

Entertaining the Unreasonable

KATHY RUDY

If I were to live long enough and develop as an artist to the proper extent, I would like to write a comic novel about a woman -- and what is more comic than the intellectually proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth?

Flannery O'Connor

Following the spiritual thread of one's life sometimes seems like the plot of a science-fiction novel in which forces are at work moving people here and there in ways they don't themselves see and for purposes they don't yet even know about.

Dan Wakefield

I believe that the search for spiritual enlightenment lies somewhere between these two epigraphs. On the one hand, this first quote from O'Connor is how I would like to see myself. Proud and strong, "inching" my way toward God with fierceness and determination. All my studies and work and writing forge for me a steady if somewhat humorous journey toward the one true God. In the end, it is the sheer force of my will that moves me away from secular distractions and into the joy of oneness with the divine.

Look at me as a little kid. Twelve years of Catholic School and four years of Catholic College, the ubiquitous maroon and gray plaid jumper and white starched shirt get bigger every year, and presumably the knowledge inside that young girl's mind (and the faith inside her heart) grow along with each new manifestation of the uniform. The nuns take her to soup kitchens, prayer meetings, various social programs and political demonstrations. The stories that fill her head are of young saints and martyrs who would rather let wild beasts gnaw on their entrails than speak a word against the church, of young women who choose a lifetime of work with lepers but never become infected, of young priests willing to sacrifice their lives in Nicaragua to stand against U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. Inside her head, these are not tales of religious indoctrination, they are truths animating a life. After twenty-some years of training, I am ready to face the world; ready to defend my faith against whatever shams the human race has to offer. I join the Jesuit Volunteer Corp in order to leave my mark.

To their credit, the Jesuits exposed me to an excessive bounty of ideas: in the first six months, I met not only people who espoused voluntary poverty, non-violence, anti-war sentiments, but socialists, feminists, and lesbians as well. I'm sure in their minds, all these progressive politics were linked to Catholicism, but that link was lost to me in those passionate early days of remaking myself into a commie-leftie-pinko-lesbo trouble-maker. I was on fire with politics, marching in an army of justice commissioned to rectify whatever wrong crossed our paths. I saw my church friends at various demos, but eventually we drifted apart. What remained after they were gone, though, was a longing for some kind of way to express, dare I say it, "my spirituality?"

If Catholicism can be faulted for its hypertrophied hierarchy and total attachment to chain-of-command, the "womenspirituality" movement of the 1980's errs in the opposite direction. Every

decision was made communally by anyone who happened to show up for that particular meeting. Over and over, the lack of structure led to total chaos. After a couple years of experimenting with goddess-worship, paganism, and Wicca groups, I think I decided that I needed structure almost more than I needed spirituality. So I did the only thing I could think of: I pulled out the “church” section of my local phone book and methodically visited each congregation, in alphabetical order. There were several filters, of course: given that I was no longer interested in Catholicism, I didn’t really care what kind of Protestant it was, but it had to be Christian (which, to my way of thinking then, excluded Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Moonies, and any church where they spoke in tongues). And it had to be white. And it had to be “close to home” (which pretty much meant white). I also tended to skip names that somehow, in the back of my mind, could be vaguely associated with things like snake-handling, tent-revivals, and altar-calls; I worried that labels like Zionist, Tabernacle, Pentecostal, Full-Gospel, or Non-Denominational meant the church was filled with oddballs more interested in eccentric performance than faith. The final filter occurred when I showed up for Sunday morning services: if the “church” was located in a building that wasn’t originally designed to be a church, and/or if its sign was hand-lettered, I was out of there.

After a couple of months of such research, the local Methodist church was next on my list. The first Sunday I visited, the associate pastor—a woman—led service, and it blew my mind. Aside from the nuns who illegitimately “said mass informally” when no priests were available, I had never ever seen a woman performing a religious service. I had found what I wanted. A woman *in charge* of her church. I was so certain that this was the place for me that I joined that church the next week. And with the (perhaps overzealous) assistance of that young female pastor, two weeks later I was enrolled in Methodist seminary.

Throughout seminary, I kept my eyes on the prize of ordained ministry, hoping someday to have a church of my own, just like her. Methodism seemed at that time like the perfect blend of mind and heart to me. With equal emphasis on rationality and the movement of the spirit, it was a denomination I could sign my name to. Not too clinical, not too gaudy, not too fringy. At its core, it captured both the reasonableness of faith along with the excitement that can happen when God enters human lives. The problem for me was that, although there was theoretically room for my heart to be “strangely warmed,” it never really happened. I was, as one of my seminary professors fondly put it, a Methodist without much fervor.

