

The Reverend

Michael Downs

This spiritual journey began, as spiritual journeys do, with a question.

“I know it’s a lot to ask,” Courtney wrote, “but we would be honored if you’d consider becoming a fake minister and marrying us.”

Her request came via e-mail. Courtney had been a student when I taught journalism at a university in Montana, and we later grew to be friends and colleagues. Now I call Baltimore home, but Courtney and Jacob still live in Montana, where, apparently, fake ministers can conduct weddings. This fact does not amaze me. Montana is wild and libertarian; in some towns the Stockman’s bar opens Sunday mornings, but the white-washed church closed a decade back. In such a vast landscape with so few people, the law provides that God’s proxies may easily be found—or made. Somehow, a minister can even be formed out of a lapsed Catholic whose idea of Sunday church is a walk with his wife and dogs in the woods.

Courtney wrote that she and Jacob believed I understood the values and the spirit of their lives, so “when we’re up there ready to say our vows, you would be able to articulate in a way few other people could what the whole hullabaloo is all about.” I felt honored, humbled, and just a little grand, vain in a kerchief-in-the-suit-pocket way.

“Think about it,” Courtney wrote. “There will be lots of free beer.”

The Montana Code Annotated of 2007, 40-1-301: Solemnization and registration (with my italics).

(1) A marriage may be solemnized by a judge of a court of record, by a public official whose powers include solemnization of marriages, by a mayor, city judge, or justice of the peace, by a tribal judge, *or in accordance with any mode of solemnization recognized by any religious denomination*, Indian nation or tribe, or native group.

Also . . .

(3) *The solemnization of the marriage is not invalidated by the fact that the person solemnizing the marriage was not legally qualified to solemnize it if either party to the marriage believed that person to be qualified.*

So, were I a huckster, a purveyor of false gods, a Bible salesman with pornographic playing cards in my briefcase, I could still unite Courtney and Jacob so long as one of them was convinced of my credentials. In Montana, by law, marriage truly is an act of faith.

I telephoned Courtney and said yes. Ordination, she explained, was necessary (“*any mode of solemnization recognized by any religious denomination*”) and would be easy if I pointed my Web browser toward the Internet address of the Universal Life Church.

I’d never heard of the ULC, but among certain folk the church is famous. Not famous as the Church of Latter Day Saints is famous, or the Society of Jesus, or even the Branch Davidians. The church’s name travels underground, through pop culture and counterculture and trivia games. One example: Chris Stevens, the convict/radio deejay from the 1990s television comedy *Northern Exposure*, was his fictional hamlet’s clergyman, ordained via the Universal Life Church through an advertisement in *Rolling Stone* magazine. The ULC, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and In-N-Out Burgers, has a cult following.

Right away I visited the church via the Internet. A pixilated dove welcomed me as it winged through a cosmic sky of stars and nebulas. I clicked and read that the ULC was founded in 1959, that it maintains weekly services in an unassuming white building in Modesto, California, and that all seekers are welcome. I read prayer requests (“I’m controlled by some kind of voodoo and black magic. I need God to save me, protect me and cleanse me”), and noted that anyone could confess online (“Have you forgiven yourself for your sins?” Click “Yes” or “No”). I could purchase clergy kits. I could be ordained for free. All the ULC required was contact information. In fact, I was already ordained! God had ordained me, the ULC explained, as God ordains everyone.

I wrote Courtney a note. “I’ll get myself ordained fairly soon. It’s too much fun to put it off.”

I’m not sure what I meant by “fairly soon.” What I must have meant was “I need to sit on this.” Because I didn’t sign up to claim my ordination that early November day, nor the day after. Christmas came and St. Valentine’s Day passed, and still I hesitated.

Sputtin rhymes with *button*. Among my wife’s people—Dutch-American Calvinists who populate western Michigan—the word means “to make a little joke at God’s expense.” If you need to boost a child sitting at the dinner table and suggest using a Bible, that’s *sputtin*. To actually sit the kid on the book is sacrilegious.

Sputtin has no English-language synonym. *Irreverence* is a mismatch because to be irreverent doesn’t require humor. *Sputtin* does. *Sputtin* also requires those listening to recoil in mock shock, chastising the wag. “Oooh, you are *sputtin*,” is the proper response, like the playground taunt “You’re in *trouble*.”

