

“A Letter to Curtis”
By Mike Varley

Curtis,

Greetings from Austin, Texas. My name is Mike; I live with your Aunt Jen in a housing co-op called Sasona. She asked if everyone in the house could donate some toiletries to her nephew in Afghanistan and maybe some time to write a letter. Seeing as my only employment right now is writing, there was really no excuse for me *not* to sit down and write a letter.

Your Aunt has told me a lot about you – about your life, your service to the country, etc. First off, congratulations on receiving the Purple Heart. Maybe ‘congratulations’ isn’t the proper word, but as a civilian I don’t feel I’m in any position to rightly commend you. Either way, it’s a truly admirable distinction. The story your Aunt told me was that you held up a table top to prevent some soldiers from getting hit with bomb shrapnel and two fingers were exposed. That’s some remarkably fast thinking right there, straight out of an action movie. I wonder if I’d have enough sense to react the same way.

She said that as a result of the blast, you have no feeling in the exposed fingers. Is that true? I thought about that for a long time after she told me. Even still, I can’t imagine that feeling. To have a part of your body you can see and touch and operate yet it sends you no feedback. They must have seemed alien to you at first. It can’t make your job as a medic any easier. Like if you’re reaching in a supply kit, can you distinguish different objects by touch anymore? If you’re treating someone while doing something else at the same time, do you have to look at your hands periodically to make sure they’re doing what you want? Maybe it’s not as bad as I imagine it. There are certainly worse injuries to have. Still, I can’t picture what it’s like to have five working fingers and three feeling fingers.

Jen said you’re twenty-three. I’m twenty-three, too. It also came up in conversation that both your parents are divorced and remarried. So are mine. It even turns out our fathers did pretty much the same thing: your dad moved north from Texas to Maryland, while my dad moved south from New York to North Carolina. I was thinking about this a couple of days later and out of curiosity I asked when your dad had moved. Jen said he moved when she was twelve, or seventeen years ago. We were the same age when our fathers moved away.

I’ve always found it really easy to imagine myself in other people’s shoes. For instance, there’s this girl that Jen and I live with at the co-op named Steph. Steph was born February 7th, 1984 and I was born Feb. 6th, 1984. I know that doesn’t sound all that impressive, but for some reason I find it intriguing. That we were put here on this Earth less than twenty-four hours apart, she in Guatemala, me in Brooklyn, and our paths wound and turned until they ended up here, in Austin, Texas, at the co-op, fifty feet down the hall from each other. Nearly the same amount of time on this Earth, and, for a little while at least, our vastly different paths have led us to the same destination.

It’s not the same for sure, but I get a similar feeling with you, Curtis. Here we are – twenty-three, male, products of a four parent upbringing, our fathers far away by the age of six, hitting the prime of our adulthood with our country caught up in conflicts that will come to define how the United States chooses to use its superpower status. And where have our paths led us? I’m out on a patio in Austin eating a giant chocolate chip cookie while you’re in the unreachable wilds of Afghanistan treating soldiers in the midst of combat. With two unfeeling fingers.

I can’t say you don’t make me feel like a child. It’s doubly embarrassing that I was eating the cookie at the time of this realization. But I don’t think it’s your involvement in combat that makes me feel childish in comparison. It’s your involvement in a *war*, if that makes any sense. Combat happens everywhere: playgrounds and pool halls, side streets and swap meets. War is different. War means ideology. You’re not stumbling into a random

knife fight, you're going to battle with a cause you're willing to die for.

I'd really love to know your motivations for fighting one day if you get the chance to write back. From what your aunt tells me about you, your intentions seem to be nothing but the purest. For starters, defense of country, both its citizens and its values. She also told me how your service will help you fund your education. That's also a really well intentioned pursuit, though the idea that there are probably men and women over there fighting solely for access to education is an unsettling thought.

