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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

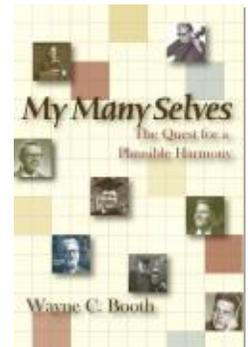
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Chapter Eleven

The Quarrel between the Cheater and the Moralist Produces Gullible-Booth

The most positive men are the most credulous.

—Alexander Pope

Want of tenderness is want of parts, and is no less a proof of stupidity than depravity.

—Samuel Johnson

Man's gullibility [is] not his worst blessing.

—Thomas Carlyle

*Work on,
My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught,
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,
All guiltless, meet reproach.*

—Iago, just after gulling Othello about Desdemona's sex life

Never give a sucker an even break.

—Popular saying through twentieth century

There's a sucker born every minute.

—P. T. Barnum

If the world will be gulled, let it be gulled.

—Robert Burton

Anyone who cannot be gulled by a clever beggar is obviously not a Christian.

—Anonymous

You might expect that being an (almost lifetime) cheater, I would have become unusually suspicious of cheaters. But for some reason, it's been the opposite. I've turned out to be gullible to many con artists. People who know me intimately—no names, please—claim that I am often just plain dimwitted in response to appeals *they* see as obviously fake. MoralB and EgalitarianB sometimes answer with an angry outburst, “Even if they're conning me, isn't it better to risk that than to ignore the possibility that they really need the cash—that they may be genuinely suffering?” “Don't they need this cash more than I do, even if they're conning me?” To which the others respond, “You're not *helping* them when they con you. You're *enabling* them, encouraging them to continue with their alcoholism or drug addiction or sheer daily thieving.”

So the splits remain strong and will never go away. One Self says I'm absolutely right, driven to do what I can for “the least of these,” but ThinkerB knows that the attackers are also absolutely right: “You don't help someone by letting her con you.”

The sources of these splits are clear from previous chapters—my Church, my family. As I've said, Mama always responded with food when a Depression “bum” came to the door, and my grandparents always gave something to the Indians who came each fall with their pine nuts. But the family also issued plenty of warnings about how the “world” is full of cheaters. Mother once even went so far as to say, as we quarreled about it, “Practically anyone will cheat you or drive a hard bargain if they get the chance.” I answered quite gullibly, as my journal reports at age twenty-two:

Few people will cheat you, and one is happier when one forgets there are cheaters in the world. One will be cheated occasionally but the amt. will be small. One doesn't need to be foolish about it, but this eternal suspicion is terrible. . . . The world is improving—people are getting more honest, kind, chaste, humane, social-minded all the time. I am going to try to make myself be *good*, & without being pious, make others good. Man has a long way to go. There is much dishonesty. Man is still human, but there is no cause for general discouragement. . . . I wish mother was happy, or at least happier. She feels sorry for herself, in many respects.

As I see it now, the skepticism and sorrow were largely about having been cheated by God with Daddy's death. But the young optimist doesn't mention that.

For now I select only three of many episodes when my optimism about "the world" and AmbitionB's desire to become more virtuous, with VainB's desire to earn virtue credit, produced Gullible-Booth.

1943

As mission secretary in charge of the mission office, I have a small "charity fund." A uniformed GI comes to the door, explains that he is a "devout Mormon," displays his worn Book of Mormon, and tells an elaborate account about having had his pocket picked the night before while sleeping in the railroad station. He needs \$45.70 to get to his uncle in Hammond, Indiana.

Feeling immense sympathy, I immediately succumb with cash from the fund.

A few months later I receive a call from "the American Red Cross in Gary, Indiana." "We have a down-and-out guy here, says he's a devout Mormon, and he is desperate to get to his home in Texas. Do you have a charity fund?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, he says he needs \$95 for his transportation and food—says he's almost starving. Could you possibly meet him in the railroad station just south of the Loop? We'll pay his train fare."

I immediately agree, without a smidgen of doubt, and drive downtown. At the station, I suddenly recognize that the man coming toward me is the same man I had previously "rescued." He glances at me, shocked, and quickly ducks around a corner. I try to catch up to him, but he outruns me.

If I had caught him what would I have done? I felt both anger and sympathy.

Winter 1965 (quoted from a long letter to several family members and friends)

Scene: Bedroom of Professor & Mrs. Booth. Heavy snowstorm outside.

Phone rings. Alison answers [from other room], calls: "Dad, it's a collect call from somebody named Trorie." WB goes to phone.

"Will you accept a collect call from Edward Trorie?"

"Never heard of him."