Even so, I wanted to be a minister. But that didn’t work out. I settled on the desire to be a theologian, but that didn’t work out either. Then I decided I should study ethics; at least that way I could continue teaching in a religious environment, but that didn’t work out either. Through a strange array of twisted events, I ended up teaching in the most secular pocket of academia: women’s studies. Here, my involvement in Christianity has evaporated like a puddle on a sunny day; slowly, little by little, outside my field of perception. I woke up one day last year and knew that if I didn’t do something fast, I would be resigned to spend the rest of my life pushing words and papers through secular structures.

So, here I am again, inching my way toward God, but this time in a group of academics who share what they call “faith-based perspective,” all of us slouching toward Bethlehem because otherwise, the center does not hold. We try hard to talk about faith, prayer, discipleship, etc. but the conversations often have a metallic, secular ring to them. Maybe the problem is simply that we always have our eye on opportunities for institutional recognition and advancement; questions like “can we get a book out of this?” or “how will that get funded?” persistently bring us back to the fact that we are engaged in an activity that our surrounding environments neither understand nor support. We are forced to translate our thoughts and experiences into the lingua franca of the academy, which for the most part means diluting or omitting the very parts that seem most important. Like the subaltern ‘savages’ encountered by Dipesh Chakrabarty, we are coerced by

language to rob our gods and spirits of agency. “In effect,” as Chakrabarty suggests, “we have two systems of thought, one in which the world is ultimately disenchanted and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of [academic writing], the first system, the secular, translates the second into itself.”¹ It is this secular translation that all of us find objectionable.

Our group believes that there may be another avenue, one that ties spirituality to newly emerging discourses of subjectivity theory. Post-structuralism, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, performativity studies, queer theory all seem like viable instruments to help us articulate the agency that other-worldly beings have had in our lives. But, in order to bring this new mode of analysis into being, I am convinced we need to abandon our attachment to a chronology where an “I” is responsible for the trajectory of any journey. For example, in what I’ve said so far, “I” went to Catholic school, “I” studied theology, “I” made choices about my spiritual journey. This “I” locates my analysis in a world of real, objective, material agents who act—with total free will—in and on a world of passive objects and entities. Put simply, it reinforces the validity of the secular translation.

In contrast, I want to highlight here one aspect of new postmodernist insight that may be particularly fruitful for our group: the conviction that no human subject is its own point of departure. As Judith Butler articulates it:

It is clearly not the case that “I” preside over the positions that have constituted me, shuffling through them instrumentally, casting some aside, incorporating others. The “I” who would select between them is always already constituted by them. The “I” is the transfer point of that relay; this “I” is constituted by these positions, and these positions are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable subject.²

I suggest that living inside our own lives often feels fragmented, just as Butler describes it. The “I” is a placeholder for a story of cohesiveness that we can only tell later, that in the middle of it all, we often feel bewildered. In other words, we can only sew the major themes together once we’ve seen the big picture. We can only measure inches *toward* God if we know exactly where s/he resides. In real life, it’s not an overarching theme that drives us on; rather, unseen powers sort of propel us from place to place, from identity to identity. That is to say, Flannery O’Connor’s is not the only grain of truth in this sand. Like Dan Wakefield says, my spiritual life seems more like the plot of a science-fiction novel “where forces are at work, moving me here and there in ways I don’t understand and for purposes I can’t even begin to conceptualize.” It is only in telling my story non-chronologically—in bits and pieces and fragments of dreams—that the exploration of my spiritual life can shed light on this new model of subject formation. It is only in looking beyond that all-encompassing “I” that these forces and spirits can be drawn into sharp relief.

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One of the things that Susan’s essay made clear to me is the fact that spiritual strength often emerges in times of trauma. In the same month of the same year that Susan underwent her painful divorce, I was living through a divorce of my own. This is as good a place as any to start. After ten years of living with my partner and raising her child, she called long-distance to tell me our life together was over. In the twisted logic of my bereft mind, I believed that I had traded my faith in God for this family, and now that the family was gone, I had nothing. I was damned. I spent months and months on pills and in therapy, trying to go through the motions of everyday life, but

being overwhelmed by dark emotions every time I sat still for more than five minutes. By the end of the year, the end of the millennium, I felt I had nothing to live for.

Depressed. Darkness visible. Nervous Breakdown. I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't read. I was tortured by memories, haunted by feelings of worthlessness, always acutely aware of the fact that, now, as a result of this divorce, I belonged to no one. Going home alone at night was unimaginably difficult, so much so that sometimes I would just drive around until 2 or 3 in the morning, waiting until exhaustion set in, secretly hoping I would end up in a fatal car accident. (I did have an accident on one of these nights, a \$780 fender bender.) I would get home, fall into bed, sleep for thirty minutes, and then wake bolt up, filled again with that pathological fear. The only sleep I experienced for months was drug induced, and then it was not restful or refreshing. Klonopin, Ambien, Valium, Prozac, Zanax, Paxel, Zoloft: my medicine cabinet grew at approximately the same rate as the mold on the food in my refrigerator. I would take these drugs fairly randomly, pulling together a new pharmaceutical cocktail each night, feeling like a voodoo priestess combining herbs for a potion. With this concoction, I would think, I want to obliterate my own despair, if only for one night.

