

## HEALED, WHOLE, AND HOLY

All children are artists, and it is an indictment of our culture that so many of them lose their creativity, their unfettered imaginations, as they grow older. But they start off without self-consciousness as they paint their purple flowers, their anatomically impossible people, their thunderous, sulphurous skies. They don't worry that they may not be as good as Di Chirico or Bracque; they know intuitively that it is folly to make comparisons, and they go ahead and say what they want to say. What looks like a hat to a grownup may, to the child artist, be an elephant inside a boa constrictor.

So what happens? Why do we lose our wonderful, racketsy creativity? What corrupts us?

*Corrupt*: another unpopular word; another important one. Its importance first struck me when I was reading Thomas Traherne, one of my favourite seventeenth-century poets and mystics. "Certainly Adam and Eve in Paradise had not more sweete and curious apprehensions of the world than I when I was a child," he wrote. Everything was new and delightful for him. The rosy glow of sunrise had in it the flaming glory of creation. The stars at night were a living, heavenly dance. He listened to the grass growing, smelled the west wind,

tasted the rain, touched the grains of sand on the shore. All his senses, his mind, his heart, were alive and in touch with *being*. "So that," Traherne adds sadly, "without much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world, which now I *unlearn*, and become as it were a little child again, that I may enter into the kingdom of God."

A lot of my adult life has been spent in trying to overcome this corruption, in unlearning the dirty devices of this world, which would dull our imaginations, cut away our creativity. So it is only with the conscious-unself-consciousness of a child that I can think about theories of aesthetics, of art, particularly as these touch upon my questions about life and love and God.

I was still at the age of unself-conscious spontaneity when I started to write. At the age of five I wrote a story, which my mother saved for a long time, about a little "grul," my five-year-old spelling for *girl*.

I wrote stories because I was a solitary, only child in New York City, with no easily available library where I could get books. So when I had read all the stories in my bookcase, the only way for me to get more stories to read was to write them.

And I knew, as a child, that it was through story that I was able to make some small sense of the confusions and complications of life. The sound of coughing from my father's gas-burned lungs was a constant reminder of war and its terror. At school I read a book about the Belgian babies impaled on bayonets like small, slaughtered animals. I saw pictures of villages ravaged by the *Bôches*. The thought that there could ever be another war was a source of deep fear. I

would implore my parents, "There won't be another war, will there?" My parents never lied to me. They tried to prepare me for this century of war, not to frighten me.

But I was frightened, and I tried to heal my fear with stories, stories which gave me courage, stories which affirmed that ultimately love is stronger than hate. If love is stronger than hate, then war is not all there is. I wrote, and I illustrated my stories. At bedtime my mother told me more stories. And so story helped me to learn to live. Story was in no way an evasion of life, but a way of living life creatively instead of fearfully.

It was a shock when one day in school one of the teachers accused me of "telling a story." She was not complimenting me on my fertile imagination. She was making the deadly accusation that I was telling a lie.

If I learned anything from that teacher, it was that lie and story are incompatible. If it holds no truth, then it cannot truly be story. And so I knew that it was in story that I found flashes of that truth which makes us free.

And yet we are still being taught that fairy tales and myths are to be discarded as soon as we are old enough to understand "reality." I received a disturbed and angry letter from a young mother who told me that a friend of hers, with young children, gave them only instructive books; she wasn't going to allow their minds to be polluted with fairy tales. They were going to be taught the "real" world.

This attitude is a victory for the powers of this world. A friend of mine, a fine storyteller, remarked to me, "Jesus was not a theologian. He was God who told stories."

Yes. God who told stories.

St. Matthew says, "And he spake many things unto them in parables . . . and without a parable spake he not unto them."

When the powers of this world denigrate and deny the value of story, life loses much of its meaning; and for many people in the world today, life *has* lost its meaning, one reason why every other hospital bed is for someone with a mental, not a physical, illness.

Clyde Kilby writes, "Meaninglessness inhibits fullness of life and is therefore equivalent to illness. Meaning makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything. . . . It is not that 'God' is a myth, but that myth is the revelation of a divine life in man. It is not we who invent myth; rather, it speaks to us as a Word of God."

The well-intentioned mothers who don't want their children polluted by fairy tales would not only deny them their childhood, with its high creativity, but they would have them conform to the secular world, with its dirty devices. The world of fairy tale, fantasy, myth, is inimical to the secular world, and in total opposition to it, for it is interested not in limited laboratory proofs but in truth.

When I was a child, reading Hans Christian Andersen's tales, reading about Joseph and his coat of many colours and his infuriating bragging about his dreams, reading *The Selfish Giant* and *The Book of Jonah*, these diverse stories spoke to me in the same language, and I knew intuitively that they belonged to the same world. For the world of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is the world of story, story which may be able to speak to us as a Word of God.