With *sputtin*, nobody gets hurt. There is no challenge to a belief in God or loyalty to creed. The joke only makes God less scary, suggests a divinity who appreciates a chuckle. *Sputtin* is gentle, never revolutionary, never subversive.

Which brings me back to fake ministerhood. My wife told friends, “My mother always wanted me to marry a minister,” and we’d laugh. At parties, when I mentioned my plan to become a man of the cloth, I cloaked my

attitude in casual irony. But even as I grinned, I felt unsettled, cheap. From the moment Courtney mentioned the ULC Web site, I'd tried to frame my ordination as sputtin. Even Courtney had called it becoming a "fake minister." But if such an ordination were sputtin, why did I feel mean making wisecracks? Was I mocking the ULC? My own confusion about religion? God?

A joke? Really?

One day I would stand before Jacob and Courtney as one of many who loved them, and I'd direct a ceremony during which they would make solemn and joyful vows. I was supposed to articulate "in a way few other people could" what verities adhered to that moment. Humor is a truth of marriage but not the only one. So my ordination couldn't begin and end as a joke, either, because Courtney and Jacob's marriage couldn't be constructed on a foundation of burlesque.

Summer mornings in Glastonbury, Connecticut, circa 1974, I rise earlier than everyone in the house. I eat a bowl of cereal and read the sides of the box, brush my teeth and comb my hair, and walk a mile or so to St. Paul's Catholic Church.

Inside, a statue of Jesus suffering perpetual crucifixion towers over the altar, far from the rail where parishioners kneel to receive the host—a wafer minutes ago but through liturgy and prayer made into the instrument of an intense, palpable, intimate interchange with God. The Body of Christ leaves the fingers of the priest to rest on the tongue of a kneeling communicant, and an altar boy stands near, holding a gold-plated saucer on a stick beneath the hands of the priest (which have been washed clean of iniquity) and beneath the tongue of the communicant (who has admitted unworthiness of this gift but who has faith God's word can heal). The altar boy holds the saucer—I hold the saucer—in case of human failing, in case the wafer drops. What is sacred must not be profaned by floor's mud crumbs, lint, and stray threads.

This is a grave responsibility and a solemn ritual. Studying people's outstretched tongues, I step alongside the rail and say nothing. The priest murmurs, "The Body of Christ," and the communicants answer, "Amen." I hear the rustle of the priest's surplice, the click and scrape of shoe leather

or the tok-tok of high heels as parishioners return to the pews, the crack of a kneeler dropped too hard against the tile floor, and the echo of the crack. Afterward, silent in a room behind the altar, I leave my cassock in a closet. Maybe the priest speaks to me. Maybe not. And then I walk to Franklin Avenue Pharmacy, which has a soda counter and a comic book rack. I order a chocolate shake and pay twenty cents for *The Incredible Hulk*, and I read and sip in silence. And I walk home in silence.

In all of this astonishing quiet, I feel near to God. He approves of good boys who do not worry their parents and who keep inside themselves a private peace.

A wedding at St. Paul's. My first as an altar boy. Likely my first ever.

During one long part of the liturgy everyone but the priest must kneel. We altar boys do not have kneelers or a pew or rail on which to lean. Kneeling without assistance requires balance and good posture, muscles in the abdomen and lower back clenched for stability. But I've heard the liturgy hundreds of times, and it works on me like a lullaby. Mind astray from the Lamb of God, I test my balance. How far can I tip my torso forward while kneeling? A little tilt, back upright. Farther forward, back upright. Even farther, and I reach—literally—my tipping point. Down I go, hands no longer clasped in respect but instead pressed against the floor as if I am about to finish a pushup. Which I do, springing back to kneel, praying now that Father hasn't noticed.

But someone sees, father of the groom or bride, perhaps, who sneaks onto the altar to whisper his concern in my ear. Are you sick? Dizzy?

Embarrassed, I say the fall was an accident. Except it wasn't. As with all games, as with all falls—even the first and most famous—it was a test of limits and also a metaphor (as games are), by which an altar boy might get a hint of how it feels to sin.

