

PROLOGUE

"You don't have to leave your room. Just sit at your table and listen. Do not even listen; simply wait. Do not even wait; remain still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you unasked. It has no choice. It will roll in ecstasy at your feet."

-- Franz Kafka

It was Feb. 9, 1964, and a rock and roll band from the unlikely place of Liverpool, England called The Beatles made an appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Like every other young person in the country I was spellbound. It was the most exciting thing I had ever seen on television. I loved music and had grown up listening to the founding fathers of rock and roll - Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Little Richard. But they were all older than me, larger-than-life personalities that I never thought of as role models. The Beatles were different. The Beatles were four kids my age playing and singing their own songs. If they could do it that meant it could be done. Then why couldn't I do it? It was almost an epiphany. I was a sophomore in college and suddenly I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a musician and play in a rock and roll band. My father was quick to point out all the difficulties I would have and the dangers I would face. But how difficult could it be? So what if I couldn't play an instrument and didn't know anyone else who did? So what if I couldn't afford to buy a guitar? I had a vision of something big and in that vision all those details had been taken care of. I saw myself playing the bass guitar. I saw myself driving a Jaguar. I even saw myself on the Ed Sullivan show and hanging out with The Beatles. And guess what. It all happened.

Right away I started noticing little things that convinced me it was meant to happen. Three months after their appearance on Ed Sullivan I read with great delight that The Beatles were coming to Los Angeles to play at the Hollywood Bowl. I called the box office to buy tickets but it was already sold out, and the concert was still six months away. I couldn't take a chance on missing them. Right away an idea came to me. It would mean having to work the whole summer but I would be there the night of the concert. I would apply for a job as an usher at the Hollywood Bowl. I turned in an application but never heard back from them, and the summer season started without me. The Beatles were coming and I wasn't going to see them. I moped around for several weeks before I was able to let it go. But I finally did let it go. Then on Aug. 1 I got a letter in the mail. "Because of the need for increased security the night of The Beatles' concert you have been added to the list of ushers at the Hollywood Bowl. Please report at 3 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 23, to receive your assignment." This was unbelievable! It happened right after I gave up the anguish of it *not* happening.

The Hollywood Bowl is a natural outdoor theatre carved out of a mountain, and as a temporary helper I expected to be somewhere up in the treetops. Instead, in a stroke of incalculable luck I was assigned a section right in front of the stage. In a theatre that seats 18,000 I was in the front row. How lucky could I be? But is that really what it was? Was I just an extremely lucky person? Or was it a sign from somewhere meant to

encourage me? In any event, I was going to see The Beatles in a concert I thought I was going to miss, and be paid for it! I didn't even have to work the whole summer to make it happen.

The performance exceeded all my expectations. I was close enough to see George Harrison's fingers move on his guitar and the joy on the faces of John and Paul as the girls screamed their love and adoration. I made mental pictures of everything. When it ended my ears were ringing and I was emotionally drained, but I came away full of inspiration. I was convinced I had made the right decision about a career in music. I came home that night and started drawing pictures of how my band would look onstage, where we would stand, and what instruments we would play creating in my mind what I knew would someday become a reality. Oh yeah, the instruments. How could I possibly get the instruments? The very next day after The Beatles' concert I was on my way to a school orientation and had an auto accident. I was stopped at a red light and a car ran into me from behind. No one was injured but a few weeks later my insurance company surprised me with a check for \$1,100. It was enough to have my car repaired. But in 1964 it was also enough to buy two guitars, a set of drums and a bass. I knew I would be driving a Jaguar someday so I bought the instruments and taught myself how to play the bass.

I started a band called The Leaves and in two years we had the #1 record in California and appeared at the same Hollywood Bowl where I saw The Beatles.

In 1967 I became the bass player for The Turtles and we had the #1 record in the country. On May 14 of that year we were the musical guests on the Ed Sullivan show. The night was even more special because my dad was in New York and I had gotten him front row seats for the show. He idolized Ed Sullivan. When we were children it was my dad who gathered the family every Sunday night to watch the Ed Sullivan Show. It was also my dad who warned me about the seedy nature of show business and begged me to stay away from music. Now here he was in the Ed Sullivan Theatre watching his hero introduce his son's band. "Now for everyone watching all over the country, here is a group of youngsters playing their big hit, '*Happy Together*.' Here are The Turtles!" It was three minutes of the greatest personal affirmation a young person could ask for. Not because hundreds of thousands of people were watching us, and not because Ed called us over at the end for the handshake that signaled he was happy with us. More lasting than all of that is the memory I have of my dad smiling at me in the glow of the stage footlights.

