

Jesus
Wears Socks
with Sandals

41 STORIES
of Humanity Being
Ridiculously Lovable



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Before You Even Get Started

Alex snuck quietly into the church and removed the cover from the grand piano. He had been eyeing up the instrument since it had been installed five years prior. Very few people in the parish, certainly none of the staff or volunteers who were mingling about that afternoon, knew he had been taking lessons for eleven years. Knowing him only as the kid who sat on the sanctuary steps during Mass as a toddler, and the always-smiling server who could be counted on week in and week out throughout his youth, they had no idea what a gifted musician he had become. Odd how we do that to each other, isn't it? How we miss each other's gifts because we've already defined them?

In the dark corner of the church, Alex opened the piano's top with the confidence of someone who had done it a hundred times before. He stretched his long fingers and played a few soft scales. Once comfortable with the instrument, he began playing a rich, embodied "Clair de Lune" that infused the entire church with fresh breath. Time paused to create space for unexpected music. Father Paul emerged from his office to follow the sound, with four staff members and three volunteers trailing behind. They stood in the back of the church, unable to make out the shadow behind the piano. When he finished, they expressed appreciation with a smattering of applause.

Alex immediately uncorked the real reason he came to the church that afternoon. Pushing back the bench and standing at

the keys, he ripped into a perfect rendition of Billy Joel's "Piano Man." A few among the gathered assembly shifted uncomfortably. Was this appropriate in a church? They weren't quite sure how to respond. Standing in an entrance on the other side, I held my breath, both proud of and nervous for my son.

Father Paul knew exactly what to do. "Bravo!" he shouted across the nave. "Bravo!" He moved closer to see the identity of the pianist. "Alex? Is that you, Alex? I had no idea you were so gifted! Thank you for sharing that with us!"

That's the closest Alex ever got to rebelling against the Church. Until he quietly left.

Alex is a bright guy. I'm not talking about your garden-variety-advanced-algebra brightness. Sure, he might not know how to fix the lawnmower. Come to think of it, I'm not sure he knows how to use the lawnmower. Maybe that's not fair. Maybe. But intellectually he breathes rare air. He understands things like binary asteroids and how to calculate the orbital trajectory of Jupiter's moons. I don't know why anyone would need to know that, but he does.

He also understands people. I mean, he really gets them. Alex has amazing social intelligence, which strikes me as a bit surprising for a space geek whose leading passions, even as an adult, are Lego and *Star Wars*. Music, science, humanity—it all comes naturally to Alex. But the one thing Alex doesn't understand in spite of an immersive upbringing is organized religion. As Alex went through high school and college, he still loved the parish and loved the people, but he grew increasingly disenchanted with organized religion in general, which he accused of hypocrisy and exclusion. I tried reframing hypocrisy as the human condition and exclusion as tribalism, but Alex wouldn't bite.

When I shared the title of this book with him, I was shocked at how vehemently he objected. I had thought his passions for faith had waned to nary a whisper. Boy, was I wrong! “Just stop,” he said. “Before you even get started, just stop. Jesus is *not* a dweeb!” The more he talked, the more animated he became. He was adamant about protecting the image and reputation of his very good friend, Jesus.

“That’s the point,” I countered. “Jesus seeks to live, breathe, work through, and be present in every person, no exceptions.” I added the *no exceptions* part to appeal to his millennial sense of radical inclusion. It did get him to pause. For a moment.

“But he would not wear socks with sandals,” he insisted.

I wrote the stories in this book to emphasize how human Jesus is and how sacred humans are. I fear we are losing connection with both sides of that equation. Religion doesn’t make sense to a lot of people anymore because we’ve created this false divide between Christ and humanity, seeing them as separate rather than as a common union—many parts, one body.

The stories in this book are divided into sections because it helps the content seem organized and the reader feel oriented. In truth, life has a way of unfolding both sequentially and randomly, often at the same time. It’s seldom tidy. Some structure is helpful; much of it is arbitrary. In this book, it’s mostly inconsequential. If you’re the type of person who sticks to your grocery list, start at the front and read straight through. It’ll feel more comfortable for you. If, however, you’re more inclined to wander aimlessly and let surprising things fall into your shopping cart, go nuts and approach it like a book of poems you open willy-nilly. There are no rubrics here. Thanks be to God.