The artist who is a Christian, like any other Christian, is required to be *in* this world, but not *of* it. We are to be in this world as healers, as listeners, and as servants.

In art we are once again able to do all the things we have

forgotten; we are able to walk on water; we speak to the angels who call us; we move, unfettered, among the stars.

We write, we make music, we draw pictures, because we are listening for meaning, feeling for healing. And during the writing of the story or the painting or the composing or singing or playing, we are returned to that open creativity which was ours when we were children. We cannot be mature artists if we have lost the ability to believe which we had as children. An artist at work is in a condition of complete and total faith.

Bach is, for me, the Christian artist *par excellence*, and if I ask myself why, I think it has something to do with his sense of newness. I've been working on his C Minor Toccata and Fugue since college, and I find something new in it every day. And perhaps this is because God was new for Bach every day, was never taken for granted. Too often we do take God for granted. I'm accustomed to being a Christian. I was born of Christian parents who were born of Christian parents who were . . .

That's all right when one is a child, that comfortable familiarity with being Christian, because to the child, as to Thomas Traherne when he was small, everything is wonderful and new, even familiarity. The edge has not been taken off the glory of God's creation. But later on there comes a time when this very familiarity can become one of those corrupting devices. We learn this early, in our attachment to certain bedtime routines of bath and story and prayer and teddy bear and glass of water and good-night kiss—and the routine must never be varied because this is security in what the child learns early is an insecure world.

This past winter, while our three grandchildren were with us because their parents were in the Holy Land, I knew the joy again of a bedtime routine with a two-and-a-half-year-old. Edward and I sang "Molly Malone" and "Speed Bonny Boat" at the piano. Then came bath and bed and more songs, and finally the great moment of the bedtime routine came when he looked at his great-grandmother's charm bracelet, and particularly a small, silver wicker basket, which we opened with extreme care, for within it was the baby Moses. The basket was the basket of bulrushes in which Moses' mother put him in the river, that he might be found by Pharaoh's daughter. Edward would hold this tiny metal baby, less than a centimeter long, and look at it wonderingly, and every night he would say, "He will grow up to be a great prince."

The child himself will know when it is time to let this safe routine go, when holding the soft corner of the favourite blanket is no longer needed for sleep, when the most dearly loved stuffed animal can stay in the toy chest. It is a mistake for the parent to try too abruptly to break the pattern. Most children will let it go when the right time comes. But there are other and less creative familiarities which remain with us and dull our perceptions. When we lose waking up in the morning as though each day was going to be full of adventure, joys, and dangers, and wake up instead to the alarm clock (as most of us must, and how lovely those rare nights when we look at the clock and don't have to set the alarm) and the daily grind, and mutter about TGIF, we lose the newborn quality of belief which is so lovely in the child. It may be less lovely in the artist; it can occasionally be infuriating; but without it there is no impulse to rush to the canvas to set down that extraordinary smile, to catch the melody in

the intricacies of a fugue, to reach out to life and then see Hamlet pull back, and wonder why.

Along with reawakening the sense of newness, Bach's music points me to wholeness, a wholeness of body, mind, and spirit, which we seldom glimpse, but which we are intended to know. It is no coincidence that the root word of *whole*, *health*, *heal*, *holy*, is *hale* (as in *hale and hearty*). If we are healed, we become whole; we are hale and hearty; we are holy.

The marvellous thing is that this holiness is nothing we can earn. We don't become holy by acquiring merit badges and Brownie points. It has nothing to do with virtue or job descriptions or morality. It is nothing we can *do* in this do-it-yourself world. It is gift, sheer gift, waiting there to be recognized and received. We do not have to be qualified to be holy. We do not have to be qualified to be whole, or healed.

The fact that I am not qualified was rammed into me early, and though this hurt, it was salutary. As a small child I was lonely not only because I was an only child in a big city but also because I was slightly lame, extremely introverted, and anything but popular at school. There was no question in my mind that I was anything but whole, that I did not measure up to the standards of my peers or teachers. And so, intuitively, I turned to writing as a way of groping towards wholeness. I wrote vast quantities of short stories and poetry; I painted and played the piano. I lived far too much in an interior world, but I did learn that I didn't have to be qualified according to the world's standards in order to write my stories. It was far more likely my total *lack* of qualifications that turned me to story to search for meaning and truth, to

ask those eternal questions: Why? What is it all about? Does my life have any meaning? Does anybody care?

To try to find the answers to these questions, I not only wrote but also read omnivorously, anything I could get my hands on—fairy tales, the brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Oscar Wilde, the story of Tobias and the angel, Gideon and the angel. Very early in my life the Bible taught me to care about angels. I also read about dreams in the Bible, and so I took dreams seriously. I read and reread and reread *Emily of New Moon*, by L. M. Montgomery, author of the more famous stories about *Anne of Green Gables*. I liked the Anne stories, but especially I loved Emily, because she, too, wanted to be a writer, a real writer; she, too, walked to the beat of a different drummer; she had a touch of second sight, that gift which allows us to peek for a moment at the world beyond ordinary space and time.

