

# I'M NOT HITLER



A REAL CONVERSATION ABOUT ENTRY TO HEAVEN

# MIKE LYON

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Artistic Lyon, LLC  
3200 Main St, Unit #3.2  
Dallas, TX 75226  
[www.artisticlyon.com](http://www.artisticlyon.com)

Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2019

ISBN 978-1-7329974-0-0

United States Copyright

Type of Work: Text Registration Number / Date: TXu002128506 / 2018-12-21

Application Title: I’m Not Hitler. Title: I’m Not Hitler.

Description: Electronic file (eService)

Copyright Claimant: Mike Lyon. Address: 3200 Main St, #3.2, Dallas, TX, 75226.

Date of Creation: 2018

Authorship on Application: Mike Lyon; Citizenship: United States.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Suffering Is Bullshit!

*“But a mermaid has no tears, and therefore she suffers so much more.”*

—Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*

This world has teeth and will bite you. Grab a few drinks with five friends and ask each one if they’ve experienced pain in the past. Behind the veneer of competency and assuredness, you’ll find buried wounds of violence, sexual abuse, and broken parenting. Maybe breadcrumbs of healing have taken place, but often the trauma has been duct-taped like a bad plumbing job.

One of the biggest challenges we face in life is to believe in a God who gives a shit about the divergent plots in our lives. In my journey, I vacillated between a God of my creation as sort of a holy executive assistant, or does God exist at all? There’s so much outright evil that goes unpunished, that I became numb and thought, “Hay-ell no! He’s not involved.” If so, Elvis has left the building with what looks like a big ol’ middle finger to the fine folks trying to make sense of the carnage.

A minimum of three days a week I shake my head in disbelief at our fucked-up world. A recent example involved a friend opening up about her childhood. The courage it took to describe her family history astounded me. She was adopted and raised by an abusive mother. She’s let me include her story below:

I would watch her at Bible study, on the couch with my dad, and praising Jesus and talking about how the Holy Ghost moves through his flock at church. It burned me up. Maybe my head was still hurting from her dragging me down the hall and through the

living room by my hair, down from their bedroom at the back of the house, where I had failed to dust a bedside table. Then from dragging me to the front of the house where the dust cloths were, while she raged at me for being so lazy and useless and craned my neck to smash my face into the cleaning bin. Or maybe I was still hot with shame after the scrubbing she gave me years earlier in the scalding bathtub, tears streaming down my face as she rubbed the washcloth angrily between my legs while telling me I was so filthy, and didn't know how to clean myself, and maybe that's why some man had messed with me.

The year before I attempted suicide, there were two things that kept me from the deed: One, it would crush my father, and two, I would go to hell. By the time I finally gave in to the need to end my life, the desperation and hopelessness was so great, the darkness was so thick, even those massive weights weren't enough to hold me where I was. I needed relief more than I needed to be good or redeemed.

I suffered this broken but SAVED woman and tried so hard to earn her love. Through our secrets and my shame I tried to make sense of her love of Christ and complete hatred of me. I knew I was not good; obviously I wasn't. But I also had some sense of the fact that I would treat any animal more kindly. That I knew. I understood that I was unlovable, but I struggled with where the fuck was this Holy Ghost, because I wouldn't kick a dog the way she kicked me. Shouldn't he at least intervene sometime to keep a child's body safe? Shouldn't there be some evidence of his love in the people who had asked him in? I was giving blowjobs in a shower when I was three. Now I was here in a new, "safe Christian family," and it was no safer, no kinder. This Jesus, this Holy Ghost, he was NOWHERE that I could see.

God, where were you in her story!?

A visceral punch to the gut. I grapple with belief because of the struggles I hear from my dear friend above or read about daily in the news. It's a constant battle of, "What the fuck, God!? Why!? Why!? Why!?" I readily admit that knowing how the universe works is 1000x above my paygrade. A saccharine *thank you* to all the Christians who explain it away with, "Well, it's a broken world." Yep, got it, and I have read how all the heavyweights of theology through the ages have reconciled this cosmic tragedy. But the bigger frustration is directed at God as he asks me to go out into the world and sell people on a bunnies-and-sunshine fairytale of a personal relationship with this Jesus character. Too many days I throw up my hands and say, "No thanks. I don't have the faintest clue of your love language!" In practical terms, you might be thinking it's like if I had a wife who I claimed to love more than she can fathom... and then punched her in the nose and said, "Trust me, I know it doesn't make sense, but this is how I show love, it's good for you." How long would the relationship last? Or maybe you're thinking, "Hey, God, I'm drowning here! I'm going underwater and can't breathe!" His response: "Don't worry, I'm right here beside you... while you drown." Uh, gee, thanks, I hope you had a good seat! Why not send a shark for more giggles?

Trust me, I feel ya. The whole premise sounds like bullshit. Let's see if this book helps clean it off your shoes.