Understanding



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God Grants Do-Overs

One of the best things about being a kid is that you get do-overs. I remember getting nearly all the questions wrong on a fourth-grade social studies quiz because I accidentally skipped over question number three, so all the rest of my answers were one spot off on the answer sheet. I had unwittingly identified the Mississippi River as the Great Potato Famine, which, for the record, is arguably not incorrect. There are no potatoes growing in the Mississippi. Mrs. Caskey took me aside and said, “I see what happened. You can retake the quiz during recess if you want.” Just like that. No big deal. No lawsuits or attorneys. Just a simple do-over.

We don’t get do-overs very often as adults. Try it if you ever get nabbed for driving 78 in a 65. Argue with the officer for a while and then ask for a do-over. Offer to turn around, go back a mile or two and then drive past his radar a second time. See what it gets you. We typically don’t give one another a lot of do-overs as grown-ups.

“Mr. Johnson, your firm really messed up our tax returns. We’re taking our business elsewhere.”

“It was an innocent mistake, Ms. Uhura. I accidentally used tax tables from 1973.”

“But now I have to sell my dental work to pay the interest and penalties.”

“Can I have a do-over?”

While we don’t grant each other a lot of do-overs, God does. The ancient narrative of the Babylonian invasion, exile, and return is the story of a great big do-over. After escaping Egypt and wandering through the desert for a couple of generations,

the Hebrews finally had the life they always dreamed of in a land flowing with milk and honey, great schools, and a Starbucks on every corner. Life was good. Maybe too good. People lost perspective. When every box of Cracker Jacks contains a prize, it's human nature to feel a little cheated when you get the cheesy rub-on tattoos while someone else gets the cool magnifying glass. So it was for the Jews. Comfort without gratitude leads to entitlement and self-satisfaction. Yahweh became an afterthought. While they were preoccupied with season five of *The Bachelorishah*, the Babylonians invaded, removed them from this Promised Land, and marched them into exile in Babylon. All was lost. But then God sent the Persian King Cyrus to conquer the Babylonians and allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Darkness was lifted. There was a party in the street with live music, fireworks, and all-beef hot dogs. God had granted a do-over!

From a certain Christian point of view, the entire gospel documents a great do-over of sorts. For thousands of years, God had been inviting humanity to step up and enter fully into union, but we kept going through the motions without truly opening our hearts. So finally God says, "Do over! If you won't come to me, I'll come to you." And it's all summed up in that simple line, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son."

But do-overs work only if we accept them. We have to be willing to stop fighting, to stop insisting we're right, to skip a recess, and to try again. Not everyone accepted Jesus or his message. Even today, even with the best intentions, we ourselves can be skeptical. We hear the offer to enter new light, but still we cling to the darkness. How much of our spiritual energy do we channel toward the shadows of our pettiness rather than the light of our

potential? How much of our prayer is invested in our problems rather than our promise?

As a world community, we miss the opportunity for a do-over every time we choose the darkness of our differences over the light of our common humanity. As individuals, we miss it by preferring the darkness of self-criticism over the light of self-acceptance, the darkness of judging over the light of forgiving, and the darkness of anxiety over the light of hope. Like the Sanhedrin who turned Jesus over to be crucified, we take a pass on the opportunity for a do-over when we encounter others through the filtered lens of our own bias rather than in the clear light of God's face.

Still, God is relentless. Every time we choose darkness, God offers us a do-over. For God so loves the world that God sends God's only Son. Every time we gather for Eucharist, every time we sit and listen to the gospel, and every time we come forward to share in communion, we're saying YES to this do-over. And maybe one day we'll muster the courage to accept it. Maybe one morning we'll get up and realize we can let go of the darkness, start anew, and shape a future of light for ourselves, our families, and our world.

Green Is a Good Color for Anger

The boy looked at me with tears welling in his eyes. At first, I assumed he was expressing sadness and disappointment, but I quickly realized he was fighting back tears of frustration. He simply didn't understand. The large red S- with a frown next to

it bullied him from the top of the homework paper. It was more than his six-year-old mind could take in.

I lifted him onto my knee and held him close while we talked a little about the paper and a lot about his emotions. The homework sheet was a mess. It had been a very simple assignment asking him to color a picture of the main character in a story they had read in school. The image, which started as a simple outline of a girl, looked like an explosion in a guacamole factory. He had taken a green crayon and scribbled over everything. The girl's hair, face, shirt, hands, feet—all a sloppy mess of green that looked like a drunken leprechaun. Either he thought the assignment wasn't worth his time and attention or something else was going on. Regardless, he clearly believed an unsatisfactory mark was offensive. So we talked.

