Withness 1: Who’s Your Nathan?

You Need an Editor

Truth comes as conqueror only to those who have lost the art of receiving it as friend.¹
—Rabindranath Tagore

Someone to Give You the Finger

There is a moment in The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie when Plankton roars, “I’m going to rule the world!”

Towering over him, SpongeBob says, “Good luck with that.”

In that moment SpongeBob SquarePants was Plankton’s “Nathan.”

The name Nathan means “gift.”² Nathan the prophet was a “gift” to King David, a man we would describe today as being of Renaissance interests and Rabelaisian urges. During David’s reign, Nathan provided him with expert counsel on a vast range of issues from architecture to music to dynastic succession.³

But Nathan went beyond just advice for the throne; he spoke directly to the heart of the king. Nathan confronted David about his sexual relationship with “that woman” Bathsheba and had the courage to stick his bony finger in David’s face and say, “You are the man!”⁴ Without Nathan, David would have continued his adulterous, murderous, lecherous behavior and corrupted the Davidic line.

You need a Nathan. When you are living in grand squalor, you need someone to point his or her bony finger in your face and say the words with double meaning: “You The Man.” Yes, “You THE MAN” God wants to use. But also, “You THE MAN/WOMAN” who has stumbled or slumbered into immorality.

Who is not afraid to haul you before the tribunals of truth? Who is that person who can tell you that if you routinely run into more than three jerks a day, it’s probably YOU. YOU Da Jerk! In life, you find fewer scoundrels than jerks, and you’re the biggest one of them all.

Who can tell you you’re not speaking with a Jesus voice? Who can tell you when to turn the cheek less and the hands and feet more?

It’s easy to gloss over this little moment in David’s life: “Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD.”⁵ Did you hear it? “Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD.” Then Leonard, the writer ... then Randy, the dentist ... then Samantha, the physician ... “went in and sat before the LORD.” Someone got David’s attention and convinced him to sit down.

Love’s essence, like a poem’s, shall spring From the not saying everything.⁶
—Cecil Day-Lewis

Who is that person who can get you to come in and “sit before the LORD”? That’s your Nathan. And your Nathan is more than a wagging finger. Or as Eudora Welty might put it, a Nathan is less about pointing a finger than parting a curtain.⁷

Your Nathan is your editor, someone who lifts the veil of your own voice.

From Accountability to Editability

I borrow that metaphor of “editor” from one of my favorite authors, Joe Myers. In his book Organic Community, Joe argues for the concept of “edit-ability” rather than “accountability.” I have never liked the whole “accountability” theme for a couple of reasons, so I am jumping all over Joe’s idea.⁸

First, the world of “accounting” is a foreign territory for someone who never did like math and never could balance a checkbook. Besides, “accounting” concerns focus on the world of numbers and finance, not relationships. My proof-text verse is Paul’s misgivings about the accounting world of chart making and record keeping when he warns that love “keeps no record of wrongs.”⁹

Second, the person who is the first to volunteer to be my “accountability partner” or who promises, “I’ll help keep you accountable,” is the very person I
most want to flee from. These “volunteers” seem to hate not only the sin, but also the sinner (and secretly hate themselves as well, I suspect).

The accountability mentality has given us unscrupulous politics in the church, which is constantly on the lookout for offenses: monitoring others for sins and trespasses. On the liberal side, it’s sins of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, etc. On the conservative side, it’s opposing stem-cell research, picketing the war in Iraq, and anything having anything to do with condom use.

Third, the “accountability team” has not worked well in the past. It has not kept religious leaders from every kind of moral failure, as the spectacular case of Ted Haggard demonstrates. No one had better accountability structures and procedures in place than Haggard. But the problem with “accountability” is that it is too easy to keep double books: one book for your accountability team, and another secret book for yourself.

An Editor’s Heart

Joe Myers illustrates the editability theme with the story of his wife, Sara, handing him back an essay she had edited for him, and all he could see was red. Every page was dripping in blood. As he tried to find one pure white page, she said these words: “Joe, this is fantastic! This is one of the best things I have ever read! This is going to change people’s lives.”

“You’re kidding. You hate it ...”

“No, I love it.”

“But look at all the red. You hate it.”

“Joe, I love it. I just want you to get your ideas out as powerfully as you can. Every time you see red on the page, you should hear me saying to you, “Joe, I love this, I love you, and I want the whole world to read this book.”

