

Spring 2002

# explore, Spring 2002: Religious imagination

Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education

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# BANNAN INSTITUTE FOR JESUIT EDUCATIONAL MISSION

## Letter from the Director



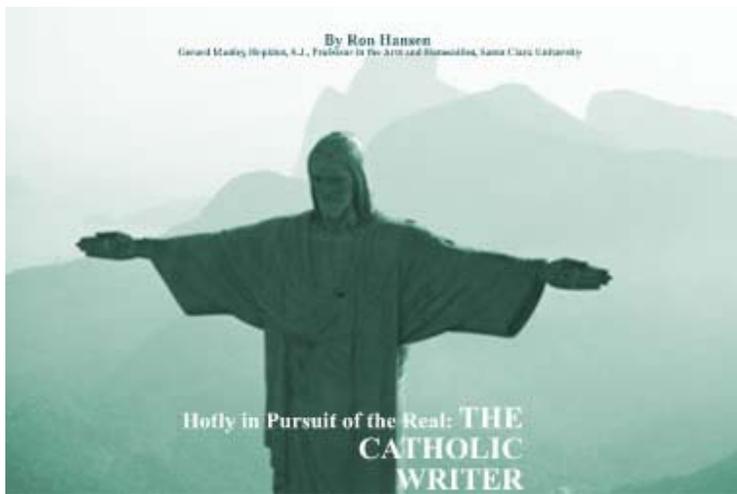
This issue explores the wonderful and terrible terrain of the religious imagination. Religion finds a natural ally in the imagination. We hope for what we do not see, but we do hear about a promised land and a heavenly banquet. We believe in One who cannot be perceived, so we have to retell stories about burning bushes, parting seas, loaves and fishes that multiply, and tombs that are strangely empty. Ignatius of Loyola was no speculative thinker, but he was a genius in encouraging Christians to enter imaginatively into the scenes of the Gospel, to paint themselves into the picture and have it speak to them. Jesuit education has appealed to the imagination in song, drama, rhetoric, and literature as the proper way to educate the whole person.

Some of the best and most widely known authors in the Santa Clara community have contributed to this issue. Ron Hansen of the English department describes how childhood experiences conveyed his vocation to become a writer of fiction who does not disguise his faith. Like his novels and screenplays, this essay conveys a "sacramental imagination" where ordinary events become transparent to God's presence. Steve Schloesser, S.J., a Bannan Fellow this year from Boston College, relates how Catholics in the early twentieth addressed a suspicious secular culture, turning its accusations on their head by finding a disguised grace in "dark," even grotesque, characters. Santa Clara philosopher Mark Ravizza, S.J., responds to Steve's essay with a challenge to rosy contemporary accounts of "the Catholic imagination" that omit the human tragedy embraced in the cross. Michael Zampelli, S.J., of the theater and dance department, shows why Jesuits have favored the stage as a prime place for educating the heart. Kristin Kusunavich, SCU dancer and director, describes how her troupe turned an F. Scott Fitzgerald story into a powerful drama that inspired the campus last year. English's Diane Dreher looks to a different kind of stage, the garden, for a spiritual practice that helps us contemplate life's mysterious unfolding.

The imagination is a vehicle of empathy as well as possibility. It connects with the suffering of others, even striving to heal old wrongs by the leap of forgiveness. The religious imagination has to be political as well as artistic if people are to find the forgiveness that makes a future possible. For two years, Jane Curry of Political Science has led a discussion group (sponsored by a Bannan Center grant) that probed the challenge of reconciliation posed by war and political oppression. Can societies overcome the memories of violence and injustice and find ways to be reconciled? Their study of South Africa, Colombia, and post-Communist Eastern Europe shows just how hard it is to beat swords into plowshares. The authors' essays challenge us as we try to imagine a human future for post-war Afghanistan and struggle to forgive our own enemies of September 11.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William C. Spohn". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

William C. Spohn  
Director



Ever since I learned to read, I have wanted to be a fiction writer. The vocation was inchoate at first, for books seem as authorless as rain to a child, but it insisted that I not only inhabit the world imagined by others, as good readers do, but go on with the story, configure it to fit my own life, filch it like candy left out in a bowl. Robert Coles has named this odd hankering and delight “the call of stories.”

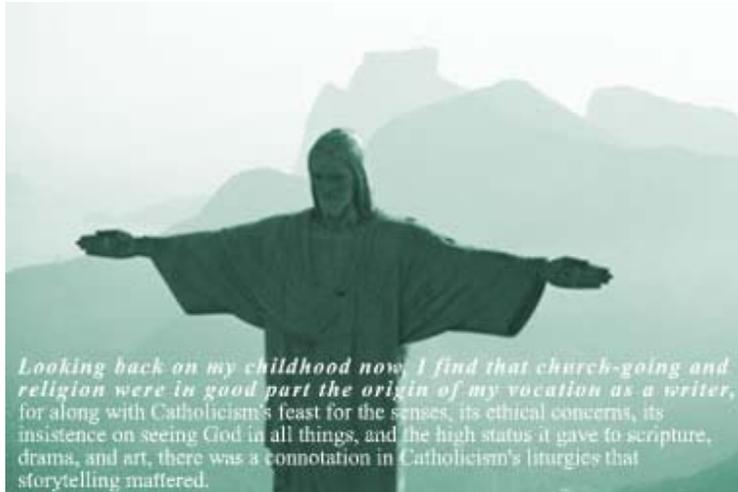
I may have been five or so when I first noticed that calling. At Sunday Mass in Omaha, the priest ascended the stairs to the high pulpit at Holy Angels Church, announced a reading from one of the gospels, and after a few sentences of the passage I was suddenly aware that the story was familiar to me. Say it was the shockingly concrete scene in Mark where Jesus heals a blind man by wetting the man’s eyes with his spittle. I found myself anticipating the next moves, certain that the man would say he could see people but they looked like trees walking. And Jesus would lay his hands on the afflicted man’s eyes again, and then the man would see everything clearly. The sentences were sure and predictable to me; I felt I was finally their audience; and I realized with a good deal of wonder that the gospels were like those children’s books that my mother or sisters would read to me over and over again. With great seriousness the priest would read aloud the same stunning stories from the life of Christ, and when he was finished reading he would talk intelligently about the meaning of the passage in our own lives, and even the old in the congregation would watch and listen like children being taught.

The liturgical rites were grand theater then, filled with magisterial ceremony, great varieties of mystery and symbol, and a haunting Gregorian chant that sounded lovely even if poorly sung. And since I could not yet follow the English translation of the priest’s Latin in my missal, I would fix my gaze high overhead on the soft blue sky of the dome on which there was a huge, literal, and beautiful painting of Christ being escorted by the holy angels on his ascension to Heaven, his loose, white clothing floating off him so that most of his flesh was exposed.

Looking back on my childhood now, I find that church-going and religion were in good part the origin of my vocation as a writer, for along with Catholicism’s feast for the senses, its ethical concerns, its insistence on seeing God in all things, and the high status it gave to scripture, drama, and art, there was a connotation in Catholicism’s liturgies that storytelling mattered. Each Mass was a narrative steeped in meaning and metaphor, helping the faithful to not only remember the past but to make it present here and now, and to bind ourselves into a sharing group so that, ideally, we could continue the public ministry of Jesus in our world.

On the other hand, my vocation as a writer was also called forth by something unnameable that I can only associate with a yen to live out in my imagination other lives and possibilities, a craving that eventually made acting attractive to my brother, Rob, and soon made storytelling necessary to me.

In kindergarten, for example, we had an afternoon period of show-and-tell. A few minutes earlier, a boy named Kenneth breathlessly told me about the side altar at some European cathedral his family had visited, where a pressure-sensitive prie-dieu illuminated a crucifix when penitents fell on their knees there to pray. Seeing my fascination, the five-year-old went further, confusing the scene and himself with flashing colors and whirring mechanisms that seemed lifted from a science fiction movie. I fell into my own imagining as Sister Martha went from child to child, asking them to report on adventures, discoveries, encounters, or anything else they thought



noteworthy. And then she got to me. And I instinctively said a neighbor had turned a hallway closet into a chapel, with holy pictures everywhere, and there were lots of candles burning all the time, because that was the only light, and there was a kneeler in front of a crucifix and when you knelt on it real blood trickled out of the wounds in Christ's hands and feet. Real blood? Sister Martha asked. Well, it looked like real blood, it was red like blood, and it trickled down his face from the crown of thorns, too. She squinted at me with just a twitch of a smile, and I was shocked, even

*An urgency to write fiction took over; it was a vocation that seemed so exalted and sacred and beyond me I would not even talk about it.*

insulted that she could think I was making this up. Hadn't I seen that hallway closet, that padded prie-dieu, that crucifix with my own eyes? I could describe the finest detail, I could smell the candle wax as it burned. Stifling her amusement, the kindergarten teacher questioned me more closely, possibly having found a kids-say-the-darndest-things instance that she could present like a chocolate pie to her sisters at dinner, and I just kept embellishing and filling in gaps in the narrative until Sister Martha seemed to decide I was depleted and she shifted to another child. And when I looked at Kenneth, he was wide-eyed and in awe, with no hint of affront for my having stolen his show-and-tell, but with a certain amount of jealousy that I'd seen a prie-dieu that was so far superior to his and, worse, seemed to have tried to selfishly keep it to myself.

Within the year I would be reading on my own and finding out about children's books and children's authors and their need to do just what I did: to alter facts that seemed imposed and arbitrary, to intensify scenes and situations with additions and falsifications, and to ameliorate the dull and slack commodities of experience with the zest of the wildest imaginings.

The first author whose name I remembered and whose stories I hunted down was Jules Verne, whom I avidly read in third grade. In fourth grade it was Albert Payson Terhune—I even named our foundling pup “Lad”—and Peck's Bad Boy by Auran Harris, with its gladdening irony that a boy who was continually getting into trouble with grownups might simply be just acting like boys do. Then it was fifth grade and the Hardy Boys and Tom Swift, books meant for kids my age but which seemed hopelessly old-fashioned and did not thrill me nearly so much as the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, who so hooked me that I held his book of horror stories open in my lap to sneak peeks at as I pretended to take classroom notes. I was drawing and painting then, not writing fiction. A friend's father was an illustrator and I fantasized that I would have a job like that when I got out of school. But gradually an urgency to write fiction took over; it was a vocation that seemed so exalted and sacred and beyond me I would not even talk about it.

In “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic,” novelist Alice McDermott recalls learning to be a writer, which, she writes, “seemed to me from the outset to be an impossible pursuit, one for which I had no preparation or training, or even motive, except for a secret and undeniable urge to do so.” She'd discovered that “fiction made

the chaos bearable, fiction transformed the absurdity of our brief lives by giving context and purpose and significance to every gesture, every desire, every detail. Fiction transformed the meaningless, fleeting stuff of daily life into the necessary components of an enduring work of art.”<sup>1</sup>

The intuition of the fiction writer is similar to that of the scientist, that the world is governed by rules and patterns that are, by analysis and experiment, detectable, that the hidden mysteries of nature can be interrogated and solved. I have run into people who don't read fiction because they feel it's founded on fabrications and swindles and worthless extenuations of reality—a famous professional golfer once complained about English classes in college where he was forced to read “these big, fat books that weren't even true”—but for many of us fiction holds up to the light, fathoms, simplifies, and refines those existential truths that, without such interpretation, seem all too secret, partial, and elusive. And that, of course, is the goal of religion as well.

Some writers are agnostic and have as their religion art, but just as many are conscious that the source of their gifts is God and have found thanksgiving, worship, and praise of the Holy Being to be central to their lives and artistic practice. In *An American Requiem: God, My Father and the War that Came Between Us*, James Carroll wrote that “the very act of story-telling, of arranging memory and invention according to the structure of narrative is, by definition, holy.”<sup>2</sup> And in a later interview, Carroll stated that “my notion of narrative informs my faith, and my notion of faith informs my idea of what writing is for.”