## CHAPTER 3

# FOMO! YOLO! Eternity!

*“If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”*

— C.S. Lewis

In the past three years, David Bowie, Prince, Robin Williams, Glenn Frey, Tom Petty, and Anthony Bourdain have all died. Famous and non-famous people die every day, to the tune of roughly 7,430 people in the United States alone.<sup>1</sup> With our 24/7 connected culture and unlimited digital content, the finality of death often doesn't fully register. Particularly with deceased musicians and actors, I can watch them on TV and YouTube, or listen to their music decades after their passing. We often say their legacy will live on forever, which is true. But it can also dull the reality of death. We can develop a false sense of living forever without contemplation of the end to this life. I'm not saying we should walk around in fear and question whether each day is our last. But we do need to urgently consider what controls we have of the outcome after this life.

According to a 2007 Pew study of religious beliefs across the country, 92 percent of Americans said they believe in a god or universal spirit, and 74 percent said they believe there is a heaven.<sup>2</sup> Yet our postmodern culture, with the advent of social media, is driven by the acronyms YOLO (You Only Live Once) and FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). The idea is we must maximize every moment of life, and any inkling that we may have missed out on a super zippy experience, causes low-level anxiety and, for some, a debilitating addiction to social media. I

often refer to these maxims as living out your Mountain Dew bucket list, where a person must experience life in a big, risky way, like jumping off a cliff, amped up on caffeine! After all, we only live once; therefore, make the most out of your time and don't have regrets.

In my own journey, I live in an area of downtown Dallas called Deep Ellum. It has some colorful history, is known for being edgy, and the bars and music venues buzz with a palpable energy. For years I had a consistent routine of cranking out work during the day, then Thursday through Saturday were designated days to frequent the nightlife. In the late nineties, there was a graffitied street tunnel leading into Deep Ellum, which served as an entrance to the area. I remember walking back home through the tunnel after a night out, stepping over the occasional syringe, masses of broken beer bottles, and the bulging blankets that often had an unfortunate soul or two residing underneath. The sounds of horns, music, random yelling, and other urban noise would pulsate through the tunnel. I always had a feeling of, "Damn, I hope I didn't miss anything." The thought of taking a year off from nightlife and enjoying a calming green tea or three simply did not resonate. There was no way I was going to miss whatever mystery I hoped to find. There was a tangible sense of searching for something. Maybe a feeling of connectedness?

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of living passionately in the moment while pursuing people, culture, and projects. It's a difficult proposition to ask a person to suspend disbelief and trust the next life in eternity will remove all levels of YOLO and FOMO. Whuh!?! No way am I gonna take that chance. I have to see, touch, smell, and hear something to believe it's real. Worse yet, what if eternity is basically a bunch of white robes and harps? No mountains to climb, no oceans to swim. What if the only beer they serve is Coors Light!?! No Belgian Ales!?! Egads, that ain't right. Or what if eternity is nothing but mulch? Just plain ol' dirt and zero-ness. Eww.

This skewed thinking causes a frenetic and short-sighted vision of life. My anxiety is exacerbated as the months and years fly past. As a Gen-Xer who has tried to live with a level of purposeful and healthy urgency, I can confirm this life is fleeting, and I feel the pull of FOMO.

The 2018 documentary *The American Meme* is an excellent exposé on our culture's shifting orientation to viewing life through social media lenses. The film explores several auteurs who have exploited the medium into a massive online presence. Each have millions of followers and in some cases have cultivated their content into multi-million-dollar incomes. The film also shows the dark side of the hunger for "likes." In the latter part of the movie, Paris Hilton mentions her constant FOMO, even after going out on the town for five nights a week for upwards of twenty years. She also closes the quote by saying she's scared of death because it sounds *BORING*. I wish boredom were the only concern. I anticipate her view is pervasive. FOMO and YOLO are powerful drivers, but if heaven is real, they're short-sighted maxims. They pull us into a vortex of living for now, being in the moment. Yes, please do! But don't sacrifice *ALL* consideration of the next life due to an expectation of boredom.

I recently watched the documentary *Quincy*, about legendary musician and producer Quincy Jones. He's lived an extraordinary life any creative person must respect. His level of content output is prodigious and close to unmatched. He's played, orchestrated, and produced music with Count Basie, Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Michael Jackson, and others. He's produced film soundtracks and musical events such as *We Are the World* and has worked with world leaders on various philanthropic projects. His list of productions goes on and on. The documentary is like watching a history of the twentieth century. And yet, his admitted workaholicism has not given him a level of peace. In fact, he said he's spent his life "running from something." Granted, he used this internal fear as a driver to push his creativity and career. But



he admitted his distress cost him lost years with his family and children. It almost killed him from health issues likely related to nonstop work. Is this another form of YOLO?