When Joe told that story at a mountain advance in Canaan Valley, West Virginia, it made me understand why I had just dedicated an entire book to my editor Ron Lee. Here was someone in my life whose greatest ambition was to help me be the best writer I could be. He labored for hours over my stumblings and mumblings, making sentences less convoluted but without destroying my voice in the process. Whenever we talked on the phone, or met in person, his entire dedication was toward making my voice stronger and helping me speak out of my voice. He often told me what to think about, but never what to think.

Belly Voice versus Heart Voice

Isaiah raged against what he called the “belly-speakers.”13 These were the mediums and spiritists of his day—what we might call ventriloquists. When you’re speaking out of someone else’s voice, you’re speaking from the belly, not the heart. An editor helps you to speak from your own voice, and when you lose your voice, an editor helps you hear it again. When the well starts to run dry, an editor rushes to prime it with fresh water: Wells that go dry quickly become hellholes.

Accountability is designed to prevent you from doing bad. Editability is designed to help you do good. The real question is not “Are you accountable?” but rather “Are you editable?” Do you mind your manuscripts being overhauled by other thumbs? What if the script being “edited” is your life? What if the subject being sculpted is your soul?

Where there is love, there is God.14
—popular medieval saying

Even the best writers in the world need editors. In fact, the more something glitters, the more it is in need of spit and polish. Don’t believe me? Here is someone you might know through his writing. Some have called him one of the greatest writers of this or any time.15 His name is Henry James, and here is what he wrote, unedited, in the Times Literary Supplement on April 2, 1914:

Mrs. Wharton not only owes to her cultivated art of putting it the distinction enjoyed when some ideal of expression has the whole of the case, the case once made its concern, in charge, but might further act for us, were we to follow up her exhibition, as lighting not a little that question of tone, the author’s own intrinsic, as to which we have just seen Mr. Conrad’s late production rather tend to darken counsel.16

If you can make heads or tails of this, you’re a better reader than I am. Or you’re psychic.

What makes the Nathans unique in your life is that they are fundamentally best understood as welcome intruders. They tend to pop in unannounced to take the moral temperature of a particular moment, especially at the most inconvenient and disturbing times. But because you are already in a relationship with them, and authenticity is your brand, their temperature taking is always welcome. In a culture
of increasing transparency, thanks to the Internet and ubiquitous surveillance (the average Londoner is captured on camera over three hundred times a day), you refuse them entrance at your peril.

**A Welcome Intrusion**

Nathan had already given David good advice on a variety of subjects when he dropped in at court that fateful day. In other words, as a trusted adviser, Nathan wasn’t a general nuisance to David. He had access to the king because he was already in a valued relationship with David, one that had contributed significantly to the success of David’s kingship. And even though David didn’t invite Nathan to edit this part of his life, Nathan had a standing invitation to drop by and carry momentum when the script desperately needed a rewrite.

Sometimes God specializes in the bony finger in the face, and sometimes God specializes in the still small voice from behind. But before either the finger or the whisper, there’s always the story. Everyone welcomes a story. Nathan didn’t come to David and say, “Bro, you done wrong.” He came to David and told a story, a story that appeared totally unrelated to the situation and that drew David into the trap.

Every Nathan has a modicum of Machiavelli. Editors know how to spring traps with stories. Nathans don’t tell stories to play games or beat around the bush. They tell stories because story and image are the most infectious transmitters of truth. Nathan’s narrative sounded deep within David long before he felt the sting in its tail.

The gospel story always has a sting in its tail: the sting of truth or, more accurately, the double sting of truth and consequences.

Nathans care as much as you do about finding the right word or putting the right foot in the right place. A Nathan is welcome because this is not an editorial critic with icicles in his or her heart. This is a person who believes in you and wants the best for you, even when he or she shows up at the door with a sword. Who in your life is able to wield what William Blake speaks of as “the spiritual sword that lays open the hidden heart”? A Nathan is not a hooded, anonymous executioner who wields a sword, but a trusted surgeon who heals the heart with a scalpel. Even though the knife is sharp and painful and cuts you deeply, red-drenched is the color of healing and wholeness.

In biblical language, Nathans “speak the truth in love.” Or as Paul put it, if someone is “detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” Did you catch that? “Gentleness.”

Besides, “take care that you yourselves are not tempted.” Some people want to catch you in your sin. Nathan wanted David to catch himself in his sin. A Nathan is not someone who rushes to “tell you the truth” but someone who helps you to “do the truth.”

---

*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.*
—James

---

**Do It!**

This world has a lot of high-octane but low-grade leaders who need special editing. But whatever your octane or grade, we all need a Nathan. No one has ever been closer to God than Moses. But even the divine face didn’t cause the greatest of all prophets to take off his shoes. He had to be told what to do: “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Without a Nathan to give what is often very simple advice, “Do the Word!” we remain oblivious to the obvious. Sometimes God is saying to you, “Do this!” and you need help hearing it. The last words the mother of Jesus speaks in the Gospels are these: “Do whatever he tells you.”