Writing not only gives form and meaning to our sometimes disorderly existence, but gives the author the chance for self-disclosure and communion with others, while giving readers a privileged share in another's inner life that, perhaps imperceptibly, questions and illuminates their own. Reading attentively, connecting our lives with those of fictional characters, choosing ethically and emotionally just as they do or in contradistinction to them, we enter the realm of the spirit where we simultaneously discover our likeness to others and our difference, our uniqueness. Questioning ourselves and our world, finding in it, for all its coin-cidence, accidents, and contingencies a mysterious coherence, we may become aware of a horizon beyond which abides the One who is the creator and context of our existence.

Writing on the Catholic short story master Andre Dubus, Tobias Wolff noted that in his friend's work “the quotidian and the spiritual don't exist on different planes, but infuse each other. His is an unapologetically sacramental vision of life in which ordinary things participate in the miraculous, the miraculous in ordinary things. He believes in God, and talks to him, and doesn't mince words. . . He is open to mystery, and of all mysteries the one that interests him most is the human potential for transcendence.”<sup>3</sup>

Edifying Christian fiction can have a tendency to attenuate the scandal of the incarnation by circumscribing the sensual or sordid facts of the flesh in order to concentrate on heavenly actions and aspirations. And in doing so, such fiction fails both the mysteries we are informed of by faith and those mysteries of sin and redemption we perceive in our daily lives. We need Christian fiction writers who are, in Flannery O'Connor's phrase, “hotly in pursuit of the real.” She noted that “the chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn't mean that his obligation to portray nature is less; it means it is greater.”<sup>4</sup>

In an essay entitled “How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic,” Walker Percy identified the inherent congeniality of Christianity to the vocation of the novelist. “The Christian ethos,” he wrote,

sustains the narrative enterprise in ways so familiar to us that they can be overlooked. It underwrites those very properties of the novel without which there is no novel: I am speaking of the mystery of human life, its sense of predicament, of something having gone wrong, of life as a wayfaring and a pilgrimage, of the density and linearity of time and the sacramental reality of things. The intervention of God in history through the Incarnation bestows a weight and value to the individual human narrative which is like money in the bank to the novelist. Original Sin is out of fashion, both with Christians and with Jews, let alone unbelievers. But any

novelist who does not believe that his character finds himself in a predicament not entirely of his own making or of society's making is in trouble as a novelist. And any novelist who begins his novel with his character in a . . . predicament which is a profound mystery to which he devotes his entire life to unraveling . . . is a closet Jew or Christian whether he likes it or not.<sup>5</sup>

Even in high school it was my habit to send off my short stories to magazines for possible publication. I was never very disappointed when they were rejected, for I had no illusions that my callow stories were any good, but I had never in my life met a fiction writer, and the profession seemed so magnificent to me that my quest to try it seemed outlandish. My regular submissions to magazines were messages in a bottle, ways of keeping contact with a lovesick yearning that was gradually becoming my soul's signature. And then when I was a junior at Creighton, a short story that was the first I felt proud of was rejected by *The Atlantic Monthly* with a letter from the fiction editor gently indicating what the errors and holes in that particular story were while generously urging me to send in something else.

I ought to have been gladdened by that letter, but instead I was dejected, because in spite of the fiction editor's notes to me, the necessary skills and discipline of revision were not yet mine, and I hadn't the slightest notion of how to make my flawed and unfinished story any better than it was. And I found myself wondering if I wasn't kidding myself about my talent and wasting my time in a foolish and vainglorious pursuit.

And then a picture flashed in my mind for just a fraction of a second. It was there and then, instantly, it was not. But I was sure that God favored me with a foretaste of the future, for what I fleetingly glimpsed was a page in a magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek* and a few inches of a column that was indisputably a book review. I couldn't read the book's title or any other words on that page, but I knew with rock certainty that the book being reviewed was by me. With that one look, major questions were answered, a critical juncture, perhaps, was passed, and I was flooded with feelings of calm and bliss and purposefulness.

Some writers are agnostic and have as their religion art, but just a *many are conscious that the source of their gifts is God* and have found thanksgiving, worship, and praise of the Holy Being to be central to their lives and artistic practice.

Writing on vocatin in *Magister Ludi*, the great German novelist Herman Hesse noted, "There are many types and kinds of call, but the core of the experience is always the same: your soul is awakened, transformed, or exalted, so that instead of dreams and presentiments from within, a summons comes from without, a portion of reality presents itself and makes a claim."

I have discovered in late night conversations that many of my friends have had profound experiences of God's hand, God's voice, God's solace, God's gentle invitation. But how often are those experiences written about? And yet they are as important, indelible, and real as anything else that happens to us. Catholic writers may principally differ from others in their heightened awareness of the unseen but ineluctable foundation of one is hotly in pursuit of the real especially when writing about the substance of things hoped for.



**Ron Hansen**

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.,

#### ENDNOTES

1 Alice McDermott. "Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic," *Commonweal* (February 11, 2000).

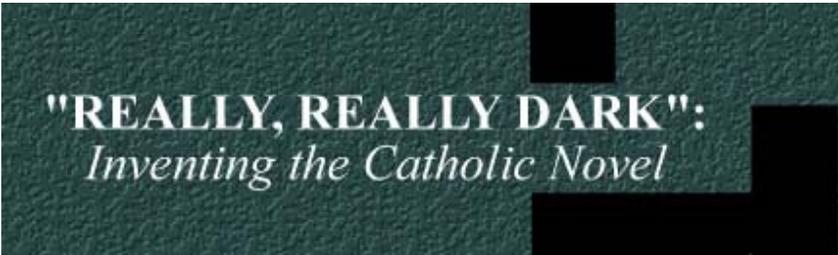
2 James Carrol. *An American Requiem: God, My Father and the War that Came Between Us* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

3 Andre Dubus. *Broken Vessels*, with an introduction by Tobias Wolff (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1991), xv

4 Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and manners*, selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 175.

5 Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Patrick Samway, S.J. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), 178.

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**"REALLY, REALLY DARK":**  
*Inventing the Catholic Novel*

**BY STEPHEN SCHLOESSER, S.J.**

*Fellow, The Bannan Center for Jesuit Education, Santa Clara University*

"We must," he thought, "retain the documentary veracity, the precision of detail, the compact and sinewy language of realism, but we must also dig down into the soul and cease trying to explain mystery in terms of our sick senses. If possible the novel ought to be compounded of two elements, that of the soul and that of the body, and these ought to be inextricably bound together as in life. . . In a word, we must follow the road laid out once and for all by Zola, but at the same time we must trace a parallel route in the air by which we may go above and beyond. . . . A spiritual naturalism!"

-J.-K. Huysmans, *Down There [Là-bas]* (1891)<sup>1</sup>

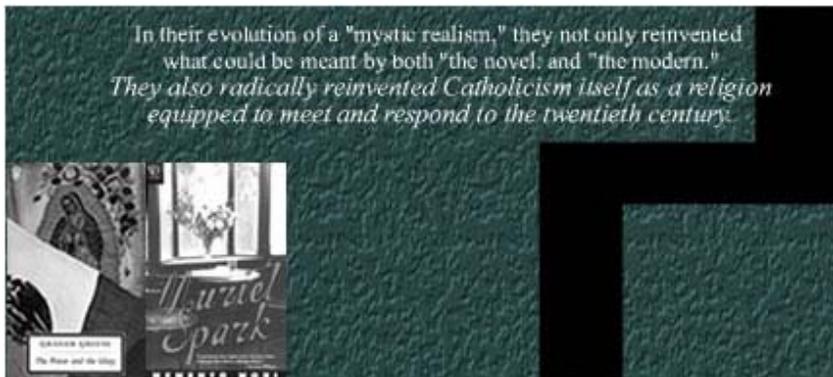
to bear in her womb  
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry  
in hidden, finite inwardness,  
nine months of Eternity . . .  
-Denise Levertov, "Annunciation"<sup>2</sup>

In a recent interview with *Notre Dame Magazine*, the Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard mischievously remarked, "When you read Catholic writers everything is really, really dark."<sup>3</sup> One needs only to have read some of Dillard's own work-Holy the Firm or "Expedition to the Pole" or *For the Time Being*-to see those words as self-description. Indeed, after the appearance of her essay "The Wreck of Time,"<sup>4</sup> readers of *Harper's Magazine* sent letters to the editor assaulting her "nihilism," "dismal inventory of human insignificance," and a vision "impossibly pessimistic, dualistic, and untrue."<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, the darkness perceived in such writing is due directly to the Catholic principle of sacramentality that informs these literary productions. As my students inevitably ask when introduced to such twentieth-century Catholic imaginations, "If this is supposed to be a religion of faith and hope, then why so much darkness?" This is an excellent question to which I, as a cultural historian, try to respond historically by tracing the development of the sacramental idea in modern times.

After nearly a hundred years of reading them, we see nothing unusual about what have been called "Catholic novels"-what Iris Murdoch, preserving the French usage, called "mystical novels."<sup>6</sup> But as late as 1920-when one French literary critic wrote, "the Catholic novel seems as difficult to realize as a squared circle"-the hybrid "Catholic novel" was considered an oxymoron. The literary genre of the novel, by self-definition, was a "realist" or "naturalist" form designed to convey "realist" content-and that meant the materialist, often "ugly," and definitely "modern" truths of Darwinism and Progress. The qualifier "Catholic," on the other hand, implied a vision that was "supernaturalist" by definition-and that meant an ideology "anti-modern" in its opposition to the great nineteenth-century forces of science, secularization, and disenchantment.

Catholic writers, if they were to gain a cultural niche, needed to reformulate the traditional "sacramental" vision as a supernaturalism that could accommodate "really, really dark" naturalist truths. In their evolution of a "mystic realism," they not only reinvented what could be meant by both "the novel" and "the modern." They also radically reinvented Catholicism itself as a religion equipped to meet and respond to the twentieth century.



### The Problem of the Supernatural



Imagine yourself in the second half of the nineteenth century. Karl Marx has theorized that all of human life is a violent struggle between social classes, and realist painters depict those violent conflicts at the barricades, delighting in detailed precision. Charles Darwin has just proposed that all of life itself-not just human life-is a violent competition between species and races for top dog. Weakest links die out while overmen survive. Realist painters develop a method of representing the "reality" of this dark life with as much imitation and verisimilitude as possible. Christian

Krohg's 1880 painting of *The Sick Girl*, for example, strikes us as uncanny in its almost photographic ability to capture all the grotesque details of the moment with a journalistic precision. Indeed, the invention of photography joins up with improved methods of mass-printing in order to make tabloid journalism possible, filled with lurid naturalist images. On the front page of one French daily newspaper, the painfully accurate picture of the bruised corpse of a little girl found abandoned on the rue du Vert-Bois helps boost circulation. Then as today, "spectacular realities" sell.<sup>7</sup>

This kind of realism joined hands with anti-Catholic politics and forms a powerful ideology that sustains the anti-clerical nation-states of the late nineteenth century. But Evolution—for it could be summed up in one word—was a curiously ambivalent attitude toward reality. As the historian Jacques Barzun once wrote of this "logic of progress," "All events had physical origins; physical origins were discoverable by science; and the method of science alone could, by revealing the nature of things, make the mechanical sequences of the universe beneficent to man. Fatalism and progress were as closely linked as the Heavenly Twins and like them invincible."<sup>8</sup> Realism might be "progressive," but it was an inevitable Progress—a determined world devoid of the possibility of both human freedom and indeterminacy as well as of supernatural existence, let alone free providential intervention ("grace"). Against this backdrop, how was 19th-century Catholicism going to advance its own vision? Namely, that the supernatural is not yet finished—that there is Providence in the world, "grace," the possibility of surprise, rupture, even reversal?



Christian Krohg,  
*The Sick Girl* (1880-81)



"Le mystère de la rue du Vert-Bois," from *Le Journal Illustré*, August 15, 1886. The corpse of a four year old girl found in a stairwell at 47, rue du Vert-Bois is displayed on the front page. See Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities* (University of California Press, 1998, p. 77.)



Grotto Of Lourdes during the Grand Prayers, August 20-23, from *Le Pelerin*, September 4, 1880. See Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999), 263.



"Death was already preparing a shroud, but Notre-Dame de Lourdes restores life." *Le Pelerin*, September 1, 1895. In this engraving, the figure of death in the lower right corner releases its grip on the woman who lets go of her crutches in a "supplication" pose to the Virgin Mary.

