

## BILL W. MEETS THE SPANISH ARMADA: SINNERS' AND SAINTS' RETOLD EPIPHANIES FROM A.A. TO CURSILLO

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### ABSTRACT

This article expands our bodies of knowledge about turning points in peoples' lives by drawing upon information from studies of addiction and from the available information about the religious movement called cursillo. A retold epiphany, like a drunk-a-log in Alcoholics Anonymous, represents the recounted conversion story which provides information about a life of abuse or misdirection, the actual turning point or paradigm shift, and evidence which substantiates the reborn person. While retold epiphanies are different from many private and communal disclosures and their environments, all three forms of self-examination are present in the cursillo movement which is directed toward the spiritual re-creation of the participant.

### INTRODUCTION

Current knowledge about conversions, turning points, and epiphanies is potentially redundant if we try to identify all forms of misconduct by such descriptors as alcohol abuse, sins, sexual promiscuity, heresy, and so on. The retold epiphany is introduced here in the realm of the cursillo renewal movement to represent the total range of stories which people in recovery modes tell of their former lives and their new lives. As an autobiographical account the retold epiphany is distinctly different from many secular and sacred private confessions, as well as from other secular and religious communal confessions, because the retold epiphany is a case narrative life history.

The cursillo movement was chosen as the exhibition environment for several reasons. Since the movement has received only modest sociological attention by such authors as Dragostin (1970), Marcoux (1982), and O'Sullivan (1988, 1989, 1997), and just passing reference in many sociology of religion textbooks, there is need to learn more about its activities and goals. Next, while cursillo is oriented toward religious renewal of the self, the movement differs from other client-centered groups because it contains the complementary presence of retold epiphanies, private and sacramental confessions, and communal confessions.

It is within the subjects of changes in the self and deportment adjustments that the interactionist, behavioral, and dissonance paradigms, each broadly defined, are used to address three related topics. First, the emergence and the properties of retold epiphanies are presented for discussion. Second, retold epiphanies are differentiated from private confessions and from communal confessions. Third, all three disclosures are identified as elements of cursillo's retreat-like initiation

period which takes place over an extended weekend. When the tasks of this article are completed the results will be new contributions to our bodies of knowledge about the self in rehabilitation, and a wider understanding about cursillo as a redemptive religious movement (O'Sullivan 1997).

### RETOLDEPIPHANIES: EMERGENCE AND PROPERTIES

Some of our works on addiction and the addicted self contain incidences and portraits of drunk-a-logs or drug-a-logs as the stories of consumption abuse which recovering addicts tell to sundry audience members (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 1976; Denzin 1986; *Narcotics Anonymous* 1984). In some cases the stories are told to specific individuals, and in other cases the formation of psychological groups, adapted from Park and Burgess' (1924) *psychological crowds*, can be applied to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, and cursillo, where like-minded participants gather to present, to hear, and to reinforce the revelatory stories.

The contents of the disclosures include selective details on life before the abuse, the effects of abuse on the actor and on others, and the process of renewal wherein the old self is left behind and is symbolically "dead," turning dissonance into consonance, as is shown in the following statements.

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 1976)

When we discovered that we cannot live with or without drugs, we sought help through N.A. rather than prolong our suffering. The program works a miracle in our lives. We become different people. The steps and

abstinence give us a daily reprieve from our self-imposed life sentences. We become free to live. (*Narcotics Anonymous* 1984)

Even though the drunk-a-logs or the drug-a-logs are descriptive and meaningful for settings of A.A. and N.A., the terms become awkward when they are used as umbrella expressions to include all abuse-to-recovery stories.

Denzin's (1989) later book on symbolic and interpretive interactionism augments the earlier statements concerning the psychological moments or epiphanies in people's lives. A *major* epiphany is a dramatic or a precipitous recognition of the need for change which forever alters the self. The *cumulative* epiphany arises when the person becomes aware of changes which have been occurring over time. A *minor* or an *illuminative* epiphany happens when the person is aware of current tensions, strains, or conflicts which occur at a given point in time. A *relived* epiphany occurs when the person re-enacts, or is continually reminded of the need for, change, as when someone quits smoking time and again.

