

Experiencing Time

My Background

I should say a word about my background. I entered the minor seminary of the Graymoor Friars when I was fifteen years old, transferred to our major seminary residence near Catholic University in 1949, was ordained in 1955 – at which point I was longing to leave my required studies behind and work with people in whatever assignment I might get. Nor was I fully conscious at the time of what I was taking on except I maintained a very personal interest in saving my soul – and religious life seemed a sure way of doing so.

While I enjoyed my minor seminary days up in the Hudson Highlands, my first class at the philosophy level at Catholic University was in a thing called Ontology – the most abstract of topics. A Basque priest, a refugee from Francisco Franco, delivered it. He taught the course in Latin with a Basque accent, cigarette between his fingers. My attention span collapsed on day one – making the subsequent scholastic, conceptual discourse of philosophy and theology un-compelling while taking up all my time and sidetracking anything like literature and graphic biblical discourse, which might have caught my interest. It was all Aristotle to me.

Yet, providentially, my desire upon ordination to get out among people, to become a kind of Bing Crosby cleric, was thwarted by my being assigned to do graduate work in Scripture – to staff my order's own new seminary. So I did the three years necessary to get a doctorate in biblical criticism

and theology and a licentiate from Rome in biblical studies. I had this immersion in biblical literature – old and new – which was really more in accord with my temperament – graphic, I needed images.

Later on – after being laicized in 1967 and teaching at the college level and then phasing into Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society effort, I later continued as a Scripture resource, teaching four groups of deacon candidates from 1989 to 2006, while also being not so much teaching but reading classic literature to residents of a senior community in Santa Rosa – all of this extracurricular to making a living. And to top that off, my pastor, the late Jack O’Hare, an alumnus of St. Patrick’s Seminary, asked me to write an essay each week for his parish Sunday Bulletin. Just for the season of Lent in 1989. I’m still writing one every week – after thirty-three years. And some have been published.

And why am I telling you this? Because all those years threw me into constant contact with metaphor and its extended expression into narrative literature, biblical and otherwise, which has so much influenced my thinking that I want to share with you this power of metaphor and narrative discourse (which is extended metaphor) to save you from missing the bus over the short span of time we have on this planet.

Introduction

Being asked to conduct a day of retreat to seminary alumni and having been a seminarian once myself long ago, I wondered what I should talk about. I was told the range of this alumni

membership went from perhaps only two years of minor seminary experience to the full course of philosophy and theology and years of actual ordination. So I asked myself: what is it – having chosen that direction or profession in our lives – we might have in common?

Of course I allow that the immediate stimuli may have been not profound. We may have been influenced by the life of some saint or a film like *Going My Way* or the widespread missionary movement as promoted by the Maryknoll Fathers. Simply participating in the vast parochial school system of the Church was bound to attract many to think of an ecclesiastical career. But early in life there may have been deeper motives that underlay our later choices – that we were not conscious of – as for instance the boy Sir Edmund Hillary's knowing yet not yet knowing that he would one day climb Mt. Everest.

And then there was the seminary curriculum in my day – back in the 1950's – which, while dealing with such profound topics as faith, hope, love, philosophy and theology, had acquired a kind of assembly line regimen as of a training school – whereby we learned the correct (orthodox) answers to doctrinal and moral and liturgical issues and the correct rubrics of worship – more in the jargon of scholastic discourse than that of biblical song, story and rhetoric – which “correct” discourse I suppose precludes any deeper understanding of what we were undertaking. I mean in my case I didn't discover what the early Church taught until three years *after* graduating from my seminary!

So after thinking as deeply as I could about what we may have had in common by entering a seminary, I concluded what we had in common at some deeper level was Time - that elusive thing that has deposited me into my ninety fourth year - Time past yet strangely enough Time always catching up to me and ushering or should I say pivoting me - like a turnstile - into tomorrow - in keeping with that saying: Time will tell - some underlying inkling of Time as confronting us with two roads diverging in a wood, and you and I took the one less traveled which had the potential of making all the difference - if I may paraphrase Robert Frost.

Of course it can be said of any human being that we have Time in common. But I can't help but think that anyone who felt early an attraction to the priesthood must have - even unconsciously - sensed Time to be not just a matter of making a living or calculable as the tick of a clock and the rising and setting of the sun, but as eventful, as meaningful in some way, eventful Time, Time as an Event, a series of Events advancing somewhere mysterious, as happenings, which word has its origin in the monosyllable *hap* - meaning luck, fate - as in happy new year or mishap or haphazard.

Time

I'm not saying we were consciously focused on Time but in orienting ourselves or allowing ourselves to be drawn toward a career in the priesthood we were setting ourselves up to inhabit and serve Time as a meaningful experience - more meaningful than the news of the day would allow, to sense history, human life not to be just a sequence of ever redundant

facts to be recorded in a data base and forgotten and even erased, but something called “salvation history”, the universe as a story told in the sense of a call, Time itself as a vocation as in the biblical expression: In the beginning a Word was spoken which resounds as Events over Time.

To put it succinctly, we were all committing ourselves to experience and deal with Time as *sacramental*, to retrieve Time from being perpetually violent and lonely. Again perhaps unconsciously we were somehow oriented, for example, to set before the world seven sacraments – temporal, eventful experiences of Time that we believed would deepen lives, open up lives, reveal Time as an experience spacious with grace, with Being.

I mean – just to recall for a moment what these seven sacraments were: they were happenings, events applied at major pivotal moments in people’s lives – to open up their deeper significance:

-baptism as an expansion of our birth out of womb water (and not just birth as a biological fact; birth as an Event) or to put it another way, as our immersion into Time as an element enfolding us even as a fish lives immersed, enveloped in water to dispel any illusion that, living as we do in the open air, we are independent of our world, that we are metaphysical instead of physical - like rocks and roses, having no solidarity with them except as objects.

