



Living by Theology

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October 9, 2011

Opening words

In Blackwater Woods

Mary Oliver

Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars
Of light, are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment,
The long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over the blue shoulders
Of the ponds, and every pond, no matter what its name is,
Is nameless now. Every year everything I have ever learned
In my lifetime leads back to this, the fires and the black river of loss whose other side
Is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know. To live in this world
You must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it
Against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it
go, to let it go.

Sermon

Living By Theology

Okay, here's the problem. We have these perfectly good words that mean more to us than their dictionary definition. Attached to their syllables are memories and emotions, some of them good and some of them bad. If there are more bad feelings than good, we reject the word; we put it in storage or use it pejoratively. If it is the other way around, we use the word again and again as if it were truth, with a capital T.

I'll give you an example—MOTHER. Whoa! Did you feel that explosion of pictures and feelings in your head? And each head is filled with a different variety of remembrance and sentiment—good, bad, worrisome. Some words even influence how we act. I, for instance, would never eat at a restaurant that had in its title or advertisement the phrase 'home cooking.' When I hear it or see it, the explosion in my head screams, "Run!" My mother fell in love with a pressure cooker when she was very young and everything we ate, except dessert, was cooked in it—chop suey, steak, spinach, everything.

Well, this same reaction to words—and you've experienced it yourself—happens in church. The word 'pray' comes through the sound system and half of you automatically bow

your head or close your eyes and the other half screws up their mouths in determined resistance, staring wide-eyed at the pray-er. Hear the word 'god,' . . . well, you get the picture. This is why, today, I'm going to begin by defining some of the words I'm going to use in my sermon, so you don't spend half the morning arguing with yourself—or with me—about what they could mean, and miss the good stuff.

Religion. By that I do not mean any spelled-out teaching by any denomination, association, sect or TV evangelist. What *I* mean by religion is how each of us consciously and contemplatively responds to life's experiences. If you cry when a loved one dies, that isn't a religious response; it's an emotional one. But, if, over the course of time you contemplate the deaths in your life, explore the idea with others, gather wisdom from books and teachers, so that you have a sense of meaning and empowerment of how you live knowing you will die, that is a religious response. The reason my definition doesn't necessarily match the dictionary definition, is that we've already agreed that I'm not going to give you the *correct* religious actions and responses and tell you they fit every occasion. Both of us pretty much expect we will each figure it out together.

Today I'm going to talk to you about theology. My definition for theology is *the philosophy of religion*, which is pretty close to the dictionary definition, so you see why I had to attempt to define religion first. Now we can move on.

When I was in seminary, the expectation was that each of us would develop a unified theology of our own so that we would always say to our parishioners, "Here's what I believe." I've done a lot of theology over the years, but I'm not sure how unified it is. And I keep changing pieces of it as I gather new wisdom. Still, I think of myself as a theologian because I continue to do the work, the philosophising. I see theology as putting together a huge jigsaw puzzle, looking for the pieces that fit the hole, match the pattern and completing a piece of the picture.

What I end up with are wisdom scraps. That's what I call the little pieces of paper I copy quotes on, or scribble observations on, that I tear from the larger paper at hand and stack on my desk until I find a place for them. When I'm ready, I build them into my theology like a collage. With each addition, I believe I understand a little bit more about life in general; a tiny bit more about truth and meaning. I find I can't do it alone. I don't think you can either. So I'm grateful for wisdom where I find it. This is what I call *living by theology*. I'll give you some examples.

One Sunday last winter I attended a Linton Concert here. I came late and didn't get my usual seat in the front row, so I found a place in the jury box there, right up against the wall separating me from the exit. The candle screen we use for joys and sorrows had been folded and stored against the opposite wall. I glanced at it, looked away, and was drawn back in disbelief. Four and a half hours after the service had ended, after the screen had been moved out of the way, one of the candles was still lit. Somebody's joy or someone's sorrow was bravely pulsing out its jubilee of life. I got out my calendar, in which I always tuck a pencil and extra paper, and I wrote myself a note, a wisdom scrap, about the candle, so I wouldn't forget. The lit candle had no meaning in itself. It was a manifestation of a physical process of oxygenation made possible by combining fuel (the candle wax) with a feeding mechanism for sustaining it (a wick) and a bowl for containing it. But because I have the habit of theology, it meant a great deal to me. It had connections to me—someone I knew or had seen that day had lit it, because of a story that is part of his or her life and important enough to make a physical effort to emblazon a candle. It had symbolic meanings—hope, courage, individuality, community, witness—symbols that are all a part of my theology. It

raised religious questions for me as well—why this candle and not others? What is the meaning of life and death, which candles have as well as humans? Where is the inspiration for hope? At the end of the concert, the candle was still lit, inspiring in me the twin sensations of awe and mystery and providing for me a very theological afternoon of contemplation and wonder.

One of my easiest and favorite ways of gathering wisdom scraps is through reading. And while I read theology books specifically for their content, I also read novels so that I might add other life experiences to my own. I just finished reading *The Night Circus* by Erin Morganstern. Go ahead. I'll wait while you write that down. (spell) The first quote I wrote down was this: *The circus arrived without warning*. Now, not everyone will be inspired by the same piece of wisdom. It might not sound like much to you, but it brought to my mind that some of the best things in my life have arrived without warning, with no planning or exertion of my own. My job, at this church, for instance. I didn't plan it, or apply for it. One day, the circus arrived without warning, and I bought a ticket. It also reminded me of the very theological concept of grace—gifts from the universe that we receive, without warning, without asking, without even deserving. A wisdom scrap for my collage. *Pay attention to the circuses that arrive without warning*.