The contention is made here that this list needs an extension to include a *retold* epiphany which replaces the drunk-a-log and similar tales, wherein the witness (Marcoux 1982; O'Sullivan 1988) willfully tells others the range and sequence of alterations in the self. The retold epiphany thus lets the epiphanist vicariously re-live the episode without repeating it, in order to continue it.

The value of a retold epiphany is twofold. First, as a tale it represents a safety net for the storyteller because it avoids the re-enactment of major, minor, cumulative, or relived epiphanies. Second, the new idiom includes all types drunk-a-logs, lust-a-logs, sex-a-logs, sin-a-logs, and so on, while eliminating adjectival baggage resulting from extensive, inclusive, and tautological investigations into different types of rehabilitation. The contents of the self-revelations fluctuate, but the formats and the purposes of retold epiphanies remain constant.

Retold epiphanies are not provided to deny the scholarship of Denzin, or Fowler (1981), Gilligan (1977), Heirich (1977), Hoffer (1951), Klapp (1969), Lofland (1966), Marcoux (1982), O'Sullivan (1988, 1989, 1995, 1997), Rambo (1987), and Turner and Killian (1987), or such organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, who have all written about feelings toward the self, conversions,

conversion surroundings, and lifestyle recoveries. The retold epiphany is constructed and presented to correspond with existing information on recovery programs, which makes our ability to assess renewal processes easier and more concise.

Even though motivational bases vary, retold epiphanies have virtually identical properties. First, the narrative contains descriptions of life before the abuse and entry into the injurious career with its adjacent effects. Second, the retold epiphany provides details of the turning point or the conversion event in the middle of the story as the bridge between that which is no longer desired or done, and that which is arriving. Third, the retold epiphany, as a public or an open declaration, contains episodes and illustrations of the newly-adopted moralities as partial evidence of the revitalization. Thus, the retold epiphany represents the speaker's ability and desire to use the personal voice of expertise in the process of *symbolic renunciation* (Lambert, Lambert 1964). Since the narrator has decided to escape from an undesirable career, the person atones for wrong-doing by metaphoric release from abuse, leaving the old life behind, continually rededicating the self to new ideals and to a new lifestyle, and maybe assisting or validating others who seek similar lifestyle changes. Sometimes the storytelling occurs in unstructured or informal settings, and sometimes it takes place in pre-planned surroundings, depending on need and availability of interactants.

## RETOLD EPIPHANIES AND OTHER CONFIDENCES

Any retold epiphany, like a drunk-a-log, is inherently autobiographical, self-effacing, and a public inspection of behavior. The recovery story is not taken without uncertainty because the information it contains has often been stoically vaulted deep in the self. Nevertheless, the storyteller makes the revelation because validation of the self reborn is sought from those who would hear the saga in the traditions of social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Homans 1974), expectancy-value theory (Klandermans 1984; O'Sullivan 1997), the looking-glass self (Cooley 1902), and behavioral psychology (Skinner 1972, 1974).

Forgiveness and acceptance are especially extended when the epiphanist prepares the verbal record with appropriate sincerity, contrition, and dramaturgical detail (Denzin 1986; Goffman 1959; O'Sullivan 1989). The

populist sentiments of learning how to "talk the talk" and to "walk the walk" - as acquisition of linguistic and behavior skills - may have instrumental value when the storyteller as seeker (Lofland 1966) strives for recognition in the processes of group membership and potential social status mobility in an organization (O'Sullivan 1989).

Since retold epiphanies are voiced accounts of "death and re-birth," two questions about them include: "How are they related to private religious confession or personal histories recounted in diverse therapy sessions?" and "How are they different from general confessions found in communal religious worship services?" The answers to these questions follow.

### Retold Epiphanies and Private Confessions

A retold epiphany is a public pronouncement of misdirection in a person's life which paves the way for lifestyle modification in alternative or healthier directions. Similar allowances often occur in secluded religious confessions or sacraments of reconciliation wherein the epiphanist tells the minister which sins, deviant behaviors, or variant behaviors have been committed. The confidant, acting as a representative of God or a religious denomination, is then positioned to impose the criteria of forgiveness and reconciliation upon the supplicant.