-*confirmation* as somehow sanctifying or celebrating our puberty, our power to communicate new life,

-*the Eucharist* as initiating us into a meaningful community, the experience of a shared table, a shared humanity,

-*marriage* as making a relationship also more than biological,

-*ordination* to effect such happenings, to change as it were water into wine as Christ did at the marriage feast of Cana, to revitalize, transfuse what could have become insipid existences,

-*the anointing* of the sick at an hour when he or she has reached land's end and is about to walk upon the sea – so beautifully spoken by Tennyson when he wrote:

Sunset and evening star / And one clear call for me! / And may there be no mourning of the bar, / When I put out to sea . . .

Of course among my Philadelphia Irish ancestors the bar referred to in that poem would have been other than the bar the poet had in mind.

This sense of Time as eventful, as having to do with the major turning points of our lives, carries over to what we call a whole year of Time as being liturgical – worshipful Time – life to be led as reverent, attuned to certain moments. Our calendar months and weekdays may retain the names of a fallen empire, but we committed ourselves to transforming the four seasons

even down to each day into the remembering, indeed to the recurring, in a spiraling way, of events that explained our existence more profoundly than a weather report – or a fascinating geological study might aspire to do. As Gerard Manley Hopkins has written: *Be Christ our Saviour still. / Of her flesh he took flesh: / He does take fresh and fresh, / Though much the mystery how. / Not flesh but spirit now / And makes, O marvelous! / New Nazareths in us, / Where she shall yet conceive / Him, morning, noon, and eve; New Bethlems, and he be born / There, evening, noon, and morn . . .*

Metaphor/Narrative Discourse

But what was the vehicle by which human beings made Time so significant and sacramental? It was a way of speaking metaphorically; it was the metaphor. We chose to think and speak metaphor over chatter. My wife and I have been great fans of Andy Griffith Show reruns – and I don't even want to probe the psychology that makes us do that. Maybe it's just because they're funny. And there is that one episode in which the schoolboys hate history and are giving their teacher fits. She complains to Andy who thinks up a way of solving the problem. He agrees with the boys that history is boring, who would want to sit through a class in history – and there is a pause – and then: who would want to hear about the shot heard round the world. And the boys agree – except again there is a pause – on their part. The

shot heard round the world? ask the boys. Their attention has been caught, thought is triggered within their brains by a metaphor. Even Barney Fife creases his brow: what shot heard round the world? Which allows Andy to recount the story of Paul Revere and Lexington and Concord Bridge – pivoting their young minds into an interest they didn't know they had, to think of history as Eventful.

And of course Andy is referring to a poetic treatment of that moment in history, Emerson's memorial poem at Concord Bridge, which translated a mere skirmish into verse, a language appropriate to an Event, into something truer than just true:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
 Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
 Here once the embattled farmers stood,
 And fired the shot heard round the world . . .

On this green bank, by this soft stream
 We set today a votive stone;
 That memory may their deed redeem
 When, like our sires, our sons are gone.

Metaphor! Making an event transcend transient Time by making it ever present and experiential – sacramental. That was the business of the seminary – or should have been.

Telling is Tolling: Tomato Soup

It was this habit we have of telling or may we say tolling time by way of a thing called narrative discourse (which includes poetry) whose clapper is the human tongue to do the telling or resonant tolling – narrative or poetry whose tongue is language by which we release Time’s meaning, by which we open up the horizons of Time, past, present and to come, to unveil an ever greater sense of existence, what it means to Be in the manner of the one who identified himself as: I am.

The event doesn’t have to be as public as the Concord event. It can be the passing aroma of tomato soup – becoming – as St. Paul says of grace – “so much more” - which at age five (I will never forget) I inhaled in the lunch room of Saint Cyril’s parochial school. It was an event, an experience laden with revelation – awaiting my memory to become articulate enough to narrate it. Why? Because as I allow that experience to become an event of my emergent Being, it still somehow relaxes me as the nervous child I was of a household become ultra tense due to a devastating economic depression and parental friction. The aroma still embraces me, still turns me around – warmly – physically – memorably – expanding spatially into the environment of that Catholic school – along with its images of “saints” and windows showing Christ walking on the water and multiplying loaves and fishes –

creating around me a home away from home, a coherent world – pivoting me into an environment that seemed somehow safer, more human than an otherwise depressed world.

Telling is Tolling: A Shave and A Haircut

Or to illustrate how – as well as our seven sacraments – the simplest events can become metaphorically powerful in the sense of a rebirth, an exposure to a wider range of sunlight, let me recall the 1993 film titled *Wrestling Ernest Hemingway*. The film's budget was set at 4.5 million dollars and its release grossed only 300,000 dollars at the box office according to the Internet – proof perhaps that its message was too deep for modern audiences. It was a flop commercially. It centers around two Florida retirees one of whom is seventy-five years old, but won't admit it, resisting Time – played by Richard Harris. He does push ups, flexes his tattooed muscles. He is a loud ex-sailor, long-haired, unshaven, still a flirt. Even his son shows him little respect.

Then there is a retired Cuban-American with a pleasant accent – quiet, dignified, who dresses casually but neatly. He follows a set routine every day, picking up come coffee and always a bacon sandwich – and retires to a park bench where he carefully works out a crossword puzzle, pausing to neatly unwrap his bacon sandwich. The role is played by Robert Duvall. (good casting!)

One day Harris intrudes on Duvall's ritual. Duvall patiently allows Harris to socialize in his unkempt and loud manner – and soon Duvall's graceful nature begins to impact on Harris. Duvall becomes a sacrament, an Event. Might we say a priest in the authentic sense of the term? Over time he offers to help Harris

improve his appearance (and tendency to diminish himself by way of bravado). Having been a barber, Duvall offers Harris a shave and haircut. In Harris's rundown apartment Duvall has him sit down and puts a sheet around him. The camera then dwells upon his snipping Harris's hair, quietly, gently, combing and snipping around the ears, the back of the neck. You can sense Harris relaxing under the remote touch. Then we see Duvall honing his flat razor on a belt, back and forth slowly, testing the sharpness lightly with his thumb.

Then comes the lather, the brush stirring in the foaming cup, the lather applied to Harris's face, applied by hand to the upper lip. And then, with a quiet, "I won't hurt you," Duvall begins to run the razor down Harris's cheek, under the chin – in soft, sure strokes. It's as though Duvall were sculpting a new man out of the raw material of the old Harris, a work of art, bringing out the latent beauty of an old man who laments his age, misses his youth.