What I appreciated the most about your intentions as relayed to me by your Aunt was your desire to help. She stressed it a couple of times that you really thought you could make a difference in the lives of the people of Afghanistan. I find that to be the most admirable of your motivations. It's one thing to force your will on a country in the interests of national defense. It's quite another to commit the immense effort necessary to help that same war torn country find its way. Much can be said about economic plans and infrastructure building, but the effort starts with you, the soldier: ambassador of America's values. I hope, with your efforts and the efforts of soldiers like you, a middle ground can be found between our values and the values of the Afghan people, the end result being a strong, independent Afghanistan.

Jen was telling me you're a very religious person. She said you belonged to a Protestant church, though she wasn't sure what denomination exactly. I myself grew up a Papist. 12 Years Catholic school, a confirmation name (Xavier), Church every Sunday, and so on. I still identify as a Catholic in some respects, but in practice I'm lacking. It's hard to be religious these days, and I'm not just talking about all the temptations around us. I'm thinking more about the flack one can take for believing in God at all. Maybe it's just the people I'm friends with or the websites I visit online (especially online), but there seems to be a weird type

of prejudice developing against those that believe in God these days.

In our society, it's all about logic: how everything observable in this world has a tangible, physical explanation that can be traced all the way back to creation if necessary. If we don't have an answer for something, the common response is no longer "It's God's work" but rather "We haven't found the answer yet." It's science vs. religion, and science seems to have the more ordered, more rational argument for the story of the universe. Because of this, religious people are looked on as ignorant and even mocked in our society by those that claim science contains the true answers to life's important questions. These are the same people that generally consider themselves progressive when it comes to issues of race and gender.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not claiming things like evolution are made up. But ultimately I know two things. First, for all the complex rational arguments constructed through science, there's still the issue of the uncaused cause. What caused the first spark that started the universe? Ultimately there's a leap of faith involved even for the science minded. So if there's a leap of faith in either case, why be so closed minded? Why so violently reject the idea that perhaps not everything has a physical cause? It seems like most of these people are throwing the baby out with the bathwater, the bathwater being the terrible things that are done in the name of God, and the baby being human spirituality.

Two: I just *know* there's more. I know that's an illogical answer, but the God question is at its heart illogical, so why not? For example, take writing, my chosen life path. When I write something really good – not just well-constructed or really witty but truly inspired – something clicks and I *know* it's good. It doesn't happen often. There's a remarkable surge of pleasure at knowing it's right. And never in the middle of that indescribable certainty and euphoria do I think to myself, "Man, my endorphins are racing!" That's an insult to the moment. It's moments like that that let you know there's something larger. I'm not even making the claim that God is behind those types of feelings, as you might.

I'm just saying there's more to that feeling and more to humans than biological function alone.

Is it hard to keep your faith while involved in a war? The whole concept of war is an affront to the sacredness of life central to Christianity. Add to that the corruption and the poverty and it really must be trying. And yet perhaps in those conditions it can be easier to see God, too. I imagine the smallest gestures of kindness, to give a bit of yourself to another, can take on a new impact when you're living in a place where looking out for yourself is a full time job. I value the conveniences a country as secure as ours can provide, but sometimes I mourn the disconnect such conveniences can cause with our fellow man.

Jen thought a good idea for the letter would be to tell you about some pop culture current events. I'm not much for following that stuff, so all that really comes to mind is the whole Britney Spears going crazy thing. Somehow, I bet news like that has a way of making it to even the remotest corners of Afghanistan, but if not, let me fill you in on what happened.

So Britney Spears has gone insane. It all started maybe a month ago or so. Britney, dyed black hair and flanked by Paparazzi, went to some hair salon in the middle of the night and shaved her head bald. As she left the salon, the photographers and video crew pressed her for a reason as to why she did it. Britney replied, "You did this to me."

So for a couple of days this was front page news and everyone saw the pictures, the video, the ugly replacement wig and all that. Most of the websites I visit on the Internet were arguing whether or not she looked hot with a shaved head, using Natalie Portman's performance in *V for Vendetta* as the gold standard. At this point it was only a bit little weird. No real long-term damage to Britney's career, just conversation around the water cooler.

