, and three years later, to our son Austin. Almost two

decades separate them from their older sisters. Shenoa has presented me with two grandchildren, Jadon and Donovan (or, as I might put it, six-year-old Austin has two nephews). I have married Mary, my soul-mate, and for the first time I know what it feels like to be in love. I cannot imagine how I could be happier. My work at the university is also my play. It sustains my belief that I can still change the world as I watch my students absorb my ideas into their lives.

Twenty-three years after I left it, I returned to the Apostolic Christian community of my Connecticut childhood for my brother Jay's wedding. I was nervous about entering the old church, seeing again the mint green walls, seeing the men in their dark suits and white shirts standing on one side, the women in their long dresses and black veils on the other. I didn't know whether I would feel nauseated or enraged. But as I climbed the steps, I was filled with a sense of calm. These people were practicing a lifestyle that lent meaning to their lives, a lifestyle that gave them a degree of contentment and the anticipation of an afterlife. And I could not prove them wrong. I made peace that day with the people of my childhood, and became reacquainted with them. I found that, in some ways, the sect has changed. One female member of the congregation is a successful watercolorist, and the church members seem to support her accomplishments. Jay's sister in law is a part-time commercial artist who also does folk art that is well-received by the church community. I went back there concerned that my 'worldly' appearance (I was not wearing short hair, a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie) would form an insurmountable barrier, but the Apostolic Christians received me with grace and warmth. I enjoyed my visit, and my hosts seemed to enjoy having me. My anger was gone. I had entered my fifth reality.

If I had not rid myself of the detritus of my childhood, I would not have written [Dogs Playing Cards](#). One can judge the book in multiple ways. Because I wrote it openly—often with a sense of standing naked on Main Street—those who seek within it ammunition to attack my views should find it. I hope so. I didn't write it with the notion that I am correct; I wrote it to provoke thought, to encourage readers to step onto sacred ground without taking their shoes off. To me it succeeds if it fuels humanity's exchange of ideas as we struggle toward democracy. If it leaves you unmoved—especially if you teach art—it fails. If it elicits a "Yes, Dennis, yes!" here and there, I humbly accept that as a sign of success. If it prompts you to test a prejudice or two, I will be so pleased that I may rejoin the Apostolic Christians.

Just kidding.

All the best,  
Dennis Earl Fehr