Having toweled away the excess lather, Duvall then goes to his barber's kit and pours a generous amount of aftershave lotion into his cupped hand. He bears it dripping to where Harris sits entranced and applies it carefully, firmly, slowly, affectionately massaging his cheeks and neck, his whole face. You can almost sense the experience yourself as you watch, smell the aroma and feel the sting. It seems as though the scene lasts forever. And as Harris emerges from the experience, a fine looking, smooth, peaceful man instead of a loud extrovert, you realize you have just been mesmerized by the performance of an ordinary, everyday deed – a haircut and a shave - performed by a man of grace and majesty.

You have witnessed the performance of a sacrament, a ritual, a ballet, a moment of sanctifying grace – the extreme opposite of the shoot-‘em-up finale’s of those films whose profits surpass their budgets every time. You have witnessed a moment that rings out with almost ineffable meaning – a key to what so many moments of our lives can be – when we wake up or when we find Time.

One could say it was a fictitious event – but it is not only the happening in the story but the story itself as a work of art that is an event proper to you as you are engaged with it – the happening in the story by way of the story happens to you and so it is with all works of imagination, or art – as well as the actual scent of tomato soup.

Nor do such revolving moments recede from our experience. They retain and indeed can increase the momentum of their moment. In some radical way it is a sacerdotal moment – accessible to everyone, feasible to everyone – even the un-ordained.

Events: literary, biblical, personal

I want to dip now into examples of literary, biblical and personal events, i.e. Moments in Time – as narratives – to bring out their resonance in such a way that *you* begin to resonate with ever wider, ever deeper insights into what it means to Be in the sense that Elohim in Genesis says: Let there be light. Elohim doesn’t say, “Let there be sound,” because in the story we human beings were not here yet but when we do arrive it will be sound that lights the light for us – it will be language or as the Acts of the Apostles says – it will be the gift of tongues.

(Preliminary Dream)

In the days before the printing press books took time to produce – not only copied by hand over months of production but embellished with art, complex designs, floral images, interwoven with the text – hardly a work of dead letters. So before I venture into bringing literary texts to life, making them presently applicable in time despite their origin in the past, let me first tell you of a relevant dream I had that led me to a precipice – to step into the abyss of Being with a capital B – by way of a book. And, by the way, to underscore the fact that dreams can also emerge as Events in Time.

After my laicization so long ago I continued to have dreams in which I am saying Mass – which has undergone a rewrite from the Tridentine Mass I used to offer. The result: it's one of those frustrating dreams where you continue to try to reach some destination or find your grip amid much fluctuation – plus dealing with the impatience of a large cathedral congregation off in the shadows waiting for you to begin. I turn the pages of the Missal frantically looking for something familiar – and with a sigh I finally turn to what is the opening page of the old Canon in Latin beginning with those words *Te Igitur, Clementissime Pater*. Relaxed, I say to myself: I can do this! and I spread my hands and am about to begin when every letter on the page changes into a flower – a variety of wild flowers – blue, yellow, red, purple, pink, orange . . . row upon row. I'm frozen in place, speechless, pressure mounts; I turn to the young priest standing next to me and plead: What do I do?

He placidly with hands folded nods to the text and says: Read what it says. Now there's an event – a moment in time - even in my sleep – when a space opens that's hard to describe – except it says something like there is more to existence than meets the eye – an invitation to see beyond the dead language that clogs the discourse of our Cartesian, media driven world.

Events literary: A Room with a View

So now let me shift into examples of how the vast field of literature is loaded with Time as an Event that not only occurs to the character in the story but can be shared by the reader, eventful for you even as you are exposed to the narrative – first by way of a commentary on E.M. Forster's 1908 novel *A Room with a View*.

The story tells of Charlotte Bartlett complaining: “The Signora had no business to do it. She promised us south rooms with a view, instead of which here are north rooms, looking into a courtyard.”

Miss Bartlett had good reason to be upset. As chaperone to her cousin, Lucy Honeychurch, it was her job to insure Lucy's first trip to Italy and her current sojourn in Florence be a pleasant change from foggy old England. And yet here they were, assigned to lodging that looked out not upon a panorama of Florence's domes and towers and ancient bridges but upon a back yard.

Mr. Emerson, an old fellow who shared their breakfast table, overheard Miss Bartlett's complaint. “I have a view,” he said

brusquely. "This is my son . . . He has a view, too. You can have our rooms. We'll change." Yet, much as she disliked their assigned rooms, Miss Bartlett had no wish to be under obligation to total strangers. Her British independence required that she refuse the offer, which she took to be a rude invasion of her privacy. "Thank you very much," she replied. "It is quite out of the question." Mr. Emerson was not the type to give in so easily. Placing his fists upon the table, he asked, "Why?" - which only made Miss Bartlett redden with displeasure.

Well, did she or did she not want a room with a view? Having traveled so far, did she or did she not want to experience Italy? Her very choice of a place to stay in Florence makes you wonder. The Pension Bertolini was a thoroughly British "island" in the midst of Florence. All the guests were genteel English ladies and proper British gentlemen. The so-called "Signorina" who managed the place had a Cockney accent straight out of London. The dining room was graced with a portrait of Queen Victoria and a schedule of services at the local Anglican Church - all of which compelled Lucy to remark, "Charlotte, don't you feel . . . we might be in London? I can hardly believe that all kinds of other things are just outside."

But before we condemn Miss Bartlett's obvious ambivalence about truly experiencing Italy, truly leaving Britain behind, the reader might consider his own ambivalence when experience offers us "a room with a view." We live such enclosed lives. We long to escape this enclosure, the confinement of our pettiness, our habits, our egocentric concerns and worries and

biases for a fresher view of reality. And along comes a call to move in a direction however vague that can open us up the way a view of Florence in all its splendor might. And yet as individuals or a Church we hesitate; we cling to familiar ways, we rationalize ourselves into remaining stuck right where we are. Like Miss Bartlett, we close the shutters upon a view and a way of being too blindingly bright, too potentially wonderful (and demanding) to be tolerable.

