

When I was in college, a few of us were invited over to dinner with one of our favorite professors. He was a professor of the old type; absent minded, losing his glasses that were always perched on top of his unkempt hair; a lover of books and a polymath, he separated his undergraduate degree in physics and his PhD in Political Science with a decade of truck driving across North America. His office was filled with books of all types, from floor to ceiling. Student papers thrown akimbo like 8.5 x 11 inch snow flakes settling on the ground.

But in his house, there were but two book shelves, containing only 72 books. "These," he said, "Are the only books I will ever need." waving his hand, Vanna White like over their leather bound spines. They were the 60 volumes of Mortimer Adler's "Great Books of the Western World" and The Encyclopedia Britannica, purchased by subscription. My professor maintained that each book was in eternal conversation with all the other books, from Homer to Sartre and Hawthorne and Twain and Marx and Solzhenitsen, the Old Testament and Darwin, all having a conversation about the same thing. Us.

This week, I had one of those rare opportunities to watch two documentaries that seemed to be in conversation with one another. And nowhere near in quality to the bulk of the Western Canon of literature, it underscored the truth of my professor's assertion.

The first was Queen of Versailles. This movie follows the lives of David and Jackie Siegel and their 6 children. The Siegels are obnoxiously wealthy, and represent all those things Occupy Wall Street told us to hate in the 1%. David Siegel is the sole stockholder of the largest timeshare vacation company in the world; selling, as he puts it "the same property 52 times." Jackie

is his wife, and his children are cared for by 6 live-in Filipino nannies. One of whom, it is revealed, left her son behind in the Phillipines when he was 10; at the time of the documentary, in 2008, he is 24 years old. They live in a 24,000 square foot mansion.

They are in the midst of building the United States' largest single-family home: a 90,000 square foot monstrosity modelled, with varying success and as stated by David: "The palace of Versailles and the top three floors of the Paris Las Vegas Casino;" the home is dubbed, without much creativity put into it, "Versailles" and is a remarkable statement of the nature of their existence. There is a stunning lack of insight or realization that someone else might find them obnoxious and ever so slightly vile. Jackie shows off the quarter-built mansion, mentioning to her friend that "If I want to visit the children, that's the grand staircase I would use." If... I wanted. To Visit. The Children. David's son, who seems to be the day-to-day presence of the timeshare business, says with no irony: "We don't sell time shares, we are saving lives," on the tendentious premise that people who have more vacations have fewer heart attacks. One appalling scene has Jackie insist that one of the live-in nannies dress up in a Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer costume for a Christmas party. Jackie says, "I've put my trust in all this" meaning her husband's business. Not her husband. But her husband's business.

The other movie is simply titled Gilbert. It's a profile of comedian Gilbert Gottfried, the shrill voiced, squinty-eyed voice of the AFLAC duck, Iago the parrot in Disney's Aladdin, and the man who famously was booed at a roast for Hugh Hefner, for telling a joke that was TOO tasteless for even that classy gathering.

It is about his 20 year romance and 10 year marriage of his wife, Dara, their two kids, and their homelife in Manhattan. Their apartment is expensive, but modest. In contrast with the ornate gold-leaf and filigreed tastes of the Siegels, the Gottfrieds have but one painting hanging in their living room/diningroom/kitchen: a large portrait of Groucho Marx. Friends of Gilbert describe his life pre-Dara as lonely, indifferent to his success; he becomes famous for being cheap, stealing soaps and towels and slippers from hotels and stuffing his luggage with doughnuts from comedy club greenrooms, hoarding them like a squirrel. In fact, Dara mentions that on the first day of their marriage in 1996, she discovered under Gilbert's bed three suitcases full of paraphernalia from Pan Am and Eastern Airlines, two business that hadn't operated in decades. All of his friends comment that they believe that Dara "Saved Gilbert." It's not totally clear from what, but the seriousness of the comment suggests a darkness urking under Gilbert's success in the '80s.