The conversation is held *sub rosa* because of the intimate details which it may contain. Once the meeting is over the adherent forgets that which has been heard because the issue is now between the epiphanist and God. The account is not supposed to become civic domain unless the storyteller decides to make it so in another venue.

Comparable events arise when an epiphanist is in private counsel with skilled, licensed, therapeutic, legal, or medical practitioners. The mentor is constrained by law and by professional ethics from making the personal log a matter of public concern, whereas the narrator retains the option of keeping the tale private or presenting it openly.

A retold epiphany is also related to stylized forms of confession which are made in congregational worship services. Selected contents from The Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* (1979) are used to compare retold epiphanies with collective acknowledgements in a religious context.

### Retold Epiphanies and Communal Confessions

Sacramental religious denominations such as The Episcopal Church publish their worship services as missals so that attendees can follow the exaltations easily. Because the Christian calendar is divided into thematic seasons, and because there are diverse forms and times of worship, there are many occasions for members of religious congregations or assemblies to confess their sins, their wrongdoings, or their dalliances, all in a cooperative and ecclesiastical setting.

The season of Lent, for example, is intended to be a period of personal sacrifice in preparation for reconciliation during Holy Week, culminating at Easter. During this rehearsal there are two litanies which are used: The first is the Litany of Penitence (*BCP* 1979) which is said on Ash Wednesday, and the second is The Great Litany (*BCP* 1979) which is said at other times during the religious season. In both of these offerings, however, the members of the congregation are to follow the rubrics of worship without declamation, and the sins or the abuses which are included are necessarily general and non-specific. While the priest grants absolution to the congregational body, no one person receives direct and singular attention, and the services are virtually empty of acclamations. Since these two rites are not amenable to retold epiphanies or open disclosures, the litanies take on the appearances of religious ritualism and flattening (Fowler 1981; Merton 1938; O'Sullivan 1995).

The Episcopal Church has other forms of collective confession in such worship services as morning and evening prayer, compline, as well as the eucharist/communion/mass (*BCP* 1979), but the details of personal histories are bypassed. There are virtually no outward signs, scenes, or other evidence of penitence and reception. The civility of privacy is maintained in the congregational assemblage. Still, rote, litanic recitations are not sole domain of organized religions.

Many social scientists as well as members of the laity are well-acquainted with the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, and other new-start programs, whose elements of discourse are used to describe and confess general patterns of abuse. Like the Great Litany, though, the details and listings of offenses are often absent, so the twelve principles seem to be mechanically

reviewed and delivered without intercession, but the speaker reserves the right to make declarations at special meetings of A.A. or N.A., or in counsel with a sponsor or a confessor, as is also the case in sacramental religious denominations.

The work of Hoffer is used, then, to clarify by contrast the differences between private confessions, solemn ceremony, and the essential details of retold epiphanies as public announcements in concessional assemblies. He states that

to confess [sins or abuses] and repent is to slough off one's individual distinctiveness and separateness, and salvation is found by losing oneself in the...oneness of the congregation [of believers and their attendant beliefs]. (Hoffer 1951)

There is traffic of exchange between the narrator and those to whom the tale is offered. The epiphanist wants the approval of the group whose members will validate the beholder as being "OK." Errors in personal judgment and behavioral choices have been made, and there is always room for improvement as the reporter's orations indicate. If the addict's, or the overeater's, or the gambler's, or the sinner's story is told with sufficient contents, details, emotional appeals, and subservience, then the seeker may receive the blessing of those who are present, which subsequently validates the group and its purposes, too.

The retold epiphany may also be given, however, as a guide for others who are in the process of making the personal renewal. Here, the intimate narrative will be offered by someone who is in a recovering mode for the benefit of the novice. The reason for so doing is simple: The seeker needs to know that the journey of resuscitation is not the dominion of one person. The fact that others have "been there, tried that, done that," too, is confirmed in the subsequent statements which are virtually identical.

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (*Alcoholics Anonymous* 1976)

Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of those steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts and to practice these principle in all

our affairs. (*Narcotics Anonymous* 1984)

Such outreach as these two principles endorse illustrate that Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are self-generating. Just as they are dependent on centrifugal and centripetal forces for their maintenance, so is cursillo (O'Sullivan 1997).

