



# Episode 96

## Oh How I Love to Get Up in the Morning

It is four thirty in the morning. The hand-wound clock that has been with her for over fifty years -- the clock that ticks metallically day and night as it marks the endless repetitive minutes of her life -- grinds into clanking awokeness. Her hand reaches out and turns off the alarm, returning it to the simple clicking away of the passing of her existence.

Four thirty in the morning.

She pushes aside the bed coverings and achingly pulls her legs around so that her bare feet are touching the cold floor. Her toes find her slippers and she slips them on. Her eyes are only partially open as she rises, making the short three-step journey to the prie-deux. She eases herself down to her knees, and she begins to pray.

The clock continues ticking, heedless of her attempt to communicate with the Infinite, the Absolute, the Creator. With God.

She prays for ten minutes. It is a ritualistic prayer, a mantra of words directed heavenward, nearly devoid of meaning after so many decades of early-morning mutterings. Her voice is barely audible in the back of her throat. As she has for over fifty years, she prays to reconnect with the Lord after her hours of unconsciousness.

When she finishes, she pulls herself up. It is not easy anymore. The years have taken their toll. Even walking isn't easy. She puts each foot down with a dragging, hesitant step. It is cold in her cell, and her floor-length flannel nightshirt is not enough to seriously warm her. Winter is coming. She can feel it in every corner of her body.

She is not the only one up. There are murmured greetings as she passes some of the others in the hall on her way to the bathroom. Good morning, Sister. Good morning, Sister. It is rote, like the first morning prayers. Good morning, Sister. It works for all of them, whoever they are.

It takes Sister Levi al-Chaim longer every morning to get ready for the day. It is her legs, mostly, getting more useless with each passing year. She only barely arrives in the chapel for six o'clock mass, the last one to enter before Father McDermott comes out of the sacristy and all the women in the room rise as one.

Sister Levi is sitting in the last row. When it is time to kneel she leans forward, but it is too hard for her to fully come down on the leather-covered kneeler; instead she half sits, half kneels. Any more than this, and she might not be able to rise again. She believes that God doesn't mind. After all, He is the one who made her this way.

Sister Levi is one of the few nuns in a habit, a dark gray robe complete with wimple. Most of the sisters long ago traded in their traditional clothes for more modern dress, and Sister Levi did give it a try herself, but after a few months she went back to the habit. She was old-fashioned. She admitted it. The habit made her feel comfortable, reminding her every waking minute of who she was and what she was doing. It still does.

She is a nun. And she is living for the greater honor and glory of God, and His Son, Jesus Christ. Her vocation has brought her to this convent at Hebrides High School, where she has lived and taught since taking her vows. She was twenty-two then. She is seventy-four now. Over fifty years.

She bows her head as Father McDermott raises the host high above the altar. This is My Body.

Over fifty years.

She can remember almost every child she has taught. And no doubt most of them can still remember her. Some of them may have liked her, but she doesn't mind if they didn't. Her job is not to be their friend, but to be their teacher. Specifically, their English teacher. She knows that she is tough, but that is the only way to be with adolescents. They understand toughness. Anything else -- being nice, being sweet, being easy -- is weakness, and they exploit weakness in their teachers. It is an unerring instinct.

Sister Levi al-Chaim takes Communion, slowly walking up to the altar and back again. The host is dry on her tongue, the first food of the morning, as it has been for her for over fifty years. Except those mornings when she is traveling with her team. When she is at a tournament it is often hard to get to mass, except of course on Sundays, when not going would be out of the question.

Sister Levi looks at her watch as Father McDermott disappears back into the sacristy. Six thirty-five. Time for breakfast.

The day has begun.

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# The History of Religion, Part One, The Early Years; Or, I Remember Moses

No religion runs on faith alone. The beliefs of any group, whether those beliefs are of mystical events in the past, or the ethical impacts of those events expressed as theology, require nourishing as does any living thing, and a viable religion is definitely a living thing. Faith is merely the starting point, the groundwork, the *raison d'etre*, however you wish to express it. Faith may be the core of the religion, but it takes more than core for a religion to survive. It takes not only belief but believers, and for true success in the human arena, it takes organized believers. Disorganized believers aren't worth a damn (literally). If this guy believes this thing, and that guy believes that thing, you have hardly got yourself anything worthy of the name religion. At best you have an agreeable dinner party. You've got to get organized, which first and foremost requires organizers.

