



*Dedicated to helping LGBTQ people build and strengthen their families.*

---

## Caring For Rodents and Other Religious Experiences

Vince Sgambati

Parenthood causes us to do things that we never imagined ourselves doing. Recently, I paid a veterinarian \$52 to treat our guinea pig, Lightning. Don't get me wrong. I've always been an animal lover and general all-around nature lover. As a kid I had many pets, much to my mother's chagrin. She preferred knickknacks: the real stuff was too messy. As an adult, I continue to share my home with furry creatures, aside from Jack that is.

Before Jack and I moved back to Syracuse, after ten years of living in a rural area near Skaneateles, N.Y., we had a number of dogs and cats. We even raised sheep and a beautiful, majestic Nubian goat named Sarafina that we saved from becoming pepperoni. Though she was from prizewinning stock, her owners planned to slaughter her since she was born with three nipples instead of two, an apparent flaw for showing and breeding. When I shared this story later with a lesbian friend and owner of one of the last surviving women's bookstores in the North East, she balked, "Slaughter her! I'd make her a queen!"

Regardless of a creature's imperfections, I've always had a soft spot for most animals, but not for rodents. Blame my urban upbringing. I come from NYC. We tried everything, including murder, to get rid of rodents. We certainly didn't take them to a veterinarian for a skin irritation and fur loss, which in Lightning's case turned out to be symptoms of either lice or mange. I was reassured, fortunately, that the parasites are species specific, but this good news did little to make me any fonder of the species in question.

I've had numerous unpleasant encounters with NYC rodents, but one is particularly memorable. I was about ten years old and taking a sponge bath. Like most preadolescent boys, I had an aversion to soapy water; halfheartedly rubbing a damp washcloth on a few choice parts was my idea of adequate personal hygiene. I raised my foot, rested it on the edge of the bathtub and reached for my toes. A huge rat with beady eyes and yellow teeth glared at me. I was a chubby kid, but I'm sure I broke a record sprinting from our bathroom to the den, where my mother sat on a shrink-wrapped chair watching television. On top of the highly polished fruitwood console sat a vase of plastic red roses, surrounded by a vinyl doily. I stood there, totally naked, clutching a damp wash cloth and screaming, "There's a huge rat in the bathtub!" In retrospect, the rat was quite average in size, but to me and to my mother it may as well have been a lion.

My father wouldn't be home for another hour. He and his brother owned an Italian-American grocery store, and they usually didn't close until 9:00 pm, but my mother sure as hell was not going to stay in the house with a rat napping in her freshly scrubbed Ming green bathtub. Poor Dad had to leave the store and rescue us. When he arrived, he found Mom and me sitting outside on the front stoop; fortunately, I had the good sense to dress before leaving the house.

We followed my father back into the house. He picked up a broom and opened the bathroom door. Not thinking rationally, my mother shoved him into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him, intentionally jamming a towel between the door and the doorjamb, so the rat wouldn't escape. My mother and I were clearly operating in a fear/flight mode. We heard a lot slamming and banging. Eventually, my father, turned hero, pulled open the bathroom door and appeared, holding a broken broom. I still remember his words, "Vinny, get me a paper bag."

continued on page 2

Granted a guinea pig is not exactly a rat. I know some very nice people who actually keep rats today as pets. This past Christmas we received one of those family photo holiday cards showing a festive picture of our two lesbian friends and their son with a rat perched on one of the mom's shoulders. They all looked cheery enough, and the picture, to some observers, would have made the idea of pet rats quite appealing, but I'm one of those skeptics who still have nightmares about the early 1970's movies Willard and its sequel Ben . For you more youthful parents, maybe you caught the 2003 remake of Willard. Just remembering Michael Jackson's teenage voice singing the theme song to Ben – Ben, you're always running here and there - is enough to give me the shivers. Never did I picture myself caring for something even remotely related to a rat.

What does all this have to do with religious experiences? Well, parenthood has not only led me to support a rodent, but for the past year, I've also been attending two church services on Sundays. Not that I'm comparing attending church services to caring for rodents, though, prior to parenthood, I had been inclined to avoid both church and rodents.