Things started to get a little weirder. The next day Britney claimed she shaved her head because of lice and not depression, which really killed any sexy talk right away. A couple days later she checked herself into rehab, which I guess has become the get

out of jail free card for celebrities. You could crash your SUV into the puppy and kitten store high on smack the day the orphanage was visiting and *still* get away with it so long as you went right to rehab. Then, not 24 hours later, she checked herself *out* of rehab like she just went in for an oil change or something. Now the public doesn't tolerate that. We need to see at least pretend remorse from our celebrities. We're starting to get into career threatening territory here.

So Kevin Federline, AKA K-Fed, AKA Britney Spears' ex-husband, AKA the least respected musician of all time, came forward to say he wanted custody of their children. Well Britney goes over to have a talk with K-Fed, and I guess it must not have turned out too well. More photos are released, this time showing Britney in some sort of jumpsuit, attacking a photographer's car with an umbrella and cracking it in half. Not one of those 5 dollar, 7-11 umbrellas, either. I'm talkin' one of those big, three-foot long umbrellas with the metal top and the hooked wooden handle. She looked like some mafia henchman from a Martin Scorsese movie, and I don't think that's the look female pop stars typically aim for. I've included some photographs of Britney just to prove that I'm serious.

(you can see the pictures at mikevarley.com)

So after that episode Britney goes back to rehab, just *three days* after checking out. Her check in day just happened to coincide with the day of the custody hearing, but I'm sure that was just a coincidence. Then, the ultimate: reports that Britney tried to commit suicide by hanging herself with a bed sheet, yelling "I am the anti-Christ" with '666' written on her forehead. I think that one was later proven false, but the very idea that that report seemed perfectly reasonable to me when I read it goes to show you how far we've come from that no so innocent girl in the Catholic school uniform.

I can't help but feel a little sad for the her. Groomed for this life since she was a child, put on a pedestal to be viewed by

the public at their whim, then mocked and tossed aside when she finally cracks. Our society treats celebrities like a child with a jar of fireflies. We put our eye up against the glass, marvel at the pretty lights, and dump the dead bodies out on the lawn come morning. But maybe that analogy isn't fully complete, because it doesn't account for the sick joy some people take in seeing celebrities fail. Divorces, drug relapses, eating disorders. Why are these events, treated as sad and personal in normal life, considered check-out material for every grocery store line in the country once it happens to a celebrity? I guess we must think because they're rich they're immune to suffering. That doesn't seem very Christian to me.

Having to write this letter made me realize I knew very little about the situation in Afghanistan compared to the Iraq situation. I knew the Taliban was deposed and we had missed our chance to catch Bin Laden, but that's about it. But after reading about the impenetrable tribal areas, Pakistan's ties with the Taliban and the real possibility of a Taliban takeover following U.S. withdrawal, I realized how little I had known all this time. Yet what caught me most off guard was the Taliban's treatment of women. Again, I had a vague idea of the Taliban's fundamentalist policy regarding women, but I had no idea of the extent. Women are not allowed to have jobs or leave the house without a male relative. Women are subject to public floggings and execution for violation of the Taliban law. Women are not to be educated past the age of eight, and before that only the Qur'an. That one really sickened me. The idea of thousands of bright little girls kept dumb and submissive. It's easy to claim women are inferior to men when you refuse them a level playing field.

It's a true catch-22 over there. I don't believe in long-term occupation, but unless we get more cooperation from Pakistan in breaking up the Taliban's tribal area strongholds, all American effort could be wiped out not a year after we leave. The situation isn't all that different 500 miles away: more unforeseen problems

and tenuous stability. What questions do wars really settle other than who's stronger?

But anyways, enough of that. I contributed some toiletries for the care package. I hope you don't mind using Herbal Essences shampoo; it was the only travel size I could find. I figure you'll be the sweetest smelling soldier this side of Kabul. There were plenty of travel-sized deodorants, but I went with Right Guard. I have a certain brand loyalty to it.

Let me conclude by saying thank you for your service to the country. Even though I oppose the wars and war in general, I recognize that without people like you defending the country, I might not be allowed to have those opinions. Be safe. Get home soon.

Regards,
Mike Varley