

Excerpt from Gott Mit Uns by Dan McLaughlin ©2010.  
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Across the street a large penguin was tossing a large red arrow towards a little store in the adjacent strip mall. Around her neck was a sandwich board that said “Good Pies” on the front and “Award Winning” on the back.

The name of the store was “Randall Sisters.”

I started to cross the street.

“Where are you going Agent Neeregem?” asked Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“I am going to cross the street,” I answered.

“I am informed by the operational parameters of the mission that you must obtain supervisory approval before entering any zone in spatial proximity of any of the mission objectives,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

I processed that.

“I have to get permission to cross the street?” I asked.

“When it involves spatial proximity to a mission objectives, yes,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“OK, then get it,” I said.

When it was not immediately forthcoming, we waited. We watched some traffic. We watched Bo toss her arrow. While she had some pretty good moves she basically was relying on being an eight and one half foot penguin to attract attention. About one car in 10 seemed to slow down and about one in twenty drew into the parking lot. After awhile I

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turned to Claire.

“You watch that show *Ghost Whisperer*?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Claire said.

“You like it?” I asked.

“Yeah, it is something of a guilty pleasure,” Claire said.

“How is that supervisory OK to cross the street coming along VOCERA 2000?” I asked Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“Adequately, Agent Neeregem,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“So that means it’s still a ‘no’, right VOCERA 2000?” I asked.

“That is correct Agent Neeregem,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000. “You are to stay here till you have clearance to move.”

“Well let me know when it comes through, Princess,” I said.

“I am not of noble lineage, Agent Neeregem,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“OK, Princess. So *Ghost Whisperer*,” I continued to Claire.

“Yeah, I like,” Claire said.

“OK maybe you can explain something to me,” I said. “I get the dewy-eyed, pouty-lipped thing. I get that the dead are still with us and want closure. I get the dead are concerned about the people they leave behind and want them to feel good. I get that the dead express grumpiness by moving things or throwing things or banging things, but for some reason can’t just use a typewriter or computer to write their stuff out. I even get,

if don't quite go along with, the spirit of a dead loved one inhabiting the body of someone else so you can sleep again with your husband."

"OK, that is sort of creepy," Claire said.

"Yeah tough on the original owner of the body, but love will conquer all bla bla bla. And did I mention that I am dewy-eyed with incredible eyelashes," I said.

"And pouty-lipped," added Claire.

"And pouty-lipped. And not afraid to wear a clingy about the hips gown about town," I agreed. "Oh, any approval yet, VOCERA 2000?"

"No, Agent Neeregem," said Claire's VOCERA 2000.

"Just checking, Princess. But what I can't get over is that how she can't ever, ever get what the dead people say to the living accurately. I mean the dead pour their heart out to their living loved ones and all she does is paraphrases in platitudes. I mean if your talent is talking to dead people the least you can do is translate accurately."

Although Claire had no way to know this, but I knew I was just getting warmed up. But I never got the chance to tell her that.

"Agent Neeregem, you and Agent Rozanna have permission to cross the street," Claire's VOCERA 2000 interrupted.

"Oh joy unbounded," I said. "Shall we look both ways before crossing?" "That is advisable, yes, but you are cleared to make such determinations yourself. I have also been instructed to inform you that you and Agent Ruzanna are not yet cleared to talk to the aforesaid the self-proclaimed but not yet officially recognized Great Goddess Bo on any topic germane to your mission," the VOCERA 2000 of Claire said.

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“I beg your pardon? What do you mean we are not yet cleared to talk with the Big Bird on any topic germane to our mission?”

Sometimes it is hard to keep incredulity out of my voice. Usually I can do it at the UDD, where it is a basic survival skill, but I have to admit at that moment I was not poker voiced.

“You are not yet cleared to talk because the proper approach you and Agent Ruzanna are to take has not yet been determined. Once an appropriate script has been prepared it will be transmitted to you and you will be able to engage in an officially sanctioned solicitation attempt at that time,” Claire’s VOCERA 2000 said.

“OK then, one officially sanctioned crossing of the street coming right up, Agent Ruzanna, run us through the check list. Prepare to engage,” I said.

“Shoes tied and socks unbunched, Agent Neeregem,” Claire said entering into the sense of play that was the only alternative to going insane.