Not so with Lucy. When at last Miss Bartlett gave in to the Emersons and accepted their “rooms with a view”, while Miss Bartlett spent her first moments investigating her room’s interior to make sure all shutters and doors had locks, Lucy, yielding to her inner need to be free of “Britain” and “propriety” and “security”, flung wide the windows to her room and leaned out into the sunshine to take in the beautiful hills, the marble churches, the gurgling Arno, the crowded trams and somersaulting children, the band and comic opera soldiers and the white bullocks coming out of an archway. Life, world, people in all their wonder and worth, releasing Lucy’s repressed potential to Be in the manner of him who could say, Before Abraham came to be, I am.

So is this narrative only about the fictional characters in the story or are we looking into an existential mirror; is there a shuttered window within our psyches behind which, like Miss Bartlett, we repress our yearning for light and beauty, insulate ourselves from all surprise, ignore hints freely given? Such writing becomes a parable – such as the Gospel of John uses in chapter nine of the man born blind to open those shutters,

touch our eyes – with even mud by the way - enhance our being as Forster does with Miss Lucy's (whose name implies light).

The pivot

The thing to look for is the turning point of such episodes – the experience of a revolving door. Here I think it occurs when Mr. Emerson, a middle-class fellow, not the best of manners, abruptly places his fists on the table and offers the women his rooms – while he takes theirs. A confrontation, an intrusion from below, as it were, that startles and reddens Miss Charlotte – and literally moves her enroute to a different space – a room with a view. Unanticipated, even irritating, emotive, yet widening horizons.

We gloss over the Gospels out of too familiar a handling, but what is more obvious about the mission of Jesus than his declaration which says in effect: I am about to reveal to you how *full* time can be if you but change your mind, experience the pivotal moments that launch you into a more profound way of being – as recorded in the opening sentence of Mark: *πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρός, καὶ , , , μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε . . .* And how does he propel people into this fulness of time? By way of parables – that pivot around a metaphor that shocks or surprises – that moves one before he or she realizes it. And by way of events whereby people begin to see, hear, speak, rise, walk, become alive as they had not before. As in these examples:

Events literary: The Golden Age

Let me offer another example of the impact of an episode told by Kenneth Grahame in his volume *The Golden Age* – about

children of a country estate who had to put up with adults whom they called Olympians because of their high and mighty manners – toward things called common; their metaphysical altitude, which seems to characterize our culture – called upward mobility.

In one of these episodes the boy-narrator tells of his being introduced by his uncle to an attic in his aunt's house. Among the things stored there was an old writing desk. "Sheraton!" remarked his uncle, referring to the desk's 18th century make. He then let down the flap to reveal the desk's many pigeon-holes and drawers. "Fine bit of inlay," he said. "Good work, all of it. I know the sort. There's a secret drawer in there somewhere." The uncle then left the room, but the boy's whole being was set to "vibrating to those magic syllables - a secret drawer." They conjured up images of a sliding panel, bullion, ingots, Spanish dollars, hidden treasure. The boy thought of all the things he might do with such treasure: . . . pay Edward the four pence he owed him, buy young Harold a toy battleship . . . now lying in dry-dock in the toy shop window, . . . Then there was that boy in the village who had a young squirrel he was willing to sell for one shilling. The boy had "wants enough to exhaust any possible find of bullion, . . ." The secret drawer awoke him to his capacity.

In quest of this treasure the boy later returned to the room alone and approached the desk. He let down the flap and with expectant fingers "explored the empty pigeon-holes and sounded the depths of the smooth-sliding drawers." He let his fingers probe every smooth surface in search of some knob or

spring that might release the secret drawer. But all in vain. Unyielding, the old desk stood, stoutly guarding its secret. He grew discouraged and paused to lament his bad luck. This wasn't the first time Uncle Thomas had proved shallow, uninformed, a guide into blind alleys. But try again he must and hardly had he put his hand "once more to the obdurate wood, when with a sort of small sigh, almost a sob of relief, the secret drawer sprang open."

Excited he carried the drawer to the light by the window. But his excitement gave way to disappointment for the drawer contained no ingots or silver but only two tarnished gilt buttons, a crayoned picture, some foreign copper coins, a list of birds' eggs and where they had been found, and one ferret's muzzle. Nothing of any worth at all! And yet as the boy viewed the drawer's contents a "warmth crept back into his heart," for he knew them to be the hoard of some long forgotten boy like himself - "treasures he had stowed away one by one and had cherished secretly awhile: and then - what? Well, (thought the boy,) one would never know why these priceless possessions still lay unclaimed; but across the void stretch of years I seemed to touch hands a moment with my little comrade of seasons long since dead. I restored the drawer, with its contents, to the trusty bureau, and heard the spring click with a certain satisfaction. Some other boy, perhaps, would some day release that spring again. I trusted he would be equally appreciative."

As the scholar Paul Ricoeur has said, every story - to be a story - follows a plot – selects and arranges *the events and actions*

recounted, which make . . . a story “complete and entire” with a beginning, middle, and end . . . No action constitutes a middle unless it instigates a change of fortune in the story . . . a final event that produces a cathartic (emotional) experience in the reader. In Grahame’s account the pivot seems obvious. As soon as the uncle says, “There’s a secret drawer in there somewhere” the boy’s imagination jolts forward like a horse to a sudden spur. Curiosity, hope, a new dimension rises – as Heidegger might say – a clearance, an Open realm. Energy stirs the boy. Exploration. But the momentum of the pivot includes here a novel element: when the drawer opens it contains no anticipated treasure, nothing big, but what appears to be nothing of any worth – except that the forward movement generated by the experience includes an appreciation of things of such personal worth of another boy like himself – that solidarity around what otherwise would be trivia results. The boy is moved, awake to something new, something so special in its own way, and walks away reverently, changed at a sensitive level, mature.