"He says it's desperate."

"Well, if it's desperate, I'll accept a call. Where is he calling from?"

“Phoenix.”

“Oh. Well, OK, I’ll still take it.”

“Professor Booth, you don’t know me, but I’ve long been an admirer of yours. I’m calling you, I don’t know, ah, it doesn’t make sense, but I have no place else to turn. It’s just that, knowing your *Rhetoric of Fiction*, it’s been an important book to me, I’m a writer, you know, and here I am, 61 years old, and I’m absolutely desperate. I just don’t know where to turn, I—oh, this must all sound confused and implausible, but you’re my last hope. I’ve phoned my uncle—he’s the only one I have left who even knows me, and he didn’t answer, and . . .”

“Now wait a minute. What is your trouble?”

“Professor Booth, I’ve had the most incredible run of bad luck—my writing has never succeeded but I’ve always got by until now, but here we are, my wife and I, stranded in Phoenix, on our way to California, absolutely out of money. She has been blind, or nearly blind, most of the past four years, though she recently had an operation that restored partial sight in one eye, and I’ve been trying to get to LA where the Association for the Blind has promised further aid. I just have *got* to get there, but my wife felt sicker yesterday and we had to stop off, and now we don’t even have enough to go on with.”

“Well, Mr. Trorie, I’m afraid that your brilliant story doesn’t sound very convincing. I’ve often been conned before, and this sounds like a con game to me.”

Sounds of sobbing. “Oh, I know it must sound weird and unconvincing, but if you don’t help me, I don’t know what I’ll do.” More sobbing.

“Is there anybody I could phone to check your story?”

“Yes, there is, there’s my uncle I tried to phone today, in Kent, Ohio. T. S. Trorie, Kent, Ohio. You could ask him about me. But I couldn’t get through to him, today; you might have trouble.”

“How much do you need for bus fare to LA?”

“Just \$23.60. We’ve not eaten all day, but that doesn’t matter, if we could just get on the bus tonight, tomorrow we’ll be all right.”

Booth still suspects that he is being conned, but he does not have the presence of mind to ask such useful questions as what parts of the *Rhetoric of Fiction* Mr. Trorie has found especially profitable. After more sobbing, dreadful to hear over the night wires, he asks,

“Have you tried the Phoenix traveler’s aid or any other charitable group?”

“Oh, you don’t know Phoenix. These people out here, they don’t care about anybody but themselves. This town is so unfriendly . . .” More sobs.

So Professor Booth agrees to phone Kent, Ohio, and to send money if the story is true.

There follows a brief discussion between the professor and his wife. She is deeply skeptical. Booth phones Kent, Ohio: no T. S. Trorie listed. Phones bus depot. Fare from Phoenix to LA for two is exactly \$23.60. Booth curses. Booth moans. Booth decides that it is now only 90% likely that Trorie is a con.

Booth curses again, puts on his coat and snow boots, walks through the deep snow to the Western Union at 63rd and Ellis, and sends \$27.00—they've got to eat, too.

The thinker in me feels a bit ashamed of himself for being a gull on that one, but MoralB comforts him for having a heart of gold, while VainB assures him that he does *appear* to have such a heart.

Scene II, two weeks later

Denver, Colorado. Five professors are dining in the Denver Hilton. Subject of conning comes up. Booth asks, "Have any of you ever heard the name Edward Trorie?" Professor Robert Gorrell laughs.

"Have I heard of him? Have I *heard* of him? He phoned me, talked me into seventy-eight bucks—but now I remember, he took Robert Clark [son of Walter Van Tilburg Clark] twice, for a hundred dollars and then for a hundred twenty-five. And he took Ray West. With Clark he pretended to be from Clark's hometown . . . and to know relatives, relatives Clark said had never been listed in any biography so the story *must* have been genuine. With me he pretended to be from near my hometown in Indiana. And he was an English teacher. I don't know what he said to West. That s.o.b.—I swear, that s.o.b. was *so* effective!"

Booth and Gorrell almost fall into each other's arms—with laughter, with mutual admiration, and with only mild self-contempt. They feel they have established a lifelong bond.

I later learned that Trorie had made a similar attempt on Saul Bellow, but Bellow caught on quickly and just hung up.

1999, Chicago

A tall, macho black man rings the doorbell, asks if we need someone to shovel the huge snowfall. We do. I pay him, at about ten bucks per hour. Joe does a good job. Next snowstorm, he is back, does a good job again. And again, through the winter.