But even through the drugs, the hauntings continued. Every night, my dreams would actively and creatively symbolize the dark conflict that had taken over my life. Good and evil being fought by angels and devils, all in the territory of my psyche. I was worn down, but the battle continued. In a stroke of incredibly bad timing, I also came up for tenure that year; my night dreams not only reflected the loss of my family but imagined the loss of my job as well. I dreamt of homelessness over and over. I had nowhere to live, no money to feed my dogs, no one to whom I belonged. I was utterly alone in a cold heartless world, and evil was closing in.

Psychologists use words like trauma, stress, despair, and depression to describe how these things operate. But none of these labels captured the feeling that someone, somehow, somewhere was stalking me, hunting me. The doctors and therapists tell us that figures produced by the unconscious can have a great deal of power over us as they emerge from the deepest recesses of our fears; investigate the center of those horrors and the dreams will stop, they say. But for me, these hauntings felt much too strong to believe that they originated from within my own psyche. I was certain I was not only depressed, but also possessed.

I flash back to 1973. I am a senior in high school, and the kids in my class are lined up outside the movie theater at 3:00 to see the opening show of "The Exorcist." We had all read the book, some of us several times, and the upcoming movie was all we had talked about for weeks. After all, we reasoned, if the good God that the nuns had yammered to us about was really real, why couldn't his counterpart be really real as well?

Back then, we believed in god and the devil in equal measure. The forces of good and evil were constantly battling it out all around us. The saints and angels took on a slightly militaristic inflection; they could go to battle with us, even take our place. Back then, the line between reality and fiction all too often blurred for me. That's the whole theory behind literature; when you enter the universe of a thrilling story, the logic of the narrative changes what you believe and who you are. Sometimes the change is only on the surface, as in desires for new fashions, but sometimes it penetrates and reprograms the very core of your being. That afternoon, that excellent film confirmed a seed of truth that had been hiding inside of me: the devil exists and could take possession of my body—just like he possessed Linda Blair—at any moment. If I watched carefully and constantly, I could see him at certain times in my life. He appeared in the form of a regular person, only a little less solid. These images had special powers; they could cast their evil eye in any direction and produce havoc and grief. I could only avoid such evil if I watched vigilantly and completely followed my intuitions about how to handle any given situation. Sometimes it was a

matter of eating a particular food, or making a phone call, or casting a spell. If I did whatever that voice said, I knew I would be protected.

But what was behind that voice? For me in high school, it was always something halfway between “extra-sensory perception” (ESP) and God. Although I would never have admitted to my high school classmates that I believed God was whispering in my ear (it was much more acceptable to believe I possessed parapsychological powers), I knew that what I heard wasn’t entirely generated by me. But it also wasn’t coming from the God the nuns described either. The voice came through only in certain ways, with a particular kind of clarity. It wasn’t that I thought I was special—I believed everyone could hear it if they worked and listened hard enough, earnestly enough. These insights (or intuitions, or communications) came through in unpredictable ways, and I often felt like I had no influence over when and where they happened. For example, the two most life-changing feelings I have ever received came in strange places; the first occurred one morning when I was in the shower, the second while I was driving the DC beltway in heavy traffic. In neither case was I conscious of thinking about God, or my life, or anything important. But something flashed in front of me that I knew both predicted and beckoned my future. I felt like a character in a novel; I couldn’t stay frozen in the middle of a story but had to turn the page and meet my certain destiny. These flashes were always filled with feelings of both excitement and protection, and I always knew that following these directions was the best and most reasonable thing to do.

Let me be clear, again, that I do not believe these insights or flashes are unique to me. They happen everywhere, all the time; it’s simply a matter of seeing the world rightly that leads to this recognition of magic. For example, the heretofore unknown Nia Vardalos, writer and star of the indie-blockbuster “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” explains precisely how she landed this fabulous role. She was sitting in her \$400/month L.A. apartment (which she paid for by doing commercial voice-overs), revising her new script on a borrowed laptop. All of the sudden, as she narrates it, “I heard the fridge hum, I heard the birds outside. The world seemed ten times more alive than it had been.” Just at that moment, she receives a call from Tom Hanks who says to her “we’re going to make your movie.” Recognizing the magic in the air, she seizes the opportunity to push Hanks even further. “Well, Tom,” she says, “I didn’t come to L.A. to be a writer. I’m an actress: I want to play the lead role.” Never even having seen her, but captured by her magic nonetheless, Hanks replies, “Yes, of course, you’re going to.”³

