

Dateline: February 23, 2011

FALL GUY, PART III FALLING UPWARDS

*What goes up must come down
Spinnin' wheel got to go 'round
Talkin' 'bout your troubles it's a cryin' sin
Ride a painted pony let the spinnin' wheel spin*
Spinning Wheel, Blood, Sweat & Tears, 1969

In the vast span of time it's hard to believe it's only been a few days since the last great pharaoh of Egypt fell from his long-held position of power and prestige. It seems he has also fallen off the radar and the front page of the daily newspaper.

Were it not for the continued curiosity that he'd also fallen into the lap of luxury with his multi-billions in *gineih*, continued interest in the personal fate of a man named Mubarak could soon be relegated to the dustbin of history. If they don't freeze his foreign assets first, perhaps someday he'll end up in one of those *where-are-they-now* human-interest stories.

Now the question that dominates the news from the Middle East is who's next? Spurred on by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, similar protests have erupted in Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Yemen, Iran, and ... *Madison, Wisconsin*.

Speculation abounds. Will Gadhafi's regime be the next to fall? A game of dominoes is being played out on the world stage, but all the pieces aren't necessarily going to fall the same way, or in the same direction.

Pundits and scholars alike use words like "unprecedented" and "truly historic" to describe what's been happening over the last few weeks. Yet, if one were to take a longer view of history than the 24-news

cycle – or even U.S. foreign aid policies propping up less-than-democratic regimes that served our self interests for a few brief decades – there seems to be plenty of precedent for the rise and fall of just a few more totalitarian monarchs, pharaohs, and dictators.

The *flash mob phenom* of Facebook and Twitter facilitating and accelerating the toppling of repressive regimes may be a novelty. But the story of the fall guy is as old as Adam. And he shows up in plenty of places besides the global arena of fallen political empires.

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A quarter century ago, in 1986, the televangelist team of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were on top of the world of conservative/fundamentalist network broadcasting. According to their son, Jay, in his recently published book, [Fall to Grace](#), they'd been peddling a soft version of the prosperity gospel: "Do good and you'll do well – then give something back."

Evidently it worked, at least for the Bakkers. That is, of course, until it didn't. In 1987, Tammy Faye overdosed and entered detox for drug addiction, news of hush money over Jim's earlier affair with a church secretary hit the papers, and the perfect Christian family was indicted and later convicted on multiple counts of fraud and conspiracy, oversubscribing memberships to their family-friendly Heritage USA theme park.

Within days, Jimmy Swaggart declared Bakker was “a cancer in the body of Christ” on Larry King’s CNN talk show. A year later, Swaggart made his own tearful televised confession of his own indiscretions, pleading that the “precious blood of a merciful Lord would wash and cleanse every stain until it is in the seas of God’s forgiveness.”

There is an endless, almost ho-hum succession of such infamous fallen angels of God. Typically regarded and dismissed as little more than hypocrites, buffoons, clowns and charlatans, they become endless fodder for biting parody. Without them, *Saturday Night Live* scripts would only be left with scandal-ridden politicians, Hollywood celebs and sports stars. The Church Lady would have joined the ranks of the unemployed long ago.

But what about the fall guy, whoever he was, in the long list of *what-ever-happen-to-what’s his name?* Here’s one. Released from prison in 1994, Jim Bakkar remarried, adopted five kids, and launched a new television ministry in Branson, Missouri, preaching a different message that may come closer to the mark; this time about restoration, healing and hope.

One might say Jim Bakker was born again. Again. He is walking/talking proof that those prodigals who were once the seeming heir apparent, but ended up as one as good as dead instead, can still be raised to new life. In a word, when it comes to the wretched and disgraced, the love and grace of God knows no bounds, or it isn’t grace.

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Of course this kind of redemption isn’t perfect. Not in this life. Jim still hawks religious trinkets and other merchandise online to finance construction of his Grace Chapel and keep his new television ministry on the air. Reportedly, a \$5,000 gift gets a donor’s name placed on an “Amazing Grace” plaque. Yes, that’s right, amazing.

Meanwhile, his estranged son Jay is promoting his new book, a rambling memoir and scriptural exposition proclaiming how grace – at least a certain understanding of Pauline grace -- changed his own life.

He recounts his own rebellious, “free fallin’” years, as he puts it. It is that common tale of self-destructive, addictive behaviors; then his gradual recovery, and his discovery of what he calls “grace in the shadows.” But it was such a revolutionary experience for him that fourteen years later – and without any formal education or training -- he’s now founder and co-pastor of Revolution Church, NYC.

A modest congregation, of sorts, meets in a bar in Brooklyn. Preaching a message of inclusion to the marginalized, he has clearly left that world of TV preachers who (as writer/preacher Robin Meyers puts it) “slice the world in half with the rhetoric of entitlement.”

But beneath the body piercings, tattoos and punk jeans and leather jacket, you can still see and hear the family resemblance. Grace for Jay hangs on Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross; the same “precious blood” in which plenty of other imperfect, fallen evangelists have plead to be washed and made clean.

That kind of atonement theology (that Jesus’ “perfect” suffering could wholly

compensate for all my imperfect shortcomings) has never been a persuasive argument for me, when it comes to the efficacy of God's grace. Jesus' execution was not divinely preordained *for us*, but was rather a calculated act of human will and political power, wielded by the state and the dominant ecclesiastical hierarchy in his own religious tradition.

That's not to say Jesus' non-violent resistance wasn't subversive, redemptive, transformative, or even revolutionary. On the contrary. Out of an experience of utter disgrace, the redemptive power of God's grace stood as an utter refutation of those *fallible*, fleeting powers and principalities that would pretend to hold sway.

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James, and Jay, and John (that's me) may tread different paths. But whether or not each of us experience such grace the same way is of little consequence, in the end. And along the way -- as I've also suggested previously -- whether we're pushed or trip over ourselves, there's good fortune to be found, after the fall.

If one lives long enough, fallibility is guaranteed. It happens to the rich, the famous, and the infamous. It can happen to the smart and clever, the stupid and careless, do-gooders and evildoers, saints and despots, the righteous and those deemed unclean.

After the fall, it's all about recovery; about the passing away of old things, and the raising up of new things. Furthermore, there is no limit to the number of times one may experience this unconditional, limitless gift.

Long ago, when once I'd turned to coffin building to be sure I grasped this gospel truth, I learned one has to die a few little deaths along the way to know the transformative power of being raised up again. It is something akin to what Richard Rohr calls "falling upward."

A journey into the second half of our own lives awaits us all. Not everybody goes there, even though all of us get older ... Many do not even know there is such a journey. ... It seems that many, if not most, people and institutions remain stymied in the preoccupations of the first half of life. By that I mean that most people's concerns remain those of establishing their personal (or superior) identity, creating various boundary markers for themselves, seeking security, and perhaps linking to what seem like significant people or projects. ... In my opinion, the first half of life's task is no more than finding the starting gate.

Excerpt, Richard Rohr's, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*

The notion of *infallibility* is a snake oil elixir, peddled by those who would guarantee surefire remedies for everything from personal salvation (the worst of religion) to the promise of doing everything necessary so no previous tragedy or disaster will ever happen again. From a faith perspective, it is not only a lie, but an affront to the gospel.

Fall-ability, on the other hand, isn't simply the obvious reality of the human condition, but the unwelcome blessing and precursor of grace.

Blood, Sweat and Tears had it right. What goes up, must come down.

But the reverse is also a possibility, the possibility of faithfully *falling upward*.

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