

**The Holy Ordinary: Locating the Sacred in Literature and Life**  
**The Capps Lecture, University of Virginia, November 4, 2009**

Mr. Head, an uneducated elderly white grandfather in the rural South, decides to take his young grandson, Nelson, for his first visit to the city. The relationship between the two has degenerated into a state of constant antagonism and petty competition. Arrived in the city, they begin to see the sights, bickering all the while, until they get hopelessly lost, each blaming the other for their plight. Eventually they stumble upon a sight neither has seen before, a weathered “plaster plastic figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence.” Their encounter with this woe-begone object they describe as an “artificial nigger” astonishes them both and leads grandfather and grandson, in Flannery O’Connor’s short story of the same title, to a religious epiphany that transforms their lives and renews their relationship.

O’Connor’s location of the holy in the unlikely figure of a racist artifact is one example of many in which the sacred emerges out of the mundane within her fictional geography of a “Christ-haunted South.” Moreover, the narratives of several other important 20<sup>th</sup> century authors, such as William Faulkner, George Bernanos, James Baldwin, and Walker Percy; and those of some contemporaries, such as William Trevor, Mark Salzman and Marilyn Robinson intimate the presence of the numinous within daily life in their short stories and novels. These literary works offer an alternative and often surprising mapping of the location and the meaning of sanctity, religion, and the sacred, in the daily events of fictional characters lives, exemplifying the insight of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French poet Paul Eluard, who once wrote, “There is another world, but it is within this one.”

“The Artificial Nigger” is one of several O’Connor stories assigned in a seminar class I currently teach at Princeton. In the course, called “Holy Ordinary: the Sacred in Contemporary Fiction,” ten undergraduates and I read and discuss novels and short stories in which the sacred

emerges out of day to day circumstances in surprising ways. It is unusual for me to teach a course in literature, since most of my research and writing has been historical. Late in life I am enjoying the opportunity to return to the field of my first academic study. As Charles said in his introduction, I majored in English in college and I gained an Master's degree in English Literature in my first stint in academic graduate school. Returns, recollections, retrospectives loom large in my life these days, as I approach retirement, which I anticipate as a major transition, the end, or at least diminution of an activity that has defined my life, my status, and my identity for forty two years. It seemed fitting then to me as I approach this milestone to use this occasion as an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of my life as a teacher and scholar, not merely autobiographically, but as a way of examining from my perspective the meaning of lived theology, hoping that my experience may be meaningful to you.

As the old adage says, "Those who can't do – teach." I remember how those words troubled my conscience during my graduate school career in the late 1960's when I worried in those "activist" times whether I ought to be out community organizing instead of studying to be an academic. I would have been a horrible community organizer by the way. Over the years I've perennially needed to remind myself that after all teaching is doing, as I discovered during my first year of full-time year teaching at Xavier University in New Orleans in 1968-69, a tumultuous year politically and socially, in which I taught Theology courses to several classes of undergraduates and discovered that teaching –reading books, exchanging ideas about important matters with bright young minds—was my vocation. But what kind of doing is it and how is it related in my life to theology? Rather than trying to answer these questions abstractly, I will offer concrete examples by discussing some significant passages drawn from several novels and short stories that we read in the course "Holy Ordinary." I will attempt to explain how the moral values, theological implications, and religious assertions articulated in the texts I have chosen to share with you tonight resonate with my life experience, influence my religious sensibility, and

inform my career as teacher and scholar. Of course, the topic of the course and the title of this lecture already reveal more than a hint of my answer.

**Relinquish:** William Faulkner, “The Bear” (1942)

William Faulkner’s “The Bear” forms the long central chapter in his novel of linked short stories Go Down Moses (published in 1942). A story about an annual ritual hunt for “Old Ben,” a legendary bear in “the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document,” (183) “that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness.” (185) Literally, Old Ben was a “big old bear with one trap-ruined foot that in an area almost a hundred miles square had earned for himself a name, a definite designation like a living man” (185). Symbolically, he was “a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life...the old bear, solitary, indomitable, and alone” (185-186). The hunt is a “yearly pageant-rite of the old bear’s furious immortality” as the hunters “were going not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill” (186). Here we are on ancient ritual ground.