One of the most famous Catholic images of the last half of the century was Lourdes. Here, the faithful believed that the inexorable laws of Nature could be reversed over and over again. If you took the newly-invented railroad trains to this particular place of pilgrimage, and if you went into this water in this concrete place and time, you could be-partly by merit, partly by grace-healed. You could defy Nature.

Devotions to Marian apparitions such as this were popular throughout that century and into the next.<sup>9</sup> And yet they posed a problem for intellectuals and artists striving to believe-for these devotions could quite easily degenerate into a melodrama that does not satisfy. Here, for example, the woman leaving behind her crutches is being fought over by absolute Good and Evil-an apocalyptic struggle between the Virgin and Satan-light and darkness, health and sickness, life and death.

The melodramatic or Manichean imagination is not a sacramental one. It cannot mourn and hence it cannot hope.<sup>10</sup> It might represent an

act of healing that comes from without, but it is an escape from a created world that cannot heal and of whose finitude we despair. Melodrama is a vision we substitute after the world has been emptied of the sacred.<sup>11</sup> How can we represent the Supernatural-our conviction that there is more to the world than Nature-without sentimentality, melodrama, or kitsch? This was a problem for Catholics who wanted to be "modern"-i.e., "realist"-at the turn of the century. The Novel: both "realist" and "modern" Naturalism was modern; supernaturalism was anti-modern-this was the nineteenth-century dualism. And nothing was so modern (and hence disenchanted) as the novel. A linear narrative, it told tales-not, as earlier genres had, of Oedipus, Antigone, Christ, virgin martyrs, Beowulf, Parsifal, knights, or damsels in distress. The novel focused on ordinary people in everyday circumstances, and those circumstances were usually really, really dark.<sup>12</sup> In France, Gustave Flaubert's 1857 *Madame Bovary* stood as the high water mark of the realist genre, and his description of Dr. Bovary's botched attempt to surgically correct a club foot is unforgettable:

. . . an awful spectacle came into view. The outlines of the foot disappeared in such a swelling that the entire skin seemed about to burst; moreover, the leg was covered with bruises caused by the famous machine. . . . A livid tumescence spread over the entire leg, and a black liquid oozed from several blisters. Things had taken a turn for the worst.<sup>13</sup>

When Madame Bovary swallowed poison in order to escape both her passionless marriage to the incompetent doctor and her illicit passion for her lover, the effects were ghastly:

Drops of sweat oozed from her face, that had turned blue and rigid as under the effect of a metallic vapor. Her teeth chattered, her dilated eyes looked vaguely about her . . . She soon began vomiting blood. Her lips became drawn. Her limbs were convulsed, her whole body covered with brown spots, and her pulse slipped beneath the fingers like a stretched thread, like a harp-string about to break. After this she began to scream horribly.<sup>14</sup>

The novel ends with a marvelous representation of Religion struggling with Science: the Catholic priest, Bournisien, and the pharmacist, Homais, in the room with the corpse of Madame Bovary, engaged in their respective and opposed rituals of purification: "Monsieur Bournisien sprinkled the room with holy water and

Homais threw a little chlorine on the floor."15

After the publication of Darwin's 1859 *Origin of Species*, realism evolved into "naturalism" as it became more embedded in biological emphases on evolution and heredity. In his epic, twenty-volume study of the fortunes of a single family under the Second Empire, the *Chronicles of the Rougon-Macquart Family*, Émile Zola wanted to show how life obeyed the ironclad laws of heredity. "It is especially important that I remain a naturalist, a physiologist," he wrote. "It will suffice to be a scientist, to describe what is by searching for what lies underneath. No conclusion, moreover. A simple exposé of the facts of a family showing the inner mechanism that makes it run."16 Among other social ills, his novels investigated alcoholism (*L'Assomoir*, 1877)17, prostitution (*Nana*, 1880)18, and even kleptomania (*The Ladies' Paradise*, 1883)19 with the realist precision of a journalist.

The supreme example of the naturalist novel was Zola's *Germinal* (1885). In this relentless story about the misery endured by coal miners—a story of poverty, illness, greed, and oppression—Nature worked out its inexorable causal necessity, grinding down humans at every turn. As if life hadn't been bad enough for the first four hundred pages, toward the end of the novel the mine threatens to flood, snuffing out the short miserable lives of those trapped in it. A wax diorama at the Musée Grévin strove to capture the gruesomeness of this final scene.20 Here, frozen in timeless wax, Étienne and Catherine stand next to the body of Chaval (whom they have just murdered). Not far from the corpse, they are about to engage in sexual intercourse for one last time, a final moment of instinctual pleasure before Nature reclaims them. Zola's universe was both Darwinian and Marxist: huge unseen forces of society and nature colluded to make human lives seem as miserable and ultimately insignificant as possible.



Tableau from *Germinal*, Musée Grévin archives. See Schwartz, *Realities*, p. 123.

Zola was heavily influenced by another fin-de-siècle movement: psychology.

Jean-Martin Charcot (at whose feet Freud himself studied) had invented the "hysteria" diagnosis. A deliberately anti-religious rhetoric, psychology looked at what might seem to be "supernatural" on the surface and diagnosed it as a purely neurological, i.e., "natural" disorder. Charcot used



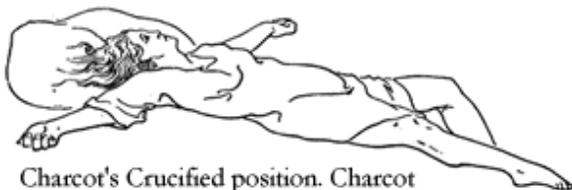
Charcot's model Augustine demonstrates the Supplication pose for the scientist's camera. Desire-Magliore Bourneville, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (2 volumes), (Paris: Aux bureaux du Progrès médical, V.A. Delahaye & Compagnie, 1877-78).



Charcot's Supplication position. J.-M. Charcot and Paul Richer, *Les démoniques dans l'art*, fifth edition (Paris: Delahaye & Lecrosnier, 1887).

photography and his model Augustine in order to put a realistic face on the figure of the grand hysterical seizures he had sketched. In his version of "supplication," the parody of the Lourdes position was obvious while the parody of Christ in the "crucifixion" pose was self-evident. Charcot produced a famous book in which artistic paintings of demonic possession and religious ecstasy throughout the ages were juxtaposed with his own iconography—Bernini's "Ecstasy of St. Teresa," for example, was reinterpreted as an example of neurotic hysterical eruption.21 Charcot's and Zola's fundamental point was plain: all causes are

material causes. What some consider to be "supernatural" can always be explained in naturalist terms.



Charcot's Crucified position. Charcot and Richer, *Les démoniques dans l'art*.

Out-grotesquing  
the grotesque:  
Joris-Karl Huysmans



Augustine demonstrates the Crucifixion pose.  
Bourneville, Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière.

Joris-Karl Huysmans stands as the great-grandfather of twentieth-century Catholic Revivalism. Huysmans, a disciple of Zola, decided to completely up-end his master by means both deceptively simple and yet quite revolutionary. Dabbling in Satanism and diabolism, he represented the figure of the hysteric as the great unknown. Perhaps, as the phenomenon of autographism (where the skin, much like a Ouija board, writes an important message for us on itself) would suggest, the hysterical body tells us herself that she is an example of Nature's neurological malfunction. But perhaps again, as in a competing example of autographism (where Satan identifies himself in a surface eruption, much as on Regan's stomach in *The Exorcist*), hysterical symptoms point rather to

supernatural causes. The devilish beauty of hysteria for Huysmans was that we can't prove which is which because we have no access to the underlying causes. The female body became the battleground for two opposing visions of the ultimate reality of the world.<sup>22</sup> The hysteric's grotesque symptoms were the same, but the underlying causes could be either naturalist or supernaturalist-and it was this uncertainty that allowed Huysmans to play Zola against himself.

This ambivalence led to what I consider to be the most significant trait of twentieth-century Catholic literature, namely: the supernaturalists will take the grotesquerie of the naturalists and make them even more grotesque. And yet they will draw the opposite conclusion from this ugliness: you show me the world as ugly as you can, and I will conclude that there are deep, mysterious, occult, forces at work in it. A naturalist concludes from the grotesque that the world is nihilist, meaningless; but a supernaturalist draws the opposite conclusion from the same data: there is more going on than what we can see. Hence Huysmans considered German Renaissance painter Grünewald as the ideal religious artist: he described the hysterical symptoms erupting on Christ's body in revolting detail and then forced the viewer to wonder: what is really going on here?<sup>23</sup>



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1645-52 [detail]. In the Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

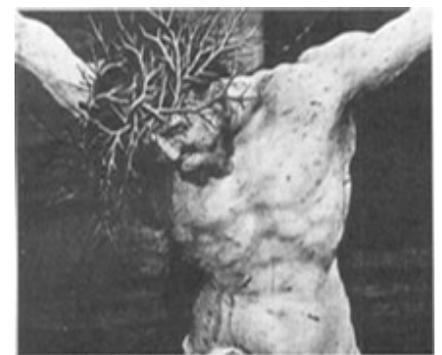
### **The Protagonist as Polluted Figure**

The discussion of the grotesque leads to a more general conclusion: in Catholic Revivalist literature, the protagonist is never a sentimental or melodramatic embodiment of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Quite the opposite. If we think in anthropological terms of the ways in which we tend to divide the world into the pure and the polluted, then we might say: the protagonist is always a polluted figure.<sup>24</sup> Ambiguously so, of course, just like the hysteric: he or she might be simply polluted. But then again, he or she might be the privileged site of divine transformation. Here are five examples:

1) François Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927). The title heroine is inspired-divinely so? -by a Jewish quasi-mystical figure (the Jew being a polluted type in postwar right-wing circles) to escape her suffocating bourgeois marriage and go on a search for God. She poisons her husband and leaves for Paris. Evil? Or divine inspiration?

2) Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*. The poor country priest, a complete pastoral failure, it seems, is always intoxicated because he drinks wine constantly to settle his stomach (which, unbeknownst to him, has a cancerous tumor that will kill him. Truly Zola-esque!) "All is grace," he says famously at the end. And we are meant to ask: Oh, really?

3) Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (1940). The Whiskey Priest goes one step further than his country cousin: the sexual act that produced his illegitimate daughter is the primary means of grace that leads him to



Matthias Grunewald, *The Crucifixion*, 1512-16. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

redemption. "When I was innocent, I had no compassion," he says. But having seen his daughter, he is overwhelmed by "an irrational affection" for his fellow creatures.

4) Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (1951). Here, Sarah-described by Greene with the word "hysterical" over and over again-is led to a love of God by her adulterous love for Bendrix. Adultery: a privileged conduit of grace?

5) Flannery O'Connor, "Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1954). The most effective symbol O'Connor could come up with for the double-aspect of the Eucharist, both bread and Christ, was a hermaphrodite cruelly put on display in a traveling circus. The shock-value of O'Connor's image hit home: she deliberately draws the parallel between the circus tent and a monstrosity-one displays the hermaphrodite, both male and female; the other displays the Eucharist, both natural and supernatural.

A "sacramental" imagination

The image of the bi-natured Eucharist brings me to a final point: a twentieth-century Catholic imagination is a "sacramental" imagination. A "sacrament" in the tradition consists of two things: the sacramentum, or the "sign," and the res, or the "reality." This ancient vision inverts the naturalist's world. For the naturalist, what we see-matter-is the real; for the sacramentalist, what we see-matter-is not the real but rather a sign-sacramentum-that both points to and carries a deeper uncreated reality.

After Marx and Darwin, created matter led to only one conclusion: we are lost in the cosmos. We are pawns at the mercy of the universe, and the grotesque factual data of life infallibly point to this nihilistic conclusion. Catholic orthodoxy attempted to respond with sheer supernaturalism, but in the face of such ugliness, representations such as Lourdes could seem untrue-sentimental, melodramatic, or kitsch.

Catholic Literary Revivalists, initially considered heterodox, turned the tables: created matter, no matter how prone to "passions," must be seen as somehow graced. A murderous hysterical wife; an ineffectual wine-sodden priest; a whiskey priest and his illegitimate daughter; a torrid affair; a bi-gendered circus show-these polluted figures are the created matter that both point to and bear the uncreated.