### CURSILLO

Cursillo is a redemptive religious movement which began in Spain in the late 1940s after civil and world wars devastated the area. Once a Roman Catholic venture, cursillo now occurs in the Episcopal, Lutheran, and United Methodist denominations. People are attracted to it because they feel it will help them to fill spiritual voids in their lives much like a traditional retreat can do, but with more open communication, sharing of the self, song, communal worship, laughter, crying, semiotics, and reunions.

Elements of the cursillo movement in all of its participating denominations suggest that it is a derivative of the Oxford Movement or the Tractarian Movement which began in the early 1800s at Oxford University. Both movements' historic and contemporary proponents have espoused the beliefs that the church, and its membership, need spiritual revival through devotion, study, prayer, and re-emphasized sacramentalism (Spencer 1965) to keep the church from becoming irrelevant and antiquated, by recruiting and instituting members at all levels of spirituality and involvement. People join the cursillo movement, then, because their own levels of religiosity have waned; because they are concerned about society's anti-religious appeals; because the membership provides a ready-made primary group with which to socialize and hang-out; perhaps because they have been badgered into it; because the church is important to them; and because joining the movement is relatively easy (O'Sullivan 1988, 1989, 1997).

Entry into cursillo occurs in a socialization period which lasts from Thursday night to Sunday evening - a *weekend*. During this period the candidates are led by a team of *cursillistas* who direct small-group discussions, who present the *rollos* or the religious talks, who direct and guide the weekend, who conduct appropriate worship services, and who hear private confessions when they are sought.

As a weekend of personal and religious growth, several forms of revelatory methods

**Figure 1 - The General Confession**

*The Deacon or Celebrant says*

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Silence may be kept.*

*Minster and People*

Most merciful God,  
 We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed  
 by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.  
 We have not loved you with our whole heart;  
 we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
 We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.  
 For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
 have mercy on us and forgive us;  
 that we may delight in your will,  
 and walk in your ways,  
 to the glory of your Name.  
*Amen.*

*Then the Bishop when present, or the Priest, stands and says*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.  
*Amen.*

BCP 1979

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are present, each existing side-by-side. These practices are secluded confessions, corporate confessions, and retold epiphanies.

### **Private and Communal Confessions in Cursillo**

As the cursillo weekend moves through its developmental stages (O'Sullivan 1988) there are casual and programmed times to meet with members of the clergy face-to-face. The unforced sessions may occur anytime, but the ministers, priests, and ordained deacons in attendance are specifically available for private counsel on Saturday night for those who seek a sacramental conversation - a confession.

The host church's communal worship services also contain prescriptions for congregational bodies to confess their sins and to receive absolution. Figure 1 presents an example of the stylized exchange in the general confession of the Episcopal Church's Holy Eucharist Rite II.

The sins which have been admitted are

those which have been committed against God and against one's neighbors. After the social and spiritual misdemeanors have been acknowledged the minister or priest gives absolution and the people are spiritually refreshed. The details of misconduct and forgiveness are not spoken for such is the tradition of the denominations in which cursillos occur.

While private and communal confessions bear similarity to the retold epiphany, neither of them contains the essence of the public narrative. The cursillo weekend contains two significant times and settings when the retold epiphany or the conversion story is unrestricted.

### **Opportunities for Retold Epiphanies in Cursillo**

The first scheduled and treated acquaintance with a retold epiphany comes at the end of the first day when the fifth *rollo* is presented by a member of the laity. The talk is labeled *Piety* and one of its goals is to define the term as a dynamic, divine, dyadic dialogue between

the believer and God. Since this *rollo* sets the tone for more witnessing talks, its other goal is to identify the relationship of piety and spiritualism which exists between the speaker and God.

