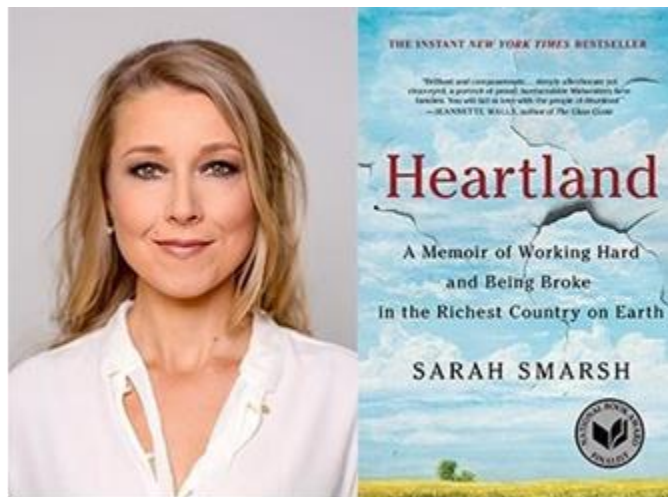


## Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

### Smarsh would not have made it without her ghost

By: Reverend Charles Brock  
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*Sarah Smarsh, the mystic from Kansas*

Sarah Smarsh is from the American Heartland – Kansas – and was brought up in relentless poverty. Her family was at the bottom of the so-called “white trash” ladder and she describes her hardscrabble life in detail and with insight in her book *Heartland – A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*.<sup>1</sup> Her story is amazing, especially as she conquers the system that is so shaped against her and in pursuit of the American Dream she ends up a college professor. But getting there was one rough ride.

Smarsh is not a mystic in every sense, and hardly anybody ever is – but she has a strong relation to mystic definitions No. 3 and No. 8. To remind the reader, the definitions are:

**TEN DEFINITIONS OF MYSTICISM** using Moses as a prime example of the first six definitions:

1. First, the major theophanies of God, for example, with Moses at the burning bush at Mt Sinai when Moses learned the name of God.
2. Secondly, Moses begs to see God's glory, God agrees, and says he shall "make all my goodness pass before you, and I shall pronounce in your hearing my name YHWH."
3. Thirdly, God spoke to Moses much of the time and Moses knows it is not his own voice.
4. Fourth is a cooperation of wills. "God and I are (at) one."
5. A fifth way is called "Identification Mysticism," pointing out that one equates, associates, relates, links with a subject, a special history, a person, even an object.
6. The sixth sense is the experience of dereliction and distance from God.
7. A seventh level is the overpowering relation to objects or expressions of God, for example, the Shechinah (light and/or name of God), the throne of God, and Ezekiel's chariot of fire.
8. The eighth point is from the Jewish Polish mystic Martin Buber: I, You, and It are the elemental variables whose combination and re-combination structure all experience as relational human inter-subjectivity affirms the polymorphous I-Thou encounter.
9. The ninth way is Eastern, "monism," which means, roughly, all in all. You are God. God is you, and that table, and that universe, and everything plus.
10. There are a lot of ways here and elsewhere you, too, can be a mystic. You can be the tenth way!

The intense way that Smarsh fits in is that she has an "I-Thou" with a spirit (or a *sprite* in old English), and that presence is a discovered ghost of a daughter and is part of her ongoing inspiration. She hears her voice; she feels her presence. She is good for Smarsh.

Strange as it sounds, the daughter became "real" to me, too, as I read the book. Let's start on the first page. The title of the chapter is "Dear August," which is the name of her discovered daughter. (Is she invented? Or is there something quite tangible about her? I am ultimately unable to answer that question, but I am no doubt convinced of Smarsh's genuine sincerity).

The first sentences:

"I heard a voice unlike the ones in my house or on the news that told me my place in the world (which was at the bottom of the American pie).

It was your voice; a quiet and constant presence, felt more often than heard. ... I was just a kid, but I know the other voices were wrong and yours was right because my body felt like a calm hollow when you echoed in it.

I didn't try to figure out what you were. I just knew you. Often, what grown-ups say is mysterious, children readily understand. Eventually, in my mind, you took the form of a baby that I either would or wouldn't have.