As I outgrew altar boyhood, I also nurtured a growing distance from the Church. My parents offered to send me to Catholic school rather than public school, but I said no; my friends attended our public school. Later, after my teenaged confirmation of faith, I stopped attending Mass. The whys are not so easy to name as the fact of the estrangement. Let's say it

stemmed from money, boredom, and the discovery of the old truth that the Church is human and flawed. An idealist, I was hell on hypocrisy, lacking any generous impulse toward an institution that had disappointed me by its imperfection. I wish my reasons had been profound and spiritual. They were teenaged and facile.

But some nights I stared at the pewter crucifix on my wall, at Jesus with arms spread and feet fastened by a spike, and I prayed the Lord's Prayer. I prayed as a believer, despite my willful exile from my community of believers. Fervent, I prayed to a statuette that hung from a picture nail hammered into the drywall of my bedroom, prayed to God who once was made flesh, now made pewter. We were not done, He and I.

Decades later, reading in a chair in my living room, I'm distracted from the pages by thoughts of the upcoming wedding, and of the Universal Life Church, and of God. What I'm thinking is unfocused, but it includes a pinch of agitation, a sprinkle of curiosity. I don't believe God has already ordained me, or my neighbors, or my brother-in-law the cop as the ULC asserts. The ULC's promise suggests ordination is a birthright, like free speech, a benefit of being, as natural as death. In the ULC view, ordination isn't a test or evaluation that proves a person's worth as a minister and establishes such a person as one others can trust regarding matters of God and spirit. The ULC says everyone is qualified. Everyone can be trusted. *I* qualify. Except I find myself on the side of history, standing with centuries of institutions and teachers who have worked with aspiring clergy, guided them so they could guide others. I want to believe that ordination is more than a birthright, that it is an earned privilege like driving a school bus. Someone somewhere decides who is fit. We can argue over who makes that determination and how, but what's clear is that not everyone should be trusted to drive a bus full of schoolchildren.

It's possible I'm thinking too much about this. But such things trouble me in my living room as I'm not reading. A few feet away, my big white-furred and dying dog lies on a rug, her crippled right foreleg extended. She has a baseball-sized lump at the knuckle, and she licks the fur under which her tumor swells, licks carefully, quietly, methodically. This strikes me as numinous.

A sharp sense of my own foolishness ends the moment. A dog and a tumor? Next I'll see Jesus in the melted swirl of a hot fudge sundae. Me, a minister? Someone needs to speak plainly. I'm more fit to drive the school bus.

But I'm expected at a wedding, and any further delay might endanger the plans. In late February, I apply for my free ULC ordination. The day my ministerial package arrives, I set it on my desk and stare as if I were nine years old and have just received a prize for mailing in a dozen cereal box tops.

Inside the envelope I discover a laminated card, blue banded, with old Gothic-style lettering announcing its association with the Universal Life Church. Below that, a golden shield with the capital letters ULC in red. And there, the word, yes, the *word*:

CLERGY.

And then, "This is to certify that the bearer hereof is ordained by the Universal Life Church."

And my name.

Also in the package: gold-leaf stickers marked with the ULC emblem and the phrase "We are one"; a booklet most gentle and welcoming, with sample ceremonies for weddings and baptisms; and a most valuable boon: a parking pass.

There again. A joke. But even as I imagine easy and free parking for an Orioles game, I know I'll never use the pass. I'm not a minister, and to con a parking attendant goes beyond sputtin. In my cassock and sneakers at St. Paul's, I learned that our proper position relative to God is on our knees, trembling, deserving His wrath, praying for His mercy. Decades later, the instruction of priests and nuns sticks with me, like a bone shard in the windpipe, and I have disobeyed. I've missed more Masses than I attended. I married outside the framework sanctified by the avowed celibates in Rome. I have received the Body of Christ on my tongue without having first confessed and repented. And I've become ordained in another church: a heresy. My enlightened self knows these not to be sins so much as violations of the red tape the Catholic Church uses to bind souls. But at an age when I believed in Magic 8 Balls and prayer and that only you

can prevent forest fires, the church called them sins. The church is wrong, probably. Probably God doesn't care. Probably.