Introduced to this ritual-pageant of the hunt, Ike McCaslin “entered his novitiate to the true wilderness with Sam beside him... It seemed to him that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth’ (187). Sam Fathers, son of a quadroon slave and a Chickasaw chief, Sam is Ike’s father-figure and mentor in the ways of the wilderness and the craft of the hunt. (It is not accidental that he is the descendant of the first occupants of the land, and of those who were brought as slaves to work the land, and of those who came to take possession of the land.) Ike has already learned the necessary humility to be a hunter and he would learn the patience (188). He knows that he will not shoot the bear. But he has seen the bear’s fresh tracks and Sam has

told him that the bear has seen him. He senses a mystical connection, and yearns to see the bear, but there remains an obstacle, something he needs to do.

He had already relinquished, of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret, yet apparently that had not been enough, the leaving of the gun was not enough. He stood for a moment – a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the other from his overalls and hung them on a bush... and entered it... emerging suddenly into a little glade and the wilderness coalesced. It rushed, soundless, and solidified.... Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It didn't walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion (199-200).

Let me highlight several features in this passage for our consideration. The primal wilderness of which the bear is the apotheosis is a “doomed wilderness” threatened first by the puny efforts of farmers to clear land and later by the much more devastating effects of logging companies and railroad clear cutting, a devastation all too familiar to us who have, as Joni Mitchell put it, “paved paradise and put up a parking lot” in our seemingly inexorable plunge toward environmental catastrophe. On the contrary Ike's attitude toward the wilderness and the bear is reverential awe. He has relinquished any will to control. It is relinquishment, relinquishment of force, control, and power, represented by the gun, and a sense of direction, represented by the compass, and predictability, symbolized by the watch that allows Ike to relinquish himself to the wilderness and so see the bear. It is relinquishment that allows Ike and us to relocate ourselves within primordial nature, our natural environment as creatures. What do we need to relinquish in order to align ourselves with the sacred in nature? Note the qualities that precede relinquishment are humility and patience.

To relinquish any desire to control, as Ike learns, requires patient listening and intense attention, the ability to totally yield oneself to nature. Perhaps this passage speaks to me so

powerfully, because it reminds me of the ways in which nature spoke to me as a boy, about the same age as Ike, when a much reduced patch of wilderness served as my playground and inspired in me feelings of enchantment, of being taken outside of myself in moments of transcendence.

Over the years rambles in nature have remained crucial respites in my life. Daily walks in the woods down by the lake where I live, offer graced encounters with great blue herons, changes of the seasons, the murmur of streams rushing over rocks, the brilliant sparkle of sun on the surface of water, the weird song of the lake freezing, occasions of sheer delight in the wonder of the world. I experience the healing power of being immersed in the beauty of nature. Some days I am capable of apprehending and appreciating the “whatness” of things, the quality that the poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins called “inscape.”

A theology of wonder at a world “charged with the glory of God” which I find compelling was articulated by St. Maximos Confessor (d. 655) in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is, according to Maximos, our vocation to perceive the presence of the logoi (seeds of the truth) in the world and to offer them back to God in a cosmic liturgy of creativity. The capacity to apprehend the logoi, which he called theoria physike (natural contemplation), is dependent upon the attitudes Ike learns from the Fathers: waiting, patience, attentiveness, stillness, and relinquishment of the will to control or predict. It is the act of contemplating God in and through nature. “The contemplation of nature,” according to Maximos, “finds its starting point in man’s complete immersion in the natural world that surrounds him. He is nourished by that world in two ways: bodily by what it produces, intellectually, spiritually by the seeds of truth that the Creator has planted in all things.” [Hans Urs von Balthasar Cosmic Liturgy (303).] It is the “reception of the mysterious, silent revelation of God in His cosmos...” by which “we see the inner meanings of things and regulate our entire lives according to the norms hidden in things by the creator. By natural contemplation we are able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in ourselves. It implies a sense of community with nature. The tendency in our modern technological view of nature is to exploit and manipulate things with a deliberate

indifference to their logoi, an indifference based in our desire to make nature serve our own immediate interests.” (Merton on Maximos)

The craft of teaching and the craft of writing, like the craft of hunting that Ike learned from Sam Fathers, require a set of skills, including relinquishment of power, control, and predictability. As I have aged, the seminar has become my preferred form of teaching, though it produces more anxiety for me than lecturing, precisely because I have less control. Seminars are by definition collaborative ventures, involving spontaneity, improvisation, and close attentive listening, alert to the possibility of inspiration. Similarly the craft of writing involves learning a set of skills that include facing patiently the empty page waiting for the mysterious bear to appear. Writing requires me to empty myself of the pretense that I can force things to happen. I am taken outside of myself in the process of creating a narrative. Indeed, I strive to achieve a writing style that effaces my ego in order to reveal the subjects of my narrative and to welcome readers in to appreciate their significance of those I write about.