A few weeks later I pulled the paper out during a parent/teacher conference and asked Mrs. Svoltman to help me understand why she felt it was necessary to grade such work. Yup, I set aside all my pontificating about letting children fail and became *that* dad.

Mrs. Svoltman looked at me as though I was missing half my brain. She recoiled visibly and her eyes narrowed. The answer was obvious to her. "Well, just look at it. He's capable of doing much better work. I mean, here..." she shuffled through a file and produced other examples of his work. "He normally does a much better job. This was an unsatisfactory effort."

I nodded. It was out of character for him. "Did you ask him about it?"

"No," she confessed before explaining, "I didn't have to. It's obvious he didn't try."

"Yes. Well, I asked him about it." I told her about the conver-

sation we had, about how he thought the girl in the story had been treated unfairly and that she would probably feel angry. Green, he had reasoned, was a good color for anger, so he smothered her image in a volatile eruption of a color I can only describe as seaweed.

He had actually done exceedingly well on the assignment but was judged negatively because his execution did not conform to Mrs. Svoltman's expectation. He had colored an expression of the girl's inner state rather than her outer state.

How often do we do this? How often do we judge someone else based on the eyes we see through without opening ourselves to the heart they live through? I'm sure I've done it a thousand times. Before seeking to learn more about another person's story and perspective, we measure against our own thought process and deem them to be satisfactory or unsatisfactory. In response to an op-ed piece I once wrote about immigration, I received a vitriolic letter accusing me of being a heartless capitalist who defends immigrants only so I can exploit cheap, illegal labor. Wow, I thought at the time. Wow. Clearly, someone was looking at the world through jaded lenses and projecting their tint onto me.

Mrs. Svoltman glared at me with a look I hadn't received from a teacher in over twenty years. I could feel her project a big red S- onto my forehead. Finally, she said, "He could have made an effort to be neater about it."

"Anger isn't a very tidy emotion, is it?" I countered.

The Quieting of Joe Hammer

Our Scriptures don't tell us much about Joseph before he met Mary and agreed to raise Jesus. Actually, they don't tell us anything. Fortunately, archeologists found his high school yearbook among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Bethlehem Class of -09. Just kidding. They used the Hebrew calendar. It was actually the Bethlehem High Class of 3751. Go Spartans! According to the yearbook, Joseph was a fine student who spent most of his time in shop class, where he was given the nickname Joe Hammer.

He served on the stage crew for the school musical (*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*), and he was a varsity track athlete who went to state for the long jump, but he was best known for the vehicle he drove—a '41 Mercury Dromedary with a Windsor double hump 351 V8 that would paste you against the seat when you kicked it, a fact that could be considered either good or bad depending on where you stood on the issue. But while Joe did his best to keep the speed down, he lived with the volume up. He ripped out the camel's AM radio and installed a Blaupunkt AM/FM 8-track stereo, which of course blasted too much power for the factory-installed speaker. Being the shop fly that he was, Joe wired a set of console speakers strapped onto the back. You could hear music blasting by bands such as Genesis and Exodus when he was still 350 cubits away, except for the time when the Dromedary needed a muffler.

Tucked in the clay jars with the yearbook were various excerpts from Joseph's personal blog, which archaeologists have pieced together to give us more of his story.

By the time Joseph met Mary, he had settled down. The Dromedary was history, long since replaced by a beige Dodge

Caravan with a satellite receiver and MP3 interface, which was very cutting edge since the MP3 format, like the Gregorian calendar, hadn't been invented yet. But he rarely cranked the volume anymore, preferring instead to drive in silence. The difference was not that he liked music less, but that he valued quiet more. And that's not because he'd gotten older, he insisted; it's because he'd gotten wiser.

"Musicians tell us it's the silence between the notes that makes the music," Joseph would say philosophically over wine with friends. "Artists tell us negative space gives dimension to positive space. If you want to make a point and have it resonate, you'll master the art of..." he'd take a sip from his goblet and let it hang in the air for a moment before continuing, "the pause." He was right in a timeless way. Even today, when we want to pay tribute to someone's life, we offer a moment of silence.

This is where we find God—in the stillness. But we have to quiet our minds and listen. Joseph had been inspired by the Books of Kings, where Elijah first looked for God in the cosmic expressions of might and power—heavy winds, earthquakes, and fire—but came up empty. Finally, Elijah found God in a tiny whisper. This story left a profound imprint on Joe, who won Mary's heart on their first date when he said, "We're more likely to find God in the wings of a butterfly than in our stresses and anxieties, but where do we place most of our attention?"