“Check,” I said.

“Far side of the street visually acquired and estimated route scanned for stationary hazards,” she said.

“Check.”

I was a model of bureaucratic efficiency.

“Route scanned visually and route clear for duration of estimated journey time.”

Claire was beginning to enjoy herself.

“Check.”

Too bad all this whiz-bang creativity was being wasted as a coping mechanism to deal with a crazy little box.

“What am I forgetting?” Claire asked.

“VOCERA 2000, has our travel path route plan across the street been filed with the appropriate agency at the UDD?” I asked

I felt Claire’s VOCERA 2000 approval as she confirmed our travel path plan.

“Let’s do this then,” I muttered in my best movie hero style.

“Roger that.”

Claire remembered to pretend to speak into her wrist.

“Delta Team Tango. Go. Go. Go,” I, not to be outdone, said into my shirtsleeve.

We executed the maneuver with speed, precision and an almost a ballet-like grace. There was a median in the middle of the road where we paused to regroup.

“VOCERA 2000 we are at ‘go/no go’ for final insertion,” I said.

“Your sarcasm is duly noted, Agent Neeregern, but yes, you may proceed when it is safe to do so,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

“GO. GO. GO. GO,” I shouted into my shirtsleeve.

Well, actually, we had missed the light so I had to wait for the light to cycle though again until the light had turned green AND the walk sign said, “WALK”.

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But finally we managed to cross the street in the UDD approved matter. VOCERA 2000 filed the appropriate paper work and we got an electronic acknowledgement, which we in turn acknowledged.

The Great Goddess Bo looked down at us with her unblinking eyes.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “Eat pie here.”

She gestured with her wing to the little storefront of the window.

Mindful of the restrictions that had been placed on unauthorized “meaningful dialogues” I went for the most innocuous topic I could plausibly think of.

“Oh, what kind of pie do they have?” I asked.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “Apple, Peach, Pumpkin and Cheesecake with a mouthwatering number of flavors and toppings.”

“What is your favorite?” Claire asked.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “Peach.”

“Peach?” I asked. “I would have put you down as more sort of a Cheesecake with fish pate topping kind of deity.”

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “And no, the peaches here retain their firmness and texture, the gooey stuff inside the pie is far superior and the crust is breaded perfection.”

“Oh,” I said.

Clearly, if you knew the right topic the Great Goddess Bo could be quite the conversationalist.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she added. “And the peach goes well with the regurgitated fish pate.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I see,” said Claire. “VOCERA 2000 do we have authorization for Operation Meaningful Dialogue. Repeat do we have a ‘go’ for Operation Meaningful Dialogue?”

“That is a big no go, agent Ruzanna. That is no go. Please continue Operation Inane Chat,” said her VOCERA 2000.

“Roger that,” said Claire. “That’s a no go on Operation Meaningful Dialogue.”

Bo looked down on us and I think she recognized us.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “And would you like a fish?”

Again a fish appeared, flopping on the sidewalk.

It was like old times.

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“Fair enough,” I said. “Unofficially, of course, I like your style. VOCERA 2000 has the authorization for Operation Meaningful Dialogue been received yet?”

“Yes, Agent Neeregem, it was transmitted and received some time ago, but you and Agent Ruzanna were so excelling at Operation Inane Chat I decided to allow you a further bit of autonomy before initiating the Operation Meaningful Dialogue sequencestartion.”

Claire and I looked at each other.

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“No need to thank me,” said her VOCERA 2000. “Here is your script. It has been written by experts and is highly calibrated to achieve its goal. Say it word for word. Step One: Establish rapport.”

I looked down at the rather thick portfolio that had suddenly appeared in my hand.

It was formatted well, I will grant you that. I weighed the script in my hand by lifting it up and down and then glanced through it, flipping the pages.

“Um, this might take awhile. Shouldn’t we freeze time?” I asked.

“Good suggestion, Agent Neeregem. Consulting. Consulting. Yes, Agent Neeregem you will follow my order and implement freezing of time and space on my command. Implement,” said the Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

I obediently hit the cosmic pause button.

“Implement stage one: Establish rapport. Read the part marked ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage One.’ Now.”