“The Bear” is about the land and our place in it. A grown up Ike argues with his older cousin McCaslin Edmonds (“Cass”) about the moral and religious meaning of the history of the land and those Indian, African, and European peoples who have dwelled on it. In this long convoluted debate, ranging across the history of the American South, from encounter, settlement to Civil War, the failure of Reconstruction, and its aftermath, marshalling and dismissing Biblical arguments, McCaslin contests Ike’s decision to relinquish his inheritance as idealistic, self-centered, and irresponsible. But for Ike their family has been irrevocably tainted (“cursed”) by the evils of slavery, including the miscegenation, rape and incest, committed by its founder, his and McCaslin’s grandfather. Ike, like the bear, remains a solitary figure, without progeny, emotionally detached from the history of his people, on both its black and white sides. As an old man, his black niece confronts him with a haunting accusation in the form of a question: “Old man have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don’t remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?” Ike McCaslin in defense of principle has relinquished

community. The text to which I turn next reveals the ongoing effects of the “curse” of slavery upon the lives of the descendants of slaves, the people of whom Faulkner wrote “they endured.” [footnote: Faulkner dedicated Go Down Moses to “Mammy Caroline Barr (1840-1940) Who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love.]

**A Spiritual Aristocracy: James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953)**

James Baldwin’s first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain (perhaps Baldwin’s counterpoint spiritual to Faulkner’s Go Down Moses –I imagine a choir of two one of them Faulkner singing Go Down Moses and the other Baldwin singing Go Tell It on the Mountain) focuses on one day in the life of John Grimes, a black adolescent in Harlem, who seeks to escape the squalid tenements, the racial oppression and poverty of his people, and the corrosive bitterness of his stepfather. His scholastic ability is praised by his white teachers and promises education a way out for John. On his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday John is cast down upon the dusty floor of a sanctified church astonished under the power of God. There he experiences the rebirth of a conversion experience. Like Ike McCaslin, John Grimes undergoes an initiation ritual, but one of a different sort. Prostrate on “the threshing floor” he struggles desperately to flee, as an ironic voice urges him to get up since he doesn’t belong in this company of niggers. But the more he tries to flee the deeper he falls into the darkness and the greater his terror. “Ah down! ---what was he searching for here, all alone in darkness? But now he knew, for irony had left him that he was searching for something, hidden in the darkness that must be found. He would die if it was not found; or, he was dead already, and would never again be joined to the living, if it was not found” (198).

Encircled by the “prayers of the saints,” which is the title of the middle section of the novel devoted to the lives of John’s aunt, stepfather, and mother, John undergoes a terrifying and liberating experience that is simultaneously a conversion experience and incorporation into the history of his people. In the stories of John’s immediate family, told in flashback Baldwin

encapsulates the history of black Americans, from the post Emancipation rural south to the late 1940s urban ghetto of the great migration north. Shadowed by racial oppression and violence from without, the lives of John's people are riven from within by jealousy, pride, misunderstanding, and the failure to love. Their stories come to a focus upon John as he is struck down by the Spirit. He falls not only under the weight of sin, but under the burden of the accumulated history of suffering inflicted upon his people. John is claimed by a spiritual force that pushes him onto an archetypal journey across an ancient landscape, populated by prophets, apostles, and martyrs.

In his trance he confronts an army of people. Puzzled he comes to understand whose company it is that he seeks so desperately to flee. They are the armies of the night, the rejected, the outcasts, the wretched of the earth and he is in their company; there is no escape. And suddenly their suffering becomes a sound – “a sound” he has heard all his life, but it was only now that his ears were open to this sound that came from darkness that could only come from darkness, and yet bore such sure witness to the glory of the light.” This sound John not only recognizes but now internalizes:

And now in his moaning, and so far from any help, he heard it in himself—it rose from his bleeding, his cracked-open heart. It was a sound of rage and weeping which filled the grave, rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice—which yet spoke now, to John's startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night; of the deepest water, the strongest chains, the most cruel lash...and most bloody, unspeakable sudden death. Yes the body in the fire, the body on the tree.

