

## “Nowhere to Hide”

When you're hiding behind the couch you find all kinds of things –  
2 quarters, 1 dime, and 4 pennies;  
The squirt gun that came in the cereal box that you lost 5 years ago  
When things like that still held some fascination;  
The corner section of the letter you ripped up into 1000 pieces  
from the girlfriend telling you she was just wanted to be friends, that it  
wasn't you,  
it was her (anyone ever get one of those?);  
and good grief, what's this? The ball of hair with strands  
from the cat, the dog, and your family.  
So this is where all dad's hair went, you're thinking.

Meanwhile, the knock on the door persists.  
*Hello?* It's still warm, so the front door is wide open,  
Leaving only the screen there.  
The knock again, *Hello?*  
You can hear the voices, two of them, two women,  
Their West Indian accents floating through the fabric on the screen,  
Down the hallway, through the kitchen, and into the back living room  
Where I am hiding behind the couch, 15 years old,  
Home from school on a late September afternoon,  
No one else in the house but me.

Why am I hiding?  
Because when I was walking down the sidewalk toward

My house I could see them walking up the steps  
Of the house two doors down from mine.  
I knew exactly what they wanted,  
And I didn't want to give it to them.  
So I hustled down the sidewalk,  
I sprung up the front steps of my house three-at-a-time,  
Unlocked the door, forgot to close the door behind me,  
Grabbed a snack, and leapt behind the couch.  
This is ridiculous, right? I mean, I'm in my own house.  
I'm safe. I should have nothing to fear.

And so again, we will ask: why am I hiding?  
Because even though I am a mostly confident,  
Mostly self-assured, 6'1 American teenager  
I am scared to death of the conversation  
These women want me to have.  
I hear the soft shuffle of shoes on the granite steps.  
I feel them approaching.  
*Hello? Knock, knock. Anyone home?*  
Behind the couch I'm turning the coins over and over inside  
In my now sweaty hands.  
*Jeez, I'm mumbling to myself, just go away.*  
*What I believe or don't believe isn't your business!*  
*Why should I have to explain myself????*  
*Hello! More knocking.*

If I had more desire, more courage even, I would just stand up

And tell these women how I feel,  
 But then they would see me pop up from behind  
 The couch, and that would give them reason to ask:  
*What are you hiding from? Are you hiding from God?*  
 So I stay there, like the poet says:  
 Elbows at my side,  
 Thinking softly,  
 Breathing shallowly,  
 Disturbing no one,  
 Hiding.

A few minutes pass and when I am sure they have left  
 I climb out from behind the couch  
 And walk to the front door,  
 And there stuck in the crack of the door frame  
 Is a magazine.

*Do you want to get to heaven? It asks.*  
*Then you had better read this!*

Leaving me to wonder then and ever since:  
 why is it that when folks evangelize, a word that means good news,  
 It always seems to come in the form of a threat?

Well, experiences like this were all the push I needed to begin  
 Questioning the wisdom of religion.  
 Maybe something similar has happened to you.  
 You and I know how it is, right?

- An evangelizing duo knock on your door to hard sell you on Jesus

And pretty soon you start feeling wary of all Christians and even Jesus himself.

- A televangelist preacher who rails against ‘those homosexuals’

Is found out to be meeting at the Motel 6 with another man

And pretty soon you start believing that all clergy are hypocrites.

- You are standing in the receiving line at the wake

For someone you love who has died too soon, too fast

and the friend of a friend of a friend says “*it was God’s will; she’s in a better place*” and you think that if there is a God like that then who

needs enemies. No thanks, God, no thanks!

- This week you’re watching with me the news as a

A small band of Muslim radicals storm our embassies in Libya,

Egypt,

Iran, Yemen to protest a hate-filled, Islam-insulting minor film that

without YouTube wouldn’t be distributed wider than a few dark

basements in California,

And you wonder why it is that religion is so often used to incite,

inflame,

Destroy. I mean, doesn’t it seem like the same story just keeps

Repeating itself over and over?

In a world like this one you and I can be forgiven our

Introversion, our hiding when it comes to talking about our faith, our church,

Our beliefs.

Yes, in this age when the religion ‘out there’ bullies us with bad news

And when Sunday morning soccer is the new sacrament

And spirituality is something you do in the privacy of your home

rather than with other people,  
you and I can be forgiven for wanting to hide behind the couch  
keeping our elbows at our side,  
Our voices low,  
Our breath shallow,  
Our steps small.

*“I don’t want to offend,”* we say.

*“I don’t want my friends to think I’m like those ‘other people’,”* we might admit.

*“We’re not a really a church,”* I have heard some of us say about ourselves,  
*“we’re not really religious,”* you have said,  
as if those two words make us dirty by association,  
as if you and I don’t the power to reclaim those words and make them mean something positive.

Now, luckily for me Ginger wasn’t so shy, so inclined to hide.

Its ten years later after the ‘couch incident,’

I’m 25, supposedly an adult, supposedly in charge of my own destiny,

But what do I know?