When Mona was a toddler, Jack and I obsessed over what to do about religion. We had both been raised in church-going families. Actually, Jack's was a church-going family. My family - with the exception of my mother and two or three aunts who covered all Sundays, Holy Days of Obligation, First Fridays and every day during Lent - showed up in church only for weddings, baptisms and funerals. Jack's family meandered through various denominations of Protestantism, depending upon how much they liked or disliked a preacher. My family was Roman Catholic with an Italian distrust of strangers and institutions. We didn't like any priests, so we just attended whatever church was closest to our house.

As a kid, my church was one block from my family's house. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Vinny Levio, Rose McLaughlin and I would walk across 104<sup>th</sup> Street from our school, Saint Mary Gate of Heaven, to our cathedral-like church, enter the doors which took all three of us to pull open and kneel at a marble altar railing in front of a larger-than-life crucifix hanging over a small side altar. We'd stare and squint without blinking at the tormented figure of Jesus.

Now of course squinting without blinking tends to distort vision, but as three highly imaginative kids who felt a kinship toward the Children of Fatima, we were not about to concern ourselves with such rationalizing. I'd ask, "Did you see Jesus move yet?" "No, did you?" Vinny'd answer. "How about his eyes? Did they open?" Rose would ask. Finally one of us would squint just right. Jesus' head would turn, or his eyes would open or he'd smile. "There He goes! He moved!" One of us would yell, followed by the three of us screaming then running from the church. How could I deny my daughter such ecstasy? I don't think Jack was ever a juvenile mystic – it's kind of a Catholic thing - but he agreed that we should find a church.

The truth is religion was an important part of Jack and my childhood and teenage years, his in Defreestville , N.Y. and mine in Queens , N.Y. Despite the gulf between Christian dogma and our burgeoning feelings around same gender attraction and maybe because we understood what it means to feel different and lonely, we found consolation in the stories of kindness, love and compassion, even though these stories were not reinforced by day-to-day church practices. Eventually, for many reasons, including but not exclusive to the horrendous treatment of LGBT people, religion and attending church lost its appeal. Then we became parents. A friend refers to her reconnecting to religion during her sons' childhoods as pediatric Judaism. Maybe Jack and I are also experiencing some kind of pediatric religious continuum: Catholicism at one end and Unitarian Universalism at the other.

continued on page 3

Friends recommended Our Lady of Solace. Solace is a Roman Catholic Church with a mixed race congregation (this latter attribute is a priority for our family). One of the friends who recommended it was the head of the Black Catholic Chancery at the time. She and another friend of ours, a married priest, had baptized Mona several years earlier: Winter Solstice, 1996, in Plymouth Congregational Church (a landmark stop on the Syracuse Underground Railroad).

We also considered a nondenominational Christian church. It too had a mixed race congregation and the pastor was African American. Coincidentally, years ago I was his daughter's third grade teacher. I called the pastor, reintroduced myself to him, explained my family makeup and asked how he felt his congregation would receive us. He stated that he would welcome us, as would much of the congregation, but of course he could not speak for everyone. The members of this church identified as evangelical or born again, but after speaking with the pastor they didn't seem to meet my stereotypical image of evangelicals. Still, Jack was reluctant to attend this church, and though I was not as apprehensive, maybe because I knew the pastor, I shared his concerns.

We decided to give Solace a try. Mona was three years old at the time. We knew a number of people who attended the church, most of them African Americans. Having been raised Catholic, I also felt that I'd walk into Our Lady of Solace projecting confidence, something Jack and I felt Mona would sense. I'm as Catholic as you are. If you have a problem with my family, stay home. Our family began attending Solace about six years ago, Jack and I with ample trepidation. But the three of us have been and continue to be treated with kindness and respect by the clergy and laity of the church. I'll cite two of the numerous examples of good will that we have enjoyed.

First, when Mona was a second grader, she was expected to receive her first Communion and had to begin religious education. I felt compelled to speak to the woman who organized religious education classes, so Mona would not be placed in any uncomfortable situations. After introducing myself, the woman said there was no need for me to explain anything. Father Bill, Solace's priest, had already spoken to her about our family, explaining that Mona lives with her two dads and her grandmother, and he added that she has a wonderful family and receives as much, if not more love than any child in the parish.

A second example typifies the respect we receive from the laity of the congregation. Several years ago, a local newspaper journalist approached me about writing a Father's Day piece; my article and a picture of our family was featured along with other family stories and photographs in The Post-Standard. Many of the Solace parishioners congratulated Jack, Mona and me about the article, and some folks even saved copies of the article for us.