She'd Rather Be With Me was The Turtles' next record and it became #1 in Europe that same year. We were in London for the beginning of a three week tour, shopping on Carnaby Street, dining with Jimi Hendrix and Roman Polanski, and playing in some of London's hippest nightclubs. One night after our final song at The

Speakeasy our road manager told us there were some special guests who wanted to meet us. We followed him through the darkened rooms and past the noisy crowd 'til we came to the back of the club. There were a few stairs to climb and a door that said *Private*. We knocked, the door swung open and I was standing face to face with Paul McCartney. It was The Beatles! Quickly my eyes surveyed the room. Ringo was raising a glass to salute us. John Lennon was sitting between two girls hunched over a table. Several bottles of whiskey sat on a bar along with plates of food. After the introductions Paul made room for me on the couch and I sat down next to him. I couldn't have been more star-struck. Immediately I took the opportunity to gush to him about how The Beatles had been the inspiration for our music, and for our careers - and for our lives. He wasn't impressed by any of it. He wanted me to show him the chords for *She'd Rather Be With Me*. What a thrill it was to know he was such a regular guy! Lennon was staring into a candle that looked like it was going to burn his face and didn't say much. Ringo was trading tips with our drummer Johnny Barbata. George wasn't there and I was sorry about that, but what an incredible time I had that night – a California boy in the presence of his gods. It was just three short years since I had first seen The Beatles. Now they had come to see me.

My father heard all of these stories and more that I will tell. Many of them brought him joy and satisfaction, like receiving our first gold record or our command performance at The White House. But many others alarmed him and reminded him why he had warned me about the music business in the first place, like the crooked promoters, the lawsuits, the drug busts, and the concert fire in Montreux, Switzerland that almost took our lives. Thankfully I left the music business in 1973 and dad lived happily ever after. From then on his favorite story was the one about how I got to be Film Director of the New York Jets Football Club because the Head Coach heard I was from Hollywood. Dad was just happy to know I finally found the security of a better life.

A better life was what he was seeking for himself when he emigrated from Holland in the early years of the 20th century. It was tough for a young man in America in those days. He landed in New York where he thought a government job was waiting, then had to keep going all the way to California when he heard they were hiring men to pick oranges. Maybe that's why he always told me, "Life isn't just a bowl of cherries." The funny thing is, the life of Jim Pons turned out to be nothing *but* a bowl of cherries.

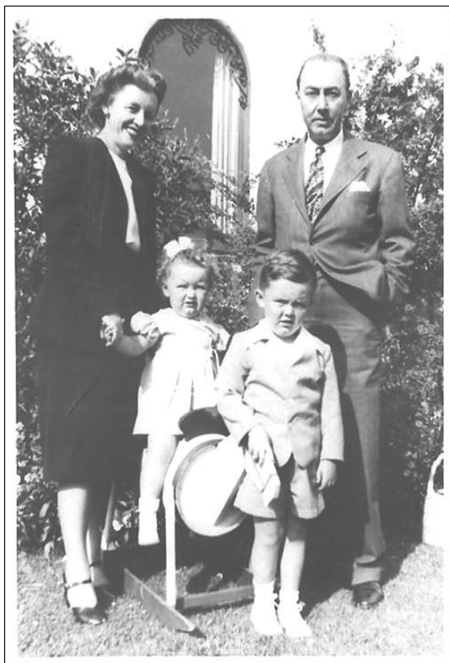


CALIFORNIA

The Catholic Years

"In the beginning man created God in his own image. What else could he do?"
- Eckhart Tolle

I was born into a big Irish Catholic family where vocations like the priesthood were encouraged. It was Santa Monica, California in 1943 and church was the center of our lives. When I was 5 years old we moved to the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley and life became a *Father Knows Best* TV Show. Dad worked every day and mom stayed home cleaning house and cooking meals which we always ate together around the



The Pons family in Santa Monica, CA - 1945

dinner table. I was exposed to many different kinds of music in those early years. Dad played the piano and loved Rodgers and Hammerstein so albums of their beautiful music and great songwriting were always honored in our family. Mom loved old-time country music and liked to sing the songs of Jimmie Rodgers and The Sons of the Pioneers. Those too found a special place in my heart. After church on Sundays, aunts, uncles, and cousins would come for family Bar-B-Qs that would go until late in the evening when everyone would stand around the piano and sing *Sweet Adeline*. That's where I developed a love of close harmony singing. And did I mention church? In a big Irish Catholic family like my mom's there was always church. Mom was a woman of great faith who always prayed for her family, mostly for the conversion of my dad who was agnostic. He said he believed in God, just not enough to be a Catholic.

Although he chose not to make that commitment until after she died he did agree to raise my sister and me in the faith. Both of us embraced it and I went to Mass at St. Ferdinand's almost every day from 1952 to 1957. When I became head altar boy Mom thought it might be the first step on my way to the priesthood. She asked me to pray about it and I did. I had friends who planned on entering the seminary and I envied them for their certainty, but I never felt sure it was my calling. Still I loved attending Mass at St. Ferdinand's. It always felt like a very holy place. My belief in God was cemented there in my earliest years.