Events literary: To Kill a Mockingbird

It was night in the small 1930’s town of Maycomb, Alabama. Atticus Finch sat upon a chair in front of the town jail. As lawyer for Tom Robinson, a young African-American accused (falsely) of assault, he had taken up his post because he expected a lynch mob to show up. His daughter Scout and her brother Jem noticed his late absence from home and decided to see what was going on. They reached the town square and saw Atticus alone, reading a newspaper. Scout and Jem ran to observe things from nearby. Men began to emerge from cars. As Harper Lee writes in her story *To Kill A Mockingbird*:

“Shadows became substance as lights revealed solid shapes moving toward the jail door.”

“You know what we want, . . . Get away from the door, Finch,” someone said. Tension mounted. Atticus would not move. The men felt challenged. Suddenly Scout ran to be by her father and Jem followed. Atticus winced. “Go home, Jem . . . Take Scout . . . Go home.” The children wouldn’t budge. Someone from among the lynch mob growled, “You got fifteen seconds to get ‘em outa here.” Scout sized up the men: “overalls and denim shirts . . . They were sullen-looking, sleepy-eyed men who seemed unused to late hours.” Scout saw a familiar face.

“Hey, Mr. Cunningham. How’s your entailment gettin’ along?” Mr. Cunningham was a poor farmer who to save his farm during the Depression had mortgaged and entailed himself beyond any hope of solvency. Atticus provided him legal representation gratis. Scout had often befriended his barefoot son at school. “Don’t you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I’m Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts.” The big man blinked, shifted his feet. “I go to school with Walter. . . . He’s your boy, ain’t he? Ain’t he, sir?” Cunningham nodded. “He’s in my grade . . . He’s a good boy . . . a real nice boy. We brought him home for dinner one time . . . I beat him up one time but he was real nice about it. Tell him hey for me, won’t you?”

Atticus and the men stood with their mouths half-open. Then Mr. Cunningham “did a peculiar thing.” He squatted down and took Scout by both shoulders and said, “I’ll tell him you said

hey, little lady.” He then stood up and said, “Let’s clear out, . . . Let’s get going, boys.” Soon car doors were closing and engines starting. The mob dissolved. Clearances.

What had Scout done to defuse that potentially lethal confrontation? She got personal. She didn’t see the mob. She saw someone with whom she felt a personal tie and appealed to that, thereby compelling Mr. Cunningham to extricate himself from the impersonal abstraction he had become; from the inflexible “principles” he had allowed to petrify his behavior, neutralize all that was benign within him. She brought out in him his paternity, his humanity and this “virus” began to spread. Feeling began to compete with the mob’s thirst for vengeance. Too good to be true?

Events literary: Revelation

Remaining within our secular canon of literature let’s consider a story by Flannery O’Connor entitled “Revelation” which rises out of human experience to serve as a type applicable to us all. Frankly I’m not sure we can classify Flannery O’Connor as a secular writer, her work is so loaded with Gospel impact.

Mrs. Turpin lives in the South of the 1950’s. As the story begins we find her in a small town doctor’s waiting room. Seated around the space are a well-dressed, pleasant looking woman and her stout nineteen year old college daughter who’s reading a book and, by contrast, an old woman in tennis shoes, a sniveling child in a dirty romper and its “white-trashy”

mother wearing bedroom slippers. (The description is O'Connor's.)

The scene makes Mrs. Turpin recall a frequent daydream of hers in which she ponders the various levels of Southern society. At the bottom are the "colored" people; then come the "white-trash"; then people who own a house; then people (like her) who own a house and land . . . The daydream leaves her feeling how blessed she is to be so middle-class. Soon she's engaged in conversation with the nice lady, addressing matters like the poor work ethic of black employees. Occasionally both have to put up with "crude" comments of the "white-trashy" woman. Possibly disturbed by the odor of the woman's child, Mrs. Turpin remarks that she raises hogs that are "cleaner than some children I've seen."

All the while Mrs. Turpin notices that the nice lady's college daughter keeps staring at her with increasing hostility over the edge of her book . . . but nothing happens until Mrs. Turpin exclaims in a fit of self-satisfaction: "When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!'" At this point the college girl's book hits Mrs. Turpin right between the eyes! - as she shouts, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!"

Now there's a turning point! And sometimes that's what has to happen. The blow certainly had that effect on Mrs. Turpin. At home she fretted over the experience. She couldn't believe anyone would think her an old wart hog, in any way mean or

insensitive. But as she hosed down the hogs that evening, her mind was now vacant enough [Open enough, spacious enough] to see the purple streak in the evening sky turn into a “vast, swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire.”

On it was a horde of souls ascending to heaven, white trash, bands of black people in white robes, “battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping”. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people like herself, “marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.” Mrs. Turpin knew there was a message in that vision that might somehow change her whole life and attitude.

By the way, the college girl’s name was Mary Grace and the book she threw at Mrs. Turpin was titled Human Development. Flannery O’Connor had a strange sense of humor.

Hermeneutics – old and new

We used to speak of the *sensus plenior* – indeed Raymond Brown’s youthful dissertation was about that topic. It refers to an interpretation of writing that seeks to find the fuller, deeper sense of texts – used in patristic and medieval times.

For instance, a passage from the Book of Isaiah written around 500 BC celebrates the return of Judean exiles from Babylon. It goes: *For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, / for Jerusalem’s sake*

I will not keep still, / Until her vindication shines forth like the dawn / and her salvation like a burning torch. (Isaiah 62: 1)

At the literal, audible level it refers to Jerusalem as that city of ancient time – post-exilic and datable. But at a deeper level (typologically) it can refer to the beleaguered Church at any time in history as recalled from an exile of some sort and on the verge of vindication. And yet again it can refer to the Church as arrived at the end of time – the Jerusalem to come (anagogically). But more to our purpose Jerusalem and what the text says about it refers to you personally – whose vindication is always at hand thanks to the grace of God.

Did I say this manner of interpretation goes back to patristic and medieval times? It is actually in use in the New Testament writings of the first century. As when in John's Gospel Jesus, while cleansing the brick and mortar Temple of Jerusalem, says of himself, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." And he was referring to himself as God's temple. So also Paul in 1st Corinthians speaking of the Christian says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple* of the Holy Spirit within you, . . . that you are not your own?" That you house somehow within you a holy of holies, the presence of your Creator?