In any religion, the first organizers are the gods themselves (or Gods, if the religion is an especially powerful one with control over capital letters), or someone who speaks for (and occasionally to) the gods. You don't get Christianity without Christ, or Buddhism without Buddha, or Islam without Mohammed, or Judaism without Moses. You've got to start somewhere.

After these prime movers, you need a solid cadre of disciples to remind everyone what the first organizer was telling everybody. The message was delivered, now someone has to keep the message alive. The disciples usually start out as the truest of true believers, from their own first-hand experience of the first organizer, but as time passes they hand the message down from generation to generation, and the message moves further and further from the first organizers. It is important to note that first organizers who insist on celibate disciples are putting their ideas at a disadvantage; it is highly recommended that, at least at the beginning, your disciples be not only fertile but prodigious. If one were to start a religion today, a polygamous arrangement would be highly recommended, to maximize the faithful through family ties, rather than just trying to proselytize the man on the street. Your children are always more inclined to believe you than your illegal lawn-mowing alien or the guy who changes your motor oil.

Over time, the process of discipleship, or disciplication, becomes formalized into a priesthood. At this stage in the religion, there is a solid foundation of believers, a group large enough, if nothing else, to support a priesthood. It is understood that the priests will succor the spiritual side of the lives of the believers, attending to the serious issues of birth and death and marriage and, of course, nourishing the beliefs of the faithful, both through rituals and passing on of the beliefs themselves. This takes a lot of time. The greater the number of believers, the more time it takes. In a start-up religion, a priest might also have a part-time job, maybe as a waiter or something like that, where the tips are good and the hours are flexible. But once a religion catches on, the priest's job becomes full-time, and the tips are replaced by tithes. The priest probably now starts wearing priestly garments, and perhaps begins referring to them as vestments (or,

perhaps, waistcoatments). Special housing arrangements start popping up, either locating the priest in a nifty brick rectory next to the church, or the primo hut next to the missionary-boiling pot, or some other unique and often elaborate dwelling. The tithes go up, and the whole operation starts generating serious bookkeeping, and the next thing you know there's lobbyists in Washington making sure that even the Reverend Sun Myong Moon isn't paying taxes because, hey, maybe he really is the second coming of Jesus and do you want to be the politician who told him, not so fast with the mutual funds, Moonster?

As the religion and its priesthood grow, a second tier of acolytes develop. Often these are believers with a strong spiritual commitment who nonetheless maintain complex secular lives that they are not able to abandon. In effect, these are the people who show up at every service regardless of the religion; they are at every funeral, at every wedding, at every everything. They are known to the congregation only as the people who always show up at the church or the temple or the baht or the mosque and everyone assumes that these people (none of whom are married or under sixty) will certainly thrive in the afterlife, but there is also a presumption that the duringlife isn't exactly booming for these people.

There is another tier of acolytes that develops for a different reason, because some limitation or other is put on the priesthood. Perhaps priesting is gender-based, or matrilinear, or requires a membership in a certain caste. In the Roman Catholic Church, Sister Levi al-Chaim is a nun because the priesthood is closed to women. There is a very good reason for this, and Pope John Paul II is the keeper of that reason. Sister Levi does not question that reason, and she certainly does not question her Primate. She was brought up in the belief that her place was to be a nun; in the last few decades her ears have not been deaf to the hue and cry of her sisters (in the "sisterhood is powerful" sense, and in the "Good Morning Sister Pete" sense, but not in the My mother had two daughters sense -- a word like sister can get fairly overburdened in a discussion like this one) aching toward parity with the men in her religion, but their arguments have not affected her. Her calling is clear. She does not question it.

We could easily go on in this vein for a while, but it is clear that our souls are already in jeopardy vis-a-vis eternal damnation as defined by a number of religions. There is no point in crossing the Styx in a speedboat.

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## And Michael Ovitz Judges on Weekends, Not that he Needs the Extra Money, he's Simply Keeping his Hand in

"You have ruined me, Starbuck."

