

*Sightings* 5/25/06

Julia Sweeney Says 'Ha!'

-- Matthew Baldwin

Many people remember Julia Sweeney as a performer on "Saturday Night Live," where she became famous playing an ambiguously gendered office dweeb named "Pat." But, burned out on improv, in 1994 Sweeney quit SNL and moved from New York back to Los Angeles, with high hopes for the future and for her forthcoming movie, *It's Pat!*

Unfortunately, 1994 turned out to be, as she later put it, "the year that I became Job." First, *It's Pat!* failed even before it opened. Then her younger brother was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer, and both he and her parents moved into Sweeney's LA home.

Beset with this difficult family situation, Sweeney found a therapeutic outlet in stand-up comedy. With charm and eloquence, she told personal stories of suffering, transforming pathos into deep comedy.

Then, in early 1995, Sweeney was diagnosed with cervical cancer, and began chemotherapy and a series of invasive surgeries. Three weeks later, her brother died, but not before joking that she must have had "cancer envy." He was 31 years old, she was 35.

Sweeney's cancer went into remission, and she turned her stand-up material into a full length monologue, *God Said 'Ha!'*, which she took to theaters in New York, San Francisco, and LA. A book version and an audio CD followed (both in 1997), and her friend Quentin Tarantino produced a film and DVD (1998). Sweeney had again turned tragedy into success.

Through the worst of times, and all through the development of *'Ha!'*, Sweeney, a lifelong Catholic and regular churchgoer, remained true to her religious roots. In 1997, she told a reporter that she found comfort in prayer, and as late as 1999 she was still attending Mass every Sunday -- although she expressed "rage" about aspects of Catholic dogma encountered in sermons.

But then Sweeney lost her faith. She explains this transformation in her latest monologue, *Letting Go of God*, which has played for the past several years in theaters from Broadway to Hollywood. While *God Said 'Ha!'* was only superficially theological -- entertaining the possibility that, in 1994-95, God was playing a practical joke on her -- *Letting Go of God* directly criticizes faith and religion.

With characteristic wit, Sweeney's monologue plays with the absurdity of religious stories. After a chance encounter with some Mormon missionaries (she finds the Mormon tradition unsettling), she joins a church-led Bible study, where she hopes to "rededicate" herself to her own faith. Instead, Sweeney finds only questions and doubts. In a voice ranging in tone from girlish insouciance to mocking incredulity, she shares her "critical" readings of some of the most problematic narratives in the Bible: the two creation accounts; Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham and Isaac; Jephthah; Jesus cursing a fig tree -- all of which she deems deeply problematic.

Furthermore, she finds that the Bible contains no satisfactory response to her personal tragedies. In a manner at once poignant and comical, she recalls her brother's months of "unspeakable suffering," comparing them bitterly to Jesus' relatively quick death and resurrection: "Someone once said: 'Jesus had a really bad weekend for our sins.'" As the Bible study course progresses, she finds herself turning away from the "bi-polar" deity found in the Bible's "nutty stories." Finally, she accedes to a little voice inside that has been whispering, to her horror, "There is no God."

With the evangelical zeal of a convert, Sweeney has engaged the increasingly religious discourse of American public life. She has shared her story on National Public Radio, and she fights the religious right in ads aired on the progressive Air America network: "Won't you join me and the Freedom From Religion Foundation in waking up America to the growing dangers of theocracy?" This June, she will speak in Reykjavik, Iceland, at a meeting of the International Atheist Alliance. And she hopes her forthcoming book, *My Beautiful Loss of Faith Story*, will be shelved in the inspiration section of airport bookstores. Atheists may never have had such a winning and funny spokesperson.

Some believers and scholars might be tempted to dismiss Sweeney as theologically unsophisticated -- and perhaps she is. But it can't be denied that she speaks to her audience. Many people have experienced the absence of God in the face of human suffering, or have felt profoundly alienated from the biblical narratives they grew up with. Her work directly challenges a theological tradition that has apparently failed to develop either a persuasive theodicy, or a sound hermeneutic strategy that really works for today's Bible readers.

Will the church and people of faith find a way to respond seriously to the challenges of this comedian?

*Resources and Further Reading:*

Julia Sweeney's official website is at: <http://www.juliasweeney.com>. Information about the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which sponsors the IAA conference, may be found at: <http://www.iheu.org>. To hear an excerpt of *Letting Go of God* on an episode of the NPR radio program *This American Life* ("Godless America," June 3, 2005), please visit: <http://www.thislife.org> or <http://207.70.82.73/pages/descriptions/05/290.html>.

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