Such an interpretation may seem archaic now – but I have read quite penetrating experts in modern hermeneutics who seem to allow a similar expanse or depth of what a text may say whether the original author was aware of it or not – it has to do with language as a manifestation of Being that promotes an

ever expanding clearing ground of consciousness. Mathematics and modernity don't tell us all we really need to know.

Events scriptural

There is that theme in biblical literature where a call comes to individuals that jettisons them off on a way that is full of promise as well as risk. Such calls can pile up as they do in Scripture – like a momentous wave that breaks around you, always depositing you into an accumulation of Time that defines you as dimensionally different than you once were – as – one might say – a person new even to yourself. By entering a seminary you were caught in the tow of such a call unlike the snare of enrollment into a school of business administration.

Metaphorically read - the boy Samuel while asleep hears a call and runs to the priest Eli and says, "Here I am. You called me." And Eli says, "I did not call you. Go back to sleep." (I remember when I first applied to the Graymoor community – in my teens – I wanted to become a lay brother. I didn't think I could measure up to the demands of a seminary. My parish priest was indifferent to my news. But when I showed my letter of acceptance to the Mother Superior of my parochial school, she said – with the absolutism of a Mother Superior - "You are not going to become a lay brother. You write back to them and tell them you want to become a priest!" Which I did! It was like in hearing her I was hearing – not Eli – but the real source of my call speaking in a way the very words Samuel heard, namely: "I am about to do something . . . that will someday make your ears ring, Geoffrey."

Or then there is Moses – no future in store, a fugitive from Egyptian justice, trailing lonely after sheep and goats in a deserted place – when a tree bursts into a fire that does not consume, a metaphor of a solitary, thoughtful, despite reluctant Moses himself bursting into flame - to change the course of history, to alter Time and Space in ways that still shape the horizon of our lives. Our Hebrew heritage.

And then there is Isaiah hearing a voice ask: “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And Isaiah can’t refrain from responding: “Here I am. Send me!” Some kind of voice that brooks no resistance, that flips our status quo into a dynamic mobility, an appetite to know, to Be with a capital B.

Simon, Andrew, James and John are engaged in their everydayness, preoccupied even mindlessly with their business of catching fish, mending nets, not only forgetful of the deeper reasons for their existence, of their tradition, and soon themselves to be forgotten by history – and along comes this Jesus who says come after me and I will introduce you to an even deeper way of fishing – drawing humanity out of its submersion in everydayness, revealing how deep you really are. Can you see the switch, the dimensional pivot that takes place? As Christ says in the Gospel: “I am the gate; whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

And then there is that next moment – so powerfully depicted by the artist Caravaggio – of Levi seated among Renaissance garbed accountants, coins stacked upon their counter – looking

up into a ray of light that reveals the outstretched index finger of Jesus who simply beckons voicelessly: “Follow me.” And it says he got up and followed, his life no longer to be summed up in calculating things but in handling everything he touches with care, with concern.

If you think such narratives are simply about biblical characters from long ago – you are uninformed, uneducated as to how to interpret biblical writing – for each episode is also about you – a stage upon which you are summoned to ascend and be drawn into all such accumulated stories out of the past, to experience them, to allow them to happen to you – for the whole of Scripture is designed to be a social event – changing humanity – and not just a private affair. It has a People in mind.

Indeed the poem written by Walter De La Mare titled *The Listeners* may be also about you. Actually it could be called *The Non-Listeners* - except that they did *in fact* listen but did not respond:

*Is there anybody there?’ said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door; . . .*

James Joyce: Epiphanies

It’s worth turning our attention at this point to James Joyce – as an interlude to what I have been saying, namely the similarity of a call to be a seminarian and to be an artist. Joyce was steeped in the Catholicism that shaped the American clergy. His *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and later classic

Ulysses show a man immersed in a culture that drew many a young man into the priesthood. He himself resisted the pressure or did he? His character Stephen Dedalus goes through a grueling retreat that encourages him to become a Jesuit. He is both attracted and reluctant. He chooses to be a writer – to engage in metaphor as his Gospel. Yet he draws on his creed’s vocabulary. In a letter to Grant Richards regarding his collection of short stories called *The Dubliners* he writes: “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country . . .” He even called them epicleti, the Greek word that refers to the moment in the Mass where faith perceives the bread and wine of everydayness transformed into the body and blood of Christ. So in some way are these stories charged with transformative potential. And then there is his use of the word epiphany to define his writings – his art in some way leading to the experience of the Magi discovering Christ highlighted by a star – a sacramental moment changing history.

Events literary: Ulysses

By the end of this important novel, everywhere Stephen Dedalus, its distraught hero, had looked he saw a world caught up in the hot air of politics, materialism, consumerism, blind nationalism - or hooked on one kind of narcotic or another, be it alcohol or money or sports or a mindless job. He felt overwhelmed by this environment to the point where he lost hope - until one night he smashed a chandelier (symbolic of the cosmos in which he lived) and staggered intoxicated into the Dublin night to end up in a gutter.

Then along came Leopold Bloom, a middle-aged Irish Jew, who had been following Stephen out of concern. Bloom was a Christ like figure, gentle, caring, curious about everything, as though everything and every experience in life were an epiphany of some kind. He brushes the dirt off Stephen and takes him home. He nourishes him (eucharistically) with cocoa (called theobroma or god-food by botanists). Slowly, under the influence of this ordinary, compassionate man, Stephen's faith in human nature and destiny revives. Soberly he exits Bloom's house at dawn to pursue his calling, "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." [Did it ever occur to you when you were in the seminary that that was a way of describing your calling as well?]

Joyce uses several images to convey the effect of Bloom on Stephen. One is especially amusing but powerful. Just before making the cocoa Bloom goes to the sink to turn the faucet and let the water flow. "Did it flow?" asks the text. "Yes." replies the text: "From Roundwood Reservoir in County Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage by way of Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles, and thence, through a system of relieving tanks" until it issued from the tap!

