

WE HAVE THE POWER TO SAY 'NO!'



ANDREW DAVID

THE GHOST OF MR. RUCKMAN

BY MICHAEL EVANS-HUTCH

The ghost of Mr. Ruckman has been haunting me since September 11. He was my 6th and 7th grade teacher. He died over 20 years ago. He had polio as a child, and although he wore a left shoe elevated by several inches, he still walked with a limp so pronounced he swayed from side to side and appeared to be dangerously close to toppling either port or starboard.

In class he was a stoic, unsmiling taskmaster, quietly moving through the room clad in his ever-present suit, carefully observing each of us as we labored on yet another writing assignment. He wasn't mean. I don't remember ever seeing him angry. He was simply intense. He took education very, very seriously. He was a completely different person when we would encounter him on a sidewalk in our town of 5,000. Outside of the classroom his eyes twinkled, he smiled, joked. He would take the time to stop and ask you how you were doing. And he looked at you. Not through you, over you, off to one side, as most adults appeared to do. Mr. Ruckman would stand on the sidewalk, eyes aglow, and really want to know how you were doing.

Mr. Ruckman's requirement that his students write a daily evaluation made him unpopular with the kids. Every day, precisely at 3 p.m., we would pull out the three-ring binder dedicated to the evaluation sheets and record one thing we had learned that day. Each subject had three columns: date, subject, and a one-paragraph synopsis of the most important thing we learned that day. No one was permitted to speak. Mr. Ruckman positioned himself in a chair, leaned the chair back against the wall and closed his eyes. He seemed asleep, or at least completely at peace. We considered that patently unfair. It was 3 o'clock, our daily parole was scheduled for precisely 3:15, and there he sat, apparently napping. Our release was conditioned upon handing him our evaluation, like an 8x10 ticket to the real world. Only then could we quietly leave the remaining students to mentally grope for one significant yet elusive fact as we raced down the stairs, to peddle down Jackson Street on the Raleigh.

The biggest problem with the evaluations was that Mr. Ruckman actually read them, thought about each one, and commented — in red ink. Sometimes that dreaded "REDO" would be scrawled across it. On those occasions we had to both redo the unacceptable entry and write one for that day. There were horror stories of some students in years past still being in his classroom at dinnertime and after. This was very serious business for Mr. Ruckman. I clearly recall on one particular day writing that I learned Indian tribes across the United States were so different that it was almost like they were from different cultures. I got it back the next day. "Define 'culture'" was written in red ink, diagonally across the entry. His comment included a parenthetical element, "(do not use a dictionary or Encyclopedia)."

As I mentioned, Mr. Ruckman's ghost has been haunting me since September 11. His vision blossomed in my mind at the slightest provocation: sudden silence in a crowded room, seeing two persons greet each other warmly on a street. I see him perched on his wooden chair, tilted back against the wall, eyes closed, breathing deeply. But I know he is patiently waiting for me to write what I learned from September 11.

The first time this vision projected itself in my mind, I mentally wrote, "We have been negligent permitting evil people to run about. We need to find them and kill them." I thought

about the response for weeks, watched the news, cheered on the kids in uniform. Finally, one night, lying awake, thinking about something completely unrelated, I saw the red ink scrawled across the evaluation: "If we kill them, mustn't we also be prepared to kill their children, their brothers, their sisters? Won't they seek revenge?" And, to add insult to injury, Mr. Ruckman hovering in my midnight bedroom added a parenthetical element: "(Please define 'evil' person — do not use any theological texts, or dogma marketed to the masses.)"

I decided to ignore the parenthetical element. It was a trick question. Even if I tried to answer it, I wouldn't get out of his classroom in this lifetime. But his main question bothered me, mainly because he was right. I had learned from bitter experience that violence does nothing, ever, but beget violence; that violence is the ultimate confession of failure.

Mr. Ruckman's ghost became progressively more insistent. He started showing up in cafes, concerts, my office. He wasn't smiling. He really wanted an answer. He demanded an answer. Right there in the righthand column of the evaluation sheet he wanted me to tell him what I learned from September 11. I tried placating him with little ditties I knew down deep were trivial non-answers: "Let's send them food." "Let's be more responsible and live more simply — no more SUV gas guzzlers." "Organized religion is politicized spiritually and potentially a great danger to the oneness in Christ."

I groped, clawed, rummaged through my middleaged mind for the right answer, the answer that would get me out of the classroom. It just wasn't there. I didn't have a clue what I learned from those horrific murders, from the dedication required for a protracted, complex conspiracy. From a hatred so intense that it became self-sustaining, necessitating no future insult or injury to erupt into violence directed toward an undefined group — a group not defined by race, culture, social-economic status, or religion.

I struggled, and found no answer. One Saturday, shortly after the echoes of the 4th of July celebration became silent, I was sitting at my computer, and there he was. Comfortably perched in his tilted chair, eyes closed. Waiting, I had had it. I didn't know the answer! I was tired of the vision, of the ghost. It wasn't a curious phenomenon any longer. It had gone on so long, it was beginning to disturb me, make me question my perception of reality. I paused for a moment as these thoughts bounced around my cranium, and then I turned back to the keyboard, and in complete, total frustration, I wrote:

"I don't know! I don't know enough about the rest of the world to answer your damn question! I've been too busy with my world, my work, my marriage, my church, my hobbies to go learn about how others live, or think, or feel. I can't answer your stupid question without leaving my known world behind!"