These polluted figures: are they truly inspired? Or are they just neurologically disturbed? It was precisely the indeterminacy-and thus the possibility and mystery-of their pollution that made them capable of being "modern sacraments." Modern in the sense that they granted the realists' contention: the created world can be a harsh world. Sacraments in the sense that even this often harsh creation is, as Karl Rahner once wrote, "the material of a possible history of God."<sup>25</sup> When you read Catholic writers, you read both realists-everything will be really, really dark-as well as anti-realists-the darkness is radically undetermined. Never fatalistic, creation remains ever open to an irreducible and inscrutable mystery.

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## ENDNOTES

1 Joris-Karl Huysmans. *Là-Bas* (Down There), Keene Wallace trans. (Paris, 1928; New York: Dover, 1972), 10.

2 Denise Levertov. *A Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions, 1989), 86-88.

3 *Notre Dame Magazine* (Fall-Winter 1999-2000).

4 Annie Dillard. "The wreck of time. Taking our century's measure," *Harper's Magazine* (January 1998), 51-56.



5 See letter of Mary Korbolic to Editor: "Dillard cannot be expected to reassure adult readers of a sophisticated magazine carrying advertisements with snob appeal that just because we're alive, we matter. As she points out, most people who've lived are already dead-and what do we know or care about them? . . . Her dismal inventory of human significance-the long view-leads to but one conclusion: Why bother?" Letter of Jan Venolia to Editor: "If we adopt Dillard's nihilism . . . we will deserve whatever happens tomorrow." Letter of Paul Shippee to Editor: "But to arrive at the end of Annie Dillard's questionable array of shocking numbers and be confronted with the unctuous comment that 'the might of the universe is arrayed against us' seems impossibly pessimistic, dualistic, and untrue. We are part of the universe, and, if anything, we are arrayed against ourselves." *Harper's Magazine* (April 1998), 6.

6 Iris Murdoch. "Existentialists and Mystics." *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

7 Vanessa R. Schwartz. *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

8 Jacques Barzun. *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (1941) 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 322.

9 See three excellent recent works on Marian apparitions in the modern period: David Blackbourn, *Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-century Germany* (1993) (New York: Knopf, 1994); Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking Press, 1999); and William A. Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

10 Martin Jay. "The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Inability to Mourn." *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84-98; William F. Lynch. *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (1965) (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974); Wendell Berry. *What are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

11 Peter Brooks. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976) (Yale University Press, 1995).

12 Representative essays of realists from both sides of the Atlantic may be found collected in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, George J. Becker ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

13 Gustave Flaubert. *Madame Bovary*, Paul de Man ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1965), 129.

14 *Ibid.*, 231; 233.

15 *Ibid.*, 244.

16 Frederick Brown. *Zola: A Life* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 188-9. Zola's most likely American Naturalist counterpart would have been Theodore Dreiser.

17 "In the second half of the century, what Jean Borie has called 'mythologies of heredity' were developed by physicians and novelists (such as the Zola of *Fécondité* and *Docteur Pascal*), by fear of the great 'social scourges'-tuberculosis, alcoholism, and syphilis-and by terror of flaws transmitted by tainted blood. Because of these hereditary weaknesses the family came to be seen as a weak link to be protected from danger through constant vigilance. Chastity was recommended, even to young men, whose escapades had once been tolerated as a mark of virility, while young women were required to remain virgins." Michelle Perrot. "The Family Triumphant." *A History of Private Life. Vol. IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 124. See Jean Borie, *Mythologies de l'hérédité au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

18 T. J. Clark. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), esp. 79-146; Timothy J. Gilfoyle. "Prostitutes in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity." *American Historical Review*, vol. 104, no. 1 (Feb. 1999), 117-41.

19 On associations of late-century consumption with hysteria and women's compulsions to shop see Patricia O'Brien, "The Kleptomania Diagnosis: Bourgeois Women and Theft in Late 19th-c. France," *Journal of Social History* 17 (Fall 1983), 65-77; and Leslie Camhi, "Stealing Femininity: Department Store Kleptomania as Sexual Disorder," *Differences* 5 (1993), 26-50.

20 As *L'Illustration* noted, the new museum's wax figures were "the triumph of Naturalism." *L'Illustration*, 10 December 1881; in Schwartz, *Realities*, 121. The wax representation hoped to be worthy of its ultra-realist subject matter. "Here is a real mine shaft," reported *L'Illustration* on January 2, 1886, "black and deep with pieces of real coal and its timbers that were taken from the depths of the shafts at Anzin. Everything is of the most exact nature. . . . As we already said, all is real . . . the timbers, the lamps, the tools, right down to the clothing that is worn by real miners." As the museum's founder had promised Zola in a letter, "The Musée Grévin will be naturalist or will not be." Letter from Grévin to Zola, 6 July 1881; both in Schwartz, *Realities*, 123; 122.

21 J.-M. Charcot and Paul Richer. *Les démoniaques dans l'art* (Paris: Delahaye et Lecrosnier, 1887).

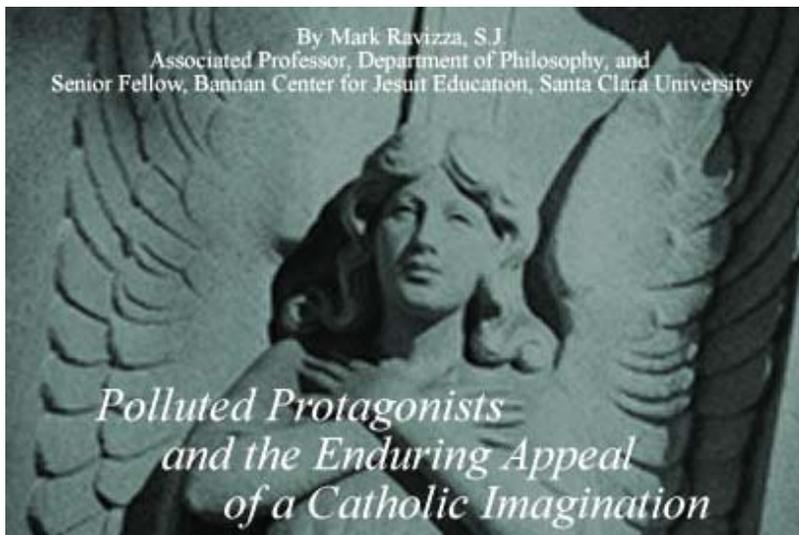
22 Cristina Mazzoni. *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

23 Ellis Hanson. *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 108-168.

24 Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

25 Karl Rahner. "On the Theology of the Incarnation." *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV, Kevin Smyth trans. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 115.

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Historians love facts; philosophers love questions. As a historian, Stephen Schloesser masterfully assembled a collection of facts to explain the invention of the Catholic novel. As a philosopher, I want to raise some questions about this account, questions that I hope will help us relate Schloesser's provocative narrative to our own time.

According to Schloesser, a twentieth-century Catholic imagination emerges in response to a particular challenge. Put baldly, nineteenth-century naturalism had reduced reality to observable phenomena governed by causal laws, and such a view left little room for the supernatural, for grace, and for God. In response to this challenge, supernaturalists developed what Schloesser takes to "be the most significant trait of twentieth-century Catholic literature."<sup>2</sup> They sought to "out-grotesque the grotesque"-to show that behind even the ugliest hysterical phenomenon there could be mysterious, supernatural forces at work. This approach led to a uniquely modern form of a sacramental imagination, one in which the protagonist is always a polluted figure. In Schloesser's view, such polluted figures (like Mauriac's Thérèse or Greene's Whiskey Priest) raised the question: "Are they truly inspired? Or are they just neurologically disturbed?"<sup>3</sup> And "it was precisely [this] indeterminacy . . . that made them capable of being 'modern sacraments.'"<sup>4</sup>

Some Questions: Then and Now?

Schloesser's account insightfully explains why the Catholic novel with its polluted protagonist developed at a particular time and place. Yet, this explanation also raises a question. For, if a twentieth-century Catholic imagination developed specifically as an answer to the quite particular challenge of nineteenth-century naturalism, then mustn't we ask if we face a similar challenge today? On the one hand, it might seem that we do. Certainly the quest for clarity and causal control that animated nineteenth-century naturalism continues to find expression in our own culture. Yet in a deeper sense, the images amassed by Schloesser remind us that we live in a very different time and place. We post-moderns live in a world not of foundational explanations, but of interpretations and perspectives. We struggle to understand chaos theory, not Newtonian determinism. We are haunted by randomness and contingency, not causal necessity. And this distances us quite a bit from our naturalist predecessors.

Noting the difference between our context and theirs prompts a further question: If the problem to which this polluted protagonist was an answer has changed, why has the image perdured? According to Schloesser's analysis, the initial appeal of this figure was that the indeterminacy of his or her polluted condition challenged

the disenchantment of naturalism; it raised the possibility that the supernatural might be at work in the darkness of what appeared to be inexorable natural forces. But if we are no longer troubled by natural necessity in the way that our turn-of-the-century ancestors were, why does this figure continue to attract us?

That this character still does capture our imagination is clearly evinced by its continued popularity in film and literature: Ron Hansen's Mariette in *Ecstasy*, Percy Talbott from the film, *Spitfire Grill*, Lars von Trier's heroines Bess, in *Breaking the Waves*, and Selma, in *Dancer in the Dark*, are all recent examples of hysteric or polluted figures who become living symbols of grace and redemption. Of course, one might explain this ongoing fascination by appealing to the power of literary influence—O'Connor and Greene read Mauriac and Bernanos, and Ron Hansen read them all. But such a simple genetic account is unsatisfying to say the least.

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### **The Dangerous Tendency to Sentimentalize**

Perhaps a clue to the enduring attraction of these figures is found if we turn to a different question raised by Schloesser's talk: "How can we represent the Supernatural—our conviction that there is more to the world than Nature—without sentimentality, melodrama, or kitsch?"<sup>5</sup> The images Schloesser shared from Lourdes remind us how easily a religious world-view degenerates into a sentimental vision that neatly separates good from evil, light from dark, suffering from redemption. Catholic writers of the early twentieth century clearly saw this tendency, and their use of polluted figures as sacramental images arose, in part, from the desire to avoid such kitsch. Yet, if we acknowledge this "tendency to sentimentalize" in the past, shouldn't we ask what we might be sentimentalizing in the present? In particular I wonder if we have not domesticated our contemporary Catholic imagination, turning it into precisely the sort of kitsch a sacramental vision once sought to avoid.

Two quick examples can illustrate this concern. In an article entitled "The Church Is 'Catholic' Because It's Sacramental," Richard McBrien asks what is distinctively Catholic about Catholicism. He answers that it is the commitment to the principle of sacramentality—the view that the whole created order is sacred because it is a visible sign of the invisible reality of God. He waxes eloquently that "there is no limit to the principle's application. The whole of creation is a theater of divine glory."<sup>6</sup> McBrien goes on to claim that although there may be long-faced Catholics, such sadness or sorrow is the result of a deficient sacramental imagination. Indeed, he insists, "There are no long faces where there is a truly sacramental faith."<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, Andrew Greeley contends in his recent book, *The Catholic Imagination*, that "Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, rosary beads, and holy pictures."<sup>8</sup>

Greeley's work develops the theme of God's omnipresent closeness to our world in chapters with titles like "The Enchanted Imagination," "Sacred Desire," and "The Mother Love of God." There is no mention of the Cross; rather, Greeley focuses on how Catholics "tend to picture God, creation, the world, society, and themselves the way their great artists do—as drenched with grace."<sup>9</sup> He interprets contemporary art with a polluted protagonist like Lars von Trier's Bess (from *Breaking the Waves*) as "a fable, a parable, of grace superabundant, of a loving God who stands by us always, just as he promised Bess he would do."<sup>10</sup> Greeley sums up his work with the confident assurance that "the enchanted imagination is alive and well . . . sacraments, community, and Mary—what more could you want?"<sup>11</sup>

And perhaps this suggests why polluted protagonists continue to inspire us. For not only are they sacraments pointing to a transcendent reality, but also *they provide Christic images for us, images of people who go through the finite, sacrifice for love, endure the Cross, and in so doing, ultimately give us hope.*

There is something missing here. Any Catholic imagination has to grapple with the double gratuity of creation and incarnation. Yet given the "enchanted world" described by McBrien and Greeley, one wonders why the

Paschal Mystery would even be necessary in such a grace-filled place. Who needs a savior if "the whole of creation is [already] a theater of divine glory?" Surely both these authors are correct to insist that grace abounds in creation. Creation is good. But creation also stands in need of redemption. And this poses a unique challenge for a Catholic imagination that wants to emphasize not the distance between God and the world, but the closeness—the presence of God in all things: How can such a sacramental vision duly accommodate the reality of suffering and evil? This is a large question, one that I cannot hope to answer fully here. But since this is a discussion on Jesuit humanism

m, let me gesture in the direction of an answer found in the Ignatian tradition.