Gloria Anzaldua has named this enchantment “*la facultad*,” and defined it as “the capacity to see in surface phenomenon the meaning of the deeper realities.”⁴ For her, it is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak but communicates in images and symbols. She describes her own experience like this:

Four years ago a red snake crossed my path as I walked through the woods. The direction of its movement, its pace. Its colors, the mood of the trees and the wind and the snake—they all spoke to me, told me things. I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and cycles of my life. I remember listening to the voices of the wind as a child and understanding its messages.

We’re not supposed to remember such otherworldly events. We’re supposed to ignore, forget, kill those fleeting images of the soul’s existence and of the spirit’s presence. We’ve been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We’re supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it.⁵

Anzaldúa rightly notices that our culture does not deem such experiences as real. As a result, many of us deny their occurrences altogether and let these inner senses atrophy. We allow rationality to tell us that the existence of the “other world” is merely fantasy or superstition. It demands that our beliefs be organized, authorized, and translated to a point, usually, beyond recognition.

A direct relationship exists between Butler’s deconstructed “I” and Anzaldúa’s “*facultad*,” I believe. In both scenarios, it’s not “me” moving toward grace, but it’s not an “other” moving “me” either. The intensity of these events, the feelings of fragmentation, justification, connection, simply cannot be captured by the language of “I” and “you.” It’s driven instead by a small piece of my consciousness that has been tucked away in a dark cubby for a long time. But in that cubby, that piece of me has done a lot of work listening to things that in general I cannot hear. Things that communicate in ways I don’t usually understand.

I never once connected “*la facultad*” with my theological education until I rented and watched “*The Exorcist*” again several weeks ago. It struck me, during this recent viewing, that all of my post-graduate studies had been a kind of quest to identify and understand these feelings. But, because academic theology is forced to tow the line of Enlightenment rationality, none of my classes ever dealt with anything remotely similar to “*la facultad*.” Perhaps somewhere in the past, someone like Teresa of Avila or St. John the Divine had had these kinds of experiences; but in seminary, the mystics were studied as historical specificities, oddities really, not to be thought of as role models for the contemporary faithful. And what I longed for was not really a role model anyway; I wanted theories about how “*la facultad*” worked, conjectures and speculations about how good and evil possessed us. (Indeed, I was quite excited when, in a graduate ethics class, I encountered the philosophical category of “pre-moral evil,” thinking surely this had to be close to what I called the devil. But it wasn’t. The official definition was something like “a bad moral sense that had not yet been interpreted,” but I was convinced it was more, and spent the rest of the semester trying to convince the Prof. and my classmates that it would be a much more useful category if redefined along the lines of satanic possession. But I digress.)

After three years of seminary and four years of doctoral work, it dawned on me that the kind of images I was hungry for didn’t exist in the academy. Souls, angels, visions, signs, ghosts were all potential candidates for naming my own experiences. But my little Methodist seminary would have no dealings with these; even those professors who publicly decried Enlightenment rationality were infected by it at the most organic level. I wasted years searching theological texts for something that resembled my experiences. And finally came up dry.

The only exception to this unwavering commitment to reason in seminary was they way many of my fellow students talked about Jesus. The only magic that ever happened there was associated solely with Him, and my classmates were quick and happy to witness to how Jesus had found for them the closest parking space, or how he helped them on a test, or cleared up their acne. Being a former Catholic, I had never fully developed what they called a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” (I tried once, with absolute earnest, to accept Jesus as “my personal Savior” but nothing happened.) Nevertheless, I understood their sentiments and wanted desperately to “study” the ways that magic filled our lives. These kinds of insights, however, rarely made it into the classroom. Or stated more precisely, when they did come up for discussion in academic settings, they always sounded so silly that I would frantically rush to distance myself from them. I think I knew, even then, that framing spiritual experiences in academic language wasn’t a good idea.

But these glitches kept occurring. Moments that become lodged in your mind as watersheds. You go over and over the way the world shifted before your eyes, mining every last detail to help you uncover the mystery. No theological training ever helped me advance this process; in fact, the old adage that knowing too much can hurt you was probably true in my case. Because I “understand” the social and political origins of most church teachings, I am able to dismiss them as

“man-made” and fallible. And the christocentric testimonies of my classmates—especially when they went hand in hand with conservative politics, as in “Jesus sent AIDS to punish homosexuals”—only served to alienate me from any like-minded friends I might have found there. So, the glitches remain unnamed. They are not the workings of the God I had met in Catholicism, nor are they related to the Jesus I studied in seminary. They exist on another plane of reality that theological education had long ago dismissed.