“Hey Bro Bo, how be the flippers flappin’? Man that be some trippin’ fishin’ that be happenin’,” I began.

“NO. NO. NO,” interrupted Clair’s VOCERA 2000. “You are doing it all wrong. Happening has to rhyme with fishing and tripping. Do it again. Implement stage one: Establish rapport. Read the part marked ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage One’ Now. And make it rhyme like it does on the script.”

“Hey Bro Bo, how be the flippers flappin’? Man that be some trippin’ fishin’ that be hiphapipipinin’,” I began, again.

“Better,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000, “go on.”



“You do know she is a Goddess not a God, right?” interrupted Claire.  
“So technically she is not a ‘Bro.’”

“What is this, a democracy? How can I work when such amateurs surround me! Quiet all of you. Just read the lines I gave you and don’t trip all over them as they leave your mouth, please. Thank you. Continue,” VOCERA 2000 said.

“Do you want me to take it from the top or just go on from ‘hiphapipipinin’?” I asked.

“God, you are such a MORON. A complete and total MORON MAN. Do I have to spell it out for you? OK I will, this is O K M O R O N. You ALWAYS take it from the top! ALWAYS! ALWAYS! ALYWAS! God save me from amateurs. Well why aren’t you saying anything?”

“I am waiting for my cue,” I said.

“Oh, my bad. ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage One’ Now,” said VOCERA 2000.

“Hey Bro Bo, how be the flippers flappin’? Man that...” I began again.

“No, No. No. I changed my mind. Stop. Stop. Stop. Take it from ‘hiphapipipinin’,” demanded Claire’s VOCERA 2000. “We’ll just have to loop it in later once we have finished with this episode of the UDD Amateur Hour of Clowns.”

Judging by the amount of laughter she generated at her own joke, she thought this the height of wit.

“UDD Amateur Hours of Clowns, that is a good one. He he he.”

“Hiphapipipinin,’ I began again, “so lay me on some fine scaley fin and so we can begin to get it in. Bring it down. Bro.”

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“Brilliant! Bravo! Author! Author! Performance merely adequate, but the writing brilliant!” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000

“He’s a she and she’s a bird. Birds don’t have scales,” Claire for some reason felt compelled to point this out, again.

The girl was going to have to develop some bureaucratic survival skills if she ever wanted to have any kind of career at the UDD. First among them was knowing when to keep your mouth shut.

This, for those of you taking notes, was one of those times.

I, personally, was impressed with the kid for speaking up and telling her boss what she was doing wrong. But then I was the guy talking gibberish to a giant penguin on a cold afternoon outside a small strip mall in the middle of nowhere.

“GOOD GOD, HOW MUCH LONGER AM I EXPECTED TO TAKE THIS ABUSE?! I am an artiste. I am creating a fabric of words to create an emotion. And I am surrounded by philistines. Literal minded, small brained, imagination stunted MORONS. MORONS all!” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000.

The Great Goddess Bo and I looked at each other.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said.

“I know, and I apologize,” I said.

NO AD-LIBBING by the actors!” shrieked the VOCERA 2000. “You are completely undercutting the sense of rapport that you had just established by your speaking to the Great Goddess Bo in her native tongue.”

Bo and I just looked at each other.

“Now that we have implemented Stage One: establishing rapport,” said VOCERA 2000. “It is on to Stage Two: pointing out the deficiencies in her current situation. Agent Neeregem, read the part of the script marked ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage Two.’ Now.”

“Bro, now I suspect you ain’t been getting no respect like a set of ducks stuck in a duct; just aren’t no way that’s going to lay like a cheap toupee for a deity like you. Bring it down. Bro.” I managed to say with a straight face.

I was inordinately pleased with myself for making toupee and deity rhyme (dei-a-tay).

Bo looked down at me and suddenly there was a starfish attached to my satchel.

“Brilliant, once again brilliant writing. Performance barely adequate, but we can move on. Now that we have established rapport and pointed out the deficiencies of her current situation, it’s time for Stage Three: to present us as a solution to her problem. Agent Neeregem, read the part of the script marked ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage Three.’ Now.”

I took a deep breath. I had read ahead, and I was too embarrassed to look up from the page.

