

The Ticket

Has it ever occurred to you that neither Herod nor his scribes could see the star the Magi saw? Otherwise they might have followed it themselves to discover the place where Jesus lay. No - only the Magi could see the star and that was because they were visionaries, men who believed in the possibility of the impossible.

Men like Herod and his scribes had no such inclination. Having a somewhat paranoid or rigidly orthodox view of reality, they feared the possible as much as the impossible. Their minds were closed to any other notion of reality than the self-justifying one they possessed - and therefore so were their hearts, their imaginations, their eyes. They saw no star and what's more: they reveal in their later massacre of the innocents their determination to prevent others from seeing any stars, any deeper meaning to life - their determination to eradicate all visionaries, poets, to repress the creative imagination every child is born with -- all notion, for instance, that life for each of us could be in any way a Journey of the Magi whereby we feel we too are following some star toward realms and experiences ineffable.

For instance, Herod might have scoffed at me when as a boy of fourteen I was accepted by a seminary situated on New York's Hudson River, a mind-boggling one hundred and thirty miles from my home in Philadelphia and, as I read the train schedule, became fascinated by the names of the stations along the way: Tarrytown, Ossining, Croton-on-Hudson, Verplanck, Peekskill, Garrison. "It's nothing but a train schedule," Herod might say. But to me each name was exotic. Each stimulated my imagination the way the names of towns and people in some novel seduce one into reading on to discover what might happen beyond the novel's opening page. This was to be for me no mere journey from one place to another (as Herod might declare) but a journey of discovery at the end of which I might eventually find my Self - even as the Magi found an infant in a manger.

Be like the Magi. Be like the poets among us. Never lose confidence in your imagination, in your conviction that life is more profound than the media and business world and habit make it out to be. Never lose sight of the star, the sparkle you sense you see in the people around you and the seemingly insignificant things you experience in life. Be like the Catholic poet Anne Porter (to whom Mary Shea introduced me) who one day found a ticket in her purse and had no idea what it was for. It had a number on it and the words INDIANA TICKET COMPANY. On the reverse side it said KEEP THIS TICKET. And so she did, on the night table beside her bed - because being a poet she knew it to be no mere stub of paper but a signal of dimensions exciting - or as she puts it:

I keep it carefully / Because I am old / Which means / I'll soon be leaving / For another country // Where possibly / Some blinding-bright / Enormous angel / Will stop me / At the border // And ask / To see my ticket