Soon he begins to come to the door to ask for a loan for this or that emergency. Some of the time he pays me back. But the emergencies get worse and worse as the weeks and months go by. (I could quote ten pages of notes from my diaries about these “visits.”) He is in and out of hospitals—or so he claims, as I pick him up and deliver him to this or that location. He always has documentary evidence or wrist-identification bands. He needs such and such for medicine; he needs so and so to escape a gang threat.

Jewel, our “cleaning lady” and by now our close friend, on one of his visits overhears our conversation and tells me afterward, “That’s just jive talk; don’t believe him.” My wife and daughters keep nagging me to cut it off, partly because to help him I often find myself traveling into “dangerous territory”—driving him to this or that ghetto hospital or friend’s apartment seeking help.

But I keep on believing him, as he talks more and more favorably about getting a job, with my help.

Finally, things come to a climax that you’ve been predicting.

March 17, 1998 [Letter to daughters, who have warned me about being gullible with Joe]

The “Joe” problem goes on and on, never fully resolved. I thought I had him set up for an appointment with counselors and job-helpers, but had not heard from him for about a week, after giving him \$40 for medicine.

Saturday night we have friends in for dinner. As we sit down for hors d’oeuvres, the back doorbell rings. When that happens, it’s always Joe. I signal to turn him away. He goes on ringing, shouting, “Wayne, Wayne, ahm desperate, ya gotta help me, I’m scared man, I gotta tell ya bout it.”¹ Finally I let him in—to explain to him why we’ve reached the end: I can’t go on helping.

“Look, Joe, we have company. I’ve told you before, no more money until you take a job. . . .” He interrupts.

“Wayne, I gotta tell ya, man, I’m really scared. They after me.”

“Who’s after you?”

“Them Purto Rickans. They gonna kill me, man.”

“Wait a minute, Joe, I can’t listen to your story now. We got company in there. . . .”

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1. One reader—and one of my more cautious Selves—warns that I must drop all of the “street dialect” here and have Joe talk just like me. “Isn’t it both racist and elitist to have him talk like a character out of *Huck Finn* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?” To which MoralB replies, “Just how dishonest are you suggesting I should be, transcribing this letter, after claiming total honesty here?”

Again he interrupts, his eyes rolling, brighter than I've ever seen them. Sweat rolling down. He grabs my arm (several times in the conversation he grabs me, circles me with his arms, and I gently push him to sit back down).

"They grab me like this, and like this. . . . No, I'm telling you man, you gotta listen. I wuz in that house, my fren's house over on 46th where you took me once, and these two guys come in, wid guns, shoutin, 'We looking for dat reefer; where is he?' I din't know nothing about it; they shout at me, grab me (he grabs *me*) take out a gun 'n point it at me. I'm good at handlin' that kinna thing, I grab the gun, dey come at me, I shoot that Purto Rickin inna leg, 'n I run. But they run after me. Gotta git outa town, man. They got a gang wid them teardrop tattoos. . . ."

"Hey, wait a minute, Joe. *You* have one of those on your right eye?"

"Yeah, but I tole ya bout dat, din't I?"—and he babbles out a short, somewhat different version of the story he told last time I asked him about whether the tattoo stood for gangs.

"I gotta git outa here, man, goin back to Mississippi. . . ."

"Look, Joe, this is the last time! You understand? If you come again I'm gonna call the police. . . ." (etc.), until, finally, feeling that Laura and Leigh have heard enough in the other room, I give him \$120 to get to Mississippi. He leaves, weeping tears of gratitude.

We then have a fairly good time with our friends, one of them saying, "That guy's tone sounds totally phony to me." When Phyllis and I get to bed, we're both a bit apprehensive. I'm saddened, wondering what on earth to do about this lost soul. (I had just that morning read a quotation from the New Testament in which Jesus rescues the down-and-outer by being kind to him! The New Testament doesn't face the problems that are faced by those of us who don't have Jesus's powers.

At 3 AM we're again waked with the back doorbell! Joe rings again and again. We consult and decide not to answer. I feel sick about it; it's cold outside, and he must be desperate again. He rings the front doorbell, and again the back. We don't answer.

At 6:45, the back doorbell rings again. I get up, go to the door, sure that he's been sleeping on the porch—on snow, temperature below freezing, windy. He is visibly shivering. I let him in. He has tears running down his cheeks; his hands feel frozen.

"I hate doing this, Wayne, but I'm scared to death. I been cryin', cause I can't get outta town."

I'm furious.

“Joe, I gave you money last night for transportation. What happened to it?”

“When I was headed for da train, da cops come up behin’ me, and since I’d shot that guy inna leg I had to run, right? I run, they caught up with me, one from the front, and arrested me for resistin’ arrest. Took me to jail. A thousand bucks bond, so I hadda pay ’em the hundred bucks as ten percent bond.”

