

A Silence Louder Than Words

by Brandon Keim

Unpublished article written for the Weekly Dig in December/January 2004.

Leave them alone, for if this plan and work of theirs is a man-made thing, it will disappear; but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them.

— Acts 5:38-39

Once upon a time I knew a woman who claimed to have been healed by God. She was a nice enough lady, not too bright but hardly stupid, with a pleasant husband and rather screwed-up daughter. As the years passed, and her daughter's behaviors looked less like a phase than a way of life, her predilection for listening to 'Jesus in language just like you speak'-type tapes grew. One day, with such a tape playing in the background, she approached me, eyes aglow, and said, "I've got a story that I've just got to share with you!"

She described how a week before she attended a faith healer's service. After seeing a crippled man walk again, she rose from the audience and asked the healer to remove a blemish from the side of her nose: a horrible blemish, one which had always tormented her, which glared unforgivingly from the mirror each morning. The preacher instructed the congregation to pray for her. Then, as she drove home, she looked in the rearview mirror and saw her nose, suddenly flawless. "It was a miracle!" she exclaimed.

Indeed. Except I'd known her for years, and there was never anything wrong with her nose.

This story kept running through my mind as I shifted on the stiff naugahyde seats of a commuter rail to Worcester. The city rose incongruously from the rolling hills of Western Massachusetts, ringed by row houses with fading paint and small windows. Somehow it was appropriate for what I was there to cover: the phenomenon of a young woman believed by thousands to be a vessel for the will of God.

On a hot August day in 1987, a three-year-old girl named Audrey Santo fell into the swimming pool of her Worcester home and nearly drowned, spending the next month in a coma. The loss of oxygen to her brain — and, according to her family, an overdose of phenobarbital later administered by medics — left Audrey with severe neurological damage, suspended in a state known as akinetic mutism. Pictures show an angelic young woman with the flawless skin of a porcelain doll, her long chestnut hair spread on billowing white beddings; it is easy to miss the feeding tube snaking into her mouth, and the respirator beside the bed. She is still conscious; the dark, expressive orbs of her eyes follow movement; but Audrey, now

nineteen, has neither moved nor spoken since the age of three.

A year after the accident, Audrey's mother, Linda, took her to the rural Bosnian village of Medjugorje, a popular pilgrim destination where six children reportedly conversed with the Virgin Mary in 1981. On their first night in Medjugorje, a chanting crowd outside the hotel alerted her to the appearance of Audrey's face in the moon. At the chapel where Mary had appeared, Linda says, God asked Audrey if she would become a 'victim soul': someone chosen to suffer the pain of others. Shortly after they returned, the miracles began. Visitors and nurses reported an inexplicable, overwhelming scent of roses — believed to be a sign of the Virgin Mary — about Audrey. Statues in her bedroom oozed oil and blood. Communion wafers also bled. Stigmata — wounds on the hands, feet, and forehead, reminiscent of those suffered by Jesus during crucifixion — appeared on Audrey, and her health worsened during Holy Week, when Jesus is believed to have hung on the cross. Visitors told of being healed in her presence, or after praying to her from afar. Audrey's story received international attention, and crowds at her annual birthday service swelled into the thousands. The waiting list to see her was more than a year long.

The Santo home is a nondescript suburban one-story in a pleasantly leafy, middle-class neighborhood. Next door is the headquarters of the Apostolate of the Silent Soul, established to provide information about Audrey and, according to the website, "spread the message of the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist." There is little to distinguish the buildings from the outside except for a few religious pictures in Apostolate's front windows and, on closer inspection, a tiny statue of Jesus standing on a rock in the Apostolate's yard. On the day of my visit it poked through a snowdrift as if recalling for passerby the story of His wandering in the desert, retold for winter.

I rang the Apostolate's doorbell and was greeted by a pleasant, elderly lady named Michelline, who directed me to the garage of Audrey's house, which has been converted into a chapel. The Apostolate's director, Betsy Ross, was in the middle of giving a presentation about Audrey. Abashed by my lateness, I tried to edge inconspicuously inside, but she warmly introduced herself and the others: three visitors, Michelline, and John Foley, the Apostolate's craggy-faced, gravel-voiced spiritual advisor. He asked me a few questions about my own religion, delaying Betsy's presentation, and she went into a mild sulk; but it passed quickly. After a few minutes of prayers, Foley left to retrieve one of the four miraculous communion wafers, or 'bleeding hosts,' from Audrey's bedroom. The atmosphere was folksy and convivial.

"It's hard to say that you love one bleeding host more than another," confided Betsy, "but this is one of my favorites!"