### Polluted Protagonists and a Christic Imagination

Ignatian spirituality is an approach to transcendence rooted in a staunch incarnationalism, where wisdom begins in recognition of divine enmeshment with the world, and a correlative human love for the world . . . . But this very incarnationalism, shot through with a certain optimism about the human project, . . . is also soberly realistic about the human condition and its involvement in the harsh realities of sin and death. The spirituality of Ignatius finds this realism only in a person's keen identification with the Cross, in an acquaintance with the suffering and death that mark the demise of every creaturely life . . . . In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, transcendence is directly tied to a full-throttle encounter with the reality of life as it is, because this is the only authentic path to promise and hope.<sup>12</sup>

The truth of a sacramental imagination—that all reality is imbued with the hidden presence of God—needs to be complemented with what William Lynch has called a Christic imagination, an imagination that sees the life of Christ, especially the Cross, as a model of the fullest human life we can lead—a life poured out in love for one another. Such a Christic imagination urges us to imitate the lesson of the incarnation, to embrace the limited, finite reality of our lives, trusting that this will lead us to the salvation we seek. As Lynch writes:

This path is both narrow and direct; it leads, I believe, straight through our human realities, through our labor, our disappointments, our friends, our game legs, our harvests, our subjection to time. There are no shortcuts to beauty or insight. . . . We waste our time if we try to go around or above the definite; we must literally go through it.<sup>13</sup>

As I ponder the enduring appeal of polluted protagonists in Catholic literature, I wonder if these figures continue to speak to us, not because their indeterminacy poses a challenge to naturalism, but rather because their stories, in some sense, capture the love, loss, and redemption of this Christic imagination.

To illustrate this suggestion, let me close with an example. In his novel, *Lying Awake*, Mark Salzman tells the story of a Carmelite nun, Sister John of the Cross. For much of her life, Sister John struggles with the ordinary dryness, drudgery, and doubt of any religious. Then one day she begins to have mystical visions, visions that reveal God's love in all things. She publishes the insights of her spiritual ecstasies and becomes a best-selling author, giving hope to many. All is well until she discovers that perhaps the visions have been caused by a small brain tumor. The question she thinks she must now confront is one that would have delighted Schloesser's Huysmans and Charcot: Is she divinely inspired? Or is she simply neurologically disturbed?

Things come to a head when her visions and seizures begin to disrupt life in the convent. Sister John embarks on an all-night vigil to discern what to do. As the night wears on, she is alone in the chapel, struggling to stay awake, falling into despair when suddenly a hand touches her shoulder. It is Mother Mary Joseph, the Living Rule, and the oldest member of the convent. She signs, "I watch for you. Rest." Her presence encourages and revives Sister John. "They become like two life rafts lashed together on the sea,"<sup>14</sup> writes Salzman. Hope returns. Then, as suddenly as she arrived, the Living Rule rises and leaves. Once again, Sister John is left alone, plunged into confusion and doubt. But not for long.

Footsteps approached the choir. The Living Rule returned to her stall holding a candle, followed by Mother

Emmanuel. Within a few minutes the entire community, all holding candles, rallied to keep watch with Sister John. Their presence turned night into day, midnight sun at the end of the earth. Nothing was said, but the message was clear: a sister might feel lost, but she was never alone.<sup>15</sup>

This experience makes Sister John realize that she had been preoccupied with the wrong question. It didn't really matter whether the visions were caused by the tumor or God (working through the tumor). What mattered was that she had failed to love and care for her sisters; she had not even considered how her seizures were destroying the community. She realizes now that the tumor must be removed.

What is striking about the account is how this image of the polluted protagonist redefines what is at stake in these stories. In contrast to the hysterics Schloesser discussed, what is important about Sister John is not that her body is a battleground for two opposing visions of ultimate reality. It doesn't really matter whether she is divinely inspired or neurologically disturbed; in the end, this issue is completely set aside. What finally matters is how she chooses to sacrifice out of love for her sisters. And perhaps this suggests why polluted protagonists continue to inspire us. For not only are they sacraments pointing to a transcendent reality, but also they provide Christic images for us, images of people who go through the finite, sacrifice for love, endure the Cross, and in so doing, ultimately give us hope.



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#### ENDNOTES

1 These remarks followed Stephen Schloesser's presentation "Inventing the Catholic Novel," and were given as part of a panel discussion on "The Catholic Imagination: Faith and Modernism" at Santa Clara University's conference Jesuit Humanism: Faith, Justice, and Empiricism in the Liberal Arts, May 5, 2001.

2 Stephen Schloesser, S.J. "Inventing the Catholic Novel." *Explore*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 9-19.

3 *Ibid.*, 16.

4 *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

5 *Ibid.*, 12.

6 Richard P. McBrien. "The Church Is 'Catholic' Because It's Sacramental." *National Catholic Reporter* (January 15, 1993), 26.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Andrew M. Greeley. *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

9 *Ibid.*, 168.

10 *Ibid.*, 166.

11 *Ibid.*, 185.

12 Paul Crowley, S.J. "Education, the Cross, and the Violence of Love: Girardian Perspectives on a Spirituality for Jesuit Education" (Unpublished).

13 William F. Lynch, S.J. *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 7.

14 Mark Salzman. *Lying Awake* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 141.

15 Ibid., 142.

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# FAITH AND THEATER:*Colleagues Enchanting the World*

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*Catholics live in an enchanted world...[W]e find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.*

-ANDREW M. GREELEY, *The Catholic Imagination*

Having grown up in an Italian-American family, I am very much at home with Greeley's observation that the Catholic imagination transforms the ordinary world into a world of wonders. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and Mother Cabrini shared shelf space with family photographs, palms from last year's Holy Week, pressed rose petals from the feast of St. Rita of Cascia, and a variety of wedding favors. These juxtapositions communicated to me that all of us-saints and sinners, living and dead, young and old-shared the same reality. Our Sunday and holiday dinners sounded like Rossini opera ensembles with people talking over one another with astonishing speed and volume. More than anything else, the action of preparing and sharing the food bound us together in a deeper communion than the words of our conversations and arguments would ever suggest. The "catholicity" of our home was rarely, if ever, manifest in positional statements regarding either religious or social issues; rather it was apparent in our ways of seeing and being in the world.

The theater has always felt like home to me. It too is a place of sensual symbols, communicative actions, heightened language, and deep communion. I suspect that this familiarity derives from the fact that the theatrical and Catholic imaginations trade in the same goods. ***Indeed, I believe that faith and theater act as colleagues in the process of enchanting the world.***

The relationship between my Catholic and Jesuit identity on the one hand and my work in the theater on the other is not always obvious. It has little to do with proselytizing or catechizing through drama. I do not choose, in other words, to direct, to perform in, or to teach work whose content is overtly confessional. The connection between my religious and theatrical identities reveals itself much more powerfully in the way I encounter and know the world.

In the first place, both my religious and theatrical experiences are essentially integrative. When I teach acting, when I direct a play, when I perform in a piece, I understand that theatrical performance aims at integrating the physical, the intellectual, the psychological, the affective. In a technological society that often fragments human living, the theater insists on exploring physicality, intellect, psychology, and affect so as to discover their connection to the wellspring of energy that bubbles beneath them all. An actor explores her body, her thoughts, her memories, her emotions; the exploration is sometimes heartening, at other times difficult. The theatrical process creates a space to let critical issues surface, but not simply for the sake of self-improvement. The aim of the exploration is the seasoning of the actor's instrument, making it more flexible and deepening its power to communicate effectively.

Religious experience aims at a similar kind of integration. In the best of times, my spiritual life, my search for God's presence, is not one "slice of life" among many other slices. Rather, it proves the integrating principle, the wellspring that feeds all the other pools connected to it and that is itself deepened by the activity of those

different pools. My commitment to the life of faith involves me in religious experience that integrates the physical, intellectual, psychological, and affective. Like the actor's instrument, the instrument of faith is tuned not just for its own sake but for the sake of others. Theater and faith enchant the world by offering it opportunities for synthesis.

In this era of e-mail, cell phones, and chat rooms, human communication tends toward the disembodied. In contrast, theater is necessarily physical communication. The bodies of performers move, speak, and sing in the presence of the bodies of spectators. *The immediate exchange of energy among the participants in a theatrical moment creates the possibility of communion*-a kind of communion not possible in television or film. I cannot help but approach such a moment with a Catholic sense of sacramentality. Communion with God and with other human beings is, for me, concrete and sensual. The sacramental moment creates the possibility of experiencing God in the doing of actions, in knowing with one's body. My faith, like the theater, enchants the world through incarnation.

The theatrical craft is about making strong choices that inject a role or a play with new life. Why do we bother to see Cabaret more than once? Because the directors, designers, and performers have made decisions that compel us to see the play and the world differently than we once did. Some choices are sound; others are not. A life in the theater demands skill in navigating the sometimes-choppy waters that separate lively choices from deadening ones. Such dexterity requires that theater people pay attention to the entire range of the experience: to the "texts" (of whatever stripe), to the communities that generated them, to the communities for which they will be performed, to the particular insights of those invested in the collaboration. Much of my spiritual life involves learning to pay attention to the images, the feelings, the thoughts, even the listlessness that make up my religious experience. The spiritual journey entails staying with the churning waters as long as necessary so that I might enjoy the peace when it finally arrives. It involves choosing between modes of being that either encourage life or court death. Choices must be made by paying attention to what happens in both the heart and mind. Thus, faith and theater enchant the world by helping us see and evaluate possibilities.

Good theatrical choices require freedom. When I teach acting to non-theater majors, I emphasize that my objective is simple: liberation. Presuming that an actor lives somewhere inside all of us, I structure the course as a series of exercises aimed at discovering and empowering the performer to act. First, the course attempts to release the students from the physical constraints that prevent action. We learn to be in our bodies, to relax them, to stretch them, to ground them in the present moment and in the present environment. Second, it aims at releasing the breath and unbinding the vocal cords so that the body, fed by spirit, has the strength and wherewithal to "reach the back wall." Third, the course works at untying the laces that hem in the imagination, the faculty that allows us to see beyond surfaces to "the deep-down heart of things." The growing performer must learn to face his attachments, his too-easily accessible "default" positions, his stiffness or rigidity-physical, spiritual, emotional. Cultivating freedom requires effort and commits the actor to evaluating herself honestly. Are there ways her body has difficulty moving? Are there ways she prefers standing? Are there words she finds difficult to say or characters she is uncomfortable embodying? Is she free to find energy in the unfamiliar?

If Ignatius Loyola has taught me anything, it is the necessity of cultivating spiritual freedom. While I often fancy myself a person who is generally unfettered, I have only to spend some honest time in prayer to understand how bound I actually am. I have difficulty moving in certain ways and there are certain conversations with God I find difficult to have. At the first sign of the unfamiliar, I can become spiritually stiff. Working toward spiritual freedom requires time, dedication, and openness. It requires naming the ties that bind the body and the spirit and then loosening them in whatever ways possible. In the end, both theater and faith enchant the world by helping us to become light on our feet.