Especially when the word is to go to places of power. Some Nathans speak the truth and “Do the Word!” to political power: for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bishop Oscar Romero. And some Nathans speak the truth and “Do the Word!” to economic power: for example, Gandhi.

Both are often also known as “martyrs.”

---

*We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry [or if we have a moral sense, sanctity].*
—William Butler Yeats

---

**Just So You Know**

It’s not fun being edited. It’s not always fun having a Nathan around. But it’s necessary. What follows is a list of “just so you know” character traits of the editor you need. Knowing them doesn’t always make the process easier; in fact, it may
make it more difficult. But most things worth something are difficult. The only similarity between the words edit and easy is that they both start with the letter e.

A Nathan Will ...

1. Get Under Your Skin

A Nathan helps you get under your skin—ideally without getting under your skin, but often the irritation comes with the intrusion. You see, the problem is never out there; the problem is always in here. Without a Nathan, you might spend your twilight years wondering what you might have become if you hadn’t gotten in the way.

The same thing that stirs our basest motives also inspires our noblest acts. Good and evil cohabit in each one of us in ways we don’t want to admit. That’s why the more you allow God to use you, the more you need a Nathan.

This is exactly what happened in Jesus’ life; not that he had evil in his heart, but that his “Your will be done” stance was a green light for Satan to full-steam-ahead. Right after his highest moment, where he is riding the crest of the wave—his baptism where he accepts his sonship of the Father—Satan immediately enters the scene to tempt him into a traditional ministry of messiahship. The deepest steps on the downward path are when you reach the summits of success.

The word Satan means “accuser” in Hebrew. Part of our “accusing” is to have four horsemen sent our way to knock us off our feet: fear, despair, rage, and guilt.

For some people, the Devil has only one subject of conversation: sex. Of course, the Devil would love for us to think that sex is the only thing evil is all about. The only thing the Devil likes better than this is to be portrayed as an “imp”—a small, trivial being that is more of a joke than a scourge.

The more I’m around people, the more I love my dog.
—T-shirt/bumper sticker

When Paul talks about the “works of the flesh” (sark), he talks about hostility, jealousy, anger, envy, and competitiveness. The “desires” of the flesh are not bad—it’s when our ego wants those desires for selfish purposes that they become “works of the flesh.” We mishandle our souls, and we can do it in a blink of an eye.

2. Ask Questions

Relationships need questions, and questions by definition are intrusive. Questions can comfort (“Is there anything too hard for God?”), questions can challenge (“Adam, where are you?”), and questions can convict (“Peter, do you love me?”).

It is quite possible to accomplish much but never amount to much. When it comes to goodness, we confuse “good” with “good at.” It’s an editor’s job to get you to ask the question: Is God’s name glorified or smeared in my life? We easily bind the spirit of Christ in the fetters of our imagination, our religion, and our systems. An editor helps to let the spirit of Christ break free from our mind-forged manacles.

In a world full of people who never even look you in the eye, a Nathan looks straight through you ... and asks questions like “Sweet, do you think God’s going to ask you one day, ‘How many books did you write?’”

It’s not usually a Nathan’s job to help you find a way out of your problem, or midwife your midlife crisis. I had a friend who, when he turned fifty, came to his wife and said, “Dear, it’s your choice. A Mazda Miata or a mistress.” But a Nathan asks intrusive questions about those ill-fitting parts of our personalities and problems that need fixing. A Nathan also inspires in you the virtue of resilience—the ability to bounce back from adversity.

To fall is human. To get up again is divine.
—T-shirt

3. Tell the Truth

A Nathan helps us see the truth about ourselves. And maybe even speak it. And the truth is, you aren’t as good as you imagine you are; however, you aren’t as bad as you fear you are. You’re probably worse, but that’s another book.

The line in us separating humbug from hero gets thinner and thinner the wiser we get.

It is hard for us to have a correct valuation of our own strengths and best assets. Linus Pauling won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1954. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1962. But he was totally wrong about what he deemed his greatest
discovery and contribution: the cancer-fighting value of vitamin C.