Religion

I was in grammar school during the height of the Cold War and was taught to hide under my desk in case we were attacked by the Russians. We were told the Communists would brainwash us if they ever captured us and the thought of that must have traumatized me. Ever since the third grade I have been careful to watch my thoughts and not believe everything I think. I became fascinated by the way my mind works and determined to find the limit of its capabilities. I remember wondering about things like the *real* me. Who was I? I had to be something more than my mind. If I was my mind then who was “I” that was observing it? The Communists never got me but the question has fascinated me for a lifetime.

Getting to know God became a passion of mine that has also lasted a lifetime. It wasn't always easy. I got straight A's all though school at St. Ferdinand's and still had no idea what I really believed about God or Jesus, just what I needed to be able to tell the nuns. Even as a kid I had many questions. They were simple ones at first and it troubled me that people of faith couldn't answer them.

- 'Why did God create Satan?'
- 'If God is all powerful, what can the devil do to me?'
- 'How can God blame me for being the way he made me?'

And they all led to the big one, 'Does God love me or does he think I'm a sinner?'



Head altar boy serving mass at St. Ferdinand's - 1957

I never got answers to these questions. Instead I was told there are mysteries of the faith that we won't understand until we get to heaven. There were 15 mysteries in those days: five Joyful Ones, five Sorrowful ones and five Glorious Ones. The nuns said they couldn't be explained. I just had to memorize them. Sr. Antonia Mary said it would strengthen my faith. I remember she always used to pray that she would go to a place called Purgatory when she died. I looked it up but couldn't find Purgatory in the Bible. When I asked her where it was she said, "You don't have to know everything in the Bible. All you have to know is God wrote it." But I did want to know what was in the Bible. And I wanted answers to my questions. Father Gottenbaus

was my first Religion teacher. One day I asked him if I had to believe in heaven with mansions on streets of gold in order to become a priest, because I didn't. He said those were symbols of heaven that didn't need to be taken literally. That made sense. But how do I know when the Bible *does* need to be taken literally? Did Jesus literally raise himself from the dead? Did his body literally go up into the sky when he went to heaven? If so is it still traveling in space? Father Gottenbaus had an answer for that too and it sounded so good I wrote it down. "It wasn't a question of miles; it was the triumph over his trials." I never asked him what it meant and that was probably a good thing. I don't think Father Gottenbaus knew himself.

I've been told that I hold a grudge against the Church because of things like these that I was taught to believe as a child. I admit for a long time I was looking for someone to blame, especially for one frightening incident that happened to me in the fourth grade. I was eating lunch on the playground and had just taken a bite out of my sandwich when I looked up and saw the dark figure of Sister St. Lawrence hovering over me. In a harsh voice that everyone could hear, she shouted at me, "What is that you're eating?" I told her it was a ham and cheese sandwich that my mom had made. She was appalled; I can still see the way her mouth fell open.

"Don't you know this is Friday?" she shrieked. "And you're eating meat? Haven't you been taught that that's a mortal sin?"

Her voice got even louder. "Don't you know what an offense that is to your Heavenly Father?"

I was mortified; I *did* know what an offense it was to my heavenly father. I told her I was sorry. I had forgotten it was Friday, and so had my mom. I immediately crushed the rest of the sandwich and stuffed it back into my lunch box, but Sister St. Lawrence wasn't finished. Back in class she spoke to me again, this time quietly and very seriously.

"I hope you know what it means to have committed a mortal sin. You better pray that you don't die in your sleep tonight. If you do you will go straight to hell and be there for the rest of eternity."

I couldn't have been more terrified. My first mortal sin. I knew Father O'Connor would be hearing confessions in the morning. I woke every few minutes that night to check the clock and thank God I was still alive. The next morning I was first in line at the confessional. Father O'Connor prescribed five *Our Fathers* and five *Hail Marys* for my penance and I immediately felt better. I knew I was going to be OK. It was like the weight of the world had been lifted off me. I thanked God and prayed with great sincerity that he would never let me make that kind of mistake again. He never did.

Some years later, though, I read that the Pope had changed the law. Now it was OK to eat meat on Friday. I felt bad for anyone who had died after eating a ham sandwich when it was a sin. They must have gone straight to hell for all of eternity. I never saw Sister St. Lawrence after the fourth grade so she could never explain it to

me. I couldn't speak to the Pope either, so I never found out how the Church could have been so wrong in its understanding of God and his requirements. I finally had to talk to God about it. That's when I discovered that no one was to blame. Because no one was really wrong, just not able to see the truth as it was later revealed. I have forgiven Sister St. Lawrence. She really believed what she was telling me. But it took a lifetime for me to get over the fear of God that nightmare implanted in me.