Lately I have been fantasizing about the possibility that my ancestors are trying to communicate with me. They stare at me from over the mantel, very old copies of very old pictures of my great-grandmother and my great-great-grandmother, newly acquired by me and housed in highly post-modernist frames from an elegant boutique in Provincetown. Good Catholics—both of them—they ask me in the stillness of this autumn night what, precisely, I have done with my life. By the way language structures reality in my family, I know that they are not expecting me to recount accomplishments such as my doctorate, tenure, income level, travels, etc.; they want to know about my relationship to church, when is the last time I went to confession, what church committees am I active on, how I have served God with my gifts and talents. They presume, of course, that the neighborhoods of Durham are all carved up into local parishes, that I am either married with children or a nun, that the parts of my life outside the purview of the church aren’t that interesting. All these things go without question.

I don’t know these women at all. One’s name is Mary and the other Kathryn (I forget which is which); my great-grandmother’s image is caught by a sepia-laden daguerreotype, my great-great-grandmother seems to be captured on a photographic Xerox of an amateur, primitivist drawing. Both wear high-collared dark collars and pulled-back hairdos that reveal similarly shaped faces and features. My mom gave me these pictures when I was home visiting this summer. She had found them while cleaning the attic of an elderly aunt’s house. No one in my family seems to know anything more about them than their name, not where they lived, when they came to America, what they liked or were like. My mom offered me these pictures one morning sort of off-handedly, in the same way she’d earlier offered me a set of four old dessert dishes and last month’s issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*. As soon as I saw these people, however, I was desperate to claim them as my own.

I am finally old enough—or perhaps just lucky enough—that trips “home” to visit my parents are void of the agonies that accompanied all those years of needing to differentiate myself from them, and their counter-need to hold on to me for dear life. Now, it’s more like we’re just a bunch of adults, “visiting.” We’ve all realized that we’re not going to change each other no matter how hard we try. Also, we’ve all acquired skills that help us take care of ourselves. My dad escapes to his den, my mom to her CNN, I’m usually out on the porch smoking, or watching videos with my teenage nieces. On this particular trip home, my nieces and I watched every past episode of all three seasons of *The Sopranos*, consecutively. We began to enter their world simply by talking like them (which was not too out-of-character for my nieces, who are proud Italian-Americans), but then we started talking about them as if they were part of our family. Uncle Tony and Aunt Carmela would have us all for Christmas, we agreed. And cousin Christopher could be counted on to get us a good deal on a used car for Stephanie. On one level, we knew we were pretending, but on another, such fantasies fleshed out how, after 40-some odd hours of viewing, we came to feel part of their universe.

What is so cool about this show is that it seamlessly represents completely different ways of seeing and being in the world at the same time. Not only do the Sopranos live in an extended, well-funded, loving, and nurturing ethnic family (with great food), they also have the world of organized crime to keep their lives secure, violent, and interesting. On top of all that, Tony has a wonderfully safe and productive relationship with his therapist, who helps him understand how and why being a

family man and a hit man often produce psychic conflict. This series is so successful, I believe, because that's how life often feels. Conflicted. Incommensurate. Crazy.

It is the way we patch and stitch our own incommensurabilities together, I think, that makes us who we are. The way we dodge and negotiate all the things that hail us. Stephanie and I email each other about the show a lot. Recently, she wrote, "My favorite family member is Carmela: I want to be just like her. She is just like all the popular girls in my high school. But in real life, I'm much more like Tony's older sister Janice, idiosyncratic, flaky, etc. But that's ok, because when I do recognize myself in her, I like it, I feel happy." It is clear to me that Stephanie is forming both her identity and self-acceptance on the site of this show.

In today's ever expanding world of entertainment, we are offered a whole host of heroes to redeem us immediately. No waiting for death to enter heaven, just turn the channel. You can be protected by a teenage girl strong enough to kill vampires, or guarded by a cute, sweet, 45 year-old Italian American who just happens to head up the mafia in New Jersey, or medically treated by legions of good-looking doctors. There is, truly, something for everyone. Just surf around and something is bound to hook itself into your soul.

This is the place in my essay where my formal theological training begs me to say something like "but all these make believe worlds are misguided, misleading, disingenuous, and ill-advised. We must return to the roots of our theological traditions, to the bible, to the revival, to the mass, to the lives of the saints. Only then will we be good Christians." But this purist position, I'm here to say, is bullshit. It is built on a sense of "the Christian tradition" as uninterpreted, handed down from above, and not at all tainted by TV or politics. In her inspiring work on theories of culture and their importance for academic theology, Kathryn Tanner also discredits this notion of an uncontaminated Christian tradition:

What is transmitted [in this pure sense of tradition] can be altered--but not too much all at once if the identity of the tradition is to be safeguarded. What is transmitted may be changed radically as it is passed down or over to others, but at each step of the process the alteration cannot be much: what comes next must always be quite a bit like its immediate predecessor in the series.... The problem with these ideas is the presumption that the traditional materials approximated are merely found, discovered or received, and not constructed in a significant sense. Postmodern cultural theory makes the important claim that traditions are invented, meaning by that not merely that traditional materials are often new rather than old and borrowed rather than indigenous, but that they are always products of human decision in a significant sense. The materials that are passed down and over to one time and place from some other time and place are always more numerous than those labeled "tradition." "Tradition" is always a selection from the wide array of materials that could be so designated in virtue of their transmission from before and elsewhere. And even more generally, tradition is always a matter of human attribution: nothing about the materials themselves requires that designation. Even ongoing customary forms of action and belief do not constitute a tradition until they are marked as such and thereby assigned a normative status.⁶

Now, I grant you, that in her interrogation of tradition, Tanner probably doesn't mean to leave the door of theology open to the inclusion of Buffy the Vampire Slayer or Tony Soprano. But I ask you, why not? Why shouldn't such agents be studied as theology? Tanner rightly claims, "Theological arguments typically start where the audience is and through the manipulations of their use of those starting points, they work to seduce, captivate, or invert the position of the addressee."⁷

Who seduces us, captivates us, or inverts us more than the characters packaged in celluloid for our fantasmatic pleasures?

Faith happens, I believe, on the terrain of our imaginations. Specific characters—call them gods, or saints, or ghosts, or actors—involve themselves in our lives and connect our futures with our pasts. Tastes and desires and patterns emerge. Strange things happen. Sometimes I know the right answer to a question about a subject I know nothing about. Sometimes my fingers type words that my mind hasn't thought. Sometimes reckless cars run out of gas before they reach my path (yes, I do confess to listening occasionally to contemporary Christian artists like Amy Grant). The strangeness occurs because the material and the supernatural are finally the same thing viewed from different angles. The supernatural is what animates the material, what makes it alive and wonderful. The seamless union of the real and the imaginary is what allows us to make history, and what allows history to make us.

We are all haunted, in one way or another. Some of us see dead people all around us, people who want things from us. Some of us live with characters that are neither dead nor alive. Some of us are dead, and move through the world without being seen by anybody, ever. Some of us visit places that do not remember us. We smell the sea air from a thousand miles inland. We hear voices. Most importantly, in the midst of all these hauntings, we do what we can to save ourselves.

The best and most profound route to our own salvation is, I firmly believe, the one that is most obtainable. For many of us, that path is entertainment. While I may be unsuccessful in developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I can become very close to ER's Carrie Weaver, the newly "out" lesbian chief of emergency medicine who needs someone to show her how to have fun. Every Thursday night at 10pm, Carrie helps me become who I am. Through the process of imagining what I would say to her if she were here in the room with me now, I form myself. Or perhaps it's better to say, I am formed. Locating the agency here is difficult precisely because it is me, but not entirely me, doing the work. It's that small piece of myself that works in corners and listens to other languages that has already formed a lasting relationship with Carrie. We find our hope and salvation in that moment where we fall into the screen. We become immortal when we are animated by the other, when we are loved by the other, when we become an other. We are saved when we are picked up and taken out of our own lives.

As the possibility of fruitful participation in organized religion diminishes for me, new forms of imagination take their place, capture my attention, seduce me, save me. These forms are not less real because academic theologians choose not to recognize them. Indeed, as Tanner herself recognizes, "Academic theology should take its cue from everyday theology. While everyday theology does not have as much to use, it tends to use everything it can; anything that might work is at least considered. It is impelled by immediate practical needs."⁸ And the practicalities of my own life have afforded me the gift of relationships with people like Tony Soprano, Judge Amy Grey, and Carrie Weaver. Upon whose authority does academic theology tell me that such salvations are illegitimate?

In *Seeing and Believing*, Margaret Miles suggested that watching movies engaged us in a certain kind of faith act, that we had to agree to suspend belief in material reality in order to immerse ourselves in the universe of the film, that we had to believe momentarily in the possibility of a celluloid world as real.⁹ What I'm suggesting here is the possibility of the reverse. That faith, in actuality, is surviving and living through all the things we do everyday just to get to that moment of imagination and fantasy. Perhaps what I am arguing is that entertainment is, in fact, a liturgical practice. Listening, watching, identifying, and repeating offer us new methods of communing with transcendent agents. We have known for a long time that being one-with-God is not a function of intellectual assent; what you believe isn't fully correlated with having your heart strangely warmed.

Magic and grace happen when they happen and our job is simply to be grateful for them. In this sense, we don't choose our destinies; they are given to us by the gods and ghosts and saints that give our world shape and form and meaning.

I'm guessing that my group members are fairly convinced of the academic legitimacy of my line of reasoning here; that the fragmentation of the human subject does leave openings for lots of different beings and characters to enter. But I'm also guessing that the anxiety-filled question "but what makes this Christian" is creeping up in the margins of your intellects. We all know that our crafty phrase "faith-based knowledge" doesn't necessarily signal the faith of Christian tradition; the thing is, though, *we want it to*. We want these theories to make a difference in the habits and practices of our worship, we want them to matter to the faith we call home.

But why do we want this identification so badly? Wouldn't it be easier to just live our lives and forget about figuring out how they relate to religion? Bear with me for a moment as I once again try to answer these questions through a rather circuitous route.

October is a notoriously bad month for most academics. In this period between mid-terms and finals, we race exhaustedly from one thing to the next with little time for sleep let alone reflection. I have been fighting off a cold for over two weeks and feel feverish, miserable. So this morning I decided to do what every good teacher does when swamped like this: show a movie. I selected Amber Hollibaugh's *The Heart of the Matter* for my AIDS class, hoping that—although out of date—it might make the students feel like they learned something. This documentary traces the development of HIV in the life of a poor black woman named Janice Jiroix, who struggles with visibility and acceptance in her family and wider Christian community. I have seen this film over a dozen times over the years and feel safe in saying that Hollibaugh's main point is to indict religion for the part it plays in spreading AIDS; as such, she splices scenes of Janice at her church worship with misogynist and ignorant preaching from the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Roberston. I knew it was an anti-religious movie, but it was about AIDS and, for today, that was good enough.

Celluloid works in unpredictable ways, though, and this time the movie was different. Instead of being elided with televangelist rant, Janice and her church literally brought me to tears. They stood, in this viewing, as the opposite of all that was bad about religion; despite their raging homophobia, confusion and fear, the folks around her did not let Janice die alone. They tried to understand her, to help her, to be with her. And even though the director's goal might have been to tell us that such help was too little too late, those characters jumped off the screen today and had me crying like a baby. The experience made me realize what I have known all along: that any church—including Janice's store-front non-denominational church with the hand lettered sign—any church that tries this hard was mine. Is mine. Is me.

Now maybe this is God calling me. Or maybe it's the residue of an intensely religious upbringing. Or maybe it's simply the fact that I'm sick, and tired, and over-emotional. Or maybe, just maybe, it's something else that made me cry. Something we haven't yet learned to name. And maybe, just maybe, the fact that some of us see church this way is enough. That is, we want these insights to matter within the frame of faith we inherited, and maybe that desire is exactly the thing that will ultimately render these insights Christian. Faith traditions are not entities handed down from above, they are made and remade inside every believer. If there is supernatural activity at all in the development of organized religion, surely it entered through the fragments of our fractured selves struggling in their own little dark corners to understand the unintelligible. Metaphors like Moses coming down from the mountain with the complete ten commandments are misleading; they make religion look like something that is given to us—whole—for our consumption; our only choice is to take it or leave it.

But that's not how it works. Again, quoting Tanner:

What Christians have in common, what unites them, is nothing internal to the practices themselves. What unites them is concern for true discipleship, proper reflection in human words and deeds of an object of worship that always exceeds by its greatness human efforts to do so. What Christians are all trying to be true to is not some element within or character of Christian practices themselves. As a result, Christian identity is not maintained by the anxiously self-concerned effort to protect those elements or that character against corruption; nor does it depend upon the effectiveness of demands for conformity within them...What unites Christian practices is not agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship; but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out.¹⁰

Over the years, Christianity has undergone many radical changes. Ancient world scholars tell us that the pre-Constantinian church was marked by secrecy and danger. When Christianity became a state power, the very character of the church and its leadership shifted dramatically. The printing press fostered the protestant reformation. Video spawned the birth of a new type of evangelism. The only thing that we can be certain of is that the ways we experience and express our faith change. I want to suggest that perhaps, just perhaps, we are in the middle of a dramatic shift in religious identity. That which grabs our attention and imagination —entertainment —teaches us more about what it means to be human, what it means to be saved, than any other 21st century form, including organized religion. Perhaps we are slouching toward celluloid because the center has already been deconstructed.