We always know less than we think and, in some sense, speak more falsehood than truth if approximate truth is less a species of truth than a species of falsehood. We all can only come close to "the whole truth" at best. I take perhaps much pleasure in knowing that Augustine changed his mind over time and came to different answers to the same questions. At nearly sixty, Augustine wrote to a friend: Cicero, greatest author of the Roman language, says of someone that "he never uttered a word which he would wish to take back." High praise indeed—but more applicable to a complete moron than to a genuinely wise man.26

Truth telling is a major role of an editor. Not "truth-dumping," which psychiatrist Willard Gaylin warns, "can be every bit as cruel as habitual lying."27 A Nathan finds ways to come and get us and make us—proud, rebellious, impatient, and all—own up to the truth, even when we're in hiding. It's not that Nathan's editorial self haunts you, casting a critical eye over everything you do. Rather, Nathan's editorial eye helps you see the very things you are running from.

The difficult truth can concern little things. Our sins make us look ridiculous more than anything. Who tells you how ridiculous you look walking around with dandruff on your shoulder or a booger in your beard? Christianity quickly becomes Niceaniety, and a Nathan doesn't live on Planet Nice, at least when we're around. You know you've been pricked and prodded by a Nathan when you leave an encounter smarting, but thinking, There are kinder words that could have been said to me, but there aren't truer ones. Nathans practice radical honesty even about the little things.

Or the truth can be about big things. Some of the most frightening words of Scripture occur in one sentence: "But he did not know that the LORD had left him."28

Or sometimes the little things are the big things, like a Nathan telling you which hat to wear. Savonarola, preaching against the excessive pomp and circumstance of worldly popes in the 1400s, was offered a cardinal's hat, which certain Nathans close to him warned was the institution's attempt to silence him. From the pulpit, Savonarola announced his decision: He sought a red hat, he admitted, but one red with a martyr's blood, if need be, not the red hat of papal, worldly glory.

We are tempted to think of a Nathan as the kind of person who likes short skirts on women, but only because it saves on material. But Nathans come in many shapes and sizes, and your spouse often makes your best Nathan. Who else can tell you what sucks, what struck out, what stuck out? Who else can see faster when you have crossed the line from beguiling to bewildering, when your strangeness becomes estrangement? Who will tell you that "it" is annoyingly cloying, or that "it"
appears a trifle cozy, or that "it," despite your enthusiasm, is no great shakes? Who else will tell you that you've just crossed that moving line of "one thought too many"29 or "one oddness too many," as my wife puts it; that your overexcited executions added an extra layer of icing on an already rich and well-decorated cake; that you've gone "too far" and violated that unspoken pact with the general audience (which, I have just been told, I've just done with this paragraph)?

**Tie a Gift to the Saddle**

Everybody needs a Nathan. Even Nathan needs a Nathan.30

Your Nathan may sometimes be a donkey that refuses to move or a whale that ressemblers your relationships, restructures your realities, and regurgitates a purged you up on the shore.

But whatever or whomever your Nathan, tie a gift to the saddle.

The seventeenth-century haiku master Basho was walking around the island of Japan in 1689 and got lost. He asked a farmer for directions, but the farmer said, "It's easier if you just take my horse. He knows the way. When you get to the next town, just let him go and he'll come home."

So Basho let the farmer's horse lead him. Once they arrived safely at the next town, he sent the horse home. But not before tying a gift to the empty saddle.31

I love that image of the riderless horse with a gift tied to its empty saddle.

It's incredibly important to tie a gift to the saddle for all your Withnesses. Relationships dissolve and decay. They are broken off, connections are severed, distances become too great (sometimes physical and other times emotional). We change, and with it our interests and circumstances, our enjoyments and our education are altered. So, too, are there changes in the relationships built on the old interests and circumstances. This is not a matter of our need to "totally reconfigure our network" periodically (to use the language of business). But it is a reflection of our constant reconfiguration and of the impact of that change on our relationships.

No matter how walk-on a role they played, former Withnesses should have a hallowed place in our lives. As much as we would like Cicero to be right—that the end of a relationship should be more like one having been “burned out rather than to have been stamped out”32—many of the 11 relationships will be broken by deceit and betrayal. Even so, we must honor our past and tie a gift to the saddle. We must speak well of every bridge that carries us across.

**The Obligation of Oblation**
You will get lost.... Let me repeat: You will get lost.

We all lose our way. Everyone gets lost for a while.... Anyone reading this not take some charming byways of irrelevance and some dangerous back alleys of irreverence? When I was a teenager, I didn’t sow wild oats. I planted a prairie.

Can you imagine former president Bill Clinton naming one of his children “Kenneth Starr Clinton”?

Do you recall what David named his son? That’s right: Nathan.
And that’s the line through which Jesus came (through Mary’s side).

Naming his son Nathan was David’s way of tying a gift to the saddle, fulfilling the obligation of oblation. When a rewrite happens, and you’ve had a Nathan, tie a gift to the saddle.