



Battle of the Puppets

Throughout the week, it isn't hard to find me. I go to this local restaurant called the Breakfast Klub a lot to eat wings and waffles and meet with folks. The place is known in Houston as a haven for young urban professionals, musicians and artists, whose progressive works are often featured in the restaurant. One such artist, Nathaniel, uses objects he finds on the street to create beautiful sculptures, telling stories of tragedy and triumph in urban life. In fact, he's more of what I call a "ghetto documentarian" than an artist.

The owner of the Breakfast Klub introduced me to Nathaniel because he believed the artist had great spiritual potential, but was falling short due to hypocrisy he'd seen in religion. He said Nathaniel knew that God was around, but earnestly believed He could not be found in religious organizations.

When I met Nathaniel for the first time, I had the church planter's itch to use a five-point plan and lead him through the doors of our church by convincing him I was a cool and relevant exception to the religious rule. If Nathaniel came, then a whole group of meaningful artists might follow him.

But I had to shut up the opportunist in my mind. The end of our conversation could not be church because the Church does not exist for itself, but for a lost world. The dissonance between the mind of church-planting Marlon and world-changing Marlon grew louder. I could almost imagine the two Marlons of my conscience, battling from my shoulders like the classic angel and devil.

On my left, instead of an angel, stood a naked and vulnerable Marlon puppet with no church-planting agenda and only a fig leaf of protection. On my right stood something far more dangerous than a tiny devil: a little Marlon puppet with a vintage T-shirt,

designer jeans and a cool wood-grained Bible in his hand.

Nathaniel and I had been talking for a few minutes when out of nowhere I felt the urge to give him an invitation. Not an invitation to our church or one of the small groups. It wasn't even an invitation to paint a portrait during one of our worship experiences. Instead, I gave him an invitation to use his art

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as an inspiration for—and not just a reflection of—life in the ghetto.

The vintage T-shirt Marlon puppet began to laugh, telling me that I was only as good to Nathaniel as I was cool enough to bait him into the Christian experience. But I ignored his taunts. I wanted to call Nathaniel out of spiritual paralysis to change the world from the inside out. The naked and vulnerable Marlon smiled his encouragement.

I challenged Nathaniel to understand that his God-given gift of art came with instructions to be a social servant of our community. As a servant, he would discover a deepened creativity that could only be realized through

service. Only if his hands were dirty and planted beneath the surface of the community could he produce flowers of art in the garden of Houston's northern Third Ward.

At this point, the Marlon puppet who used his cool Bible as an accessory scorned me with a holy frustration, telling me I was not trying hard enough to connect this great asset of an artist to our worship community.

But Nathaniel had already begun to respond, a clenched fist over his lips. He became emotional as he let me know he'd just begun his latest work of art around the issue of hypocritical pastoral leadership in our city. He let me know he would accept my challenge, but it would not stop him from finishing his untitled piece meant to challenge Christian authority in the city.

Now, it's been a year since we first met at the Breakfast Klub, where two puppets battled on my shoulders. And while Nathaniel's still not a Christian, he and I have developed a friendship and have collaborated in the community on levels beyond my expectation. Nathaniel and his family even come to our worship experience sometimes, and he has sent a number of folks to our church who are now followers of Christ.

There are huge victories with Nathaniel, but the biggest one of all can be seen in the progress of his still-untitled piece on the hypocrisy of church leaders. He hasn't painted even one more stroke.

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