Both families encounter trouble. For the Gottfrieds, it's when Dara looks into the camera and says, "All he had to do was walk in the studio, shout "AFLAC" and leave. How could you mess that up?" But the grimace the quiet tear reveals that Gilbert does, in fact, mess that up. In 2014, Gilbert was fired for making some tasteless jokes about the Japanese Tsunami on Twitter. Afterwards, he comments, "I asked my agent what the pay was for this gig, and he said... I'm not sure you can ask that question anymore." He falls back on old routines and working blue, and is clearly exhausted from the experience and yet... There is a stability, a wholeness, a holiness in his relationship with his wife, his kids and his extended family of two sisters. A real Gilbert that exists in communion with the people he loves.

If I tell you that the Queen of Versailles opens in August 2008, I don't think I have to describe what happens mid-way through the documentary... The credit and housing market collapses, ending the company's ability to sell mortgages to timeshare customers. Their financial status collapses, and various economies are taken in the Siegel household. David becomes obsessed with electric usage, putting a pad lock on the thermostat. The 20 or so staff of the mansion are dismissed, and maintaining the cleanliness of the family and the 8 dogs becomes a problem. Canine... Effluent litters million dollar carpeting. Jackie is shocked to discover that hertz rent-a-car doesn't have a driver. The company lays off all employees except for one section: Asset Recovery. As usual, insight is rare: David blames the situation on "the bankers" and their easy credit; forgetting the billions of dollars of "easy credit" mortgages he sold to his customers and and the credit his own business depended on. His youngest son enters his office, hugs him and says, "I love you, Dad." David remains locked in on CNBC and responds, "Yeah, Ok."

We can put our trust in stuff, or we can put our trust in relationship. We can Live together or die alone. Those are our options. We have no other choice. Life forever in community with one another or die alone with our green paper. New life, or old death. Take your pick. The Queen of Versailles tries to sell us on stuff; Gilbert, despite the blue humor and tasteless jokes, sells us on community.

We have in our Gospel reading one of those moments in Scripture where there is so much going that it is impossible to fully parse out the details, so rich is this story. Jesus, the well-beloved Son. Jesus, submitting to the Father. Jesus giving us the sacrament of

Baptism. Jesus, joining into a community of the Baptized, of those washed and pledged to God.

Indeed, the word "sacrament" comes from an old Roman Army practice in which the soldier would pledge an oath to his commander, and the commander would likewise swear allegiance to his soldier; the new soldier was considered adopted into his new military family, leaving his old life behind and a new life beginning.

This, of course, is the imagery of our baptism. Leaving behind an old life and being born anew. Of being members of a "royal priesthood." Of eternal, spiritual change. Of being adopted into the family, the household of God. Of the grime, grit and nastiness falling away and being made clean. "This is my well-beloved Son, Isaac, or Peter, or Doug, or Eric, or Tim... This is my well-beloved Daughter... Susan, or Brennan, or Barb, or..." Baptism restores the intimacy between ourselves and God, giving us a new story as brothers and sisters.

And Lord, have mercy do we need a new story. We live in a world where the story being sold by our media, bought by our brains, and lied to by ourselves is this: that our True Self is waiting to be discovered, and in the right circumstances, when we have the right set of friends, right set of things, right set of people recognize it, we will suddenly be Who We Were Always meant to be. Identity over reality. To put it simply: I am in a movie starring me, you all are supporting cast, and When the Time comes, when the ninjas attack, I will know kung fu.

Think about that sentence. I do not have to learn Kung Fu. I do not actually have to engage in violence, I do not have to act in any way... I will simply know Kung Fu. An identity, ready made,

waiting to come out. You, everyone else around me, has to play your supporting part to my central character. In the preposterous occasion of a ninja attack or alien invasion, you'd know exactly what to do. IT's a great story, because you can replace "kung fu" with any other identity: I will be a movie star, or a secret agent, or a priest, or a suave, creative advertising executive, or a rum-swilling pirate, or a mountain climber or deep sea diver or a guru, or... But, alas, neither my supporting cast nor reality is not cooperating. So I will settle being a middle-manager or mid-level systems analyst or school counselor until the time comes and I will know kung fu.

