

bread for the journey

The Deus Ex Machina

“Tell me how you and God are getting on these days.” I often ask this of our adolescent clients during spirituality sessions.

They know Rosecrance is a church-affiliated agency of the United Methodist Church. They see the cross and candles in the stained glass chapel. Then they meet the chaplain—or “Spiritual Bill”—the name dropped on me after working at Rosecrance for 15 years. They are not dumb. Still, they are wary and on guard when it comes to religious language. Why so guarded?

Most of our kids are somewhat acquainted with “god talk.” They may not know the stories. Adam and Eve? Yes. Cain and Abel? Never heard of them. But most of our clients have been taught that prayer for help to the God of their understanding is important. They know they should be praying for their well-being. Few do. Or, when they do, it is a bailout prayer. It is the little red lever on the wall: “Pull in case of emergency!” Many of them have suffered disappointment with God: “Where was God when my friend died from an overdose?” No answer. No help. No miracle. Disappointment with God makes them wary.

They have learned God is primarily a *Deus ex Machina*.

We know the origin of the Latin phrase, meaning “a god from a machine or a device”—some scaffolding, some magic, or some marvelous other-worldly contraption or contrivance. Greek poets squabbled over the propriety of using the device to resolve an imminent tragedy. Horace was one of those poetic professors who instructed his students to never resort to a god from a machine to resolve a plot “unless a difficulty worthy of a god’s unraveling should happen.”

Many of our kids have read William Golding’s classic, *The Lord of the Flies*, which is a literary version of the *Deus ex Machina*.

Golding employs a passing naval officer to show up on a deserted island just in time to rescue a gang of naughty school boys who were annihilating one another.

We have not totally recovered from our habit of using magical thinking to rescue us from our defects, our brokenness, our diseases, our depravity—and especially our addictions. The grease of both literary and theological genius keeps the old “*deus ex machina*” running smoothly, if not grinding away at our good sense.

How? We keep praying for divine interventions to save us from a messy life. We turn to God as a genie in a bottle. God is not going to inject fossil fuels into the ground so we can burn up still more fuel or scrub the air clean from our carbon dioxide poisoning of the atmosphere. God is not going to jump off a scaffold or spring from a trap door to rescue us from our foibles. We know that.

But we still want it to happen. We hope God will show up to heal us from our diseases. We want God to clean up our messes as a Cosmic Mr. Clean with gleaming pate, toothy smile and muscular physique. And I know as well as you do, only responsible choices, quick wittedness, good common sense, and hard work are going to make the difference in the holy living and work we do on behalf of peace and healing.

The choices we make—moral, amoral or immoral; rational, arational or irrational are up to us. No one will stop us from our stupidity, our gluttony, our lust, our insensitivity and our hostility. No one but us. The devil doesn’t make us practice evil and neglect. And God does not stop it from happening. It’s on us. The Lord may well inspire us—through 1001 ways from David’s psalms to Mozart’s music. But after the reading is over and the concerto is done, we need to do the work.


During one dark and stormy Tuesday, there was a blackout in our neighborhood. I ran for the shelter of our storage room passageway—a shortcut to an outside stairway. I opened the

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door to the storage room and the door shut behind me as I entered. Outer darkness. I immediately became disoriented and dizzy. I hugged the wall, slithered alongside of it and proceeded to get lost in a room with which I was familiar! Five minutes of stumbling and groping. Finally, after a moment of sheer panic and a foxhole prayer to boot, I made it. Afterwards, my wife asked if I had thought to use the light from my smart phone to find my way to the door. Answer: "No, I was not smart enough to do that."

God won't help us out of a dark place or even the dark night of the soul. But a flashlight will. Thoughtful reflection of how much we matter to God and praying to Him might help us through desperate times. But when we pray, we should pray—

not for the *deus ex machina* to drop down out of the sky but pray for the constancy of God's presence and voice.

Recovery at Rosecrance is about getting a tool kit and learning the discipline to use the tools. Holiness, the good life, and a good clean earth come about because we are knee deep into doing the work God called us to do. The job we were hired on to do in Eden is still ours to do. We haven't been fired or retired. It's on us. Imagine—no more addiction. It takes work. 






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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Rosecrance Church Relations Coordinator. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.