Later, when Joseph awoke from a dream and told Mary they had to travel the long way home, routing all the way through Bum-Gone-Egypt, because King Herod wanted to kill Jesus, Mary knew to pay attention and listen. Sure, it struck her as a little far-fetched at first, but then she recalled how centered Joe was. His still waters ran deep, so if in the quiet of the night and

in the depth of his prayer, that's what he heard an angel tell him, well, that was more than enough for her. They'd go live in Egypt a while, even if they had to stay there until Herod died.

At long last, as the small family made their way back toward Nazareth with the Caravan loaded with toys and Goldfish crackers, Mary looked at her husband and said, "It's really good to be going home. But anywhere we go feels like home as long as I'm with you."

Joseph reached over and held her small hand. They drove on in silence. Eventually he spoke, "I know all this time in Egypt was very difficult and lonely, but it really means a lot to me that you trusted me."

Mary smirked in that simple, cute way with her chin down and her eyes up. It always made Joseph glad to be alive. "I admit," she said, "that I thought you were a little crazy at first. But then when I considered how well you balance the noise in the world with quiet meditation, I realized you're the least crazy man I know."

"For the record," Joseph responded, "if I still had the Dromedary, we could have outrun all of Herod's chariots. They never would have caught us."

Fusion vs. Friction

Leslie is stoic about most things. She rides life's waves, taking stormy weather and bad coffee in stride. When her niece vomited tomato soup on her white sofa, she calmly comforted and held the child before cleaning it up. "It's just a couch," she would say

later. “It’s not like it has a soul.” She is unflappable about nearly everything. Except dogs. Leslie loves dogs. Their loyalty, unconditional love, selfless nature, gentleness, everything. In Leslie’s mind, dogs generously provide examples from which humanity could learn. A lot.

Leslie is the right hemisphere of my brain.

Jackson Ethan Thomas, or “Jet” as most people call him, lives across the hall from Leslie. He’s more of a cat guy. While Leslie listens to a lot of country hits and ’80s rock, Jet sticks to classical and instrumental jazz. “Leave the lyrics to the poets,” he shared in a hallway conversation with Leslie. “I listen to relax, not to jump around.” Jet, as you would imagine, is a little high-strung and needs to keep things in order.

Jet is the left hemisphere of my brain.

Needless to say, Leslie and Jet fell in love. It was inevitable. Opposites attract, so they were either going to repulse each other or complete each other. That’s how life works. And since neither had much room in their hearts for hatred or repulsion, they ended up with a Cape Cod on a cul-de-sac with three kids, two dogs, and a cat named Compromise.

It’s a real kick when things that seem opposed to each other, complete incongruities, come together to make something new and better. A taco salad. Romeo and Juliet. Surf and turf. I love how the north and south poles of a magnet create the electricity that powers the world, how sun and rain drive photosynthesis, how male and female, Mars and Venus, come together to cocreate new life with earth spinning in the middle.

When two forces bump up against each other, one of two things is going to happen: friction or fusion. They’re either going to collide or unify. When they feed friction, we end up with a

duality of wars and wills, Hatfields and McCoys. They divide and sow seeds of repulsion and intolerance. But when they fuse, brilliant and loving energy is released into the world. The sun, which makes life on earth possible, is a super-giant fusion reactor.

Our ancient stories advise and instruct us to choose fusion over friction when we're faced with conflict. David, for example, was given two chances to defeat Saul, but chose instead to unite with him. That fusion, of course, built the foundation for the great nation of Israel. Imagine what could happen if the members of Congress followed that example. Wow. That might actually be constructive.

Let your mind rest there for a moment.

Over and over the gospels advise fusion over friction. Don't escalate the conflict; reconcile it. To make the point clear, Jesus repeats it in several ways: turn the other cheek, love your enemies, do to others as you'd have them do to you, be merciful, stop judging, and stop condemning. In other words, don't get caught up in the things that divide and separate; invest your energy in the things that unify and harmonize. Don't feed friction; foster fusion.

Jesus lived in a time in which divisions and distinctions governed the social order. He rejected them all. So he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well: fusion. He dined with tax collectors and prostitutes: fusion. He reached out and touched lepers: fusion. Thus St. Paul writes that in Christ there is no rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile—we are all one body of Christ. Unified and fused.

It all sounds heavenly, because it is. What holds us back from living this way? Well, there's the rub. We'd have to let go of ego. We'd have to accept dog people as dog people and cat people as cat people, and stop trying to convince everyone to be, think, act, and speak like us.