College taught me how to write a good essay

And what it means to go into debt way over my head

(last loan will be paid off this fall, only 20 years later!),

But it didn’t quite teach me how to know myself -

What made me happy, what made my miserable,

Where my place was in the world, what it meant to work for money,

How little that money mattered when then work you did

Broke off little pieces of my soul,

How to reconcile myself to a world that wasn't quite  
 As fair or as just or as equal as my middle-class and my white skin  
 And my privilege led me to believe.

So what does a twenty-something do who is trying to sort all that out?

How about this....Why not hide?

Not a bad strategy, right?

It worked years before.

For me this hiding led me thousands of miles from home,

And into the Peace Corps.

Over the years I have told of these stories in sermons and

In conversations.

What I have never told you was hard I was running then –

Running away...from responsibility,

From the prospect of getting a job,

From having to answer: *well, Nathan, what are going to do with your life?*

From having to live in my parent's house while set about answering that  
 question,

From wondering what meaning or purpose I could find.

And two years is a long time. Two years in a foreign country

is a big couch to hide behind,

far away from my future which was just like those two women

knocking on the door -

*Hello? It said. Anyone home??*

And me mumbling to myself.

*Jeez; why can't you just go away?*

*Why can't you just leave me alone?*

Do you know how there are some people who seem to sense what we need

Even before we do?

Ever have someone like in your life?

This is how it was with Ginger,

She the 63-year-old volunteer who put her life back in Michigan on pause

To fulfill a life-long dream to be a Peace Corps teacher.

If I was running from my future, she was running toward it.

On the weekends we volunteers would come from across the island

We lived on to gather together on the most beautiful beach you have ever  
seen –

Two miles of white sand, palm trees swaying the wind, clear, cool

Caribbean water.

Your tax dollars are paying for me to be here, I'm thinking

And you're thinking, too?

Shhh, don't tell anyone in Washington.

One Saturday near the middle of those two years, half-way finished,

I'm sitting on my towel, knees up to my chest,

Staring out past the breaking waves,

When I feel a tap on my shoulder. It is Ginger -

Island teacher, and mother, father, therapist, friend to

All of us 20-somethings so far from home.

*"May I sit?"* she says. Of course.

I'm guessing she must have sensed how pensive I was,

Even worried.

I was well past the half-way mark of my tour and  
That old knock of my future on that door of my life –  
*Hello? Anyone home? –*  
Was getting louder again.

What did I have to lose, really?

I may not have been hiding from God,  
But I was hiding from myself.

So as the waves crashed against the sand I let myself go.

I talked of my fears, my uncertainties, the unknowns  
Of the life that was waiting for me.

Ginger listened,

And as she did, as she help opened the door a couple of inches,  
I took yards,

And given yards I took miles,

Letting myself pour to her and to myself in this vast,

Boundless landscape that was ocean and sky.

*“You remind me of my husband when he was your age,”*

She said.

*“Oh yeah. What did he do?”*

And in her easy, open way she says,

*“Oh, he became a Unitarian Universalist minister.”*

And one thing you can say about beaches is that there may

Be sand and water and trees and wind,

But one thing there is not are....can you guess?

There are no couches to hide behind.

Two days later, a Tuesday, I go to my mail cubby at the Peace Corps Office and there in the box is this – (hold up cassette) –

Remember these?

The younger among us may not know what this is, but it's a Cassette, and this how we used to listen to things that were recorded. On the front is a note from Ginger.

It says, "*Nate, here is a sermon my husband gave two Sundays ago. Thought it would speak to some of things you shared on the beach. It was privilege to listen.*"

On the front, this sermon title: "*The Art of Living.*"

I am here because of this sermon, because of Ginger.

Is what she did evangelizing?

Did she threaten me with hell

If I didn't go home and listen to her husband's words right now?

No. But she did share with me some good news,

Which was that there was a place, a religion,

A minister who was asking some of the same questions I was.

And that was such good news, indeed,

And it was what I needed to hear to stop hiding.

Friends,

Just like our poem says,

There is a Housing Shortage when it comes to religion in our communities.

Loud preachers, strident gods, equally strident people who reject these gods, worship and sermons that act as if we still live in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In this shortage we can be forgiven keeping our elbows at our side,

Our breathing shallow,  
Our steps small,  
Our voices low,  
Our message hiding behind the couch.  
But then,  
Being so quiet has its consequences,  
And one of them is that the people who might need us – like I did –  
Will never know we are here.

I, for one, am not willing to pay this price,  
And I hope you that you aren't either.  
Because excuse us for being alive and being liberal religious people,  
But, while we're alive,  
Given inches, why not take yards,  
And given yards, why not take miles,  
And given miles, why not dream of a landscape,  
Unbounded and vast in abandon.  
You too are dreaming the same.  
We can be a religion for our time.

**Closing Hymn:**

**Benediction**

**Choral Benediction**