He pulls out a sheet describing all that, but under another name.

“I give ’em not my name but one a the others I use. I was lucky, man, cause I had left my wallet ’n all identification hidden in a bag, so they couldn’t check my name, but now, Wayne . . .” He weeps a bit, still shivering. Phyllis comes downstairs, shouts angrily at him—and then prepares him a cup of coffee, which he accepts, and some toast, which he rejects.

The story could go on and on. We must have talked for thirty minutes, Phyll and I leaving several times to discuss things privately. At one point she bursts out at him in extreme anger—she rightly feels that I have been suckered into too much of this, and she’s angry at me, without saying so.

To shorten matters, after he begs for enough cash to get to Mississippi, I finally give him enough for bus fare to Hammond, Indiana, where “I gotta friend who might help me git to Miss’ippi.” I offer an aggressive message of finality:

“If you come for money again, I’ll call the cops. No more phone calls, no more doorbell ringing. This is the last time, Joe. We’re sorry about that, but it’s definite.”

“Can’t I even call ya to tell ya that things goin’ better?”

“Not any collect calls, Joe.”

By this time Phyll has given him one of my sweaters, some warm socks (his feet are really almost frozen—I felt them, as a test of his story about sleeping on that porch), and a scarf, and off he goes, *perhaps* with a sense of having triumphed with clever stories. But I’m feeling fairly sure that part of it has been true—this time.

A day later the phone rings, “Will I take a collect call from Joe Garrett?” I say no and hang up. The phone rings again. I accept it!

“Hi, Wayne, howya doin’?”

“How YOU doin’?”

“I’m great man, I’m in Hammond, and I gotta job already! A friend turned up here and got me a job. Soon as I git paid, I’m gonna start payin

ya back. I do wanna thank ya for what you done for me Saddy night and yestady morning. I love ya man. Ya hate me?"

"No, I don't hate ya, Joe, not at all. I just wish that we could get you on your feet."

"I *am* on ma feet, man."

"Good, but remember, no more requests for money."

"No, man, I'm gonna start paying YOU."

Will I call the police if he calls again? I think so; I'm determined to . . . but at the same time I keep on phoning charity services that might take him in, counsel him. The truth is that I find, beneath all the lies and subterfuge, a potentially strong, more-than-salvageable person. My heart goes out to him, as the corny phrase has it. Thinking of the world he lives in brings tears to my eyes.

Next day I get a call from him saying that the man who's hiring him wants a recommendation. Could he have the guy call me? Feeling deeply equivocal, I answer, "Well, I'll be willing to tell him that I've known you a long time and that you can be a good worker."

Later that day I look for our checkbook and can't find it. I have a visual memory that it was sitting on the table near Joe during our last conversation. Phyll and I look everywhere, everywhere; we even search through the garbage. Though it occurs to us to wonder whether Joe stole it, we think it extremely unlikely that he would be both so cruel to those who have helped and so stupid as to think he could get away with it.

After a day of searching, we cancel our checking account.

Several days later I come back from campus and have a voice mail from the bank. A man named Joe Garrett has tried to cash a check against my account. Do I know him? "He came with a check signed with your name, made out to him, for \$300.00. Because you had closed the account we were suspicious, but while we were checking, he caught on to our suspicion, and though we'd warned security, he got away!"

I feel both saddened by the immensity of his meanness and stupidity—so much more vicious and stupid than I had ever realized—and amused at my own gullibility. But in the middle of the night the amusement disappears and I just feel haunted with the thought of how awful his goof was and how badly I had been betrayed—and by the loss of all hope of "saving" him. I have a rather bad night, thinking about him, even wanting to weep for and about him. For some reason I feel no anger. But next morning I do phone the police. I want him arrested.

To our total surprise, Joe did come one more time and rang the back doorbell. I went to the door, did not open it, and shouted out at him, "Joe, I'm gonna call the police. You stole my checkbook!" And he slunk away.

I've never seen him since. Curiously enough, even now, I have this strong impulse to talk with Joe, to probe how and why he could do such a thing. The man I thought I knew, the man who "loves ya, man, God bless ya man, I'd die for ya, man, if anybody attacked ya"—couldn't have stolen my checkbook. But the bastard did. Yet here's GullibleB years later, still sometimes scanning the streets, hoping to be able to say, "Hi, Joe, howya doin'?"

What's more, I wish I had his narrative gifts. What an effective cheater I could have been.

Should I now load this chapter with more of the kind of speculation about causes and effects you've met in earlier chapters? I resist.

End of Gullible's Travels.