He struggles to escape, but he finds no escape. And in his fear John calls out to the Lord for mercy. “And he saw before him the fire, red and gold, and burning in a night eternal, and waiting for him. He must go through this fire, and into this night.” Then John glimpses, “for a moment only,” the Lord; “and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear.” And in that moment he was set free. “The light and darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul.”

As Baldwin well knew, the conversion experience was a major method for initiating young people into the community of African-American believers for generations. A deeply personal experience of direction, orientation and validation, conversion involved a profound appropriation of the biblical narratives. A convert's life became sacralized by casting it against the backdrop of the Biblical stories of struggle between God and evil. The resonances of this sacred drama upon the daily conditions of the rest of their lives was incalculable. A deep internal experience of transformation defined their identity and self-worth. The conversion experience rooted deep within the converts' psyches an abiding sense of personal value and individual importance that grounded their identity in the authority of God. They knew that they constituted a "spiritual aristocracy" who did not simply talk about God's Word, but experienced its power on the altars of their hearts.

John Grimes, grounded in the history of his people's suffering and endurance and transcendence, now knows that no man can strike down his soul. "He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable." He has been transformed not by fleeing his peoples' history but by identifying with that history, by permitting himself to be grasped by it. And in being grasped, engulfed by that company of suffering, he comes to comprehend the paradox that it is precisely these wretched of the earth who are the chosen ones of God. He finds himself, in their company, joining the long line of prophets, apostles, and martyrs of biblical tradition. Complementing the earlier vision of the suffering, violent and bloody history of black Americans, now comes another vision of a history of suffering **and** triumph of those who have gone before

No power could hold this army back, no water disperse them, no fire consume them. One day they would compel the earth to heave upward, and surrender the waiting dead. They sang where the darkness gathered, where the lion waited, where the fire cried and where the blood ran down.... No, the fire could not hurt them, and yes, the lion's jaws were stopped; the serpent was not their master, the grave was not their resting-place, the earth was not their home. Job bore them witness, and Abraham was their father. Moses had elected to suffer with them...Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had gone before them into the fire, their grief had been sung by David, and Jeremiah had wept for them. Ezekiel had prophesied upon them, these scattered bones, these slain, and, in the fullness of time, the prophet, John, had come out of the wilderness, crying that the promise was for them. They were encompassed with a very cloud of witnesses....And they looked unto Jesus,

the author and the finisher of their faith, running with patience the race He had set before them; they endured the cross, and they despised the shame, and waited to join Him, one day, in glory, as the right hand of the Father.

On one level, Go Tell It on the Mountain is the story of John Grimes's conversion; on another, it is the meaning of African-American history. What is to be "told on the mountain" is the lesson that salvation lies not in the high road of the proud and the mighty but with the poor, the suffering, and the wretched of the earth – not merely because they suffer – but because suffering can be transformed into a source of wisdom and strength, maturity, authenticity, and integrity. African-American Christians believed they were a chosen people, not because they were black, nor because they suffered, but because their history fit the pattern of salvation revealed to them in the Bible. They saw themselves in Christ, the suffering servant. Their lives modeled the paradoxes of the gospel: in weakness lies strength, in loss, gain in death, life. The conversion experiences of black Christians grounded their identity in the knowledge that they were accepted by God, indeed, were of ultimate value in the eyes of God, no matter what white men thought. The communal experience of worship, epitomized in the preaching, praying, and singing of generations of black Christians created and recreated their identity as a chosen people, another Israel amidst the American Egypt. In the ecstasy of worship, this identification became dramatically real and supported their communal identity as a special, divinely chosen people in stark contrast to the ubiquitous racism depicting them as inferior to whites. Conversion and worship nurtured the capacity of the human spirit to transcend bitter sorrow and to resist the persistent attempts of evil to strike their spirits down. As Faulkner observed, they endured, but, as Baldwin attests, they **more** than endured.

The resonances of this passage for me lay in the recovery of my own people's history, shadowed by racism and violence -- a history that has been formative of my life and my work. I came of age in the academy in the 1960s and 70s a period of the development of African-American Studies. The inclusion of African Americans and other previously invisible groups in the history books was an extremely important development not just for academic study but also

for the understanding of ourselves as a nation, for history functions as a form of self-definition. In its pages we read ourselves. It tells us who we are because it reveals where we come from and where we've been. The neglect of black history not only distorted American history, but also distorted both white and black Americans' perceptions of who we are.

