

NO REALLY, LOVE THY ENEMY

WHO GETS TO PLAY WITH THE NONES?

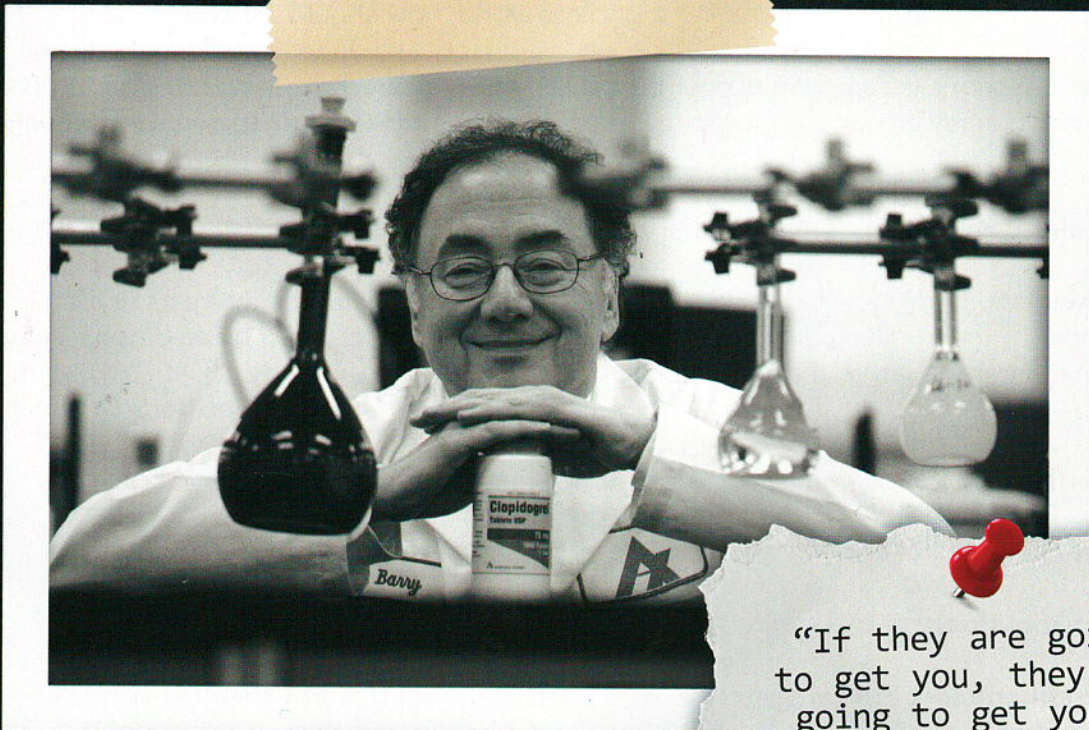
ALL HAIL JEAN MESLIER!

FREE INQUIRY

CELEBRATING REASON AND HUMANITY

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“If they are going to get you, they are going to get you.”

THE **STRANGE DEATH** OF **BARRY SHERMAN**

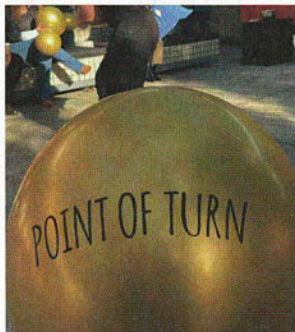
by DENNIS E. CURRY

They said the enigmatic billionaire killed his wife and himself. Then things got weirder.



Sounds of Apostasy

James Underdown



Point of Turn, by Alan Nakagawa (exhibit at Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California).

Those of us in the atheist-humanist community know that religious art is vastly overrepresented in the halls of great works, especially in the West. For millennia, Greek gods, Christian saints, and other religious icons have been depicted on canvases, carved into marble, and otherwise immortalized for future believers and art lovers alike. The rich, the powerful, and the churches have always commissioned works that propagated their beliefs down through the ages. So we nonreligious types tend to take notice when something explicitly secular pops up in any artistic medium.

