

The Erosion of Innocence

By: James W.B. Jackson  
1841911  
Polunsky Unit  
3872 FM 350 South  
Livingston, Texas 77351

It happened on one of those rare days where I couldn't cope with the noise, the smell, and the overall stench of hopelessness that lingers in the air here, and where drifting away on one of my mind traveling ventures just was not gonna do it for me, that I began to pray and ask God a very important question. I said, "Lord, how did I get here?" I wasn't talking about the events that brought me into a court room, for proceedings and Judicial Jump Rope. I wanted to know how did I lose my way, and landed in prison with a Life Without Parole sentence? What happened in my life that led to this? What did I miss? What did I take for granted? I wasn't looking for someone, or something, to blame. I just wanted to know where exactly did I deviate from the Path.

I'm not sure now if I could clarify my question to God any clearer to a human, but an image began to form in my mind... A memory...

It was about 1975. My family lived in Los Angeles, California, and I was around six years old. My dad and stepmother ushered me into the car and we went out to Pasadena, California, where my Aunt lived with her two sons, both more than 10 years older than me. My cousins.

Now there are some very small things among the huge things that my parents were just blind to during the car ride to Pasadena, but I'll have to share some of those another time.

My aunt sent her oldest son, and myself, to the grocery store. My cousin was talking about money to me, about how to have it and keep it. He showed me what looked like a fat wad of bills. I didn't really care much about what he was saying- I was just glad to be going on a little adventure with him.

We set out on our way to a Ralph's Grocery Store, and after we had gotten the items my aunt sent us for, my cousin led the way to a little toy aisle and to a rack where there were some packages of Toy Money. There were bills in denominations of ones, fives, tens, twenties and hundreds, and there was a plastic plate of pop-out coins. My cousin said, "Look, Money."

O.K., so I might have been a rather slow 6-year old, but my cousin said that this was money. So let me share exactly what was going on in my little mind. I lived in a house with a fence around it and a nice-sized back yard. My Auntie, who I loved dearly, lived in an apartment building. To me she lived in a big room with smaller rooms in it, so as my Cousin is loading up my little pants with packages of "Money", I'm thinking, "I'm gonna buy my Auntie a house, so she can have a backyard like me."

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So we went to the ckeckout, and paid for what Auntie sent us for, then left the store with our purchase and our loot. My Cousin was talking about something the whole time as we made our way back. I was thinking about if there was an empty house on our street that Auntie could move into. I don't know what my Cousin was saying. Possibly some instructions important only to him about what not to do, but I wasn't listening.

When we made it back to the apartment, I went straight to Auntie and said, "Look what we got, Auntie", and pulled out some of the packages of "Money." Her eyes went wide as the packages hit the table. I was like, "I know, right? You're moving to a house." I heard my cousin do a high-pitched "Nooooooo", and I was thinking, "Punk. He wants to keep it all to himself." As my Auntie looked at me, she said, "Baby, where did you get this?" I answered, "The store. It's just on the shelf. That's crazy, right? But Cousin loaded up my pants with it and we just left." I was smiling. My Auntie called my cousin, and started beating him. I yelled out, "He's got some in his pants, too, Auntie. Get him." My dad was laughing hysterically.

My Auntie, a very good Christian, church-going, Gospel-singing woman, was saying some very bad things while she continued to beat my cousin in the room he had ran to. I heard stuff breaking. I thought maybe there's enough money to buy new stuff since she's breaking all of her old stuff, as I pulled out yet another package still crammed into my pants. My stepmom and dad were laughing and crying at the same time. That was weird. They must be really proud of me, I thought.

My Auntie came out of the room, and I smiled as I see her with the packages of money. My Auntie did not look happy. She told my stepmom and my dad that if they didn't stop laughing, they were going to get it too.

Auntie came to me and hugged me, and said, "Baby, we have to take this stuff back, because it doesn't belong to us, O.K.?" I said okay, and my dad got up and grabbed all the packages and drove me back to the store. He told me to tell the man I was sorry for taking his stuff. My dad was still laughing a little bit on the way to the store.

When we got to the store, my dad went and found the store manager. The Manager looked down at me, and I said what my dad had told me to say.

The Manager was saying something, but I was thinking again. I wasn't listening. They smiled and shook hands, and we left to return to my Auntie's apartment. Stepmother was ready with her purse in hand when we got there, and I discovered that Auntie had been beating my cousin the whole time we were gone.

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Auntie came to me and hugged me, kissed my face, and told me she loved me. Then we left.

On the car-ride home, I was thinking that I had made a big mistake. It's what I was thinking while the manager was talking. The mistake I thought I made was not stealing the Money, but telling Auntie where it came from. It was much later that I learned that the money was not real. I missed the connection somewhere.

A seed was planted. Miseducation cultivated it. My parent's nonchalance, and humorous response to part of my innocence in destruction watered ~~it.~~

The next time I stole something, I didn't share the knowledge of it with anyone, but little by little it all began to come to light.

I don't place blame with anyone, even my older cousin who clearly must have been a special name brand of stupid for stealing toy money at 16 years old or older. Neither do I blame my parents for not being very, very clear about what I'd done regardless of my intentions.

Truly, at that moment, I didn't learn that stealing was wrong. I learned that telling anybody about it was not good.

God showed me many things that day, that answered my Question, and my Prayer.

Looking back, I can see where I straddled the fence between what is right, and what is wrong, as well as a host of bad teaching, bad teachers, and other stops and potholes on the calamitous road that led to here.