

Stepping into Transcendent Reality



Stephen Bauman

Peter had just finished washing his nets after a fruitless night of fishing when Jesus came along and, stepping into Peter's boat, spoke with those who had crowded the shore.¹ After a while Jesus suggested to Peter he put out into the "deep water;" that's how Luke reported the exchange: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Initially Peter complained, "What for? What difference will it make? Isn't fishing just fishing, Jesus? And haven't we been doing that?"

Nevertheless, out into the deep water they went, and putting down his nets for the catch of a lifetime, Peter had a sacramental moment, a holy moment, and a

moment that dignified his life and reframed his priorities. What did he then do? In an act of spontaneous humility he fell to his knees in recognition of God's nature, actually, in recognition of God's extraordinarily close proximity. In that moment Jesus made sacred what once seemed ordinary. Or better said perhaps, in Jesus' presence Peter's vision improved, and he glimpsed the larger, stunning truth behind and beneath the obvious. This led to Jesus' prediction that from now on Peter "will be catching people."

Putting out into deep water led to worship, insight, and ultimately, action in a world newly reconstituted as a place of sacred worth. At its best the church lives,

teaches and promotes this re-sacralizing of the world, revealing as sacred that which has been mistaken for something less than its true value, like human life, for instance, in all of its wondrous permutations. The church is in the business of peeling away cheap veneers to discover the priceless material beneath. This is one of the principle ends of Christian worship: providing threshold experience of imminent transcendence that re-orient the worshiper in a much larger frame of reference.

Author Yann Martel was interviewed on Public Radio. His award-winning, best selling novel *Life of Pi* concerns the spiritual awakening of a canny and quite religious 16-year-old Indian boy. Martel was asked,

“Are you saying that the act of writing this novel turned you into a person of faith?”

Martel responded, “Yes, yes, very much so. And initially my viewpoint was absolutely from the outside. Somewhat like a zoologist studying a bunch of chimpanzees in the jungle [I asked], ‘what exactly do these chimps do, what do these [Christians] do?’”

However, bit-by-bit, the beauty of the text moved me, the beauty of the ceremony. I mean, however awkward the singing may be, it’s sincere. We’re so cynical in our society. It’s so hard to talk about religion, about goodness, about love.... In a fast paced, rich, cynical, glib society, it’s really hard to do that.

“But once you make that effort, once you enter an area, a space, like a church... where you’re allowed to do that, where you can do unreasonable things like fall upon your knees and be seen mumbling little words, once you can do that you just feel better.

“There is a nobility to a life where you believe in these grand, grand stories that take our little stories and make them grander. It really ennobles a person—just as in a sense like art does...even on a grander scale.”

Reading this the first time, I was struck by how neatly Martel’s sentiment captured the experience of many persons who had found their way into the church I serve, Christ Church, in the heart of Manhattan. Stepping off the sidewalk of a bustling, noisy avenue, and passing through a small portal, one crosses a threshold into another sort of reality. The space glistens with 14,000 square feet of Venetian mosaics and the golden screen behind the altar is adorned with 17th century icons from the collection of Czar Nicholas II—certainly unusual by Methodist traditions. When crossing this threshold many persons are confused about which Christian denomination is represented in the space; the signs say “United Methodist,” but it might just as well be Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or any number of other protestant traditions.

This reflects the intentions of the church’s builders in the early decades of the last century. Founding pastor, Ralph W. Sockman, voiced the view that “in this day of inter-denominationalism, we desire to serve in no narrow denominational

sense. The new church will be a place of worship for all people of all communions. [Our] hope is to make the constituency steadily broader and more inclusive.” And so Christ Church has become a true melting pot of religious traditions. This may seem counter-intuitive in our day when an opposite design approach is the fashion, stripping all iconography from worship space so as not to offend, or “trip up” any who might cross the threshold of a church modeled in “American mall” style.

A few years ago I provided several ranks of votive candles as an act of hospitality to those who came to pray and meditate. I have been astounded and moved by how many persons avail themselves of this opportunity—to paraphrase Martel—to kneel at the communion rail and mumble little ennobling words after lighting a candle.

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One former Southern Baptist member of Christ Church confessed she thought she “would never be caught dead” lighting a candle but felt moved one day to walk forward and do just that and discovered a brimming act of piety that has since become a habit. Sometimes I simply sit and watch the extraordinary diversity of persons who step off the sidewalk and cross the threshold to pray. It brings into sharp focus deeper notions of “sanctuary” than what Christians often intend. This has transformed my own faith trajectory and how I conceive of my ministry.

The genius behind successful church architecture has always accomplished something similar. The great Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic masterpieces were meant to provide a glimpse of heaven through the most artful expressions available. On the other end of the spectrum, the colonial meeting houses that still dot the American countryside provide a starker, yet often equally inspiring, approach to the same end—space set aside for stepping into deep water. There are many fine modern examples as well, running the gamut from grand to simple, cathedral to house church. When functioning at their best, these suc-

cessful spaces invite the seeker or pilgrim into liminal experience, a sense of the sacred, what Marcus Borg artfully describes as a “thin place,” a place not unlike that experienced by Peter kneeling in the boat with Jesus, which, to repeat, leads to worship, insight and ultimately, action in the world whose potential and promise has now been revealed.

Just as in Peter’s boat, a thin place might exist at any given moment, anywhere. However, when Christians gather for the purpose of worship they are motivated by an intentional desire to create a place/time/space for sacred connection and enlightenment. Therefore it is appropriate to bring the very best offerings to the task. In this way worship becomes artful, mindful, heartfelt, beautiful, sacrificial, even as it leads to transformation of those who have gathered.

Of course, authentic worship is proved by who and what true worshippers actually love most of all. Isaiah makes this point clear when chastising the Hebrews for their empty sacrifice.⁴ He insists that if one loves and honors God above all things,

justice and compassion lead the list of one’s commitments; these passions will come to characterize the worshipping community. They may love their buildings, choirs, bands, dramas, fellowships and liturgies, but they do so with the humility of Peter, who, in the presence of Jesus, found himself, the world and even God, unmasked—and rising from his knees had a contagion for love of a different order of magnitude altogether. □

¹ Luke 5:1ff

² From an interview with Yann Martel by Steve Paulson, www.wpr.org/book/030309a.html.

³ See especially Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, chapter 8, “Thin Places,” San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2003.

⁴ For instance, Isaiah 1:10-17.



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