

Murderer as Minister

by Karl E. Johnson

Among the methods of bringing a man to his senses, threatening to kill him does not readily come to mind. But maybe it should.

In the 1999 film *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) walks into a convenience store and draws a handgun.

"What are you doing?" asks his friend Jack (Ed Norton).

"Human sacrifice," Durden replies coldly.

Durden brings the store clerk to his knees at gunpoint, and then begins to philosophize. "On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero." Then, rummaging through the clerk's wallet, he says, "Raymond, you're going to die."

But first, Durden wants more conversation. "An expired community college student ID card. What did you used to study, Raymond K. Hessel?"

Raymond, amidst heaving, fearful sobs, can only reply "S-S-Stuff."

"Stuff," Durden screams, "Were the midterms hard?" The interrogation continues. "I asked you what you studied." Durden rams the barrel of the gun against Raymond's head. "What did you want to be, Raymond K. Hessel?" Raymond can't respond. Durden cocks the gun.

It is a brutal but trenchant scene. Viewers not yet desensitized to visual violence will grimace and turn away. I am not ashamed to admit that I did. But in its own strange sort of way, the movie is about hope, transformation, perhaps even salvation.

When the clerk finally says he wanted to be a veterinarian, Durden uncocks and lowers the gun. "I know where you live," Durden says. "I'm going to check on you. If you aren't back in school and on your way to being a veterinarian in six weeks, you will be dead. Get the hell out of here."

Apparently, this is Durden's idea of career counseling. "Tomorrow will be

the most beautiful day of Raymond K. Hessel's life," he announces to Jack. "His breakfast will taste better than any meal he has ever eaten."

Although *Fight Club* is a creative and startling film, the narrative outline is not entirely new. G.K. Chesterton spoke about carrying a pistol in the event that he came across anyone who claimed there was really no reason to live. Whether he did or not, he wrote about a man who did.

In *Manalive*, Dr. Emerson Eames, an internationally renowned philosopher, has a memorable encounter with a student named Innocent Smith—who has just come from pistol practice. Smith, not unlike Nicodemus, goes to see the doctor of philosophy at night—in both senses of the word. Smith was melancholy over the meaninglessness of the material world.

Dr. Eames, however, offers no reassurance. Vulgar people, he tells his pupil, want to enjoy life like a moth goes to a flame—because "they are too stupid to see that they are paying too big a price for it." The few who "see things at the right angle," by contrast, naturally go mad. "An omniscient God would put us out of our pain," he continues, except for the fact that "he is dead himself; that is where he is really enviable."

From G.K. Chesterton's *Manalive*:

"Oh, hang the common world!" said the sullen Smith, letting his fist fall on the table in an idle despair.

"Let's give it a bad name first," said the Professor calmly, "and then hang it. A puppy with hydrophobia would probably struggle for life while we killed it; but if we were kind we should kill it. So an omniscient god would put us out of our pain. He would strike us dead."

"Why doesn't he strike us dead?" asked the undergraduate abstractedly, plunging his hands into his pockets.

"He is dead himself," said the philosopher, "that is where he is really enviable."

"To any one who thinks," proceeded Eames, "the pleasures of life, trivial and soon tasteless, are bribes to bring us into a torture chamber. We all see that for any thinking man mere extinction is the... What are you doing?... Are you mad?... Put that thing down."

Dr. Eames had turned his tired but still talkative head over his shoulder, and had found himself looking into a small round black hole, rimmed by a six-sided circlet of steel, with a sort of spike standing up on the top. It fixed him like an iron eye. Through those eternal instants during which the reason is stunned he did not even know what it was. Then he saw behind it the chambered barrel and cocked hammer of a revolver, and behind that the flushed and rather heavy face of Smith, apparently quite unchanged, or even more mild than before.

"I'll help you out of your hole, old man," said Smith, with rough tenderness. "I'll put the puppy out of his pain."

Emerson Eames retreated towards the window. "Do you mean to kill me?" he cried.

"It's not a thing I'd do for every one," said Smith with emotion; "but you and I seem to have got so intimate to-night, somehow. I know all your troubles now, and the only cure, old chap."

"Put that thing down," shouted the Warden.

"It'll soon be over, you know," said Smith with the air of a sympathetic dentist. And as the Warden made a run for the window and balcony, his benefactor followed him with a firm step and a compassionate expression.

Both men were perhaps surprised to see that the gray and white of early daybreak had already come. One of them, however, had emotions calculated to swallow up surprise. Brakespeare College was one of the few that retained real traces of Gothic ornament, and just beneath Dr. Eames's balcony there ran out what had perhaps been a flying buttress, still shapelessly shaped into gray beasts and devils, but blinded with mosses and washed out with rains. With an ungainly and most courageous leap, Eames sprang out on this antique bridge, as the only possible mode of escape from the maniac. He sat astride of it, still in his academic gown, dangling his long thin legs, and considering further chances of flight. The whitening daylight opened under as well as over him that impression of vertical infinity already remarked about the little lakes round Brakespeare. Looking down and seeing the spires and chimneys pendent in the pools, they felt alone in space. They felt as if they were looking over the edge from the North Pole and seeing the South Pole below.

In mid-sentence, Eames finds himself suddenly staring into the end of a revolver. "I'll help you out of your hole, old man," offers Smith politely.

"Do you mean to kill me?" Eames cries, running for the balcony.

"It's not a thing I'd do for everyone," responds Smith, who Chesterton likens to a "sympathetic dentist."

Just as the sun is rising, the long night of conversation gives way to the moment of conversion. Eames has a change of mind (or is it a change of heart?) and asks to come back in.

But Smith is undecided. "Before you break your neck, or I blow out your brains, or let you back into this room (on which complex points I am undecided)," Smith says, as if asking Eames to count the cost of disciple-

ship, "I want the metaphysical point cleared up. Do I understand that you want to get back to life?"

Eames: "I'd give anything to get back."

Smith then demands of him a song of thanksgiving, followed by the raising of hands for worship. "You shall thank heaven for churches and chapels and villas and vulgar people and puddles and pots and pans and sticks and rags and bones and spotted blinds."

The parallels between *Manalive* and *Fight Club*—lucidity from madness, metaphysics at moonlight, life discovered at death's door, and gratitude for the ordinary—are more than superficial. But neither are they extraordinary. ("I have a deep and hearty hatred of literary parallels," Chester-

ton once wrote. "There is no reason why two independent poets should not think of the same image or idea quite independently.")

Indeed, death has long had a way of clarifying life; mortality of inspiring morality. Think of traditional rites of passage, which often entail a symbolic passage from death to rebirth.

Think also of Scripture—of the cross as a substitute for the crosshairs of our lives. "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Regeneration begins with release from death row. ☞

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