Most recently, in the wake of Katrina, Solace has brought us unexpected comfort. It turns out that a number of Our Lady of Solace's African American parishioners are from New Orleans or have family living there. Our daughter, Mona, was born in New Orleans. Life has a strange way of taking us where we should be. Our Lady of Solace has become an integral part of our family life. It's a small, uniquely diverse and supportive community. Mona is growing under the watchful eye and within the loving embrace of doting elders. This year, she became an altar server, which makes mass more tolerable for her since she gets to share top billing.

As you can imagine, the broader issues of Roman Catholic dogma and politics are a continuous challenge for our family. Father Bill is very patient with my rants. During the last presidential election, when so many conservative Catholic organizations were scapegoating LGBT people as a ploy to frighten voters and secure a Republican win, I wasn't sure if I could continue to enter a Catholic Church. One night, about a week prior to the vote, I visited Fr. Bill at his rectory and asked if he'd allow me to blow off steam. I told him that I wasn't expecting him to respond, but he had to at least sit and listen if I was to continue to attend Mass. He was a cordial listener and in fact shared many of my concerns. He is not a political progressive by any means nor is he a right-wing ideologue; he's just a good man who's trying to do a difficult job with integrity and compassion.

Two years ago on Father's Day, Jack, Mona and I attended a special service entitled Daddy Dearest/Daddy Queerest . Obviously, this service did not take place at Our Lady of Solace Church. It was held at the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse. A long time friend is the pastor. He's also gay and out. For years we've attended a few of his services, but not regularly. A little over a year ago, this changed. Now, after Mass ends at Solace, we drive to the First UU for a second Sunday service. About a month ago, we became official members. This church offers something that Solace doesn't. It has a growing LGBT congregation including numerous LGBT families, and it's free of repressive archaic dogma. Our pastor friend is also a brilliant, inspirational preacher and the music – instrumental and vocal – is exceptional.

During the services children attend youth education programs. Mona already knew many of the children involved and has much in common with them. I, however, having grown up in a very ethnic family, neighborhood and church, experience a bit of cultural disconnect. I know I'll never be soft-spoken enough or mild-tempered enough or relinquish my superstitions enough to be a diehard Unitarian Universalist. I mean, what's religion without a little guilt, repression and hocus-pocus? Regardless, the First UU is a safe space for our family, especially for our daughter.

Years ago, Jack and I went to a Halloween party dressed as the Saturday Night Live Church Ladies. Little did we know how prophetic our drag was. For now, spending Sunday mornings in community with the congregation at Our Lady of Solace Church followed by sharing community with the members of The First UU speaks volumes about our family. We move between worlds: gay and straight, black and white. We hold fast to traditions while also navigating the margins. The specifics may be unique to our family, but moving among and blending multiple worlds is a reality shared by all LGBT families. In her article, Parenting in the Gray Area , published by In the Family magazine, Ari Lev, friend, author and fellow LGBT family activist, wrote, "I often forget how damn unusual my family really is...I live my life at an intersection of many communities." Sometimes we build bridges, but sometimes the gulfs feel insurmountable. For my family, our multiple spiritual practices are another reflection of who we are as a family. There is no single space where we are complete.

Maybe this is merely our pediatric religious stage, but for now it feels right. I concur with author and self-proclaimed left-wing, born-again Christian with a bad attitude, Anne Lamott, who wrote in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith* , that she wanted to provide her son with, "a path and a little light to see by," to share community with those who, "follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle." We too want our daughter to be a part of something that transcends the blink of our lives. Ultimately, like Lamott's son, Mona will make her own spiritual choices. Jack and I are just providing her with a starting point, but, in doing so, we're surprised by how much our own journey has been enhanced. Life is a spiral of surprises, and, when raising children, such surprises increase exponentially. In time, I might even consider another pet rodent – maybe a rat. Now that would really take a miracle.

Postscript: As I write this, some Catholic bishops continue their assaults on our families, most recently in the Boston and San Francisco Archdioceses, around LGBT adoption through Catholic Charities. By the time you read this article, I don't know how far this assault will have spread, and I don't know how long my family will be able, in good conscience, to attend Our Lady of Solace Church. Then again, I also don't know how, in good conscience, our family would leave Our Lady of Solace Church.