

From my memoir, ***For All My Relations***

by Sally Bartolameoli

In the small town of 8,000 there was just one high school and three elementary schools, one of which was Catholic and only four blocks from my home. I went to Catholic school from first through eighth grades and walked to school every day. In the winter, a much longer season than spring or fall, one learns to layer early in life in the upper peninsula of Michigan. Even in below zero weather when it might be snowing outside, I only needed to see the next few steps in front of me to finally arrive at the door of my school. I remember only one day in the 3,000 plus that I walked each day that I actually passed my school and didn't realize until I finally peeked out of the scarf wrapped around my face. I forgot to stop and look and ended a block and a half past my school entrance. Lesson learned.

Since I went to Catholic school, we didn't attend CCD classes like the public school Catholics did and had religion class every day during the

week. I remember being especially troubled at a young age by some of the teachings in religion class and I knew that I would have to find my own resolution to the intellectual dilemma. There was this theme throughout mass attendance and our priest's sermons and the teachings in our religion textbooks and the nuns at the school that was particularly baffling to me. We were told that God loved us so much that he would sacrifice his son, Jesus, for all of our sins. God was everywhere and was watching and caring about every hair on our head with the deepest affection. Then, on the other hand (and sometimes in the same sermon or religion class), we were told that we had to fear God. There were flames and fires of hell and if we were "bad" this hell would break loose. For my seven year old mind, this did not compute and I often wondered about the real nature of God. If God loved me unconditionally it didn't make sense that He was also so vengeful. I did not understand how someone who loved me could also be someone I feared. Still, I was told to fear Him. This was little to reconcile in my young mind compared to Sister Marie Immaculate. She was the one that taught religion every day and gave verbal testimony to the loving

nature of God. At the same time, she reminded us of God's omnipresence and ability to see and know all of our sins. We had better be vigilant. She struck terror in the hearts and minds of children everywhere. If she was an example of the "loving" nature of God, I knew it was appropriate for everyone everywhere to do whatever we could to avoid the wrath that could descend upon us at any time. She had a look that stirred fear within the most lionhearted of us all and this included parents as well.

I lived with this cognitive dissonance for months and one day it came to me. I knew what I had to do. I would find out, once and for all, the true nature of God.

It took me a couple of days to muster the courage to take action. On my walk home from school one day, I knew it would happen that afternoon. I smelled the lilacs a block from my house, appreciating their sweet scent and wondered if it would be my last opportunity to enjoy the blooms. As I rounded the corner, I went straight to our two car garage where a 4' by 6' foot mirror hung on the wall.

As I stood in front of it, I paused to look around. I peeked out the window at my neighbor's home, for, perhaps, the last time. I took a couple deep breaths, closed my eyes, and tightened my fists close to my body to prepare for, what might be a final blow. I took one last inhale and finally yelled, "I HATE YOU GOD!"

The next moment or two seemed like an eternity. I stood with my eyes shut and my body stiff with tension. After thirty seconds or so, I slowly exhaled and relaxed the tightness in my shoulders and fists. I cautiously opened my eyes and gradually looked around in anticipation of what destruction might await. To my relief, nothing had changed. I peeked out the window to see my neighbor's home still standing. I quickly ran in the house to be sure my Aunty Ann was there, waiting as she always was.

I walked back to the garage and stood for another moment in front of the mirror. I wasn't struck down by lightning and no one I loved had been hurt. It was an important day. At that moment I decided that God was indeed a loving God. Even when I disobeyed and was a blasphemer, I wouldn't be struck down nor would I or could I evoke the fires of hell. I still

wasn't sure why I was told to fear God, but it didn't matter to me. I knew His love was stronger than His vengeance and his kindness would always win over his anger. Yes, it was a good day for me, a day I would anchor with the belief that God was kind, understanding and somehow impenetrable by the whims of a child. There was something sturdier and more reliable than just me. This was a great comfort for me as I navigated so much on my own already and even though today I speak of God more in the Feminine and experience this omnipresent Source as benevolent and ever available, it was still a turning point to know She/He was always lovingly at my side, encouraging my rich exploration in the depths of the psyche and destined to share my stories with others.