The liberation of the body, voice, and imagination that is part of the theatrical process is essentially a journey toward discovering the dignity of the human instrument. It results in a newfound respect for something that was, at some point, taken for granted. Implicitly and explicitly I suggest to my students that the discovery of their

own dignity, the discovery of their own physical presence, and their own voice should change their view of the world. So many people in our society and in our world cannot indulge their imaginations, cannot find their voices, cannot be in their bodies safely. Quite often those people are poor. Sometimes they are women. Sometimes they are from a different country. Sometimes they are gay or lesbian. Sometimes they profess a different faith. Sometimes they have a different skin color. Theater requires a facility at crawling into the skins of people very different from ourselves. It involves seeing the world from a different point of view. Such a facility encourages an empathy that is not abstract but rather concrete. I hope that when my students discover their own dignity through performance, they become champions of the dignity of others. What better way to describe the Christian vocation? In a world fractured by hatred, misunderstanding, and terrorism, the theater and faith enchant the world by founding a school of solidarity.

Enchantment exists where "reality" is more than what meets the eye. "Grace is everywhere," and I, for one, am liable to overlook it without the habits of being cultivated by prayer and performance.

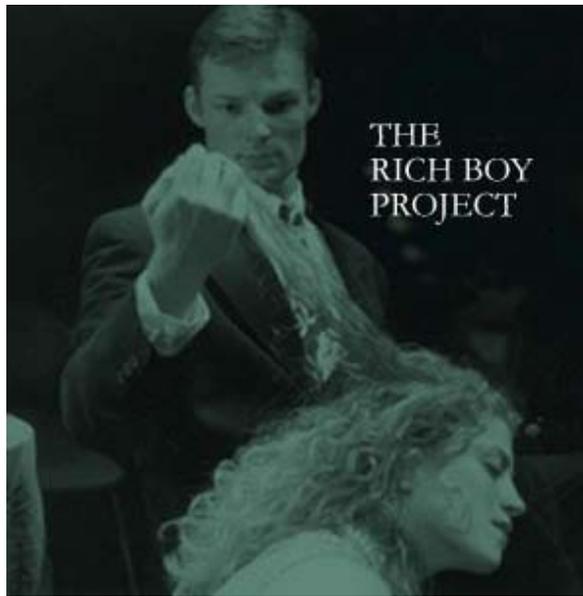
#### ENDNOTES

1 Andrew M. Greeley. *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)



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**By Kristin Kusanovich '88**

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*Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand.*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Rich Boy”

**T**heatre of Happiness, a theater troupe based in St. Paul, Minn., visited the SCU campus in May 2001 to participate in “The Rich Boy Project,” which brought together members of the theater and English departments as well as Santa Clarans for Social Justice. The project consisted of a series of performances, lectures, class visits, and post-show discussions centered on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s startling and poignant novelette, “The Rich Boy.” My husband, Mark Larson, and I directed the performances, which were held at Mayer Theatre with support from Bannan Center and the Center of Performing Arts.

We premiered our original stage adaptation in Minneapolis in 2000, and felt that its message might be especially poignant in Silicon Valley, a region that has experienced the ramifications of rapidly fluctuating affluence. The protagonist Anson Hunter’s decline, which is anything but monetary, poses important questions about our ability to remain whole in the presence of wealth. The intellectual and spiritual climate of SCU has provided an ideal venue to share this play with a diverse audience and to widen the circle of investigative inquiry into the profound and subtle ethical questions that form the context for “The Rich Boy.”

We premiered our original stage adaptation in Minneapolis in 2000, and felt that *its message might be especially poignant in Silicon Valley, a region that has experienced the ramifications of rapidly fluctuating affluence.*

Elusive and enchanting, “The Rich Boy” was written while Fitzgerald was in Capri awaiting publication of The

Great Gatsby, and published in two parts by Redbook in 1926. Our troupe was attracted by the moral challenge that is implicit in the story, which is at once a memory piece, a treatise on the laws and loss of friendship, a graceful account of the disaster of amoral living and an uncomfortable but intriguing journey through the emotional terrain of one man born into wealth and all of its assumptions. The devastation is of the spiritual order, is never stated explicitly, and comes at the audience from behind. For Anson's flaws are so much a part of his magnetism, and the lure of his personality makes us less willing to see the emptiness that actually propels this fantastical image. Anson Hunter is like a camel which, when caught halfway through the eye of the needle, calls out for a drink and asks the bartender how his family is doing.

To bring this story off the page and into a full theatrical production has been a remarkable journey filled with challenges and grace, and guided by inspired moments of deep spiritual reckoning. Wrestling with this story has helped us to understand our own limitations and to define our own sense of justice. Amidst the apparent opportunity and ease that Anson's wealth has provided, it is hard to believe his real goodness or happiness ever had a fighting chance.

### DISCOVERING "THE RICH BOY"

Our troupe first encountered "The Rich Boy" on a dark, snowy, winter night in April on Summit Avenue, the street of wheat and railroad barons' mansions in St. Paul that Fitzgerald described as "a museum of American architectural failures." Our troupe rehearsed in an 1880s carriage house that happened to be across the street from Fitzgerald's former home, so he was often on our minds as we worked on our various productions. On this night, we piled into a few cars and navigated the icy streets to the nearest bookstore in search of a Fitzgerald story for our next show.

With every edition of the complete works off the shelves and in our hands, we spent hours revisiting old favorites and delighting in discoveries of "new" ones. Suddenly one of our younger actors, a high school senior who was quite well read, proclaimed that he had just found the best opening to a story that he had ever heard. He proceeded to read it to us, while our thumbs held "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" and "Basil and Cleopatra" like undefended chess pieces. But fingers slid to laps and bindings eased their creases as these words struck like icy, graceful truths.

Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing. That is because we are all queer fish, queerer behind our faces and voices than we want any one to know or than we know ourselves. When I hear a man proclaiming himself an "average, honest, open fellow," I feel pretty sure that he has some definite and perhaps terrible abnormality which he has agreed to conceal—and his protestation of being average and honest and open is his way of reminding himself of his misprision.

The reactions and admissions brought out through the process of this project have been strong and enlightening. Through visits to Dr. Edelstein's Survey of American Literature classes and post-performance discussions with Randy Sweringen and Santa Clarans for Social Justice, *we were able to gain new perspectives and enjoy the thoughtful analyses of all who were involved.*

We knew we were in the presence of a story that was uncommonly demanding and daring. It spoke to us, or called us. And we have learned much from sharing it. We worked without pre-conceived ideas or formulas, employing a rather democratic process of investigation. Our troupe, which has no pre-planned season to fulfill, enjoys the satisfaction of waiting to be called to do something when the conditions are right, and then doing it out of love. This is one of the greatest joys of the arts.

### BRINGING THE STORY TO LIFE

With our romantic notions in a league with our author's, we spent the next three months working with the text, which is mostly narration, as opposed to dialogue. Adaptations of literature often cut narration in favor of dialogue, which, by giving the actors more "to say" seems to give the actors more "to do." However, this can result in a lack of depth or viewpoint, causing a frustrating feeling that "the book was better." The narrative

voice of Anson Hunter's friend, a character similar in function to Jay Gatsby's neighbor Dick Diver, drives the piece, and so we maintained virtually every word of the narration. We made a simple but profound discovery that we could treat the narration as dialogue—a dialogue with the audience—and so we kept every word and spoke right to the members of the audience who sat in a loose ring around the actors, in only first and second rows. This produced an effect that had the gentleness of being read to, and yet was also startling, fresh, and provocative. Many members of the audience appreciated how the troupe found a way of retaining the imaginative spirit and verbal emphasis of storytelling while creating living, moving, believable characters.

In the process of developing the physicality of the production, we worked with each actor's intuitive responses to the situation, and then choreographed each gesture of sitting, standing, tilting one's head, or touching a finger to one's shoulder into a seemingly natural sequence of pedestrian movement. This created what we have called "a prolonged pin-drop" state of tension. The audience was on-stage with the actors, close enough to hear and feel the breathing of the characters, and close enough to intrude. Through a simple combination of Persian rugs, overstuffed chairs and potted palms that suggested a plush hotel lobby, we were able to create an intimate, immediate atmosphere that could hearken either to the 1920s or to the present. Steven Stampley designed lighting that clung closely to the actors' bodies and quietly invaded the audience as well, during moments of self-scrutiny undergone by Anson. Stampley's imaginative work helped to convey the emotional weight and each shift in locale through subtle shifts in coloring, angle, and intensity. Perhaps it was this up-close sensory experience that led several post-performance workshop participants to compare the style of our presentation with the films of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock.

Having experienced its effect on audiences in two regions, I can say that "The Rich Boy" seems to be a life-changing story for all who encounter it, whether they reside in a city that claims Fitzgerald as its own or not.

There are no types, no plurals. There is a rich boy, and this is his and not his brothers' story.

Fitzgerald's insistence on the uniqueness of the protagonist's behavior only serves to free the reader/ spectator to examine the universal traits that Anson Hunter embodies. The artful crafting of language allows the reader/viewer to go through a process of personal questioning and admission to the tendencies, in part or in whole, of the rich boy or of his relations, or both.

#### THE AUDIENCE RESPONDS

The reactions and admissions brought out through the process of this project have been strong and enlightening. Through visits to Dr. Edelstein's Survey of American Literature classes and post-performance discussions with Randy Sweringen and Santa Clarans for Social Justice, we were able to gain new perspectives and enjoy the thoughtful analyses of all who were involved. "The Rich Boy" was described as a "completely material being." The lifelong presence of wealth in his life has "distorted every relationship he has or attempts to have." "We (the audience) are like eye-witnesses to the gradual, painstaking decay of a man whose ability to undergo introspection is thwarted by his own character." His treatment of others, and particularly of women, has a "Godlessness that at once shocks, and yet is so recognizable and familiar." In the script, women at times defy the superiority inherent in Anson and at times, and often unknowingly, nurture it. "Fitzgerald equally implicated men and women" in supporting the failed system that is Anson's life. On Anson's drinking, one spectator said, "the behavior associated with alcoholism was totally taken for granted in this time period. It is as if the people around him did not see this as part of the problem." This work helped us to feel "reinvigorated in our investigation for God in what we do and in how we treat others" and to "disarm our notions of wealth and its potential attractions."

The text speaks to students of literature, psychology, and sociology. It speaks to workers for social justice, theater aficionados, members of all faiths, and members of the outside community who found themselves at the theater last May on a warm, spring night.

In the intellectual, aesthetic, moral, spiritual, physical, and social truths of Fitzgerald's characters, the actors and

audience undergo a transformation of consciousness and travel toward a common ground of meaning. The images in this story etch themselves hauntingly into one's memory. Charles Scribner III wrote that Anson's "self-conscious superiority will forever, in my eyes, embellish the gilded lobby of New York's Plaza Hotel." Fitzgerald admits the impossibility of dispelling "all the lies the poor have told about the rich, and the rich have told about themselves," and this production followed Fitzgerald's lead in refusing to simplify the questions of justice that the work presents. Yet the force and momentum of this staged version allowed the participants to undertake a journey in which our often-unquestioned assumptions about those born into wealth were brought into clearer focus. The essential questions raised by Fitzgerald's words, and put into flesh and blood by the ensemble, remain poignant for our times.

## THEATER AND SPIRITUALITY

Just as many students arrive to the campus of SCU without an explicit commitment to the Jesuit character of the University, but find it unfolding before them and perhaps inside of themselves as they engage in four years of life here, so it is with theater of this intimacy and intensity.

An audience of students, staff, and faculty may be drawn to a night at the theater for a myriad of reasons, but it is the goal of our work that *they leave the theater transformed, revitalized, and with a subtler awareness of our social reality.*

We are not the first to recognize the symbiotic functions of the performing arts and religion, and we feel that the arts have always been carriers of social wisdom, both its dissent and agreement. Their presence serves our spiritual life and our religious practice by helping us to develop our imaginations, which in turn helps us relate to one another with more compassion and care.



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**By Diane Dreher**

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"Time began in a garden" says the small wooden sign by my garden gate, recalling the Biblical Garden of Eden.<sup>1</sup> Our word "paradise" itself once meant an enclosed garden.<sup>2</sup> The Western garden tradition developed fifteen centuries ago in Benedictine monasteries, self-contained agricultural communities where monks grew grain, fruits, herbs, and vegetables. Cultivating an enduring connection between gardening and spiritual growth, early Benedictines combined laborare and orare, the work of hands and hearts in alternating rhythms of devotion.