My lonely solitude kept me far more in touch with this world of the imagination than I would have been had I been off with the other children playing hopscotch or skipping rope. It was this world which gave me assurance of meaning and reality despite the daily world in which I was a misfit, and in which I knew many fears as I overheard my parents talking about the nations once again lining up for war.

If I found this world in *Emily of New Moon*, in books of Chinese fairy tales, as well as in Andrew Lang's collections, I also found it in the Bible stories. I was fortunate (in the strange way in which tragedy brings with it blessings as well as griefs) because my father's deteriorating lungs dictated an unusual schedule; he worked best in the afternoon and evening, and slept late into the morning. Therefore there was no one to take me to Sunday school. I have talked with such a surprising number of people who have had to spend most of

their lives unlearning what some well-meaning person taught them in Sunday school, that I'm glad I escaped! All the old heresies of the first few centuries—Donatism, Manicheism, Docetism, to name but three—are still around, and Satan doesn't hesitate to use them wherever possible.

In the world of literature, Christianity is no longer respectable. When I am referred to in an article or a review as a "practicing Christian" it is seldom meant as a compliment, at least not in the secular press. It is perfectly all right, according to literary critics, to be Jewish or Buddhist or Sufi or a pre-Christian druid. It is not all right to be a Christian. And if we ask why, the answer is a sad one: Christians have given Christianity a bad name. They have let their lights flicker and grow dim. They have confused piosity with piety, smugness with joy. During the difficult period in which I was struggling through my "cloud of unknowing" to return to the church and to Christ, the largest thing which deterred me was that I saw so little clear light coming from those Christians who sought to bring me back to the fold.

But I'm back, and grateful to be back, because, through God's loving grace, I did meet enough people who showed me that light of love which the darkness cannot extinguish. One of the things I learned on the road back is that I do not have to be right. I have to try to do what is right, but when it turns out, as happens with all of us, to be wrong, then I am free to accept that it was wrong, to say, "I'm sorry," and to try, if possible, to make reparation. But I have to accept the fact that I am often unwise; that I am not always loving; that I make mistakes; that I am, in fact, human. And as Christians we are meant to be not less human than other people but more human, just as Jesus of Nazareth was more human.

One time I was talking to Canon Tallis, who is my

spiritual director as well as my friend, and I was deeply grieved about something, and I kept telling him how woe-fully I had failed someone I loved, failed totally, otherwise that person couldn't have done the wrong that was so destructive. Finally he looked at me and said calmly, "Who are you to think you are better than our Lord? After all, he was singularly unsuccessful with a great many people."

That remark, made to me many years ago, has stood me in good stead, time and again. I have to try, but I do not have to succeed. Following Christ has nothing to do with success as the world sees success. It has to do with love.

So does the Bible. God's love for his people. All of us. As the psalmist sings, "God loves *every* man. . . . He calls *all* the stars by name."

I'm particularly grateful that I was allowed to read my Bible as I read my other books, to read it as *story*, that story which is a revelation of truth. People are sometimes kept from reading the Bible itself by what they are taught about it, and I'm grateful that I was able to read the Book with the same wonder and joy with which I read *The Ice Princess* or *The Tempest* or about E. Nesbitt's Psammead, that disagreeable and enchanting creature who would have been no surprise to Abraham or Sarah. In Isaiah I read about those dragons who honour him because he gives "waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to his people." So it was no surprise to me to read about a mediaeval dragon who was a great pet in the palace; he helped heat water, and on cold winter nights he got into every bed in the palace, by turn, breathing out just enough warmth to take off the chill and make the sheets toasty to get into.

I had an aunt who worried that I lived in an unreal world. But what is real? In the Bible we are constantly being given glimpses of a reality quite different from that taught in school, even in Sunday school. And these glimpses are not given to the qualified; there's the marvel. It may be that the qualified feel no need of them.

We are all asked to do more than we can do. Every hero and heroine of the Bible does more than he would have thought it possible to do, from Gideon to Esther to Mary. Jacob, one of my favourite characters, certainly wasn't qualified. He was a liar and a cheat, and yet he was given the extraordinary vision of angels and archangels ascending and descending a ladder which reached from earth to heaven.