One day, I learned that a coworker had also been ordained in the ULC. We talked about the strange joy in it, the allure of blasphemy. He said, "Anything that takes thirty seconds to do can't be that big of a sin," which sounded good, but I felt that shard in the windpipe, and I remembered the nuns' lesson about bearing false witness. *In thirty seconds*, I thought, *you can agree to a lie about who you are.*

Dear Lord, who am I now?

Reverend Downs? Brother Michael? *Father Michael?* Pastor Michael. Minister Mike. Parson Downs. Holy Mickey (a happy hour cocktail?). The Rev? The Most Fraudulent Reverend Downs. Or the Least Reverend?

Lord?

Lord?

Amen.

"Always do the right thing," the ULC advised me. Inside their booklet, church leaders proclaimed, "We only believe in **that which is right!**"

How simple-minded. I felt silly reading such squishy doctrine, however good-natured, embarrassed for myself and for the church that had just ordained me. The ULC insulted a millennia and more of thinking about how best to live, how to know what is right, how to coexist with neighbors, with nature, and with God. The ULC took the wisdom of prophets, of Jesus and Buddha, Confucius and Moses and Mohammed, of Reformation theologians, and Gandhi and Mother Teresa, and cast their insights aside.

In turn, I rejected the ULC's slogan spirituality, easy for someone who had spurned Catholicism. In fact, rejecting religion had been my habit for years, comfortable and thoughtless as switching off lights when I left a room. My wife and I had sampled half a dozen churches in Montana and found reasons to reject each (too much ritual, not enough ritual, the congregation mumbled during hymns). But at some point, you have to stop rejecting, right? One day, you must proclaim a belief, even if it is that you have no belief. Simplistic as the ULC's doctrine might be, it was a belief.

When last my belief felt perfect, faith fastened my heart to God as

those spikes fastened pewter Jesus to the crucifix on my wall. Now, older, why would I welcome a new nail? Perhaps my rejection of Sunday worship services, of dogmas and creeds, is self-preservation. Unsure and still seeking, I'd rather not suffer a wound that fixes me in God's embrace; I want to grow in God's presence. I want room to doubt.

With room to doubt, I can say I believe in God and that there are things I don't understand but want to.

I can say there is no God and that there are things I don't understand but want to.

I can say how I appreciate, in an immediate way, that God and I are not finished yet.

Courtney and Jacob met me in Montana a month or so before the September wedding date, on the sun-pummeled deck of a hotel restaurant overlooking the Clark Fork River and Mount Sentinel half a mile beyond. Over iced tea and green salads, we chewed over the ceremony's nitty-gritty: Who holds the rings? What role do parents play? Should I announce Courtney and Jacob as Mr. and Mrs., or would she keep her surname? We edited their skeleton draft, added lines, replaced words. Two sections remained empty, ones I needed to write.

My big question: "How much God do you want?"

By which I meant, should I even mention God? How often? In the person of Jesus? Or some other identity? And behind all those queries, a larger one about what Courtney and Jacob took to be holy, and about God's role in their marriage that day and thereafter. Would God hold the rings?

They talked about what they believed, about their understanding of what is spiritual. The Courtney who had asked me to be a fake minister gave way to a contemplative woman who believed in something beyond understanding, even if she struggled to enunciate how. Jacob spoke of his Quaker father whom they had first asked to oversee the ceremony. Why he declined they couldn't say, but I wondered whether his decision had to do with the humility of his belief and the way his sincere faith would conflict with ULC ordination.

What I heard, too, was that Courtney and Jacob felt closest to the di-

vine when each suspended a sense of self to engage Montana's landscape, to let it infuse them with spirituality's necessary sense of insignificance. I knew what they meant. Once, hunting elk in Montana, I'd trudged through snow to a mountaintop nearly ten thousand feet high, from which I could see a hundred miles in every direction. Puffing steam, sweating, my jacket open in the below-freezing temperatures, I stared across a world of valleys and rivers and plains so immense it lost all perspective, tilted this way and that so I couldn't be sure I stood upright on solid earth. Nowhere in that circle of horizon did I see any human sign. Only God and God and God and God.