As I sought sources to work on the history of the religious lives of slaves, I became fascinated by the voices of former slaves preserved in narrative accounts of their lives, not simply as historical evidence, but also as voices that seemed to speak directly to me. These voices were special: they rang with the authenticity of those who had endured brutal suffering and triumphed over it. In my dissertation and book, Slave Religion, I tried to capture the tenor, the rhythm, and especially the wisdom those voices conveyed. The core of what they conveyed was succinctly captured in the words of Howard Thurman in his profound meditation on the spirituals, Deep River: "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst." Despite severe persecution and suffering, slave Christians bore witness to the Christian gospel, whose truth they perceived and maintained in contradiction to the debasement of that gospel by those who held power over their bodies, but not their souls. The suffering witness of slave Christians constitutes a major spiritual legacy not only for their descendants, but also for any who take the time to heed their testimony.

A basic underlying premise of my work is that we have need of their voices. We need to hear and to listen to the stories of all our ancestors. We need to be informed by the memories of their lives. Memory, story, ritual are all ways of re-remembering a community broken by hate, rage, injustice, and fear. Not to avenge, nor to make up for what can't be undone, but perhaps to heal. I remain convinced that if we listen to the stories of others we will be intrigued by the drama of their lives, moved by their poignancy, and finally, surprised at the common humanity that lies beneath their distinctive details. In the end, what we hold in common is a set of shared stories. If we seek commonality, we will discover it in the telling and listening to each other's stories,

confident that an adequate history of the various races, ethnicities, and religions that came to dwell in this land will reflect our continually expanding American identity.

Flannery O'Connor's story "The Artificial Nigger," with which I began, offers a striking symbol of the healing power of the African-American experience converging with Baldwin's vision in Go Tell It on the Mountain. "It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead." (268) Nelson and Mr. Head "stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy." (269) My next text, selected from another story by Flannery O'Connor, deals with one of the more intransigent and deep-seated barriers to communication, reconciliation, and community.

### **Who do you think you are? Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation"**

Flannery O'Connor's story "Revelation" is a story about Mrs. Ruby Turpin, a forty-seven year old Southern Christian woman; sure she's saved and thankful to Jesus for not making her a nigger or white trash or ugly (491). The story opens with Mrs. Turpin surveying the doctor's waiting room that she and her husband Claud have just entered. (Claud has an injured leg that needs attention.) The Turpins own land where they raise cotton, harvested by black workers, keep white-faced cattle, and raise pigs. Their pigs, Mrs. Turpin testily explains to a "white-trashy woman" are not dirty, since they live not in a pig sty but in a pig "parlor," where their feet never touch mud but only concrete. Besides that Claud hoses them down every afternoon. Mrs. Turpin is puffed up with pride in her own virtue: "To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or

black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so” (497).

Meanwhile, another patient waiting to see the doctor, a young Wellesley college student, has been eyeing Mrs. Turpin since she entered the room. The significantly-named Mary Grace has got Mrs. Turpin’s number. Her blue eyes “appeared alternately to smolder and to blaze. The girl’s eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give.” (492) Mrs. Turpin has the uneasy feeling that “She was looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life – all of Mrs. Turpin’s life, it seemed too, not just all the girl’s life” (495). As Mrs. Turpin waxes on about how grateful she is for what Jesus has made her and what he has given her, she gets carried away with joy and cries aloud “Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus thank you.” At that instant, a book, hurled by Mary Grace from across the room (titled Human Development.) hits Mrs. Turpin directly over her left eye. Then Mary Grace hurls herself at Mrs. Turpin and begins to throttle her. After Mary Grace is subdued and sedated, Mrs. Turpin recovers enough to confront her attacker:

She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. ‘What you got to say to me?’ she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation. The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s ‘Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,’ she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target (500).

Back home after this traumatic event, Mrs. Turpin lay down to recuperate. But rest was impossible

the image of a razor-back hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head. She moaned, a low quiet moan, -- ‘I am not,’ she said tearfully, ‘a wart hog from. From hell.’ But the denial had no force. The girl’s eyes and her words... brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now....The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath (502).

Mrs. Turpin allows full vent to self-justification, self-righteousness, and wounded pride.

Incensed, she challenges God.