Religion is full of paradox—inconsistencies, absurdities, contradictions and impossibilities. Why? I believe it's because life is full of the same things. In a book I just finished rereading, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, by Garth Stein, I was inspired to transcribe this wisdom scrap, paradox to mysterious circuses: *What you manifest is before you*. To me it says that we are co-creators of our own lives. We didn't create ourselves, we don't know why we're here, but let's not waste time speculating. We have the power to become who we wish to be within the confines of our physical manifestation. In the story, the line was said by a race car driver to explain why some drivers come out of spins and some don't. If you, the driver, look to the wall, he explained, your car will crash into the wall. *What you manifest is before you*. If you concentrate on the track, you will likely be able to get back into the race. Don't look for the bad stuff. Don't look at things you don't want to happen. *What you manifest is before you*. If you manifest fear, you are more likely to fail than if you manifest confidence. If you manifest happiness, you are more likely to overcome grief, than if you wallow. If you manifest an open heart, the riches of the universe—not the gold, but the real riches—will become apparent to you. If you leave your life entirely up to god, don't come complaining to me. There are no guarantees, of course. The writer didn't say *What you manifest you are sure to get*. No. That's not even good theology. But *What you manifest is before you*, gives you a path to walk down, a door to knock on, a theological possibility to live by.

See how I do this? See how I live by doing theology? Anyone can do it. But it's not a one-time deal. Creating theology for yourself is a lifetime vocation. It takes practice. But, if we share what we create, it's even better, and easier. We don't have to write a whole book to have wisdom scraps we can give to one another. Every life has them. *The Night Circus* was rich with wisdom scraps. Here is another one from near the end of the book: *The truest tales require time and familiarity to become what they are*. Well, of course. The truest tales are our actual lives and they seldom end the way they started out. We need time and familiarity, patience in abundance to learn to be ourselves and to love ourselves. And we need help—lots and lots of help, theologically *and* secularly. That's why we need to tell our stories, to keep them before us, to test their truths and to become familiar with paths we have chosen. That's why we need to find acceptance for who we are and models for who we might become. Because the truest tales do require time and retelling, until they are familiar, in order to become the truths we live by. Morganstern reminds us that we need to tell the whole story of our lives,

not just the good parts, by asking us, *Is not the dragon the hero of her own story?* Dragons abound, theologically and actually, but even dragons can learn to cover their mouths when they belch fire, if they are theologically adroit and grounded.

At the ministers' retreat this past week, one of my colleagues tried to get a theological discussion going at lunch time. There were six of us at the table and she asked each one, "Do you believe in God?" Two of them said 'yes,' reluctantly, because they didn't want to be criticized for not thinking rationally. Two of them said 'no,' reluctantly, because they could have been criticized for being irreverent. It was a group that didn't know one another well. When she asked me, the one with the longest service, and therefore a longer practice of living by theology, I said, "It's a non-question. To *believe in* something presupposes a something that exists, thereby voiding the question. If I accepted the question, my response would have to be, 'which one?'" I told her, "I understand the god concept, which is that which you consider as the best, the greatest or the utmost you can imagine striving toward. It can be addressed as a metaphor, like father-god, creator-god, or whatever is most high and necessary to you. For me it is spirit of life and of love, possibility and potential." That's when the discussion really got started.

In Stephanie Kallos's amazing story *Sing Them Home*, about a Welsh community in central Nebraska, she offers this wisdom scrap: *It's so hard to explain what the dead really want. . . . The living are a constant source of exasperation. The living—pathetically obsessed as most of them are with calendars, deadlines, delivery and expiration dates, estimated hours of departure and arrival; with measurements, quotas, statistics: exude this energy, for lack of a better word, that frustrates the dead to distraction, makes them so nervous that they'd jump out of their skins if they had any. . . . The dead simply want to be undistracted.* The dead play a huge part in the story, nevertheless. Why did I include this in my wisdom scraps? Because our options for thinking about death—our own and others'—are so limited. It isn't that we are in denial about death, as many writers presume. It's that the explanations for it are so unimaginative, so much like this life except for certain supposed perks, which I, for one, don't see as so great, that it seems silly for us to take such an arduous trip for so little value or variety. Before this wisdom scrap, my favorite one about death was, *I don't know if there's an afterlife or not, but if there is, I'm convinced my response will be, "Wow! I didn't think it would be like this."* It makes death and dying a much more palatable contemplation to have more leeway in your considerations, to have a little sense of humor about it.

My final theological lesson of the day comes from a wisdom scrap out of Elizabeth Berg's latest novel *Once Upon a Time There Was You*. She is describing a lioness in the zoo, an old gal, who spends much of her time lying in the shade and letting her keepers feed her and keep her clean. She is not sick, and she is still beautiful in her own right, but, Berg explains *She's earned the right to stop running after things that don't want to be caught.* I added it to my theological collage because it helps me to put into perspective my most recent decision to retire. I mention it in this context because I hoped it would help you understand and to let me go. Ministry is hard work. You know that because you all do ministry of one sort or another. You take up the tasks, you teach by example, you support one another, you *go out into the world and have courage, you support the faint-hearted and honor all persons.* Do it. Do as much as you can of that kind of ministry and as well as you can. It makes for a useful and satisfying life. But this old lioness has earned the right to stop running after things that don't want to be caught, and I'm simply exercising that right. Not that I'm not still a lioness. If some tasty little rabbit comes walking by, I will reach out my paw and grab it. I will continue to manifest what I want before me. I will continue to tell my story and ask for the stories of those around me. I will quicken to the circuses that arrive without warning and I will attend them,

until that last circus comes into my life. I will find blessings in the candles and the people that glow beyond their allotted time. I will continue to create theology and I will continue to learn from it and pass it on. And my advice to you is that you do the same. It makes for a much more interesting life and it ensures that people and ideas worth paying attention to are part of that life, as you are and have been a part of mine.