On the restaurant's deck I said, Maybe you'd like me to describe the outdoors where we'll be, bring attention to the landscape, draw us all into the moment. Yes, they said. I said, Maybe you'd like a few words about the nature of marriage, too, as best I understand it after fifteen happy years. They agreed. So we parted. After all, their wedding work involved music and flowers, food and chairs, ushers and bridesmaids, enough of the mundane to distract them from God. To provide overarching meaning, to convey the sacred power of a wedding through words—that was my job.

Back home in Maryland, on my front porch, I started writing. I mulled over the meaning of marriage, of Montana, and of the love Courtney and Jacob shared. As I typed, I reached for beauty, charity, and grace. The composition of each sentence became a kind of prayer, a struggle toward the fervent passions I'd felt as a boy who called on a pewter Christ and as a servant who poured sacred water to cleanse the hands of a priest. With each new sentence, I relaxed into a peace that was like all the peace I've known yet new, a serenity so deep that I didn't want to finish the last sentence. More than once I'd noted to friends that "Writing is what I have instead of God." But now, on my porch, with a neighbor outside mowing grass and pigeons puttering atop the roof next door, writing didn't substitute for God, or vice versa. Both existed in the same space.

Writing the ceremony, I used forms of the word *bless* or *blessing* four times, *joy* twice, and once each I chose *grace* and *sanctified* and *God*.

The morning before the rehearsal, I kneel in a bathroom of our host-

ess's house, and my wife, Sheri, takes electric shears and passes them over my neck to shave the hair there. Shirtless, wearing pajama pants, I face into the shower and lean forward, so that the hairs will fall where we can wash them away. Kneeling, I hold my balance. My wife passes the shears back and forth, guiding them with the fingertips of her free hand. Her fingertips are cool, and she places them carefully against my skin. The shears hum and buzz, and the two sensations are different, the touch of the metal and the touch of her fingers, but each feels full of love. My eyes close. What is holy cannot always be named.

For their wedding, Courtney and Jacob chose a hundred-year-old ranch, with a red-board and stone barn, south of the state capital at Helena and half a mile from a coal yard of black hills and sky-high smokestacks.

At the rehearsal, we plot who stands where, and when I recite my lines Sheri urges "louder." Afterward, we eat in an open-air outbuilding, then someone cues an iPod for square dancing. Allemande left! Dosey do! Full of lasagna and wine, the wedding party stumbles to the orders of a split-rail of a woman who, like me, was Courtney's teacher. But Mrs. Hilt taught third grade. She abides no foolishness so grabs laggards and forces them into dancing shape. Were she a minister, all our souls would be pressed and starched, the corners creased.

"It's odd being the minister's wife," Sheri tells me in a break from dancing, by which she means she feels out of place. I do, too. Though Courtney and Jacob are dear to us, we're not college pals or parents. Friends and family work behind the scenes, know where caterers will park and who will help Courtney with makeup. My role is more about the stage itself. I need to maintain my posture, project my voice and convey authority.

So I start to feel awkward as the evening ages and as others loosen up in the private ways beer and wine and long, shared histories encourage relaxation. Time, I tell Sheri, to fade into the background and leave revelry to others. No one wants the minister lingering, spilling booze.

On our way out we stop to thank Jacob's father for hosting the dinner. It's the first time he and I have spoken. After polite words, he asks, "What's your background?" No one has ever asked me this, and I'm confused. I offer a summary of jobs, cities, and states. He looks at me with a patience

that tells me I'm not revealing what he hopes to hear.

Then I realize. He means my religious background. I'm the minister.

"Roman Catholic," I allow, "though lapsed." What follows is hemming and hawing, so I switch focus, ask him questions. He has practiced his Quaker faith since boyhood. His mother, he tells us, was a birthright Quaker from Indiana, though I don't know what that means and am too abashed to ask. He has an Indiana face, lean and high cheeked, eyes bright behind glasses. I wish he had asked about my faith earlier, when we were eating lasagna or walking up from the glade to the outbuilding where we now stand and where square dance music stutters and stops and starts again. Then I could have sat with him a moment, thought before I spoke, and told him how I often think about God, and doctrine, and what is the right way to live. We might have talked about spiritual truths, and I would have been glad for his counsel. But that wouldn't be right, either. I'm the minister; wishy-washy spirituality isn't part of the job description. So, because it's late and I've drunk red wine, I say I plan to write about becoming a fake minister, how I know that in my months-long hesitation to sign up lies a story. It's as if saying "I will write about it" means "Don't worry, I'm taking this minister thing seriously."