The ghost of Mr. Ruckman visited me for the last time that night between dreams about sailboats and fishing tackle. In the dream, he opened his eyes, lowered the front legs of the chair back to the floor, slowly stood and limped out of the room holding what appeared to be my typewritten note.

He was smiling as he left the classroom. I had never seen him smile in the classroom before.

Michael Evans-Hatch wrote this for *Spirit of Grace*, the newsletter of Grace Episcopal Church in Astoria.

BY LINDA O'BRIEN

There are many of us who know, in spite of the skewed polls, the fear mongering, the slanted reports, the lack of support from Congress, and the refusal of the media to question. All of it is meant to deny us the power of knowing. But the amazing thing is, we know anyway. It's been greatly helped by the Internet, but that doesn't entirely explain it. Ask a tentative, "What do you think about what's going on in the country," and you'll probably find you're surrounded by people who are outraged. For many the knowing started on September 11 itself, where it sat in the gut like a stone and could serve no purpose, since it couldn't be shared or verified, but could only raise nausea and make us feel isolated and despairing. The power we have, unspoken, not even needing words to share it with each other, is evident. The implications are enormous.

So why, why, are we letting Bush prepare to do the unthinkable and unnecessary in Iraq?

From all sides experts say that there are better ways to deal with the potential danger of Hussein. There is a total absence of present threat from him, far less from his people. But many thousands of them will die in any form of this war Bush is pushing, whether it involves "precision" bombing or 200,000 troops. For the first time, the only rationale we'll have for their deaths is our fear of a possibility. Blind yourself, the seduction goes, and I'll save you from your greatest fears. Surely there's a sickening dissonance inside us at the distance between the facts and this relentless push for war. But many appear willing to wait and see, the fear of another deadly assault just edging out the knowledge that this war is desperately immoral. If we continue, the trade-off will be that thousands more innocents will die. Then perhaps the sickness will rise to our throats, and we'll have to own what we're now refusing to know.

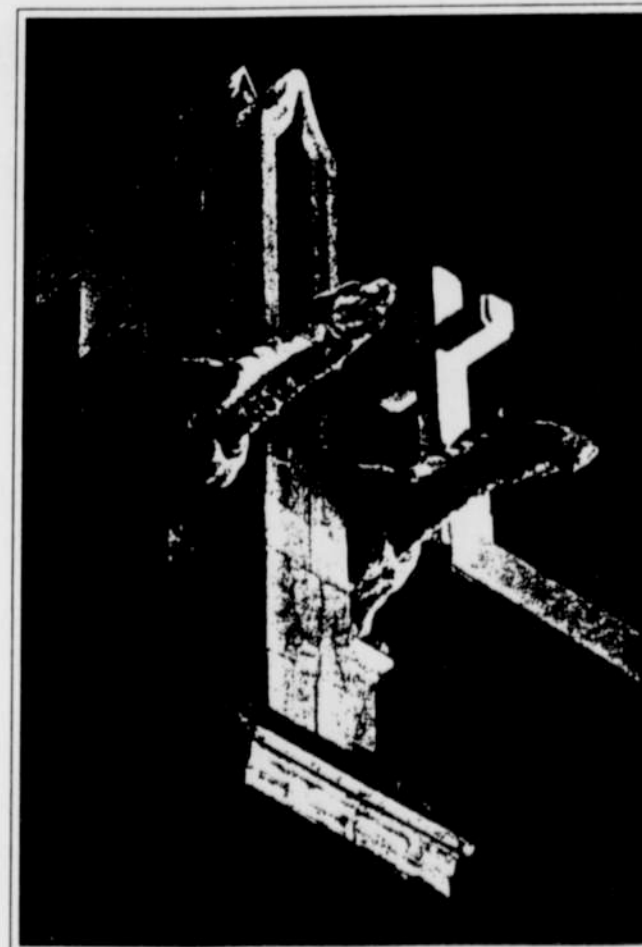
We've placed a lot of sacrifices on the altar to fear lately. Over two centuries of freedom from snooping and paranoia. The lives of hundreds of immigrants locked up in secret for months. The privacy and peace of mind of thousands of others rounded up and questioned by authorities with initials for names who don't have to give a reason. The deaths of hundreds of Afghan civilians. This particular god is very hungry, insatiable.

It's been said that Bush is acting as if he doesn't need the approval of Congress, or our allies or us. And it's true, he doesn't, as long as we keep giving our power to him. It's a classic setup: a frightening event, power handed to one who seems able to save us, and the possibility of other frightening events are held continually over our heads until power becomes an abuse of power. The abuser seems much more powerful than he is, all out of proportion to reality, and we come to believe we're powerless, feeding the cycle of increasing abuse, until, desperate and exhausted, we face the worst fear: that no one's going to save us but us.

The worst of what has been done since 9/11 has been to try to deny us knowledge, and it has failed miserably. If, as some fear, something devastating happens to provide a convincing rationale for war on Iraq this fall, many, perhaps most of us are going to be looking past the great and terrifying face on the screen to the man frantically pulling levers behind a curtain. It would be good to make that clear right now.

We were thrust into the mythical hero's journey on September 11. The way out, the hero discovers, is always rediscovering the power that was always there. This may be the knowledge we must turn and look upon: that we've become too afraid of our own government to challenge what it is doing. We know now. We do. It is done and will be done in our name. We must own it now, and say no.

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HAUNTS

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RECEPTION OCTOBER 19

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