“Why me...It’s no trash around here, black or white, that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church... How am I a hog” she demanded. “Exactly how am I like them...”If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then,” she railed. “You could have made me trash. Or a nigger....Go on...call me a hog... Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There’ll still be a top and bottom!”... A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, “Who do you think you are?” (507)

Then, as she does frequently, O’Connor describes the natural surroundings, as if they were a heavenly chorus commenting on the action of the drama: “The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood. She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it” (507-508). Her question is its answer. As a result of all that has occurred Mrs. Turpin is prepared to receive the revelation of the title of the story, which fittingly takes place, like that of the Prodigal Son, in the company of pigs:

Then like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them.

Parens: Could she be apprehending the ‘whatness’ the ‘logoi’ of the old sow and the piglets?

They appeared to pant with a secret life. Until the sun

Parens: Often the sun figures as a Eucharist symbol in O’Conner’s fiction.

slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic [priestly gesture] and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those

who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense 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. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile. At length she got down and...made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah (508-509).

Could that last shout be the ‘logoi’ of humans? Could it be that we exist to praise God – that is who we are? Status, respectability, class, complacency, justification blind us to that reality. Top rail vs. bottom rail isn’t the ultimate configuration of human relations according to the Gospel: “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” “Revelation” may be read as an extended gloss on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

The Pharisee who goes into the temple praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Who do you think you are? Humility is to perceive ourselves as we truly are, not inflated by grandiosity cloaked in thankfulness to God (Mrs. Turpin’s gratitude to Jesus made her “feel as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty pounds.” That is real inflation...) Nor, deflated by false humility, making ourselves out to be less than we are by simply adopting the reverse image of pride.

In my life, humility (seeing myself accurately) was made more difficult by the role I felt assigned to me in my family. As the favored child, the only son, bearing my dead father’s name and the family’s future, I assumed the role of family savior. Like John Grimes, my academic success seemed to offer a way out of the neighborhoods of poverty that we lived in and the limits of white racism upon our opportunity. My academic success made my folks proud and

confirmed my task as caretaker, a role reinforced by my Roman Catholicism, which led me to adopt for myself a heavy burden at an early age. As a close friend of my mother's remarked when I was ten years old, "here is the little old man." I did what others wanted and I did it well. I wanted to be a saint and to try to be not only virtuous but perfect.

In my career, the dangers of elitism and the dangers of false humility have also loomed large. How to accurately see myself is, I believe, to place myself in the guild of the profession past and present instead of entertaining the fantasy of the pioneering innovator, deserving of the coveted genius award from the MacArthur Foundation. Nor will it due to disparage my accomplishments in an act of false piety that only feeds my pride. Placing myself in a common enterprise enables me to value what I do beyond my gratification or aggrandizement of myself. Let me give you an example. Several years ago, I taught a seminar on Religious Radicals: Religion and Social Change in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. It was the third time I taught the course and it seemed to me to be going badly – a smaller enrollment than usual (only six students) and they were unresponsive, especially one who hardly spoke at all until after midterm. At the very end of the semester I learned the reason for his alienation. He had been found by the police passed out drunk on the street and had been arrested for possessing a false id. He had to face the accusation of criminal behavior and the realization that he was an alcoholic. In the course, he had read two passages that turned his life around. One was the testimony of a black tenant farmer motivated by John Perkins' campaign to organize poor black farmers and sharecroppers in the environs of Mendenhall, Mississippi. This alcoholic farmer had "put down the bottle" and stayed sober. The other was a passage from Thomas Merton's journals on **le pointe vierge** that place within where our being meets God's being – a point of innocence unavailable to the brutalities of our wills. The student entered a 12-step program, stayed sober, and was requested to speak on alcohol abuse to campus clubs. Now, I had no idea of any of this. The class was an occasion of grace. I may desire to see the effects of the good I do, but the situation is much richer and more complex than I can ever grasp. Like Mrs. Turpin, my ego gets overly invested in the results of what I do. For

me the “field of living fire” in O’Connor’s story illustrates the surprising and liberating truth that God’s mercy is incommensurate with our standards of judgment of ourselves and especially of others. It is God’s mercy, not certainly my virtue that matters. [Mr. Head “stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the actions of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it.” (269-270)]

Teaching and scholarship as collaborative and communal activities may help to transform us as disciplines of doing, enabling us to understand each other and the “others” we study and in understanding them come to a more adequate understanding of ourselves. We encounter difference not as something alienating but then as enriching. And so are led not only to knowledge but to compassion, the antidote to Mrs. Turpin’s and our tendency to dehumanize others by classifying them not only as others but as pejorative others, inferior to us and those like us. This inner attitude can lead of classification and superiority, quietly, subconsciously, as O’Connor warns, to horrific external social consequences. “Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people... Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.” (491-492)

O’Connor reveals the extremes of the tendency to class ourselves as spiritually, intellectually, materially, physically, or racially superior. The subtlety of spiritual pride as the barometer of the relation of the self to others is outlined by Mark Salzman in his novel about a cloistered Carmelite nun in Los Angeles.