The lawyer looks up from his papers. "Ruined you?"

Don Proscenio ("the Whale") Vitelli is floating on his back, his feet kicking slightly to propel him along. Staying afloat is not hard for anyone who weighs a seventh of a ton.

"You've definitely ruined me," the Don continues. "You made me exercise. I was doing good before that."

"Doing good how?"

"I was walking fine, feeling good, didn't even have to use the wheelchair."

"You've never had to use the wheelchair, Proscenio. You just do it to gain sympathy. You would have done pajamas, but they were already taken."

"How dare you suggest such a thing!"

"I know you, Proscenio."

"Then you should know that you've definitely ruined me. You and that golf of yours."

"Miniature golf, Proscenio. Hardly considered to be much of a workout in most circles."

"I am not built for exercise."

"Then what are you built for."

"Love." The Don's head disappears momentarily below water. "Lots of love," he says when his face meets the air again.

The door to the pool room opens, and an elderly woman enters.

"Maria!" Starbuck says. The consigliere stands and extends his hand to the woman. She takes it in hers.

"Hello, Mr. Starbuck."

"Look who's here, Proscenio," Starbuck says.

The Don spins around in the water, looks at the old woman for a moment until he recognizes. "Ah. Maria."

"Hello, Don-a Proscenio."

The rest of this conversation takes place in Italian, but we'll translate it into English. The benefit of this is not having to add "-a" after everything Grandma Buglaroni says.

"I haven't seen you since the funeral," the Don says. "How's Ham?"

"He's good, Don Proscenio."

"And your grandson? Ham Junior. How is he?"

The old woman frowns.

"Is something the matter, Maria?"

"That's why I'm here, Don Proscenio."

The Whale paddles to the edge of the pool nearest the old woman as the lawyer brings her a chair. She settles in as the Don asks her to tell him about it.

"Well, it's like this. My grandson has a chance to be a Hollywood actor."

"I thought he wanted to be a debater."

"He does want to be a debater. A good debater."

"Then what's this about Hollywood."

"When kids debate, apparently Hollywood sends in talent scouts to find the next generation of star actors."

Starbuck and Don Proscenio exchange glances. "Talent scouts?" Starbuck asks.

"He was debating last week in Manhattan," Grandma says. "The Hollywood people were there looking for stars. Definitely talent scouts. They saw Ham Junior and they knew right away that he could be the next Leonardo Caputsio."

"DiCaprio."

"Whatever." Yes, there really is an Italian word for whatever. "They're going to be auditioning Hamlet this week. Friday. Giving him a screen test."

The Don nods. "And what do you want me to do about it, Maria? That's why you're here, isn't it? To get my help with this?"

"Yes, Don Proscenio. I do want your help." She takes a deep breath. "Help my boy, Don Proscenio. He is no genius. He is no DiCaputsio. But he could be a star. He could make something out of himself."

"What do you want me to do?"

"You have Hollywood connections. You have power. You can make them hire him."

The Don raises an eyebrow. "You're asking an awful lot, Maria."

"And I owe you so much already, Don Proscenio. Your father, Don Angelo, may his soul rest in peace, he is responsible for everything that is good in my life." She suddenly drops down to her knees and grabs the Don's right hand. She kisses his knuckles. "Please, Don Proscenio. Help my boy."

As soon as he can, the Don pulls his hand away.

"I'll see what I can do, Maria. You're sure you want him to be a star?"

"I want him to be what is right for him. He is a wonderful boy, Don Proscenio. He deserves to be shared with the world."

The Don and his consigliere exchange another glance, and Starbuck leans down and helps the old woman to her feet.

"Thank you, Don Proscenio," she says as the lawyer leads her to the door. "Thank you."

The big man smiles and nods. When she is out of the room, he reimmerses himself in the water.

He deserves to be shared with the world.

Whatever, as the Italians like to say.

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**Do Italians really like to say whatever?**

**Will Sister Levi al-Chaim get into heaven?**

**Will the authors of Nostrum get into heaven?**

**Did we inadvertently miss insulting any religion?**

**What kind of odds are the Vitellis giving on the Phillies?**

**Stay unglued to your seat until our next episode: "Basmati: nutty-flavored rice or sports car for sheep?"**