“Bro. Now I know this show is no the way to go, so I am here to be bringin’ notice that a new day be beginnin’, that someday soon we’ll be singin’ together you and me all one and all united in the UDD. Bring it down. Bro.”

“I think I am going to cry,” said Claire’s VOCERA 2000. “It is just so beautiful when you finally hear the words you wrote said out loud. I mean you hope and pray and you hear it in your mind, but to finally hear

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it, no matter how inadequately expressed, but spoken to an actual deity for the first time. Brought to life. But I must be strong. Keep it together around the little people. Oh heck, it is just so beautiful. I give myself permission to cry.”

And so she did. After awhile she dramatically composed herself.

“OK people, enough indulgence. Chop. Chop. We have work to do. Agent Neeregem, now that we have established rapport and pointed out the deficiencies of her current situation, and presented us as a solution to her problem, it’s time for Stage Four, closing the deal. Agent Neeregem I want you to dig deep. Now dig deeper. Deeper. I want to feel the need in you, Agent Neeregem. The universal need we all have to belong. The need to feel part of something larger than ourselves. That somehow some spark of who we are will live past our brief flash of existence in the institutions we create. Feel that anguish. Feel that longing. Now feel that it is all better. You are the daddy to the puppy that is running towards you. You are the cause of the look of delight of a bride looking at you as you walk down the aisle to her. That is what I want to hear in your voice. That emotion. That richness. That depth. Dig deep Agent Neererem. Dig deep and give me your soul. Now Agent Neererem, read the part of the script marked ‘Agent Neeregem. Stage Four.’ Now.”

During this little breakdown and following pep talk the three of us had made ourselves quite comfy. But as it seemed that she was winding down we had gotten up from the folding chairs we had acquired, put down our cups of coffee, tossed the magazines and crossword puzzles onto the coffee table, done a few stretches and waited politely for VOCERA 2000 to end her little speech. Claire dutifully picked up the used creamer containers and Nutrasweet packets. At my cue I read:

“Bro. So here we stand hand in flipper, we wish we got here quicker, but if they say your face is like a zipper, then they become our enemy, we make them flee, because we are the deities united in the UDD. Join us,

it don't matter the type of clothes, the number of toes, the hair in rows, all it does matter is that we are together, all the bros and hoes. Break it down. Bro."

There was a pause.

"Is it too much to ask that you just read the words as they were written?" asked the VOCERA 2000.

To be honest she had far more energy into her delivery than I had put into mine, but what the hell, she was the boss and I the merest of peons.

As was about to be pointed out to me again.

"Break it down. BREAK it down?" VOCERA 2000 said. "What kind of MORON says 'BREAK it down', Agent Neeregem? Obviously you are that kind of MORON. The line was 'Bring it down'. BRING. BRING. BRING. YOU BRING SOMETHING DOWN. How can you break something down? That makes no sense. You bring it down. Something is up. And then you BRING it down. Not BREAK it down."

Again, I could tell just from her tone that she was upset.

"Claire," I said, "let's go back to regular time and space for a sec."

"OK," she said.

Time and space began its usual dance.

"Give me your VOCERA 2000," I said to Claire.

Her VOCERA 2000 was still fuming over the bring/break "debacle". Claire handed me her VOCERA 2000. I waited. Then I tossed it into the street. A passing 18-wheeler ran over it.

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“Oops, it slipped,” I said. “I would call that Catastrophic Failure by inadvertent truck tire/unit interaction.”

“Actually,” said my VOCERA 2000 rather faintly, “the category has already been established. It is Catastrophic Failure by truck, eighteen wheeler.”

“Works for me,” I said.

“I had tried to tell her the statistics for the units that had been used in the field, but she just wouldn’t listen. I hope you know she was completely on her own on this one,” my VOCERA 2000 said rather hurriedly.

“No worries,” I said. “Just as long as we all agree that the Catastrophic Failure was caused by interaction with the truck.”

“As indeed it was. An eighteen wheeler,” added Claire.

“Yes, yes it was. Quite a catastrophic one. Smashed into a 1,836 irretrievable pieces,” chimed in my VOCERA 2000.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” said the Great Goddess Bo. “And that was certainly one annoying little snot of a box.”

Claire and I looked at her.

“I am the Great Goddess Bo,” she said. “And I am a goddess of surprising depth.”

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