Because many of the speakers have had epiphanies or psychological moments with God it is common for them to survey the conversion or the renewal. The *rollo* then recounts the liminal life which has been led wherein the speaker admits to having lived in spiritual limbo, or having strayed from the faith, even though the speaker was in a moral dilemma - caught between the ethical appeals of dialectic lifestyles. The *metanoia*, then, is an inherent element of the story, but the retold epiphany indicates that the epiphanist is never really recovered, but is continually recovering, as is the case with all forms of addiction. The anecdote often has a high emotional plain of empathy, and sometimes it has a humorous portion, according to the storyteller's discretion, purpose, and background.

A slight variation on the retold epiphany occurs in *cursillo* at the *clausura* or the closing ceremony on Sunday afternoon. It is at this time that the entire weekend community - candidates, team members, support personnel, sponsors, and others - gather to meet all of the new members and to introduce the team players in their roles. In this debriefing the new *cursillistas* are provided the chance to tell those present how *cursillo* has affected them, so far. Fellow witnesses frequently tell of spiritual barrenness which has now been seeded; and in other cases they talk of rededication to family, to the religion or their denominational affiliations, and to *cursillo*, itself. While the story may told for the first time it can still be called a retold epiphany because it has a counterpart in A.A., for example, when the visitor first says "Hi. I'm [Bob], and I'm an alcoholic."

The timing of the story and the frequency with which the story is told are less important than the fact that the story has been offered. No one in *cursillo*, A.A., N.A., or Promise Keepers openly asks "Now, just how many times have you told your story, and have you told it frequently enough for us to accept you?" Membership in the group and affirmation by its members are accorded unconditionally. Acceptance by others in the day-by-day world and the acceptance by God in the salvific realm are the afferent appeals which attract new members to the group and keep them in it; just as

the desire to become an advocate for the group is the efferent stimulus to become a messenger for the group in order to sustain it (O'Sullivan 1997).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The ability to have any type of epiphany, paradigm shift, *metanoia*, or psychological moment is dependent upon a person's ability to engage in self-reflection. The person studies the present cognitions about the self, the environment, the relationship between the self and the environment, and resultant behaviors, and from such observations evaluations about the self are made. Those ratings are often placed on a bipolar dislike-like scale, and if the person comes to the conclusion that there is something about self which is need of remediation, a dissonance which can be seen in self-abusive or self-destructive behavior, then change in the self is possible, but not inevitable.

Bem (1967) thus seems to be correct when he states that we are capable of self-attribution in the same way that we assign meanings to others. This social-psychological viewpoint is consistent with addiction-recovery programs which talk about personal inventories wherein the addict, or a religiously wayward person, takes stock of a lifestyle and determines that some habits can be unhealthy to the self and to others. However, the adage "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make [him] drink it" also "plays in Peoria." No one except the actor can determine whether, or when, to drink the water, so to speak; but, sometimes help is needed in order to make the transition from a "self dislike" to "self like." Such programs as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotic Anonymous, Weight Watchers, or *cursillo* for that matter, are available for those who need assistance making the change. The programs, though, are just tools to be used because no program *per se*, and no other person *per se*, can facilitate the renewal until the actor is ready to do so.

One of the elements of such programs is the encouraged willingness of the seeker to share the inventory of self-attribution. The obvious benefit of such storytelling is that it allows the person to openly admit that a problem exists because renewal will not occur until then. The sharing, though, also has the benefit of creating a sense of openness, trust, and commitment to group; just as the retold epiphany serves as a directional guidepost for others who are trying to create consonance

from dissonance. It was from observations of addictive settings and the cursillo movement that the retold epiphany was born as a shared transition experience.

A retold epiphany is a confidence revealed about the self to friendly or empathetic audiences. The topic is change in the actor or modification of behavior based on the shift from a harmful lifestyle to a manner of living which is more benevolent. Retold epiphanies represent the ability of people to share their autobiographies and to treat themselves as subjects rather than as objects.

Unlike other forms of self-revelation, though, retold epiphanies are offered as public proclamations of judgment error to rebuild the self and to seek forgiveness from others. When the retold epiphanies are offered in cursillo the renewal stories can produce the added benefit of hallowed redemption.

Regardless of where it is told, and regardless of its contents, the essence of the retold epiphany is contained in the inscription to my copy of *Narcotics Anonymous* which a friend gave me. He wrote: "I have to get back to the past is past, and recovery is my responsibility."

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