During the lull I examined my surroundings. Statues, paintings, and photographs covered nearly every inch of the walls and altar in a rich bloom of Catholicism's artistic heritage. It was quite fantastic: not precisely otherworldly,

but rather like an aquatic grotto from a wildlife documentary. The chapel was so visually overwhelming that it was easy to forget Audrey actually lay in the next room, behind a few inches of insulation, wiring, and drywall.

Betsy enthusiastically showed us the bleeding statues. There were several, though two stood out: a brown-robed priest in front of the altar, and a white Virgin Mary on a wall. The blood did not, as I had imagined, gush as if from a cut, but resembled a few daubs of rust-colored paint. Oil was also plentiful, gleaming from paintings and sculptures. Betsy informed us that they recently became active after being dry for more than a month. Cotton balls daubed in the oil are freely distributed by mail to anyone who asks; beneath one painting, a tupperware dish collected the oil as it dripped, and a statue of Jesus had a small plastic cup tied underneath its chin. Betsy produced an oil-filled golden goblet and encouraged us to sniff it. The cup gave it a magnificent coloration, though my unresponsive nose detected no odor.

After Reverend Foley returned, we said a few more prayers. When they were finished, Betsy insisted on showing a short video which I'd missed earlier. Much of it was taken from old home videos and snapshots of a pre-accident Audrey; juxtaposed with images of a perfectly normal-looking child was an insistence on the early appearance of her otherworldliness. Unlike the service, and the quiet faith I had already witnessed, it felt somewhat desperate and grasping. So did a numerological connection which Betsy explained: Audrey's accident happened on the same day, at the same minute, as the atomic bombing of Nagasaki — a fact to which Apostolate followers attach great significance.

We went back to the Apostolate. In the visitor area, tables were covered with Audrey paraphernalia — rosaries, cassettes, videos, books, t-shirts. I poked through them until Linda Santo entered. A short, kindly woman with piercing eyes, it is not difficult to picture her defying the doctors who fifteen years ago said Audrey would soon die, and should be institutionalized so Linda could continue with her own life. She made sure I was harmless, then spoke with Deborah, one of the visitors, who wanted to volunteer at the Apostolate. "I was just called to come," Deborah told me. "I believe God has a reason for everything, and that's why He brought me here." In the chapel, she had asked the Lord to bring faith to her husband and to visit her son, who has a behavioral problem, before his next "episode." She left with two plastic shopping bags full of Audrey memorabilia.

Several days later I spoke to Martha Urbino. For seven years she suffered from a disease called Eosinophilic Granuloma, an irreversible scarring of the lungs which in her case was so severe that she was used as a medical case study. "Six liters of oxygen allowed me to go to the mall for two hours," Martha told me. "I couldn't get on rides with my kids at the park. I couldn't clean the house or prepare meals on my own." Few doctors thought she would live much longer, and none believed she could ever survive without the tank of oxygen she kept at her side, its twin plastic

tubes running into her nose.

In the autumn of 1998, Urbina saw a 20/20 feature on Audrey Santo. "I was baptized and confirmed and all that," she recalled, "but I wasn't real devoted to the church. I felt like I was dying. I felt betrayed. I didn't think going to church was going to save me." Still, out of sheer desperation, she decided to visit.

On Easter week in 1999, the Urbina family packed into a van and drove from Denver to Worcester. Martha arrived at Audrey's on Good Friday and departed with little bit of oil, awed by the beauty of the chapel but otherwise unchanged. On the way back they visited the Statue of Liberty. There she took off her oxygen mask and walked two blocks to a bathroom without feeling any ill effects. Even this short jaunt was particularly unusual. Outside St. Louis, to her family's great alarm, she again removed her oxygen supply. She has not used it since.

"People remember me from when I used to be sick," said Martha, "and they're in shock." Her doctors are also mystified, all the more because her lungs are as scarred as they ever were; the symptoms have simply disappeared. Martha has since become a photographer, working the Entertainment beat for a Denver newspaper. To her delight she finds herself meeting celebrities and attending society galas, "making up for all the years of my life that I missed." She credits it all to Audrey. "I really got a miracle. A true, true miracle."

Not all experiences quite so spectacular as Martha's. One such account belongs to Gael Berberick, a composer of Christian music who lives in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Like Martha, she saw a television show about Audrey. Unlike Martha, Gael's own health was fine; the story captivated her because her teenage daughter Stephanie is quadriplegic and unable to speak, requiring medication three times daily to live. "When I saw that Audrey has to live every day in the complete trust and care of others," Gael explained, "I immediately understood that."

