

Scared Straight
Life Experience
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My recollections of kindergarten are hazy more than 60 years later. Of course, my brain was not fully developed then, but I vaguely recall recess, naps, large building blocks and story hour—and I know I was the youngest in my class, having landed just within the requirement that students reach age five by December 1.

One of the strongest memories is that kindergarten was a cakewalk. We simply played all day, blissfully unaware we were being educated and socialized. If this was school, I was totally onboard.

It wasn't until the next year, after entering first grade at St. Mary's (Catholic) School, that I realized I'd been duped. It was clear our parents and the school system used the pleasantness of kindergarten to lower our guard against the dark cloud of mind control that would soon envelop us. In retrospect, I think that was when my inherent anti-authoritarianism emerged.

Rahway State Prison in New Jersey, featured in the 1978 film "Scared Straight," had nothing on St. Mary's. In the movie, convicts frightened juvenile delinquents into following a path of righteousness. At St. Mary's, they didn't even wait for us to be delinquent. They immediately brought a jarring end to our days of peace and complacency, scaring us straight before we could even think about breaking any rules.

In my first few weeks at St. Mary's, I learned ignorance of the law was no excuse. The schoolyard had no fence, and I unwittingly stepped three feet off school property to screen myself from view while playing hide and seek during recess.

In an instant, a nun swooped down on me with her habit blocking the sunlight like the wings of a massive bird of prey. She firmly grasped my right ear with her talons, not releasing her falcon-like grip until I was standing before the Mother Superior (head of the convent and warden). That may be why my right ear is slightly larger than the left. Had I not hung my head in shame and begged forgiveness—at least partly an act, but I had survival skills even at that young age—I doubt I would have been allowed to return to class.

My fellow students didn't know I caved. In their eyes I was the elementary school equivalent of a hardened convict, a budding Edward G. Robinson or James Cagney character who had faced down the warden and spent a week in the hole without so much as a wince.

“Solitary ain't nothin’,” I imagined telling classmates. “It's just a great chance to catch up on your sleep.”

I never knew the name of the nun who busted me, but I learned to be alert whenever I saw a flowing black habit coming my way. And that was just the beginning.

A few weeks later, our teacher Sister Agnella introduced her innocent young first-graders to the different degrees of sin. It was clear that controlling our bodies was not enough—St. Mary's wanted our minds as well.

“Pay close attention to this, because it's very important,” Sister said as she drew a large heart on the blackboard. “This heart represents your soul, and when you commit sins, you stain your soul.”

This was perplexing, because the only staining I'd done at that point involved spilling grape juice or spaghetti sauce. But Sister Agnella removed any confusion her lesson might present.

“When you commit a venial sin, like gossip or sassing your parents or teacher, you put small stains on your soul, like this” she said, placing tick marks on the heart she had drawn. “God doesn't like this, but he truly hates when you commit mortal sins.”

Now I was nervous, but at least I knew I could get away with the small stuff. That's when Sister Agnella brought the hammer down.

“When you commit a mortal sin, like murder or dishonoring your parents, your entire soul is stained,” she explained, dramatically filling in the heart with chalk. “If you die without confessing that sin and getting forgiveness from God, you will go to hell **forever**.”

She made the last point with a disarming serenity. I guess she didn't worry about where her soul would spend eternity, but my mind was racing.

Wait, what? Hell forever? You're scaring the spit out of me. Let's think about this. We can't go to confession until next year, so if we commit a mortal sin we won't be in the clear until then? If we get hit by a school bus before that we're **doomed**?

I may have been barely six years old, but I knew this wasn't at all fair. That's when it hit me. They **wanted** to scare us, and it worked. I worried over how I could get through life without messing things up. Hell (word chosen deliberately), I didn't even know all the mortal sins; I could send myself to eternal damnation without knowing it until I felt the heat. It crossed my mind to lock myself in my bedroom and come out only for meals and school—like work release, I suppose.

These were the two most vivid “lessons” from my time at St. Mary’s, but there were many others. Almost every day we received subtle reminders that we didn’t make the rules; we just followed them. Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time. Cross the line, and you’ll be in trouble with the man.

On one occasion, Father Urban, the assistant pastor, administered a blessing while visiting our class. He was always kind and friendly, so I guess he played good cop to the nuns’ bad. When Sister saw a student mimicking the priest’s hand gestures during the blessing, she smacked the top of the boy’s desk with a loud crack.

“That’s only for Father!” she scolded. “You are **never** to do that!”

The poor kid didn’t mean anything. He was just fascinated by the blessing, but Sister Agnella put an end to that then and there.

From first grade on, I toed the line. I knew my place, and I knew what could happen if I forgot. I rolled on through that year and second grade as a model prisoner. Then, I caught a break.

My family moved to another town, and the Catholic schools there were too full to accept newcomers. So, my sister and I enrolled in public schools—but that hardly meant we were unshackled. Because we did not receive religious instruction during the week, we were required to attend classes at the church on Saturdays or Wednesday nights through high school. It was like being on parole and having to check in once a week for 10 years.

Even after I was 20 years into my working career, the Catholic remote control of my brain would reveal itself from time to time. By this point, I thought I had drifted away

from much of what I was taught at St. Mary's. I did not abandon beliefs in higher powers, but religious structure no longer made sense to me.

I did not attend Mass regularly, although I went occasionally with my parents and other family members when I was home for a visit. The services one day included a blessing of throats in honor of St. Blaise, who according to the Bible used prayer to save a child choking on a fishbone.

That crossed into the surreal in my view, and later that evening I told my brother-in-law that I found the "mumbo jumbo" to be over the top. We both had declined the blessing, so we shared a small chuckle over the silliness.

The laughing stopped when both of us woke up the next day with sore throats. Was that a mere coincidence? It was winter in Wisconsin, and sore throats were fairly common—so we could not be sure. Regardless, the experience was reason for pause.

Was there a message in that sore throat? Could organized religion be a positive force? Was the agnostic spiritualism I fashioned misguided? Were **they** coming for my mind **again**?

Probably not, but I'll likely think about it forever. After doing hard time at St. Mary's, I'm okay with not knowing. I was scared straight when I was young, but I've had enough dogmatism to last a lifetime.

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