You were far more than what a baby is. My connection to you was the deepest kind of knowing. ... I've never been pregnant, but I became a mother very young – to myself, to my little brother, to my own young mother.

I was on a mission toward a life unlike the one I was handed, and things worked out as I intended. I'm glad you never ended up as a physical reality in my life."

And the last sentences in the opening chapter where she begins to relate the individual problems of the poor to the national disregard: "How can you talk about the poor child without addressing the country that let her be so? (She now moves into her vernacular) ... The crop depends on the weather, dudnit? A good seed'll do 'er job 'n' sprout, but come hail 'n' yer plumb outta luck regardless."

There are other aspects of mysticism that Smarsh recognizes. "Dad and Grandpa Arnie were mystics, of sorts – a private spirituality that existed apart from their Catholicism. They communicated with livestock, felt a foundation problem in an apparently sound structure, had correct hunches about where water was in earth." (245)

Smarsh always understood the American Dream as something to strive for, and if you didn't achieve it, you simply had run out of luck. Most Americans thought that those on welfare were "lazy" and that was a very hurtful word indeed. She vowed never to be that.

She did well in school and made it to college. Her sociology course in her junior year led her to wonder about fiscal policy, and study after study claimed that if you are poor you are likely to stay poor no matter how hard you work. It punctured her American Dream, both shocking and angering her. Not many people understand this point, rich or poor. But it wasn't just individuals or families that suffered from this loss – it was most of Kansas – called despairingly by many, "the flyover state."

But Smarsh made it to grad school, becoming one of a number of students federally funded through a program aimed at supporting first generation and low-income

students in their academic pursuits. They had a nickname, according to Smarsh, called “White Trash Scholars.” (272-4)

She would talk with her sprite all the time about these things. To be poor meant to be bad, according to a large proportion of the population. She never believed this about herself or her spectral daughter. “What I truly got out of it is a sense of lack – a feeling that knows no socioeconomic boundary. You were the one who helped me do it, your presence telling me you deserved happiness and therefore so did I. It’s no surprise, the, that the moment I let you go was the moment America would say I made it.” (282)

“But what I strived for, that amorphous goal I’d set as a child – to break the painful cycles I’d been handed by my family before I had any child of my own – had been reached,” she writes. (284) This is what is known in the theological trade as “grace” – you get something for nothing, and you might not even deserve it. Smarsh’s was a co-operating grace. She wanted it, accepted it, and grace came. This is one of the most important ideas in Western and Eastern religion, and it can be expressed in sacred and secular terms. It is hard for many to grasp. They think they don’t deserve it; they didn’t work hard enough; it is their fault that they haven’t made it in the American Dream or whatever goals they had set for themselves. But good religion and honest mysticism will contradict that – every time. Co-operation with grace really helps. And help comes with somebody to talk to who understands who you are and what you need.

“I was lying there in my bed, and suddenly I sensed you in the room. It was the same presence with whom I’d spoken for so many years but closer and more specific, like a real person. I closed my eyes and saw you for the first time as a clearly defined image – a child’s form. You didn’t look like me, but I knew who you were. And I knew why you were there: to say goodbye.” “I felt you leave like a soul that had waited around in my room for a thousand years. Thank God, but how it hurt.” (285)

“I cried to mourn a loss in success, then. I was so grateful to have known you and to feel you leaving that I cried from amazement, too.” (286)

“You are priceless,” the voice said. “It was my voice, and it was yours. I heard you, August.” (287)

Smarsh sums up her life so far with reflections on society and the need for an ethereal relationship as well as good values such as a modified American Dream. “Maybe what holds a society together in a lasting way isn’t a calculated trade involving sacrifice, currency, and power – a wobbly claim that you get what you work for – but something more like a never-ending spiral of gifts.” (288) In other words, good grace can come.

Her last words in the book are about society and economics, the fruit of her thinking as well as her mysticism. “An honest economic system might still come to fruition in this place, whose most noble ideals are always available to us. That’s a dream worth having, I think. That’s a goal worth working toward.”

