

2006-3-12 Spirituality of the Scholarly Approach
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here,
as green shoots dare the warmer air,
and as our minds dare to open like rosebuds,
to worship, to become more aware
of what hides behind the demands of our lives,
and to link our hope to strength and power again.

And so we begin with familiar words:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence

My mother's father bending over his roses.
A new young mother bending over her twins.
An unsung biblical scholar bending over her desk.
My godson Ben bending over his biology book.
A grandmother bending over her crocheting.
A teenaged pitcher bending before throwing his famous curveball.
A budding pussywillow bending in the wind.
An attentive robin bending over new blue eggs.
My father bending in pain radiating from his back.
A 5-year-old bending to pick up a worm on the sidewalk.
A nurse bending to better hear a bed-bound patient.
A battlefield medic bending to tighten a tourniquet.
A social worker bending low to talk with a child.

A dancer bending in the arms of his partner.
A singer bending to read the music easier.
Children in Darfur bending into the dust, screaming because everyone
has been killed in their village.
New shoots of daffodils bending under raindrops.
The back of a Dubai mullah bending toward Mecca.
Physicist Steven Hawking's neck bending in his wheelchair.
The stem of a tulip bending like Barishnykov.
The people of this congregation bending
into the silence in the direction of their heart.

silence

Bending toward those we love,
in a bow of honor and gratefulness.
Bending toward those who challenge us,
in a bow that recognizes their impact.
Bending toward those who have gone before
Us, in a gesture of honor.
Bending toward the realities of our local lives,
by imagining or naming the people who
shape and shadow who we are.
Naming them aloud; naming them in silence.
Bending toward our lives.

naming

The musician bending toward her keyboard,
or bending to pick up a flute.
Bending toward beauty. Bending toward dreams.
Bending toward delight.

Readings:

*The First Reading is from a critical essay on a New Testament passage
from the Book of Acts. This essay was written by Julian Hills, a
professor at Marquette University.*

What attracts my attention is the challenge to make a coherent academic argument that can convince the majority of reasonable people—Christians and non-Christians, conservatives and liberals alike—that my rejection of this story as anything approaching “history” is based *not on my personal aversion to it* but on solid historical-critical reasoning. This challenge resembles what many of us regularly face, who dare to question the so-called prophecy scholars of the Christian right—who are sure they can tell us where to find the grave of Moses, the resting place of Noah’s ark, and even the Garden of Eden. From the perspective of responsible scholarship it is so easy to recognize that they are mistaken, and it is so tempting to ignore them. But an intelligent lay audience needs to know *how* and *why* any story is to be rejected.

The Second Reading is a poem from the much honored American poet, Mary Oliver, who, I am glad to say, will be the Ware Lecturer this year at our General Assembly in June, down in St. Louis. This is from her book The Leaf and the Cloud, from a poem called the Book of Time

Count the roses.
Each with its yellow lint at the center.
Each with its honey pooled and ready.

Do you have a question that can’t be answered?
Do the stars frighten you by their heaviness
 and their endless number?
Does it bother you that mercy is so difficult to
 understand?
For some souls it’s easy; they lie down on the sand and
 are soon asleep.
For others, the mind shivers in its’ glacial palace,
 And won’t come.
Yes, the mind takes a long time, is otherwise occupied
 than by happiness, and deep breathing.
Now, in the distance, some bird is singing.
And now I have gathered six or seven deep,

half-opened cups of petals between my hands,
and now I have put my face against them
and now I am moving my face back and forth, slowly,
against them.

The body is not much more than two feet and a tongue.

Come to me, says the blue sky, and say the word.

And finally even the mind comes running, like a wild
thing, and lies down in the sand.

Eternity is not later, or in any unfindable place.

Roses, roses, roses, roses.

Sermon

One of the stories I remember vividly from my parochial grade school was the strange tale of what happened to the famed philosopher and canonized saint, Thomas Aquinas, not too long before he died. Now just to make sure this was not the sort of legend which might stick to the life of a saint, I did some research this week. Sure enough, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this story is historically true. In fact, since this story can be seen as rather embarrassing, its historicity is almost guaranteed.