What a wonderful way of describing what Bloom did for Stephen! His simple charity helped release that vast reservoir of love and vision that was dammed up in Stephen (even as it is dammed up in each of us) - so that his creative love might flow

forth even as redemptive blood and water flowed forth from the side of Christ.

And isn't what Bloom did for Stephen, what the literature of salvation history does for us? Doesn't Christ say, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me: out of his gut shall flow living water"? Isn't that what's symbolized in that great vision of the prophet Ezekiel who saw an ever deepening river flowing out of the temple of Jerusalem right into the Dead Sea to turn its salty waters sweet? And doesn't St. Paul say we ourselves are temples of the Holy Spirit, reservoirs of sweet water, of inspired words and deeds that can sweeten our whole environment - if we but turn the tap and let it flow? If we let it Be.

Events personal: a photograph

Some time around 1995 (when we were already aged) a classmate of my sister in Philadelphia called to tell me she had a photo I might like to have. It was of a group of thirty-one Resurrection parish altar boys (ranging from the 6th to the 8th grade) taken on a picnic in the summer of 1939. Well, I remembered that picnic. But I couldn't remember any picture being taken. So I said, "Yes, send me a copy."

Now you have to know that I attended Resurrection parochial school for only three semesters. Actually, my elementary school experience reads like a litany: St. Cyril's, St. Ludwig's, King of Peace, then back to St. Ludwig's, then Resurrection, and finally St. Matthew's. Six schools in eight years. The reason? Mainly economic during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Upon my registering usually in the middle of a semester, I was led into my appropriate grade's classroom, subjected to the skeptical gaze of about forty other children and introduced as "so and so who will be joining us - and I want you all to make him feel at home." At that remark the skeptical look on the boys' faces changed to one of latent sadism, a transformation that escaped the nun but was very evident to me, because I had been through this ritual several times before. In fact some psychologist might say it was a foretaste of the adult world that awaits so many of us in modern times.

It usually took about a week before the schoolyard "initiation ceremonies" were exhausted. Then followed the cultivation of a few pals, significant eye contact with a redhead named Rosemary, enrollment in the altar boys - and so on, until my parents decided to move to another neighborhood before I could ever really say: "Gee, at last I belong!" Never acquiring depth. The result? In my later years I could never quite get over a sense of unresolved distance between myself and whatever group I might associate with. I retained this feeling of always being on the outside looking in. Which is what so many scholars and novelists and screenwriters talk about all the time.

And then Mary Jane called and said something that seemed like music to my ears, something I guess I've always wanted to hear "You're in the picture!" she said. And I said, "Send it!" Within a week a manila envelope arrived addressed in Mary Jane's still liquid Palmer script. I opened it and there we all were, laughing, arranged in three rows, standing, sitting, or squatting

in the trampled grass - the Nolans, Kelley, Murphy, Corkery, Turco, the Vearling brothers, Tomlinson, Callahan. Some had tattered baseball mits; some were in undershirts, or no shirts at all, hair mussed. And there indeed was I in the front row, second from the right, smiling too, flanked by my friends, Bill Miller and Joe Whyllie (now dead these many years).

And as I looked at my eleven year old face, it seemed to be saying to me, the viewer, "What are you doing out there all by yourself? Why do you continue to suffer the illusion you didn't belong; that you have no depth, no grounding, that you don't exist? Can't you see you were very much in the picture, more so than you think? Don't you remember how, amid all the moves your parents made, it was you who insisted on going to a school named Saint Somebody? Why? Because in some unconscious way you found there in that atmosphere of the Church, among the sisters and classmates and the saints that bedecked the walls, whether even that Church knew it or not, a circle of solidarity that made you feel at home in its world in ways an everyday world will never quite understand. It doesn't matter how many schools you went to or how briefly you stayed - because I, your eleven year old self, can testify: you did find family, you touched upon Being with a capital B, as in these everlasting faces of your fellow acolytes with whom you shared that rare capacity to say in Latin: "I shall go in to the presence of God - the God who gladdened my childhood days."

The recovery of that sense of belonging, that sense of solidarity with my cosmos brought on by that intervention of a

girl I hadn't seen in 50 years – that release from my persistent feeling of being on the outside ontically, looking in, rather than ontologically Being in – made evident to me by my having been very much in the picture – *becomes a metaphor out of my own experience that I have now consciously located in my personal canon of stories* – something sacramental. Pivotal – with a long fuse.

Events personal: A Bucket of Steam

My experience in this anecdote has not so much to do with a turnstile experience of my own but perhaps of those who decided to play tricks on me. I was about twelve years old, a mere tenderfoot boy scout. The troop had been taken to Treasure Island, a scouting camp situated on the Delaware River a few miles from where Washington crossed to surprise the Hessians in 1776. As we ourselves rowed over to the island from the Pennsylvania shore to spend a weekend there in its big, cold lodge, we hoped the current of the river wouldn't carry us past it – it was so fast.

Anyway when we woke up on Sunday we Catholic boys in the Troop had to negotiate that current again under obligation to attend Mass in Frenchtown. When we returned we found the Protestant boys still in bed, not having done us the favor of having made breakfast. However, the only thing I really remember of the trip is my being taken aside by the scout leaders before our departure for home and being told to fetch a bucket of steam needed to put out the lodge fire.

Off I went and wandered amid snowy woods in the direction they sent me. After an hour I had to return saying, "I looked all over but couldn't find the bucket of steam." They said, "No matter, we don't need it. What we need are those skyhooks up along the shore." Again I went forth.

After about a half hour I came upon a narrow pier and decided to look beneath it. *And there they were*, about twelve skyhooks tightly tied to an iron bar – too tightly for me to get loose. [They were probably canoe anchors but I didn't know that.] I returned just as the last boat and my mentors were busily leaving the island and said, "Hey, I found the skyhooks but I couldn't cut them loose." They eyed me curiously and told me to get into the boat.

As I thought of that later in my adult years I wondered: what effect did my "discovery" have on those adults? Did they just laugh or as they rowed across to the other shore did they wonder? "The kid says he found some skyhooks. There is no such thing as a skyhook. There's no such thing as a bucket of steam. They are just words we make up – not to be taken literally. We mean, that's the joke – that someone takes them literally and is fooled." Or did one of those older scouts remain thinking that it's possible that words can mean more than we think they mean – like metaphors; like Time can be more than we think it is – like a sacrament? I was too young to realize then that the joke might have been on them.