For centuries, monastery gardens and spiritual practice informed the lives of Western Europeans, religious and laity alike. Daily devotions followed the sun's rounds, and the liturgical year paralleled the annual cycle of seed time and harvest, death and rebirth. Saints' days corresponded with sowing, reaping, and harvest feasts. Each year the dark days of winter were dispelled at Easter as gardens in early spring bloomed with the promise of eternal life.

From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, people perceived the world as a divine poem, in which the individual, or microcosm, corresponded with the macrocosm, or larger world around them. The garden became a living guide to devotion: the harvest represented God's bounty, cultivating the soil was an exercise in humility, and sowing seeds became an act of faith. The rosary was named for the rosarium, the medieval rose garden. Many saints, including Francis de Sales, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena, meditated in gardens, and St. Ignatius Loyola ended his Spiritual Exercises with a vision of all creation informed by the loving presence of God.<sup>3</sup> English poets from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Donne, Herrick, Herbert, Vaughan, Milton, and Marvell wrote of spiritual lessons they found in the garden. Shakespeare described the symbolic importance of pruning in *Richard II*, and Herbert's poem, "The Flower," portrayed his soul's growth through many seasons of doubt and renewal.

Centuries before hospitals and drug stores, people turned to their gardens to heal colds, sore throats, indigestion, and other physical illnesses. They used garlic as a tonic and antiseptic; dill as a sedative and cure for indigestion; thyme for coughs and colds; marjoram to treat aching joints; rosemary to improve memory and to treat stiff necks and sore muscles; lavender for headaches; mint for colds, anger, and indigestion; parsley to treat migraines; and sage as an all-purpose remedy.<sup>4</sup> Early monasteries had their herb gardens and herbalists. The medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen celebrated "veriditas," the greening power of life, which she saw as

evidence of God's grace in the world, the key to vitality, goodness, and health.<sup>5</sup>

Contemplating the beauty of nature has long been a path of spiritual healing. The medieval Franciscan, St. Bonaventure, encouraged people to meditate on the beauty of the natural world, and seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne wrote: "You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God: . . . till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars."<sup>6</sup> For Traherne, nature was not a commodity to be exploited but a divine gift to be shared in loving communion, his vision anticipating the holistic message of today's organic gardeners and environmentalists.

Like Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, people for centuries have found a "paradise within," cultivating their souls along with their gardens.<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas More studied religion and philosophy in his garden at Chelsea with his friend, Erasmus of Rotterdam. In difficult times, gardens have become sources of consolation and renewal. Amid the violent world of the English Civil War, seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell sought serenity in his garden, meditating on "a green thought in a green shade."<sup>8</sup> During the dark days of World War II, Winston Churchill found renewal working in his garden at Chartwell. In September 2001, many Americans returned to their gardens searching for peace and enduring signs of life.

The connection between gardens and healing has developed into horticultural therapy, now practiced in hospitals, prisons, and convalescent homes. Research has shown that gardening reduces stress and promotes a healthier outlook. In the mid-1980s psychologist Marilyn Barrett combined gardening with clinical practice, helping people heal their lives by clearing the ground, cultivating the soil, and planting new seeds, gaining greater insight by working with the cycles of nature.<sup>9</sup>

Scientific research has rediscovered what saints and sages realized centuries ago: that renewing our connection with nature heals us on many levels. In one study, convalescent home residents who were given plants to tend stayed healthier and lived longer. In another study, surgery patients with trees growing outside their hospital windows suffered less pain and recovered more quickly than others who faced only bare brick walls.<sup>10</sup> Gardening helps restore our sense of hope. Psychologist Martin Seligman has demonstrated the strong connection between depression and "learned helplessness," when people feel that nothing they do makes any difference.<sup>11</sup> Helping defeat learned helplessness, gardening offers tangible results for our efforts: seeds germinate; plants blossom and bear fruit. In small but powerful ways, our gardens reassure us that our actions can make a difference. They remind us that we are part of a pattern of infinite meaning we cannot fathom but which graces us with moments of surprising beauty.



Gardening can become a spiritual exercise, teaching us discernment as we eliminate the weeds from our lives, giving what we value room to grow. By cultivating the soil, we develop perseverance. For good soil is created layer upon layer, season upon season, with repeated applications over time of compost and other organic matter. So, too, do we cultivate the important areas of our lives: our faith, our vocation, and our relationships, with deep abiding love, over time, with one small action leading to the next.

In my own life, the contemplative time I spend in the garden makes me more present, more peaceful, more whole. Medieval Benedictines alternated private time for reading and reflection with the ritualized prayer of the Divine Office. *Lectio divina*, or contemplative reading, for many people throughout history has also meant drawing inspiration from the book of nature, a practice begun in medieval cloisters and meditation gardens, embraced by Renaissance poets, and taken to heart by gardeners from their time to our own. For time in the garden uncovers the natural harmonies beneath the troubled surface of our world. Simple actions such as staking the tomatoes, raking and composting fallen leaves, watering, weeding, and trimming, can become healing rituals, helping us plant the seeds of new possibilities, cultivate our talents and exercise our faith so that we may go in peace to love and serve the world.

## ENDNOTES

1 Adapted from Diane Dreher, *Inner Gardening: Four Seasons of Cultivating the Soil and*



2 From the Persian pairidaeza (enclosed park), the Old Hebrew pardes and the Greek paradeisos. See *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 2072; and Christopher Thacher, *The History of Gardens* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 15.

3 See the "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" in *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, tr. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), 102-03.

4 Elizabeth and Reginald Peplow, *In a Monastery Garden* (London: David & Charles, 1988), 110, 114-116; Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (New York: Viking, 1980), 179; Nicholas Culpeper, *Culpeper's Complete Herbal and English Physician Enlarged* (1814) (Glenwood, IL: Meyerbooks, 1990), 63, 82, 104, 113, 117, 131, 162, 183; John Gerard, *The Herball*, Rev. Thomas Johnson (London: Adam Islip Joice Norton and Richard Whitakers, 1633; New York: Dover, 1975), 178, 572, 584, 672, 766, 1014, 1033, 1293,

5 See Hildegard of Bingen, *Holistic Healing (Causae et Curae [c. 1158])* ed. Mary Palmquist and John Kulas, O.S.B., tr. Manfred Pawlik, Patrick Madigan, S.J., and John Kulas, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), xviii.

6 Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation* (c. 1670) (Wilton, CN: Morehouse, 1986) 13-14. (27 and 29 of Century I).

7 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII, l. 587 in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957), 467.

8 From "The Garden," l. 48 in *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*. 2nd. ed. rev. Ed. Alexander Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 970.

9 Marilyn Barrett, *Creating Eden: The Garden as a Healing Space* (San Francisco: Harper SF, 1992), 1

10 E.J. Langer and J. Rodin, "Effects of Choice and Enhanced Personal Responsibility for the Aged: A Field Experiment in an Institutional Setting," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34 (1976), 191-99; R.S. Ulrich, "View Through a Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery." *Science* 22:420-421.

11 See Martin E.P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

**THE FORGIVENESS**

**READING GROUP**



**Introduction by Jane Curry**

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The Forgiveness Reading Group, sponsored by a Dialog & Design Grant from the Bannan Center, began as a way to explore whether good people were supposed to forgive, whether bad people were supposed to be punished, or whether there was something else that could make a difference.

As a political scientist, I began to explore forgiveness when I was unable to explain why the politics of post-communist countries were so often dominated by who did what, when, and to whom in the past rather than how to make the new systems work. The South Africans could go on after horrors that were far worse than anything that had happened in the old communist world. The Latin Americans have lived with silence about the horrors of military rule.

In my own life, there are those I never can forgive and others I forgave after they did what seemed "unforgivable." I puzzled over how my ersatz "Polish father" could have been imprisoned in Auschwitz and, later, kept his numbers tattooed on his arm while he used his German as a guide for German tourists. His explanation, when I asked, was the War was over and "It is better to go on so that no one ever wants revenge."

Like the others who joined this reading group, I came with the frustration that nothing seemed to explain why some forgive and others don't and what difference it made. Could it be a matter of different cultures and religious traditions? Where did law, international and national, fit in? Is there psychological research that explains why and how some forgave and others did not? And did that psychological literature work for groups and, ultimately, for nation states?

Our group's goal was to look at forgiveness and justice across disciplines and in various cultures. The "fellow travelers" included men and women from Berkeley, Stanford, University of California at Santa Cruz, and Santa Clara University, as well as a Palo Alto lawyer who had worked with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Lisa Mammel, whose article is in this issue), a teacher at the San Jose Juvenile Jail, two Santa Clara students, and a Buddhist priest from San Francisco.

We have read and reflected on readings in psychology, ethics, comparative religion, law, and literature. Our cases included the Jewish experience in the Holocaust, the various official and unofficial attempts to establish the truth of military rule in Latin America, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Frederick Lushkin of the Stanford "Forgiveness Project" shared his research on how individuals learned to forgive and how this process worked for the victims of the strife in Northern Ireland. Avery Cardinal Dulles

joined us to talk about how religions view forgiveness. Father William O'Neill brought the insights of his time in Rwanda to the table. I puzzled over the troubled transition out of communism. Others raised issues from their own lives and work. And, we continue on as the issues become even more relevant with the battles that continue in the Middle East and the need for recreating a nation in Afghanistan, understanding what triggers the lack of forgiveness that comes with terrorism, and the need to reconstruct lives touched by terror here.

But, for now, some of our reflections on the political are stories in themselves.

Selections from the Reading List for  
the 2000-2001 Forgiveness Reading Group

#### GENERAL WORKS

- *The Sunflower: On the Possibility and Limits of Forgiveness* by Simon Wiesenthal
- *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History After Genocide and Mass Violence* by Martha Minow
- *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* by Donald W. Shriver Jr.
- *Transitional Justice* by Ruti G. Teitel
- *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives (Laws of Life Symposia Series, vol. 1)* edited by Everett L. Worthington

#### SOUTH AFRICA

- *Coming to Terms: South Africa's Search for Truth* by Martin Meredith and Tina Rosenberg
- *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, by Michael Battle
- *For Humanity: Reflections of a War Crimes Investigator* by Richard J. Gladstone
- *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* by Antjie Krog
- *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu

#### LATIN AMERICA

- *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* by Lawrence Weschler

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## THE FORGIVENESS SEMINAR

By Nancy Spatz

*Santa Clara University*

I entered the Forgiveness Seminar hoping to learn more about Imperialism and the Cold War in Europe and its former colonies in the 1980s and '90s. Although I had been teaching ancient, medieval, and Renaissance European history for ten years at a state university in Colorado, my new position as lecturer at SCU required me to teach the modern half of Western Civilization, and I felt ill-prepared on the post-War period. I figured that the topic of forgiveness and the recent history of Third World countries such as South Africa would fill in some gaps in my knowledge. Also, I assumed that the readings would be unfamiliar and even exotic, offering me a refreshing break from my research on the history of the medieval Roman liturgy and medieval education. All this, and free books and dinners too, every month. What an opportunity!

As a result of the seminar, I did bone up on many useful teaching topics such as the Holocaust, post-Communist Poland, and the military juntas of South America. What I did not expect was to have my soul touched by the writings of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. I dimly remembered that Marxism was the leading ideology in liberation movements in southern and southwestern Africa in the 1970s and '80s. I can't describe my astonishment to find out that Bishop Tutu credited his success in vanquishing apartheid to the Anglo-Catholic liturgy. He writes:

For me, it would be impossible to engage in the kind of public life I have had if this was not undergirded by the spiritual life. Our tradition is one where we have, as far as possible, a daily Eucharist and an extended time of quiet in meditation, and mid-day we . . . pause for the Angelus. . . . There is this constant stream of worship and adoration and all I need to do is to jump into the stream and float. . . . [The Church] is the storehouse of the energy and power of good which must combat the power of evil to the end, and which as it triumphs over the dark power makes all things new . . . (Michael Battle, pp. 89, 91, 97)

Before I read this book I knew very little about Tutu. I certainly did not expect a famous black South African revolutionary leader to credit his success to the Christian liturgy, the roots of which go back to the ancient and medieval Mediterranean world, my teaching specialty! What I had always thought of as merely an odd scholarly interest of mine—the liturgy—turned out to be a vital force in world affairs and politics halfway around the world. I now see the weekly Sunday liturgy with fresh eyes.