Personally, I have a choice when watching a documentary like this. I can see it and measure my output and career against his, which results in despondency due to the realization he's a hundred times more talented. And deep disappointment that I've missed my chance of reaching that kind of success—yes, FOMO. Or I can believe the reality that even the most staggering of artists still run into the wall of finality: there's never enough time in this world. What if in the end we just become worm food and complete nothingness? Sheesh, if I camp on that thought for too long, sheer panic sets in. I have warped thinking of, "How much coke can I snort, so I can stay up to get everything done before I croak?" Even having memorized the possible outcomes of living like Tony Montana in *Scarface*, I'm still tempted. But what if there is an afterlife, an eternity to get shit done? There is some level of comfort in knowing I may have all the time needed to achieve goals I haven't yet dreamed. Is it challenging to believe? Of course. If you see belief in heaven as wishful thinking, it might at least take the edge off your worry, and allow you to live and work diligently in the moment.

Let's look at elite professional athletes like NBA players LeBron James and Michael Jordan. The runway for the prime of their physical talent and ability is at best ten years. Jordan entered the NBA at twenty-two, LeBron at eighteen, and by thirty, their physicality started to decline. I'm not saying they were ineffective after ten years, nor am I saying their life was finished at forty (LeBron is not there yet). I am saying the decline shows how temporal our physical abilities are in this life. Pause and think about that fact. On average, most of us have fifteen to twenty years max before we begin our physical decline. *Really! That's it?* If I marinate

in this reality for too long, I feel an uncontrollable anxiety building up—FOMO at the highest level.

I remember seeing a *60 Minutes* interview with NFL quarterback Tom Brady in 2009. He had won three Super Bowls by the age of thirty. In the interview, he seemed to drop his guard for a few minutes and asked the question, “There’s gotta be more than this?” He was asking the bigger question many of us ponder at times. The difference is he achieved what most never contemplate. He was living out the fantasy of all fantasies: fame, fortune, and a beautiful spouse. Part of me thought, “Tom, you can’t be anything but happy 24/7 every month of the year! You have it all! Women want to be with you; men want to be you! I WANT TO BE WITH YOU!” The other part of me knew deep down that Brady realizes like all of us that this life never completely fulfills. If it does, it’s only for fleeting moments. The fact is, Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Bill Gates, and Quincy Jones end up losing to Father Time like everyone else. No matter how perfect now, the most beautiful men and women will end up all wrinkly with gray hair and saggy butts and boobs.

You may think there’s no way you’re going to slow down your living on the off chance that heaven is real. You might miss out on something on this side of paradise. I understand the tension. However, if you haven’t already realized this, you do miss out on things no matter how diligent you are with disciplined and adventurous living. I’ve participated in or led sixteen humanitarian aid trips to Cuba, Haiti, Africa, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Nicaragua, India, and Guatemala. Those trips punctured my heart; they changed my worldview. I was privy to emotions I continue to process. I’ve also vacationed in Europe, the Virgin Islands, New York City, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. And yet, I have daily moments of FOMO. I want to do more, eat more, hear more, and have my nerves wowed with exhilaration.

But tick-tock-tick-tock, the years are eviscerated. Hell, I recall being blown away when hearing cultural gangster Anthony Bourdain say, “The one thing I know for sure about China is, I will never know China. It’s too big, too old, too diverse, too deep. There’s simply not enough time” (*Parts Unknown*).

This is a guy who had done laps around the world. He had dipped his tongue and mind into the thousands of dark alleys that scream of visceral delicacies available to daredevil souls. But again, “There’s simply not enough time.” Come on, if Bourdain had an inner turmoil, where does that leave the rest of us who at best make it to Disneyland for a selfie with Mickey?

Let’s say a person lived an amazing and fulfilling life after being born in 1930 and dying in 2006 at the age of seventy-six. Yes, they lived through the greatest world war, saw the first man walk on the moon, and witnessed plenty of other historical moments. However, before they were born they missed the invention of the first airplane to take flight in 1903. The year after they died the first iPhone came out and revolutionized the world of technology and communication. Sure, I don’t regularly wish I had been around to witness the invention of electricity; I’m not sad for missing out on events before my birth. But I do sometimes think about what it was like to see Elvis or the Beatles for the first time. I know there will be unbelievable inventions in the next fifty to one hundred years, and I will miss out on seeing them arrive in the world. As I grow older, this creates FOMO for me.

A famous prophet once said, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” James 4:14 (NIV)

Ouch! This is depressing, but true. I’m not saying you should write off living in this world cuz you’re about to vaporize. Go hard, take risks, eat good meals with friends, travel as much as possible. But I encourage you to explore if there is a bigger, more important life after this brief

existence here. Trust me, when you hit forty, when fifty comes screaming into sight, it's in your best interests to examine whether there's a way to extend the runway. We must consider if there is something after this *Snapchat* of a life, and if so, if there is a way to guarantee we participate in an afterlife.