In the first chapter of John's gospel, Nathanael was given a glimpse of what Jacob saw, or a promise of it, and he wasn't qualified, either. He was narrow-minded and unimaginative, and when Philip told him that Jesus of Nazareth was the one they sought, his rather cynical response was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And yet it was to Nathanael that Jesus promised the vision of angels and archangels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

In the novels and stories which have always meant the most to me, and to which, as both child and adult, I return and return, I find the same thing: the unqualified younger son finishes the quest where the qualified elder brothers fail because they think they can do it themselves. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, a young, unqualified girl, ends up solving all the tangled problems and marrying the duke. The Macbeths bring disaster on themselves and others because they take things into their own hands; they think they have a *right*

to do what they need to do in order for Macbeth to get the crown; they listen to the witches, and they fall for the three temptations of power—temptations which have been the same since Satan offered them to Jesus in the wilderness. King Lear moves into tragedy when he assumes that he has a right to be loved by his daughters and when he tries to compare their love quantitatively.

Moses wasn't qualified (as I run over my favourite characters in both Old and New Testaments, I can't find one who was in any worldly way qualified to do the job which was nevertheless accomplished); Moses was past middle age when God called him to lead his children out of Egypt, and he spoke with a stutter. He was reluctant and unwilling, and he couldn't control his temper. But he saw the bush that burned and was not consumed. He spoke with God in the cloud on Mount Sinai, and afterwards his face glowed with such brilliant light that the people could not bear to look at him.

In a very real sense not one of us is qualified, but it seems that God continually chooses the most unqualified to do his work, to bear his glory. If we are qualified, we tend to think that we have done the job ourselves. If we are forced to accept our evident lack of qualification, then there's no danger that we will confuse God's work with our own, or God's glory with our own.

It is interesting to note how many artists have had physical problems to overcome, deformities, lameness, terrible loneliness. Could Beethoven have written that glorious paean of praise in the Ninth Symphony if he had not had to endure the dark closing in of deafness? As I look through his work chronologically, there's no denying that it deepens and

strengthens along with the deafness. Could Milton have seen all that he sees in *Paradise Lost* if he had not been blind? It is chastening to realize that those who have no physical flaw, who move through life in step with their peers, who are bright and beautiful, seldom become artists. The unending paradox is that we do learn through pain.

My mother's long life had more than its fair share of pain and tragedy. One time, after something difficult had happened, one of her childhood friends came to give comfort and help. Instead of which, she burst into tears and sobbed out, "I envy you! I envy you! You've had a terrible life, but you've *lived!*"

I look back at my mother's life and I see suffering deepening and strengthening it. In some people I have also seen it destroy. Pain is not always creative; received wrongly, it can lead to alcoholism and madness and suicide. Nevertheless, without it we do not grow.

Demetrios Capetenakis says, "One must really be brave to choose love or writing as one's guides, because they may lead one to the space in which the meaning of our life is hidden—and who can say that this space may not be the land of death."

Even to the Christian this land of death is dark and frightening. No matter how deep the faith, we each have to walk the lonesome valley; we each have to walk it all alone. The world tempts us to draw back, tempts us to believe we will not have to take this test. We are tempted to try to avoid not only our own suffering but also that of our fellow human beings, the suffering of the world, which is part of our own suffering. But if we draw back from it (and we are free to do

so), Kafka reminds us that "it may be that this very holding back is the one evil you could have avoided."

The artist cannot hold back; it is impossible, because writing, or any other discipline of art, involves participation in suffering, in the ills and the occasional stabbing joys that come from being part of the human drama.

We are hurt; we are lonely; and we turn to music or words, and as compensation beyond all price we are given glimpses of the world on the other side of time and space. We all have glimpses of glory as children, and as we grow up we forget them or are taught to think we made them up; they couldn't possibly have been real because to most of us who are grown up, reality is like radium and can be borne only in very small quantities.

But we are meant to be real and to see and recognize the real. We are all more than we know, and that wondrous reality, that wholeness, holiness, is there for all of us, not the qualified only.

I am glad that in the communion of my church we are baptized as infants, because this emphasizes that the gift of death to this world and birth into the kingdom of God is, in fact, gift—it is nothing we have earned, or even, as infants, chosen. It is God's freely bestowed love.

Juan Carlos Ortiz, a priest in South America, uses this baptismal formula: "I kill you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and I make you born into the kingdom of God to serve and please him."

It is baptism itself that I am talking about, not "immersion" or "splashing." My husband, being properly submerged in the First Baptist Church when he was ten, experienced the

same undeserved glory that I did, who was baptized before the age of reason. It is the gift that matters. It is death, and life.

It is as radical as that, and it is gift. Through no virtue of our own we are made dead to the old and alive in the new.

And for each one of us there is a special gift, the way in which we may best serve and please the Lord, whose love is so overflowing. And gifts should never be thought of quantitatively. One of the holiest women I have ever known did little with her life in terms of worldly success; her gift was that of bringing laughter with her wherever she went, no matter how dark or grievous the occasion. Wherever she was, holy laughter was present to heal and redeem.

In the Koran it is written, "He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh."