

Faith and Experience

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It has never occurred to me that faith and experience could be separated. As a veteran of testimony and prayer meetings and Bible studies that emphasized over and over again that God was involved in our lives, I came to believe it. Not because of all the hard evidence I heard there: God would tell you when to sell your house, the sex of your baby, or even take over the wheel of your car if you wanted to drive 110 mph and get to Spokane faster. I've heard amazing things about God's involvement in our daily lives; it isn't those stories that convinced me. But other stories have.

I suppose the problem with experience for many of us with pietistic backgrounds is that THE experience gets to be the only one. Since I am one of those who did not have the experience, I've worried a bit about this all and grew to be suspicious and critical of those who claimed to have had *the big experience,* but seldom had any *experiences* in which they could see God working in them.

Youth does need the big experience. But as one grows older, our experiences, instead of being less deeply felt, threaten to undo us and sometimes do. Not just the big moments, but the morning sun reddish against the books in the library, the fragrance of beans in the August garden, the frank look of a friend.

The kind of experience that has turned many of us off has been the brash and egotistical appropriation of God as my errand girl, the one who does all for me, for whom I do nothing. God runs around while I remain still. God is in process. I am not.

Most American education is based on some kind of version of Dewey. Teachers are supposed to create situations in which the students can learn by doing, by their experience. Ideally, in those created situations theory and the practical world meet and the student grows. Though I am not a Deweyite, I am attracted to the piety of the idea that theory and action should engage in some meaningful way. It has integrity, that thing pietists love especially. As a Christian, however, it is possible to be even more radical. My faith is no theory. It is my lens upon the world. It allows me to see.

My father tells of two testimonies he heard every Sunday night in his boy-

hood church. The one man, like the Pharisee, stood up proudly and said, "One thing I know is that I love Jesus." The other, like the publican, though he is not reported to have smote his breast, said, "All I can say is Jesus loves me."

Now if the Word is truly transforming, it will have shaped us so by the time we are fifteen, that any of us would have known what we were seeing in the experience of that event.

Jesus' parable caused my father to interpret that experience. The Bible was his lens into the world and it caused him "to see to see," as Emily Dickinson puts it. In that very fundamental way, the Word transforms our lives. If the second "Pharisee" could see himself in the story, he would have to suffer a change, but it's in the nature of "Pharisees" not to see.

Both the Greeks and Hebrews knew that suffering brought insight and wisdom. Those whose every experience is a sunny victory are in some way preventing the work of the Holy Spirit or denying Incarnation, for suffering cannot bring wisdom if people do not fully experience it and allow it to change them as they struggle to understand it. To understand it, they must return to their deepest sources. Dante, in the Dark Wood, is lost until, suddenly from the darkness, a messenger appears. Grace. And his life, now connected to the big story makes sense. What suffering he must endure after that is considerable, but it is redemptive. It has meaning. Until grace comes to him, all his experiences have been meaningless; without hope, he is out of joint and out of time. But after grace comes to him, he can go back and trace how God was working on him, even in the darkest times.

Dante brings us to the inevitable question of relevance. Some say the old story with those old metaphysics no longer means anything to people and we have to find a new story. That's an interesting idea, especially in the church where we have at our center a very good story. Old stories endure beyond the world-views of their time, because what is interesting in story is not the furniture, but the human relations. In story we watch people living ethically with each other. We can watch people do the right or wrong things and we can learn from them how to live. Our lives are shaped by the quality of the story we imbibe (which is why television is so frightening: rather than spending all our time telling the old stories, as the oral culture must do to survive, television uses up all the great stories in a week and is in desperate search of newer and different—alas, more kinky—material). Christians are shaped by the stories of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the Crucifixion, not just because they are there, but because they are great stories and they moralize and change us. We are changed. God works in us.

It doesn't take much insight to see that the loss of these stories has impoverished us greatly. We know a lot about life, but not how to live it. The me-first generation does not read literature of any kind, preferring their own story to the stories of others. Which is why the late '60s and early '70s were rather embarrassing to us pietists. It was the very worst of Haugeanism gone groovy on beads and Ripple Wine. People told their stories, didn't listen to any others and never seemed to be changed, fundamentally, from what they had been, even though they protested loudly they had been.

Epic is autobiography writ large. To tell my story, I have to be able to connect it to the big one. Midrash. As a Christian poet I am involved in some form of

midrash all the time. I am constantly telling my story and the story of my people. The teller of a story sorts out the strands of cause and effect that run through the event, and gives it meaning. To tell the end of a story is to create significance in the story. Conflict and trouble in the story come to have purpose, one can see grace, God acting in history, even in our lives.

Story tellers take experience and put it into words, and find words to shape their experience. Bad poetry is full of thoughts and images we already know and familiar words we don't even hear. Just recently in my creative writing class I had to convince my students that dogs

are not better friends than people. Though dogs may be more faithful, people who are faithful like dogs are not interesting. In the discussion it struck me that both their words and their experiences seemed unexamined and, therefore, shallow. There was nothing new in their perceptions or in their language. I'm not sure which was the cause of which. But some kind of new vision was needed.

One of my colleagues once said in reference to the open curriculum: you can't give a *carte blanche* to a *tabula rasa.* It is true also in matters of faith. Our earliest experiences of the faith will be much less rich than our later ones. But that does not mean we should delay religious education. The more richly our children have been inducted into the Biblical stories, the more resources they will have as they live their lives of faith. That is how God's Word works in us: there, living in us, it transforms and judges our lives together.

A year ago, I received a grant to study Swedish folk songs in Stockholm. It was a lonely and troubling time for me. I could not afford to buy many books and so I began writing sonnets, one an evening. Something was eating at me, and I was troubled by the nature of the Christian life: Is it simply ethical? What about my sin? What is sanctification? As I grow older, I am more and more troubled by those very typical and human feelings of guilt. Not the guilt for some strange and unacknowledged transgression, but for specific and deep feelings of failure to be what I want to be and feel I should be.

And so I was in Stockholm brooding along with all the rest of the Swedes. Whatever was bothering me found some expression in my poems. I began to write to live and suddenly I found I was living to write. Everything around me became transformed because I was making some new connections. The material was old, but the connections made it new. The old Gospel stories were transforming my vision. There was a new joy in everything because it was a gift to me. A surprise. Grace. As a Christian I should have expected as much. Maybe the poem tells it better.[1]

[1]Quoted from a collection of poems by Gracia Grindal, "Sketches Against the Dark: A Journal of a Month in Stockholm (For Mary Lou and Martin)," *dialog* 20 (1981) 96-101.

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Here in the Stockholm archipelago
the train conductors say before each start
the doors are closed and after that there's no
persuading them to open. They're shut tight.
The kingdom of heaven is like a subway train.
The foolish virgins weep and wail outside the doors
let us in they cry to no avail
the porter shakes his head *sorry dears*.
The door closes, they should have thought ahead
and filled their lamps when oil was free and easy.
That's the hard part, timing, knowing your need.
Not having one is death. *O Christ have mercy.*
We are ready for take off now, despite the snow.
The flight attendants wave good-bye. The doors close.