In the Eighth Grade I was elected Class Valedictorian and had to deliver the commencement speech at our graduation. I had written it out and practiced it with my mom, but was still nervous when it was my turn to speak. I found out how difficult it was to look at the audience and think about my notes. Suddenly, I lost my place in the speech; I had missed a whole line. I looked at the audience and there was an uncomfortable pause. Then from somewhere a calm feeling came over me and I heard words coming out of my mouth. And they weren't bad. In fact they were better than what I had written. I continued with confidence and never did look back at my notes. Somehow I got through without them and Mom said it was a great speech. My aunt Catherine said I was born to be an orator. I was happy for them, but I was more interested in where those words had come from. Mom said it was Jesus.



Sex in the '50s

I had other interests in those days besides religion. It was a time radio stations like KFWB and KRLA appeared in Los Angeles and people called disc jockeys started playing music called rock and roll. It was a passionate and dangerous sounding kind of music and it awakened in me something I had never felt before. My parents gave me a transistor radio and every night I would put it under my pillow and listen to Elvis Presley and Fats Domino until the batteries died.

We lived in a new neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley and in those days the roads weren't paved yet. I had to cross a dirt road and climb a fence on the other side to visit my friend George. One day I noticed some paper in the middle of the road. It looked like part of a magazine. As I got closer it began to come into focus. I couldn't believe what it was I was seeing. It was a picture of naked women playing volleyball! Someone had discarded the remnants of a nudist magazine in the street right in front of my house. Most of the pages were torn but the title on the front was intact, *Au Naturale*. Never in my life had I seen anything so exciting. Never in my wildest dreams could I have known what it would lead to. I've always wondered what purpose it served God to allow that magazine to be in that place at that time, just when I would be crossing the road. A few days later I saw something else that rocked my world. I was vacuuming the

floor in my parents' bedroom and found a box of *Playboy* magazines under my dad's nightstand. At the age of 10 an enticing lure was dangling in front of me and the hook was set.

To his credit, dad did make a brave attempt to tell me the "facts of life" at the appropriate age. We were on our way to the store when he reached over the bench seat of our 1952 Dodge Coronet and pulled me to his side. Cautiously he told me we needed to talk about the birds and the bees. I was shocked when I learned what he meant, not sure I was hearing him correctly. Maybe I was just nervous because he seemed uncomfortable about it. That made me uncomfortable about it too, and I've probably been uncomfortable about it ever since. He also told me I could come to him with any questions I had about sex, but I never did, come with any questions, that is. I had plenty of them. Like what were those magazines under his nightstand? And where could I find a nudist colony in Los Angeles? I never asked, and we never talked about sex again.

Sex was not a subject anyone talked about in the '50s. Even on *I Love Lucy*, when baby Ricky was "on the way" an obviously expectant Lucille Ball was not allowed to use the word *pregnant*. In fact, she and Desi always slept in separate beds; so guarded and secretive about sex was the puritanical culture in which we grew up. I went to a Catholic High School where the boys were separated from the girls. Only during lunchtime did we see any girls and they were always on the other side of the football field. The priests said it was to keep us from being tempted. Tempted? Tempted to what? Find out about sex? They did their job well. The only sex I ever knew was what I saw in my dad's magazines.

Late in my sophomore year we had a Sex Education lecture in our Science class and all of us were excited about it. Unfortunately Mr. Diaz had also been muzzled by the priests. He carefully avoided all the important things, like girls, and why I was having these thoughts about them. All we learned was how a zygote forms by the introduction of a sperm cell into an egg. Most of us were asleep before he shocked us with the remarkable statement that masturbation causes young boys to become homosexuals. Yikes! Was that the truth? He couldn't be right about that could he? If so *that* was something I needed to know for sure. I decided to do some research of my own. My family had a 20 volume Encyclopedia Britannica which took up half of the wall of our living room but otherwise went largely unused. I pulled out the M-N volume and looked for the word masturbation. There was a short, clinical explanation of sexual stimulation but nothing else, certainly no evidence that it led to homosexuality. Us guys talked about it privately and tried to make some sense of it, but Mr. Diaz left the school and we never had any more sex education. After that one class, we were on our own. But I wanted to know more. When I was old enough to drive, I drove into town to see if I could find a place that sold those nudist magazines. I did; it was in a derelict section of downtown Los Angeles that my dad called Skid Row. I went inside and hurriedly searched the magazine racks until I found what I was looking for. Then when I went to

pay for it, I found out I wasn't old enough. On my way out of the store the solution presented itself. A passing wino agreed to do the deed in exchange for money to buy a bottle of Ripple. He shuffled into the store and returned moments later with a copy of *Sunshine and Health* that I had described to him. I took it home that night and hid it under my own nightstand.