**Solitude and Community:** Mark Salzman, Lying Awake (2000)

Sister John of the Cross has been in the convent for twenty eight years, most of them years of spiritual dryness. “She knew what it was like to feel abandoned by God. She had languished in the cloister for years, her prayers empty and her soul dry, until grace came and brought the drought to an end.” (13) For the last three years she has experienced vivid visions

that inspire her to write essays and poetry on the contemplative life. She is gaining a reputation as a spiritual writer. The novel opens with Sister John rising before her sisters in the early morning hours:

Instead of going to the choir to wait for the others, she returned to her cell, knelt down on the floor...and unfocused her eyes. Pure awareness stripped her of everything. She became an ember carried upward by the heat of an invisible flame. Higher and higher she rose, away from all she knew. Powerless to save herself, she drifted up toward infinity until the vacuum sucked the feeble light out of her. A darkness so pure it glistened, then out of that darkness, nova. More luminous than any sun, transcending visibility, the flare consumed everything; it lit up all of existence. In this radiance she could see forever, and everywhere she looked, she saw God's love. As soon as she could move again, she opened her notebook and began writing (5-6).

Sister John has been experiencing not only visions but has been suffering increasingly severe migraines. Her superior orders her to see a neurologist who determines she has temporal lobe epilepsy caused by a small benign tumor. The tumor is removable, but surgery will end her visions. "Please, God, take anything, take my life but don't take Yourself away from me, don't tell me I haven't known You at all. I waited so long, Lord," is her poignant prayer at this point.

Sister John had learned a novice that "In religious life...to gain, one had to lose everything first. The only path to victory was through surrender. To become full, one had to become empty." (96) She had chosen to name herself after St. John of the Cross, author of The Dark Night of the Soul, "which described the soul's crucifying but purifying journey away from self and toward God" (97). Now as a mature nun she faces her dark night: the emptying of her desire for union with God, which she has been experiencing. She has to decide whether to have the surgery or not: her test of faith. "[S]he hoped that when she faced her own dark night of the soul, she would, like her patron saint, find the strength to choose faith over despair." (97)

Her decision, however, involves not just herself. It also involves her community. She learns from Sr. Miriam, a troubled novice in the community, that she is jealous of Sr. John because she and the other sisters are still searching for what Sr. John has found. Mother Emmanuel, the prioress, reveals to her how disruptive her visions are to the community as a whole. “Perhaps you aren’t aware of yourself during those moments...Just when God offered Himself to us through the Eucharist, you stood up and began wandering around the choir, staring at the ceiling and humming to yourself...Do you remember any of that?” Torn by the decision, Sr. John begins an all night prayer vigil in the chapel the site of common prayer. As she prays alone in the choir, she is joined by one sister and then another and finally “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” (142). Sister John chooses to have the surgery and her visions cease. The novel ends with Mother Emmanuel asking her to take charge of training a new novice who is entering the convent. “She’ll need a novice mistress with a special understanding of the difficulties we face trying to do God’s will,” Mother Emmanuel says. When Sr. John protests, “I don’t feel I know anything about God’s will, Mother,” the prioress responds “Yet you are still here to do as well anyway. That’s the kind of understanding I meant. The doing kind, not the knowing kind.” (181)

Self-emptying, not self-fulfillment is the purpose of contemplative practice: silence, solitude, prayer, meditation. Religious piety can turn into a subtle spiritual pride -- a form of ego gratification when it degenerates into spiritual consumerism that focuses on having spiritual experiences to aggrandize the self. As Franny observes to Zooey in the J.D. Salinger novel “spiritual hedonism is still hedonism.” Behind the drive for self-aggrandizement, whether material or spiritual, is a distorted sense of the person as an atomized ego. On the contrary, Christianity views the person as interpersonal. Made in the image and likeness of God, the very purpose of our being is to commune with others in imitation of the Trinity of Divine Persons in