On the the Wednesday before Easter, 1997, with her husband away on a business trip, Gael took her four children out for dinner. She fed Stephanie her favorite meal, a hamburger and french fries, though the evening's pleasantries were dampened when Stephanie choked.

Upon returning home, Gael prepared her children for bed, then went to check on Stephanie. In the hallway outside Stephanie's room, she heard strange sounds, as if her daughter was unable to breathe.

"I put a light on and walked in and she was choking," she remembered. "I was ready to call 911. At the same time I thought of Audrey Santo. I said out loud, 'Audrey Santo, I believe you are a living saint. I need you to help me with the Lord right now. My daughter is choking.'" Within seconds, Stephanie coughed up a large piece of hamburger, and began to breathe again. Gael fell to her knees, weeping, and Stephanie slept uneventfully through the night.

Another tale is told by Laurie Wilkinson of Wakefield, Rhode Island, whose health deteriorated after she underwent a caesarean section to deliver her son in 1989. She developed chronic fatigue syndrome and a hernia, and in 1991 was told

by doctors that she might actually have multiple sclerosis. "From there I went downhill," recalled Laurie. She lost feeling in her extremities, suffered debilitating migraines, and "went from doctor to doctor and hospital to hospital. They tried me on different medications; it was just trial and error. They didn't do anything. It was incredibly frustrating. I went from being active all my life to breaking blood vessels in my hands when I moved." Laurie was soon wheelchair-bound, unable to even bathe herself without help.

In 1997, Laurie saw a television special about Audrey Santo, and for a moment forgot about her own pain. "I felt real, real bad for her. I said a prayer: 'God, you know how bad I want to be healed, but heal her first.' Then I had this weird, weird, feeling. Something came over me and I knew I had to see her." Ten days later, she and her husband drove to Worcester to find Audrey, but the chapel was closed and they went home.

Despite her attempt to see Audrey, Laurie says she was not very religious at the time. "I believed in God, but had a lot of doubts. I couldn't believe that so many rough things happened to people." Even the pilgrimage, she insists, was motivated by hope and desperation. "I had nothing to lose. At best I'd be healed. At worst it would be a fake." Several months later, they tried again.

In Audrey's chapel, Laurie and her husband inspected the statues, looking for evidence of fraud. Suddenly Laurie "felt this warm heat like electricity go through my body from the top of my head down to my feet. I felt like I was glued to the floor. My son was in my arms. He said, 'There's something strange happening. I feel like something is going through my body. I'm warm, and I can't feel my feet.'"

Laurie's health has since improved, her wheelchair discarded last August, but she does not claim a physical healing. Her rejuvenation has been more intangible. "I was a wreck before, and now I feel peace no matter what comes my way. I know everything is in God's control. I don't need to worry about anything any more. That's the confidence I gained from Audrey." Laurie now regularly visits the Apostolate of a Silent Soul. She told me of "seeing people from all over the world, all different races, all different ages, coming together, even in doubt. They're all united, and they forget what's going on in the outside world. You feel peace, you feel happy, you feel loved." She treasures her meetings with Audrey, "who's got a calling, and is amazing for accepting that calling," and her relationship with Linda Santo and the Apostolate volunteers.

"They're my role models now," Laurie said at the end of our conversation. "They're so loving. Nowadays we pick our pick stars as our role models, but when it comes to the soul, they're everything that you would like to be. I've never seen anyone more sacrificing, more loving, more giving. It makes you glad that you can see them and reach them.

"I don't care if I ever get healed. Health is important, but for a trillion dollars I would never give up what I got there. I would rather suffer to the day I die than never know what I found there."

Of course, many people leave Audrey with nothing. "I went to see a healer because I had a severely damaged child," one woman told me. "That child is long gone. Now I have a second child, and something else has put us in the same situation. I saw Audrey Santo, and wanted to believe. But she's like the clouds: someone says, 'this is what I see,' and they believe, but it could be anything."

More than statues and blood and miracles, Audrey Santo is surrounded by a community, and a family which has met tragedy with genuine faith. Almost every story about her, from skeptic and convert alike, agrees on this. The appeal is obvious. Often it is repeated that religion is the opiate of the masses; but that is a corruption of Marx's original words, which have a different meaning altogether. "Religion is the sigh of the soul in a soulless world," he wrote. "Religion is the opium of the people."

"People come from all over the world," Betsy told me as I left. "People come out of desperation. Some go home and die. But their families call and say, 'they died in peace.' And that's the greatest gift they receive."