Such is the case when *FI* Editor Paul Fidalgo got wind of a special, one-day exhibit at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in downtown Los Angeles, which included an auditory piece called *Point of Turn* by artist Alan Nakagawa. My wife and I went to hear his work¹ in the late afternoon of a warm spring day and spoke to the artist afterward.

Point of Turn is what Nakagawa calls a “vibratory piece”: in this case, a thirty-minute recording that juxtaposes nine people telling the stories of how they lost their religious beliefs, set against a musical backdrop. This was played through a beefy sound system on the west patio of the Geffen Contemporary.

Before the piece began, Nakagawa encouraged the three dozen or so attendees to walk up to the woofers of the speaker

1. Though I've seen (in person) a fair amount of what's generally acknowledged to be some of the world's great art, I'm not greatly educated about that world. So don't expect some erudite treatise from a critic here, though I do have my favorites. And I try staying open to hearing Yoko Ono scream into a microphone as well as standing awestruck before *The David*.



James Underdown with Alan Nakagawa.

system and take a set of earplugs and a balloon, and then inflate the balloon. Both would enhance the experience. The piece was fairly loud, and the multi-tone harmonics sent distinct vibrations through the balloon. Many of us smiled when we figured out that our fingers could “hear” the music and voices along with our ears—especially those fat, low-end frequencies. Nakagawa said he first learned of the balloon technique from a deaf student in a class he did a presentation for. He later found that balloons could also enhance the listening experience of anyone who could feel sound vibrations.

The musical backing for the stories was mostly a sort of ethereal, multi-track harmony—think of a choir full of angels holding a note the moment you get to the pearly gates (you know, before St. Peter checks your rap sheet and sends you down to eat fire for the rest of eternity). This musical background was inspired by a 1975 hit by the British rock band 10 cc, “I’m Not in Love.” 10cc used this kind of multi-voice harmony as the bedrock for the song, which is about a guy telling a girl that he’s not in love with her, though he clearly is. Nakagawa sees a parallel to this kind of “doth protest too much” sentiment in some who lose their religion but still retain some of the mannerisms and opinions—in other words, the “residue”—of their former beliefs. Of course, for a lot of us, leaving religion is not, as the song says, “a silly phase I’m going through.” We’re out for good.

The stories of leaving religion that were woven into the recording varied widely, although there are, I would argue, relatively few themes that account for most religious departures. From the woman who was tired of “acrobatic mind games,” to the man who found evolution more compelling than biblical teachings, to the guy who lied as a kid to get out of having to attend vacation Bible school classes organized by fundamentalist neighbors; all these stories brought forth in me nods of familiarity. Some left because of abuse or bad behavior from people *in* their church, which is a legitimate reason to get out but not as solid as understanding that the *beliefs themselves* don’t hold water. One can leave the money-hungry pastors, pedophile priests, or cold congregants at one church and find better people at another. But once you shed the nonsensical sacred texts and rid yourself of the supernatural, you are free from all churches and most religions.

Nakagawa told me afterward that at least one person he knew wouldn’t bring a religious friend to hear the piece for fear the friend would be offended. Maybe that person’s belief foundation is too weak to withstand even a soft challenge from a work of art. Nakagawa was raised in a relatively nonreligious home and considers himself an agnostic. He seemed to be a very down-to-earth, sensitive person who is genuinely interested in people’s religious journeys.

His grandmother was Shinto, and his grandfather was Buddhist, but neither pushed their faith on him. He attended a religious science middle school and an all-male Catholic high school. That he could also spend four years at the Pasadena Buddhist Temple as an artist-in-residence tells me that he flows easily among people of different faiths or of no faith at all.

Point of Turn reflects this relaxed attitude about religion and allows it to be more food for thought than a slap in the face of belief. Alan Nakagawa’s innovative mind has paved the way for the rest of us to see—no, *hear*—something familiar in a surprising, inventive way. That is art at its best. **EI**

James Underdown is the executive director of the Center for Inquiry West and the host of the web series *SkeptiLab: The Bunk Stops Here!* and CFI’s *Point of Inquiry* podcast. He is also the founder and chair of the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group (CFIIG).



Alan Nakagawa and a sign language interpreter.

