

## A One-Ended Stick

Sufjan Stevens is a folk singer. He is also a Christian - a high-church Anglican. (Well, what did you expect a folk singer to be? A Baptist?) One of his songs, "John Wayne Gacy, Jr." ponders the career of the monster who raped and murdered at least thirty-three young men, most of whom he entombed in the crawl space beneath his house.

Stevens does not romanticize this serial killer, but neither does he demonize him. Instead, he speaks of Gacy's abusive and alcoholic father. He also notes that the respected business man and political activist pursued his abominations while "on his best behavior." The gentle melody and the singer's soft voice combine with ironic lyrics which describe what Gacy did "for" instead of "to" his victims. Stevens will not let us ignore the easy confusion between respectability and depravity, the fact that abominations can be set to a lilting tune.

Stevens saves the sucker-punch for the last line, as he sings,

And in my best behavior  
I am really just like him.  
Look beneath the floorboards  
For the secrets I have hid.

It reminds me of a story about George Jeffreys, a seventeenth-century English jurist who made Judge Judy look like a Teletubby. Famous for dealing death sentences on the slightest evidence, Jeffreys once pointed his walking stick at a man awaiting trial and thundered, "There is a rogue at the end of my cane." The defendant stared His Honor straight in the eye and quipped, "At which end, my lord?"

Gacy often appeared at neighborhood block parties as Pogo the Clown. White pancake makeup and a cosmetically-enhanced smile formed a weird contrast to the evil within. Jesus once likened us religionistas to something similar, whitewashed tombs that clown around with purity and hide the sin-broken bones of our victims' souls (Mt 23.27). He also told a story about a first-century Judge Jeffreys who did a little stick-pointing right in the temple (Lk 18.91-4). "There is a sinner at the end of my pew," he informed the Almighty. Jesus' parable invites us to ask, "At which end?"

The problem with sticks, as the old eastern conundrum reminds us, is that they inevitably have two ends. We do well to keep before us the fact that sin finds its end only at the center of a four-ended stick on which Our Lord accepts our guilt. When there was a sinner at only one end of the rod of God's righteous wrath, Christ chose to switch ends with us.

On My Best Behavior,  
Doug