But This story... Always. Fails. Because the people around you are not supporting cast. Because reality *always* wins.

It should not surprise anyone, then, that when reality ceases to cooperate with role in their movie, when the supporting cast fails to cooperate, that shame of getting caught not knowing Kung Fu becomes rage. Not anger, but rage. And then the bullets fly, and we go on TV and say, "Someone was supposed to stop this. Some thing was supposed to stop this. Someone or some thing was supposed to know kung fu." "The medium is the message," wrote Marshall McLuhan, except in the first edition it was rendered as "The medium is the massage," altering the meaning of the first sentence not one bit.

I am willing to talk about guns. I am willing to talk mental health. I ain't never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be talked about. But so long as the discussion revolves around "Who was supposed to know Kung Fu?" then we will be back here saying the exact same thing, in 87 days. I say 87 days because I checked; that is the average amount of time that it takes for the name of a school involved in

a shooting to return to the pre-shooting amount of searches in google. That's 5 days and 3 hours per dead Stonewall High School student. 87 days of distraction and incentive to *not* change.

I look at the 1600 students at my school and I say, "Which one?" Which one has believed this obscene lie? Did I teach it to them? Am I adding to it? Which one is hurting because they believe someone else has to affirm their identity as a loved Child of God? Which one thinks their self-worth and identity is bound up in getting a 21 on the ACT? Or a 5 on their AP test? Or their relationship with the girlfriend? Or being the fastest runningback? Will I know kung fu when the time comes? Or will I cower in the corner like everyone else? And we all know the answer to that... Because I do not know kung fu. And I will never know kung fu.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, holy immortal one, we need a new story. The Great Conversation has broken down into the assertion of self over others, over reality, over Our Father in Heaven. In this narrative, God cannot be God. The narrative requires you not to know who He is, so you can make Him into whatever you need Him to be. Remember all those movies where the Devil was the bad guy, and the hero had to recite those rituals and prayers perfectly to win and save the girl? That's when we used to believe God existed outside of ourselves; we don't make movies like that anymore. The medium is the message. We do not make God into graven images of things that crawl or fly or even of ourselves. We make a graven image of a supporting cast member.

Recall the story of Narcissus: the man who falls is captivated by the beauty of his reflection in the pond; but remember that he

does not fall in love with himself; he falls in love with *the image* of himself. We need a savior who comes to us kneeling in front of that pond, staring into the eyes of a person that does not exist, that will never exist, and kicks our butt into the water. Who cleanses us, pledges Himself to us, and gives us a new, real identity, one that doesn't need kung fu, or a 90,000 square foot mansion. The good news of Jesus's baptism is the good news of Jesus' story in a sick, broken world that lies to his children and is full of children that lie to each other. That our full identity is not found waiting for a preposterous outbreak of ninja attacks, but is totally and completely found in being adopted by Jesus. Being given an identity that exists because Christ loved us first, and that we are loved by a communion with sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, where we point to the cross and say, "This! This is what I put my trust in. Jesus is Lord. Jesus conquers death. I am in HIS movie, I refuse to be cast in any other movie, wither supporting player or starring role. I refuse any other allegiance. I refuse any other story."

That's the message we have to tell to all those who are plagued by the idea that they have to be something else in order to be loved... by their parents... by their significant other... by their friends... by their school. You are loved, now. We are loved, now. You are who you are because of our choices, good and bad, the power to shape yourself is *yours*, not in waiting around for The Time. If you want to know kung fu... Go learn it. Look away from the image in the water and let yourself fall INTO the water. Be immersed. Be baptized. Be made different. Stop reflecting; choose to act. Live together or die alone.

Act in hope. That's the choice we have. Hope not in who we will be, but He who IS. Hope not in the things we collect whether that is material goods or the detritus of discarded identities,

tried on, found ill fitting, then thrown away. Hope in the Father-pleasing Son of God, the one Person that will always love us as ourselves.

Amen.