Paul's Letter to the Romans as an ever current Event!

I want to close the day with an especially important pivoting moment that is not so much found in a biblical or other narrative kind of text but in a Letter written by St Paul, namely his Letter to the Romans. This is more a rhetorical document but rhetoric, like narrative writing, uses imagery and a kind of emotional energy that distinguishes it from conceptual discourse – it's intent being to persuade and not just inform. I am speaking specifically of chapters 1 to 8.

I mentioned earlier that I was sent in my final year of graduate Scripture to study at the Biblical Institute in Rome in the school year 1957-58.

The Jesuit Stanislas Lyonnet – a dynamic, bouncy fellow who might have resembled the original St. Paul himself, taught the Letter. You have to remember from the Acts of the Apostles that Paul, then known as Saul, arrives on the scene as an arch-legalist, fanatically dedicated to the observance and enforcement of the Law of Moses (including its thesis in Deuteronomy: obey and prosper; disobey and suffer). The Law, with its many applications, was the vital infrastructure of Israel's creed and identity.

By Saul's time the Jesus movement was seen as an existential threat to the whole Temple/Torah tradition upon which Saul's people depended for survival. So his moral duty was to round up these Christians who are preaching a different impression of God – who are saying of the Law: you have heard it said such

and such, but we say unto you God *is* and expects *us* to be so much more than that.

But then occurred a change in Saul – suddenly while in the act of implementing his juridical warrant. He was knocked over – and quickly became a Christian – namely Paul. By the time he wrote his Letter to the Romans – around 58 AD – he was so changed, so convinced about his understanding of the impact of Christ’s Gospel that he was lighting fires from Antioch to Corinth and in writing this letter he wanted to introduce that Gospel, his Gospel, to the Christians of Rome.

His first need is to deconstruct the whole Temple/Law infrastructure of the past – not as bad but as missing the mark. Indeed he takes in the infrastructure of Law universally. How? By showing how ineffective it is. He does so by reciting a litany of behaviors reported even today in every edition of the media; he would almost have you savor each word, taste it: *greed, and malice; . . . envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, and spite. They are gossips and scandalmongers and they hate God. They are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wickedness, and rebellious toward their parents. They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know the just decree of God that all who practice such things deserve death [Thus says the system], they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

And this is true of believers as well. He cites his own inability to live up to the laws and rituals that promise safety here and hereafter: *I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self,- but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my*

mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?

Quoting the psalms of his biblical tradition – anatomically - he describes us as violent from head to toe. So that he concludes with an incontrovertible finality: - *no human being will be justified in [God's] sight by observing the law; for through the law comes consciousness of sin.* The Law judges but does not save. It is a greased pole that defies our ascent and guarantees our exhaustion.

And here we may recall Lucy's compliment to Charlie Brown: "Now you've REALLY learned something!"

What hit me as I heard Lyonnet, indeed heard Paul's text, was that I was doomed! All my pious efforts and worry about falling short of heaven were useless. My existence was out of my hands. My environment amid the wreckage of my traditional organization of my world became vacant, empty, without guidelines, meaning, hope. For a moment I was literally, existentially scared, as if to say, "What do I do now?" in this vast emptiness. For the first time in my life I really experienced a radical anxiety – such as maybe the biblical Job felt when God told him to shut up and listen.

And yet somehow the finality of that awareness made me also want to leap for joy! The anxiety was not without joy, relief, release! As in those stories I've been explaining, I was revolving through a pivotal Moment in Time like from one Dispensation to Another.

Issuing from this deconstruction of the Law as anything but a stop gap device to ineffectively ward off wrong, Paul turns to a man of grace who understood the Source of our universe to be absolutely generous as in the case of every prodigal son's Parent from start to finish – a man of grace whom the Law mistakenly killed (as it has often done) but whose bloodshed bore witness to "how much more" even our flawed being is valued by the Source of everything that IS.

As Paul writes: *But now the righteousness, the rightness, the unconcealment of God has been manifested apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, who dare to trust the "impossible" – as did Abraham. For there is no distinction; for all have sinned . . . - They are justified freely by his grace (not by their merits) through the redemption, their recovery in Christ Jesus.*

Jesus is the pioneer whom the lawyers condemned for behaving gracefully instead of "correctly" and opened up to us the true face behind this universe. So that Paul can say that, trusting in what the good news has revealed in Christ - *we have peace-with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast –we boast - in hope of the glory of God.* (Romans 5: 1-2) [Peace, Existence wide Open.] Stone rolled away.

And here is where Lyonnet used imagery, the metaphor of the Temple to clear up Paul's new experience of Being. Lyonnet said that under the Temple's security system only a high priest had access (technically: *prosagoge*) - once a year - to the location

behind the veil, the inner sanctum, the holy of holies where God dwelt invisible in isolation from a world of courtyards divided hierarchically – from priests to men to women to gentiles and whatever divisions exist among us on this globe – a God so holy as to be dangerous to any intruder.

But *now*, explained Lyonnet explaining Paul: you and I and *everyone* who trusts the words and deeds of Christ have access, *prosagoge* to that so called *inner* sanctum – without fear, for it has opened up, its veil ripped from top to bottom, to – what shall I say – the land, the region, the space, the wide Openness (as in Heidegger?) toward which Abraham was directed before he could fully understand where it was . . . ?

The inner sanctum turns out to be not a confining chamber but the gateway to the whole of reality, the expanse of a graced creation, horizon after horizon, poetic, made present for instance in a painting by someone like Van Gogh or a story like A Room with a View or the scent of tomato soup - like the new heaven and the new earth of the final book of the Bible where one sees how *the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the turbulent sea was no more.*

What I have been saying is what moved you to enter a seminary – it was all there beneath your consciousness - like a minefield – waiting to explode – to propel you into Being wide open with possibilities and potential and a gift of tongues – leaving you now to retrieve Time as a destiny.

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