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Gloria Anzaldúa once wrote the following about her ancestors:

Before her death, my great-grandmother had asked that we bury her next to her husband, in a six-acre cemetery, all that was left of our ancestral lands. But the “mineral rights” to that land had been sold for \$12.50, and a fence surrounded the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn’t even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there. Today it is still padlocked. The sign reads, “Keep out. Trespassers will be shot.”¹¹

Perhaps like many of you, my first impulse—produced undoubtedly by white liberal guilt—is to notice what a sad thing it must be to not have access to your ancestor’s gravesites, to be chained and padlocked out of your family’s burial land. Only the most heartless kinds of oppression could pull off such brutality.

But then I realize that I have absolutely no idea where my own great-grandmothers are buried. These people over my mantle that I am trying so desperately to communicate with, I don’t even know in which country their graves lie. What’s worse, my mom doesn’t know either. “Kathy,” she sighs apologetically, “we were always really poor, we moved around a lot. Those things just weren’t important.” Who is to say that robbing a family of such knowledge is any less violent than chains and padlocks? I have never learned how to speak to my dead. My answers to the questions I imagined they’d ask me are met only with silence.

But, just as I plump my self-pity for having been abandoned by these particular ancestral ghosts, others stand tall and demand to be recognized. Last week, I went to a lecture given by world-class feminists talking about the importance of connecting transnational feminist movements, a topic which would be very useful both in my classes as well as my own thinking. A little late, I enter quietly through the back of the room, sneak halfway up the center aisle, and climb over four people to get to an available chair. I pull out my notebook and pens, smile at the people sitting next to me, and settle down to learn something. Ten minutes later, a ruckus in the back of the room

causes me to turn around, and much to my absolute horror, my ex-partner, the one who called me long distance to break up, is sitting right behind me two rows back. I have not laid eyes on her in over two years.

I am no longer able to concentrate on the lecture. I try to position myself at such an angle in my chair that if I look outside the frame of my glasses I can just barely see her. I know she is watching me and I hope it makes her feel like shit. Who is she sitting with? Who are her friends? Why is she here? I came into this room to feed my powers of reason, but encounter instead the ghosts of past abandonment. I can't distract myself by listening to the speakers' arguments because I am busy remembering how cruel she was and how much I hate her. But I also can't leave early because doing so would mean I would have to pass by her again, and that seems unthinkable. I write a witty remark to myself in the margin of my notebook: "Where is Tony Soprano when I really need him?"

Suddenly and without warning, a mobster in a black leather jacket and ski mask enters the East Duke classroom, toting all variety of automatic weaponry. He heads straight for my ex and shoots her so violently that every particular of her being is obliterated from this earth. In a scene right out of the Matrix, the molecules of her blood disappear into thin air. The room ruptures into total chaos, everyone is screaming and trying to hide under their desks. Even the guest lecturer ducks. People are calling 911 from their cell phones. Fear pervades everything. But for some strange reason, I am not at all scared. A sense of peace—or perhaps it's justice—seeps into my consciousness. I feel that everything, finally, is going to be OK. Just then, the gangster approaches me and hands me a small chocolate heart with the words "love tony" carved into its center. I pop the candy in my mouth secure in the knowledge that, this time, good has overcome evil.

Tanner tells us this:

One's judgments about appropriate Christian discipleship cannot be made in isolation from what Christians have done and said before and elsewhere. One owes others who have made the attempt of discipleship before and elsewhere a respectful hearing. One's own judgments then make a similar claim on others; they are submitted, in the same way, for the consideration and judgment of others who are also concerned to establish the meaning of Christian discipleship.¹²

Whether or not what happened in that room can be considered Christian—in Tanner's terms—is a conversation we have to have. I will listen to the academic theologians compare this event to the plagues of ancient Egypt and to the violence of Jesus' response to the tax collectors in the temple. I will hear you as you contrast such brutality with turn-the-other-cheek pacifism of spiritual leaders like Martin Luther King. I will hunker down and discern with you whether killing can ever be Christian, whether mobster Mafiosos are simply homegrown terrorists or whether they are engaged in the legitimate and timeless business of pitting moral forces against immoral ones. In the spirit of discipleship, I will respectfully hear your judgments.

In return, though, I submit this claim for your consideration and judgment: Tony Soprano saved my life that afternoon in a way that all the saints and angels and even Jesus Christ himself never have and never could. And from this claim comes my modest conclusion: that a disenchanting world in general, and academic theology in particular, place unnecessary constraints on the ways we understand ourselves, our gods, and everything in between.



NOTES

- 1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods" in The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital, edited by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 1997), 35.
- 2 Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'" in Feminists Theorize the Political, edited by Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 9.
- 3 Fred Schruers, "Fat City," in Premier, November 2002, 42.
- 4 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 38.
- 5 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 36.
- 6 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 133.
- 7 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 117.
- 8 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 89.
- 9 Margaret Miles, Seeing and Believing, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
- 10 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 152.
- 11 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 8.
- 12 Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 137.