

EPIPHANY V

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Creator in heaven. Matthew 5:14-15

A couple of weeks ago, on a frigid evening, I went over to Cambridge to a book discussion and signing. The author was Seth Mnookin, son of Wendy, one of my closest friends. The book is called **The Panic Virus**, and its nominal subject is the specious connection between autism and the MMR vaccine.

But the book covers way more than that. It discusses some of the history of health scares involving other vaccinations and hazards such as mercury, the ways the mainstream media handle and mishandle medical information, and the herd psychology of panic.

The Wall Street Journal said that “The Panic Virus should be taught in every medical school in the world.” Sam and I had heard Seth on NPR a couple of days earlier; he’s been getting media attention all over for this book, so I figured I’d better go see the celebrity.

At the Harvard Bookstore it was standing room only. Seth talked, apparently without notes, for an hour. He was articulate, witty, erudite, funny, and he made some challenging concepts very accessible. He answered questions politely and with poise and generosity. He said that he gets some very angry, nasty, threatening emails because of his position that the supposed link between MMR and autism is specious. Indeed, his mother had told me that he has to have security at every public event.

I’m now about halfway through the book. It’s an amazing piece of work; extremely well written and unbelievably wide-ranging, while at the same time tight and focused. I can only imagine the amount of arcane research and medical information Seth had to read, digest, understand, and translate into lay terms. I do have some idea of the amount of time and energy involved, as I’d get weekly or monthly reports from Wendy: *Seth is working 12 hours a day. Seth’s book isn’t finished. Seth’s deadline was last month.*

Seth had two successful books before this one, but I hadn’t read either of them because the topics didn’t interest me much: one was on the shady **NYTimes** reporter

Jason Blair, the other (I hesitate to admit this) on the Red Sox. But even before all the buzz, I wanted to read this book because it seemed to me to have a higher purpose.

I say all this, not to sell books for Seth, but because all through high school and college Seth was an enthusiastic and probably perpetual drug user, and for three years (which felt at the time like 3 decades) after college he was an I.V. heroin addict. I'm not outing Seth on this, you can find it on Google, in an article he wrote for *Slate*.

It had been three years since I first tried heroin, snorting a bag by myself on a brisk Sunday morning the fall after I graduated from college. I was living in New York City, and within weeks I was using every day. It had been two years since I had moved back to Boston, ran out of money, and began shooting up. I had been almost laughably lucky—I had friends who brought me to hospital when I overdosed; I hadn't tested HIV-positive; no one I'd tied off had ended up dying on my floor. Now, after about a dozen hospitalizations, a handful of overdoses, more than \$10,000 in credit card cash advances, and thousands of dollars stolen from my friends and lovers and family, I was cashing in my last remaining chip. My parents agreed to front the money for the Renaissance Institute, a hard-core treatment center in Boca Raton that specialized in intractable addicts.

When Seth began to act weird and secretive in high school, his parents wondered if he might be gay. *Would that be so bad?* I wondered as gently as I could. Apparently it was the limit of what they could imagine, in the beginning. Toward the end, they figured he was going to die. A doctor told them, “You must be prepared to lose this child.”

Seth's mother Wendy had a fancy 50th birthday party at her brother-in-law's house in Cambridge. At one point Jim, Seth's Dad, came up to me, tearful. “Seth isn't even here,” he said. “He couldn't even come.

Sometime later that evening, I happened to be near the front door when the bell rang and I answered it. There was Seth, skeletal, huddled in a too-thin jacket, eyes red and nose runny. “Can I come in for a minute?” he said. His parent wouldn't let him upstairs, because that's where the women had left our purses.

For the first time, I could dimly understand why someone might disown a child. Not that it would stop the pain. But it might be a way of setting some boundaries for the parents, of saying, “I can't be responsible for him any more.”

But that last stint in rehab did it. Well, sort of. Seth got kicked out of Renaissance for having sex with another patient, but by that time he'd been clean for 3 months, and that was the end of his drug and alcohol use and abuse. And now, 14 years later, he's a very successful, reputable, journalist.

Seth is no longer hiding his light under a bushel.

Now, I firmly believe that addiction is a disease. I am sold on the medical model. But why is it that among those of us who share genetic backgrounds and family upbringing, some of us are vulnerable to addiction and others are not? That's still a mystery, and may always be.

Seth talks in that Slate article about *the overblown combination of insecurity and arrogance I'd nursed since junior high* and I suspect that's not an uncommon profile for addictive personalities. In fact, it could describe most of us, in one way or another, couldn't it? Jesus tells us that *we are the salt of the earth*, that *we are the light of the world*. Do we believe it? But do we believe him?

Jesus tells us to let our light shine before others. And sometimes we do shine, or want to shine, in a very flashy way. We want to be the best. We want to outshine everyone else, to prove to ourselves and the world that we are worth a lot. (That's the arrogance part.) But then we wonder if what we're showing forth is phony or fake, whether it's worth anything at all. (That's the insecurity part.)

Substance abuse can exaggerate these qualities, these temptations. But they are there in all of us, I believe. No one is entirely free of the sin of pride; no one is totally free of self-doubt and self-disparagement, of shame.

Seth Mnookin will never be my favorite person, because of the hell he put his parents through. But he has redeemed himself. He is clean and sober and healthy; he has a wife and a baby. All the rest is frosting: the money, the celebrity.

Somehow, Seth has learned to love himself, and others, and to be loved, more than he loved heroin. That's no small accomplishment. And that's really what Jesus tells us today: *learn to love yourself. Take care of yourself. Let your light shine.*

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are God's hope, God's promise, God's abiding beloved. Alleluia! Amen.