The Forgiveness Seminar also made me more keenly aware about the importance of teaching history to young people. As Martha Minow writes, "Demonstrating the crucial role of dehumanization of particular groups of people before genocide or mass violence occurs can alert young people to the dangers of group exclusions and degradation in their own world" (p. 144). I left the seminar feeling more certain than ever about the moral and practical value of history in undergraduate education.



Alas, my enthusiasm for teaching history was to be short-lived. Citing budget concerns, SCU did not renew my contract. I had left my previous tenured position with the understanding that my services at SCU would be needed indefinitely. Ironically, now I faced the issue of forgiveness: forgiving SCU for discarding me after two years of outstanding service, my profession for not providing me with better employment opportunities, and myself for never landing a good position in academia.

Faced with poor job prospects in academe and two small children to support, I have become a landscape designer. Creating gardens has become my method of reconciliation. One of my first projects is a medieval garden at SCU.

As a result of the seminar, I did bone up on many useful teaching topics such as the Holocaust, post-Communist Poland, and the military juntas of South America. ***What I did not expect was to have my soul touched by the writings of Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.***

**ON FORGIVENESS**  
**By Lisa Ann Mammel**  
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I stood next to a Sardinian shepherd looking out onto his fields, which were dotted by the white carcasses of his flock of 200 sheep. Their throats had been cut.

"What will you do? Have you called the police?"  
Grimace.

"Do you know who it was? Do you have any ideas?"  
Silence.

A tug at his pocket, a light of a cigarette, and a slow statement to me and to his own conscience: "La vendetta si mangia fredda." (Revenge is a meal to be eaten cold.)

These words in 1985 first peaked my curiosity: What provokes the demand for revenge? What prompts a victim to seek recourse through legal channels? What makes a victim forego legal channels? What allows for forgiveness?

My interest deepened a decade later when, in 1997, I served as an attorney-observer of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ("TRC") in South Africa. For two weeks I attended "Victims Hearings," where those who had experienced gross human rights violations during the apartheid era spoke before an attentive nation (and a listening world) about their pain, their losses, and their grief. Here are a few paraphrased selections from the testimony:

My son's body was left at my door; it was missing a hand.

I found my wife dead, face down in the dirt. A panga was still in her back. It had missed our baby who had been tied to her back. The child was crying.

At the funeral for our child, we stood with the coffin out there. And then they started shooting. Everyone ran, and we ran too, carrying the coffin.

Listening to the details of the victims' experiences provoked in me a rippling wave of feelings: anger, sympathy, and then an almost self-preservation-like feeling of being numb. However, that numb feeling was pierced by feelings of astonishment. When I interviewed these victims and asked them "What will you do? What do you want?" their responses were remarkably similar: "I will forgive. I must forgive." "Madiba (Mandela) asks us to forgive. God alone can judge." "I must forgive. It is for my country."

Why the different response in South Africa? Like the Sardinian shepherd, these people had suffered a crime-in fact they were victims of more horrific crimes. And like the shepherd, these people had not pursued legal recourse to address their wrongs. (Indeed, in the compromise brokered in the creation of the TRC, victims were precluded from seeking resolution from the court system.) Remarkably, unlike the Sardinian shepherd, South African victims were not seeking revenge-neither immediate nor delayed. They somehow had the ability to forgive acts that were unforgivable, and to forgive perpetrators, many of whom never came forward nor were identified.<sup>1</sup>

I continue to seek to understand the ability of the South African victims to forgive. I have considered whether it stems from the South African people themselves-their character, their faith, their moral center. I have considered whether the unique South African forgiveness stemmed from the victims' cognizance of their place in history or that the TRC process and the larger-than-life example of Nelson Mandela simply came together to make forgiveness happen. When I have found such explanations unsatisfying, I have looked beyond South Africa to other examples of forgiveness and vengeance: e.g., Ireland, Rwanda, Eastern Europe, and Bosnia. They, too, have left me wanting: I continue still on my search through the Forgiveness Reading Group. I have puzzled with others intrigued by the power of forgiveness, seeking to understand its roots, and wanting to transplant it like a heady, benevolent (and, some would argue, non-naturally occurring) weed in places (personal, local, national) where other dispute resolution has failed. Each of us had a personal motivation for participating in the reading group. Each brought a unique perspective to the discussions. My ongoing reflections on the South African experience have been further shaped by some of those discussions.

As an attorney for a secular legal tradition, I have wondered if the combination of a very religious population and a spiritual process could explain why South Africans testifying before the TRC were able to forgive the unspeakable crimes. It was an important part of the equation for forgiveness, but not an answer I feel satisfied with. *After all, various countries and populations with strong spiritual groundings have not adopted a forgiveness model in response to the heinous crimes of their nations' pasts.*

### The Forgivers

Those testifying before the TRC-amazing the world in its lack of vindictiveness-were conducting a repeat performance. They had astonished the world only three years before during South Africa's first multi-racial elections. For those, I had been selected by the United Nations to be a monitor. I witnessed the moral fortitude of the South African public first-hand, observing voting at polling stations in rural schoolhouses, a white community center, a home for the elderly, and a prison in the province of Christiana. People who had waited generations to obtain political franchise and to participate in their country's future waited some more, standing peacefully in polling station lines for 10, 18, 20+ hours to cast their ballots in a highly charged political landscape. There were no expressions of defiance, vindication, or an in-your-face exuberance-I saw nothing but dignity and reserve. Except for a very few isolated incidents during the week preceding the elections, a country that had been at brink of civil war carried out a peaceful revolution at the ballot box.

Many say that the peaceful polling process in 1994 and the magnanimous forgiveness demonstrated by the victims testifying before the TRC in 1996-1997 were products of the principle among some indigenous groups in South Africa known as "Ubuntu" in the Nguni languages. The concept is not easily translatable. Its central precept suggests personal fulfillment can only be found through positive social relationships and group solidarity. In the case of violence, Ubuntu suggests that a victim should not seek revenge and thereby become a new perpetrator, but, rather, should forgive and, thereby, break the cycle of violence.

In South Africa, where violence had permeated society, forging new relationships of trust in a post-apartheid nation of many races was both an urgent personal goal for individuals and the key for the new nation's viability.

In addition to subscribing to the principles found in Ubuntu, many of the victims testifying before the TRC acknowledged a deep spiritual foundation. Upon reaching the witness table, many called for God's assistance in their testimony. When asked by the TRC Commissioners what reparations they wished from the TRC, some stated that they had no expectations or demands, and left things in God's hands.

The TRC's structure was also distinguished by religious elements. Religious leaders led the public debate setting up the TRC. The head of the TRC was an archbishop; three ordained ministers served as Commissioners; and hearings were often held in church halls. A hymn opened victims' hearings and was usually followed by a prayer. Solemnity, contrition, and forgiveness were emphasized.

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and a spiritual process could explain why South Africans testifying before the TRC were able to forgive the unspeakable crimes. It was an important part of the equation for forgiveness, but not an answer I feel satisfied with. After all, various countries and populations with strong spiritual groundings have not adopted a forgiveness model in response to the heinous crimes of their nations' pasts.

## The Process

I then considered whether (in addition to the deep-seated faith and the prevailing value of Ubuntu, the style and substance of the TRC, and the political process that brought it about) the very real example of forgiveness by Nelson Mandela would explain the spirit of forgiveness I witnessed in South Africa.

After all, when Nelson Mandela left prison after 27 years, he embraced his jailer and explicitly forgave his oppressors. On a world stage as a former freedom fighter, president of South Africa, and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, his example could not be missed. Indeed many victims buying into the TRC did so in allegiance to Mandela.

Forgiveness and Ubuntu were key to those negotiating the transition and drafting the Interim Constitution. The 1993 Interim Constitution ends specifically mentioning Ubuntu:

The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgressions of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge.

"I will forgive. I must forgive."

"Madiba (Mandela) asks us to forgive."

These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimization.

Truth and forgiveness were set out as the twin pillars of the legislation setting up the TRC. Amnesty from prosecution was granted to individuals who had committed gross human rights violations in the past. The exchange was for Truth: a complete and public disclosure of the crimes that they committed, and the political motivations behind them. Victims, denied justice by the court system during the apartheid era and silenced by threats of further violence, were given the opportunity to tell their part of the Truth-through telling their stories of pain and suffering to a listening nation and, eventually, receiving reparations for their losses. Amnesty was offered by the state. Forgiveness was imparted (or not) by the grace of the victims.

Perhaps the strongest element of the TRC process was the public airing of "Truth." The TRC was set up on the premise that to forgive, one must NOT forget. The assumption was that the public establishment of truth means the mistakes of the past will not be repeated and sets the groundwork for atonement, forgiveness, and eventually, reconciliation. In order to build the bridge between the past, characterized by injustice, and the new nation founded on recognition of human rights, the TRC was to establish as complete a picture as possible of the truth about injustices committed in the past. The picture was to be a composite of perpetrators' amnesty applications, investigative findings and, most importantly, victims' testimony.

The revelations were truly horrific: first, the existence of death farms-rural areas where many bodies were located and exhumed; second, the development of torture methods; and third, state-sponsored experimentation in poisons.

Then, there were over 21,000 statements made by those claiming to be victims of gross human rights violations. Approximately 10 percent of those were publicly heard in the TRC's Human Rights Violations Committee hearings in public venues throughout South Africa from April 1996 through August 1997, although all were

considered for reparations.

***Time and time again, victims I interviewed stated the simple act of giving testimony allowed them to forgive based on remembering*** (as opposed to forgive to forget). Forgiveness was no longer located in the private interpersonal realm between a person wronged and his offender. It took place in front of a public, which, up until then, had refused to listen, or when it did listen, challenged both the veracity and significance of the tales. Through public revelations, the victims gained community acknowledgment of their pain and suffering. National and international television and radio coverage widened the public circles that validated the testimony of victims, and encouraged many who were hesitant to testify. Victims' publicly shared stories revealing the worst injustices possible essentially rewrote the nation's history.

"God alone can judge ."

"I must forgive.

It is for my country."

Anecdotal evidence from interviews of the victims indicates that testifying had a therapeutic or healing effect for the victims. Telling one's story to a listening public appears to have lifted a burden; the lifting of that burden further led to offering of forgiveness. In the words of the legislation establishing the TRC, testifying (and, at times, offering forgiveness) "restored the human and civil dignity" of the victims. The respect and dignity gained by testifying to a respectful public was enhanced by the emboldening power that the victim possessed to forgive the perpetrator of his crime.

Why forgiveness? What lessons, might be transferred from the South African experience? I must confess, it remains unclear to me, and I look forward to continuing on my search with my colleagues. There are many populations who are deeply spiritual, yet have not demonstrated a propensity toward forgiveness. There is but one Nelson Mandela. Constitutions can be written intoning forgiveness and reconciliation, yet not be heeded. The truth commission process as a transitional mechanism for dealing with the crimes of a nation's past may be an exportable lesson for national reconciliation. However, there is no guarantee of forgiveness. It is an individual determination. Nonetheless, a truth commission may lay the fertile ground for forgiveness by empowering the victims, via a public forum, to share their grief, their losses, and their truths.

It is now, when the tragedies of Bosnia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, and others are in need of paths to national reconciliation and transitional justice that we must attempt to extract any principles and lessons from those expressing forgiveness in South Africa. If such lessons are not considered, it is quite possible that any political fall-out in such countries could transpire along the lines of my vengeful shepherd acquaintance's cold meal. Given the human capacity for compassion, understanding, reconciliation, and forgiveness, that is far from the just desserts our evolving world deserves.



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## ENDNOTES

1 It is true, not all of the South African victims were willing to forgive the perpetrators. The Biko and Mxenge families, for example, challenged the very establishment of the TRC and pursued legal avenues in an attempt to bring accountability for the murders of their loved ones.