whose image we are made. We stand not alone, as solitary individual selves, but in compassionate solidarity with others, those who have gone before, as well as those who come after. And we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the present, especially with those who suffer. In the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, a 7<sup>th</sup>-century ascetic and theologian, our compassion should extend to “the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing: and by the recollection and sight of them the eyes of a compassionate man pour forth abundant tears.” The contemplative tradition bears profound witness to the hidden connectedness of us all. The way to recognition of our interpersonal responsibility, as the elders of this tradition taught, lies in the “self-naughting” practice of obedience, prayer, and humility, which liberate the person from the tyranny of habit and desire, from slavery to hyper individualism that leads to isolation and despair. Solitude and community aren’t antithetical but contrapuntal. Contemplative experience in silence and solitude should not degenerate into narcissistic self-absorption, but should generate profound compassion for everyone and everything.

The appeal of the contemplative life hit me at the age of thirteen when I chanced upon The Seven Storey Mountain, Thomas Merton’s bestselling autobiography. Merton, Trappist monk and the foremost interpreter of the contemplative life for modern Americans, argued eloquently, in a succession of spiritual classics that silence, solitude, and contemplation, are necessary for a meaningful Christian -- indeed for a meaningful human--life. Merton’s description of the simplicity and holiness of the monastery convinced me. I wanted at age 13 to become a monk. And even though I dropped the idea in college, the monastic ideal he depicted had a long-lasting impact upon my life. For years, way into maturity, career, marriage, family life, I felt a nagging doubt that somehow I had made the second best choice. I identified monastic solitude as the place of holiness, and the “world” as the place of ordinary humdrum responsibility. Even after Merton turned in the 60s to writing trenchant social criticism of the racism, militarism, and consumerism, rampant in American society and even after I became involved in social activism

and protest myself, the monk haunted the corridors of my conscience. At base, the source of this romanticized view of monasticism was, I believe, my hunger for spiritual experience. Like Sr. John of the Cross, I wanted to have such experiences, and secretly, wanted others to know I was these experience. Now to want to be viewed as a saint is not compatible with sanctity. I found it all too common that other people placed me upon a pedestal, but was reluctant to realize that I had internalized the pedestal.

Merton insisted that the contemplative experience does not end merely in personal illumination and individual liberation; it also includes a profound realization of the unity that binds us all together, the ‘hidden ground of love.’ In awakening to our own true identity, to who we really are, we find not only ourselves, but also the world, the world of creation of creatures and of other people, our brothers and our sisters. Only gradually have I begun to dismantle the internalized pedestal of spiritual pride. Once again teaching and writing are the disciplines which help in this undoubtedly life-long process. It has taken me a long time to realize that in fact I have chosen a contemplative vocation. Teaching and writing provide me with regular times of solitude and silence, alternating with regular periods of community. My life is counterpoised between solitary introspection and interpersonal communication. A priest friend of mine once surprised me when he advised me out of the blue “Al, when you enter the classroom, look at the face of each of your students and love them.” He opened my eyes to a dimension of teaching I had not consciously considered. Similarly, a student in a seminar I taught several years back, “Spiritual Aspects of African-American Autobiography,” revealed another dimension to our reading and discussion that had escaped me. During the next to last class, she described what she thought we had been doing all semester. She said, “We have been breaking apart the bread of the texts and offering each other communion.” Her metaphor was Eucharistic, alluding to the post resurrection appearance of Christ to the two disciples travelling on the road to Emmaus, who recognize the stranger who was accompanying them “in the breaking of the bread,” a passage itself alluding to the passage of the Last Supper command of Christ to “do this in memory of me.”

As the student continued her presentation, a murmur of approval emerged from her fellow classmates, when she had finished, a burst of applause. She enabled us to recognize the Holy Ordinary in what we were doing. As I look back on a lifetime of researching, writing, and teaching, that has stretched from Xavier in New Orleans to Yale in New Haven to University of California in Berkeley and to Princeton, I am grateful for how fortunate I have been. Alas, there have been too many times when I have “had the experience but missed the meaning” as T.S. Eliot puts it. Too often I’ve been distracted by impatience and pride and the need to know the outcome of my efforts. Too often I’ve been looking elsewhere, desiring to escape the here and now and the hard work of tending daily responsibilities and complex relationships in search of a “holy” life of spiritual experience. But every now and then, more frequently than I expect, I glimpse of the holy ordinary and am moved to agree with St. Therese of Lisieux, another Carmelite nun that “Grace is everywhere.”