And she ends with the last paragraph in the book with gratitude for her mystical sprite who might help transform the nation: “The best version of so many things has been conceived but remains unborn – like the girl you might have been and the country I trust your spirit is helping to create somewhere; America in high summer, tired from a season of fieldwork but clear-eyed and full of promise under the harvest moon.” (288) That is a true version of the Holy Spirit for me. Allow me to copy a poem that resonates her views:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>2</sup>



In summary, this is a story of a truly remarkable person who came up from the 'trashy' depths of heartland Kansas to the heights of academia. It not only speaks well for her, but also for America. She lived the Dream. She made it work, but, according to her, she would not have made it without her ghost. She lived in grace as well, as she realized there was something outside her own mind that drove her on and made her successful.

I do not question Smarsh's otherworldly companion. It seems right to me. And I suspect that many others have these experiences. To date, I have not had such an experience, but that is of no importance. People don't want to admit it because it sounds so weird. But it isn't and there are millions of others around the world who understand this. It is significant to listen to William James, the founder of the study of the psychology of religion. James knew about Freud and how Freudians and others would have dismissed the likes of Smarsh and the paranormal as a function of an ill-fated childhood: "In the natural sciences and industrial arts it never occurs to anyone to try to refute opinions by showing up their author's neurotic constitution. Opinions here are invariably tested by logic and by experiment, no matter what their author's neurological type may be. It should be not otherwise with religious opinions ... immediate luminousness, in short, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness are the only available criteria." Pragmatism was his answer – not so much the origin of an idea, but the way it works is the final test of a belief. "In the end it comes to our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."<sup>3</sup>

Smarsh is not selfish. She wants the Dream not just for herself, but for others, for her family, for the country. And because she was able to go to college and take a course that had insight into the problems with the economics of America, she saw through the veil of national poverty that far too many try to ignore, perhaps because of their own guilt, and/or for their own benefit at the expense of the poor. But we won't have a decent country with the horrible wealth gap that we now have. It must be changed. Smarsh sees this, and her education helped her understand it, and I have no doubt that she will be in the forefront of change in the **future**.

**Addendum** – There are problems with the American Dream, especially as it now relates to college education. Many of those who could not go to college feel humiliated, because for one reason or another, they could not attend. "Michael Sandel, professor of political philosophy at Harvard, argues that the polarized politics of our time, and the resentments that fuel it, arise, paradoxically, from a seemingly attractive ideal - – the meritocratic promise that if you work hard and go to college, you will rise. But this ideal sends a double message. "It congratulates the winners but denigrates the losers," he writes, because it creates the impression that a "college degree is a precondition for dignified work and social esteem" – while devaluing the

contributions of those without a diploma. This has led many working people to feel that elites look down on them, creating the conditions for the “politics of humiliation” that President Donald Trump exploits.” “Resentment borne of humiliation is the most potent political sentiment of all,” Sandel explains.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a way through on this, and I suspect from what I read that Smarsh is an advocate. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman writes: “If you show people respect, if you affirm their dignity, it is amazing what they will let you say to them or ask of them. Sometimes it just takes listening to them, but deep listening — not just waiting for them to stop talking. Because listening is the ultimate sign of respect. What you say when you listen speaks more than any words.”<sup>5</sup>

The *I-Thou* that Buber rehearsed, and that Smarsh had with her sprite, can work at all levels of society. It means taking others seriously, indeed, and as human beings, or objects of God, equal to you. It adds this type of mysticism to the human process that is always right and proper.

But it also means that when we look at American life, its elections, its splits in society, that issues are important but so are attitudes. We need to think about these things and act.

Citations:

1. Scribner 2018
2. Gerald Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*
3. William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 1900
4. Thomas Friedman, *Who Can Win America's Politics of Humiliation?* NY Times Sept 8, 2020
5. Thomas Friedman, *Who Can Win America's Politics of Humiliation?* NY Times Sept 8, 2020

Photos:

Book Cover and Author: <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/conversationslive/2018/10/10/author-sarah-smarsh-discusses-heartland-on-conversationslive>

Angel Wings: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/economy/2018/05/08/which-town-your-state-poorest-list-financial-hardship/581103002/>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.*