Which is not a good answer to his question. Not the day before the wedding.

The ceremony itself plays out down a slope from the barn, in a glade edged by Prickly Pear Creek, beneath cottonwood trees still green-leafed with summer. The wedding day starts overcast, but the clouds give way just as Courtney begins her bridal march, her farmer father beside her in crisp blue jeans, bolo tie, and Western vest. He walks with his daughter, and she comes to Jacob in sunlight. Maybe a hundred witnesses sit in folding chairs, or stand, and a few locals play traditional stringed instruments, Appalachian-style versions of classical wedding songs. The ushers are flirts, young and blond and blue-jeaned, the definition of raw-boned, useless in helping people find seats. For the most part, the guests don't need guidance. Courtney and Jacob's people are self-reliant. They come from farms and newsrooms, from San Francisco and Big Sandy, and they are smart and tough and loving. In the midst of this crowd, alone with each other, Court-

ney and Jacob stand steady and certain, neither of them shy nor surprised to find themselves here. This is where they mean to be. They need only for me to start speaking.

I begin by asking their parents to bless the union. I welcome the guests and then start to give shape to an idea of marriage. Marriage is a host of contradictions, I say. A mystery. How it grows and changes is impossible to predict, but how it grows and changes are among the institution's greatest rewards. Encouraging people to remember the moment, I ask them to study how sunlight falls on nearby mountains, to feel the dry breeze on their cheeks. "Remember this moment and how rare it is," I say. "Know it as a time of grace, one that years from now you will hold dear in memory. One you will mark as blessed." I nearly shout so guests in the farthest rows can hear. But because I have always felt closest to God in silence, shouting makes me feel more like an emcee, the director of a stage play, and less an agent of the spiritual.

How I feel, of course, isn't primary. I only pray the love and grace I'd felt when writing the ceremony still exists in the words, that the words as chosen and ordered carry their own spiritual heft, and that Courtney and Jacob, if no one else, feel their power.

I, in turn, am inspired by theirs. They have written their own vows, which I have not read. Nor have they shared them with each other. They have memorized what they mean to say, words that will form the foundation on which they will build their lives, and when they speak they do so to each other, not to the assembled. Their voices are clear and unwavering as water in a slow creek, but only a few people can hear. Jacob starts, and when Courtney cries it is all I can do to keep my own composure. What is holy cannot always be named. But I hope everyone in the glade sees, as I do, the grace that shines from groom and bride.

In that moment, all doubts and confusions about my role are cleared. If I stand accused in the eyes of any true believer, let it be as an accomplice to joy. And if my actions are in any way a blasphemy, I am the happiest blasphemer.

After the ceremony I scramble for the signatures of witnesses, of bride and groom. On the marriage license, I fill in "county" with the wrong one,

then cross it out. An ugly imperfection. Then I drop the pen just before Courtney is to sign, and the fine dust of the barn floor ruins the nub. I don't have an extra, and while a search begins for another pen, I think: A worthwhile minister would carry a spare. All of this reminds me that ministers are also bureaucrats.

At the barn, in the sharp, clean twilight, caterers serve a meal of beef and grains and of vegetables Jacob grew on the farm where he works. Jacob's father thanks me for the ceremony. So does Courtney, with a hug so long that Mrs. Hilt nudges my shoulder to remind me that Courtney is now a married woman. Mrs. Hilt's a widow, so I hug her instead. And my role as minister ends. No one asks how I dreamed up the content of the ceremony, or how I came to visions of marriage and of God, visions that will evolve because I am still married and because God and I are not finished yet. And I know that back home, there's no voice mail warning me that the collection plate is light and the church roof leaking. No stranger will expect my compassion, nor must I live each day, as I imagine sincere ministers must, with the knowledge that I am unworthy of the role I've taken but called to it nonetheless.

What I did was simpler. What I did was shout to the back row of a momentary paradise and trust the rest to God.