Tomaso D'Aquino was an amazing theologian from the area north of Napoli (or Naples), in Italy. He lived between 1225-1274, a very fruitful time in European history. Vilified by his family, and often insulted by being called the "Big Dumb Ox" because of his large size, Aquinas was one of the most brilliant people to live in his or in any century. A Dominican friar, he became a famed teacher and philosopher-theologian, deeply influenced by Aristotle, and surprisingly for his time, very willing to engage both Jewish and Muslim theologians in their own terms.

Living in Paris, Cologne and near Naples, Aquinas wrote over 101(!) thick volumes in his short 49 years. I hope it amazes you as much as it does me that he did this without computers or Google, without the Dewey Decimal System or even an old IBM Selectric. He wrote it all

out by hand, or dictated his words to scribes. He quoted texts from memory. Even if you disagree him, you have to admire his sheer fortitude.

In any case, even though he was a Dominican friar and Roman Catholic, his philosophical thinking has been so admired that today there are Jewish Thomists, and Baptist Thomists and even Evangelical Thomists, although conservative religious evangelicals like Francis Shaeffer tend to dismiss Aquinas as the taproot of modern humanism because of his reverence for reason and his rejection-in-advance of the future Protestant teaching, humanity's *innate* depravity.

No, Aquinas was brilliant. One of the smartest people that ever lived. Always acclaimed as a great scholar, even by those who disagreed with him.

But toward the end of his life, while he was working on the 60th volume of his masterwork, the (*Summa Theologica*), Tomaso D'Aquino had an experience he could not describe. He had gone into the chapel of St. Nicholas at the monastery where he was working.

When he came out of the chapel, hours later, he looked stricken, pale. He refused to go into the writing room to continue his work. When his friend Reginald came to him and asked him why he was not writing, Aquinas turned to him and said, "I cannot anymore."

When pressed, Aquinas added "I have come to understand that everything I have written...all of it... is just so much straw, chaff fit for stove." And for the next four months, until he died, Aquinas refused to write, leaving some passages in his famous book half-written.

Was he, as some insist, repudiating all the work that he had done, talking of it as no more than tinder with which to make a blazing fire? After all, "It's all straw!" he said. "It's all chaff!"

Now clearly, this was an amazing experience. But many interpreters over the years have come forward to try and “make hay” out of Aquinas’s “straw.”

After all, twenty-five years of reading, interpreting, translating, memorizing, considering and developing sounds pretty boring to lots of folks, apparently. Scholarship and study is a big yawn. The “spiritual” experience of having a revelation go off in your heart like a gong is much more exciting. The sudden peak experience is always the high road! After all, no one much talks of Newton doing the math...they speak of the apple conking him on his head. No one much speaks of the Buddha’s slow and reasoned discourses...they speak of his stunning revelation under the fig tree and his fights with demons. And when the traditional story of Christ comes up, it’s always the snazzy miracles people admire, like the raising of dead Lazarus, and not the difficult and deeply learned teachings on anger, love, justice and peace. And yes, I know, these are all men I’ve mentioned. That’s because women, in both Western and Eastern history have been systematically deterred from any life of scholarship and study until very recently, and even still, in some professions, it’s still an uphill climb.

Only a mere fifty years ago, women were rarely found in pulpits, laboratories, university class rooms on either side of the desk, or in law or medicine. And there are some university presidents who are still convinced that women couldn’t fare well with higher mathematics, no matter how many apples fell on their head.

The sensational, the uniquely powerful, the sudden revelation, the blissfully ecstatic, the apple on the head, St. Paul knocked off his horse, the lightning bolt, the transcendental experience, the singular book that explains EVERYTHING... I have been observing for years that such things seem much more compelling in our present frantic society than long patience, years of study, continuing questions, expressed doubts, living in uncertainty, and working together s l o w l y to discover the deeper truth of things, whether it be the historicity of a story in western scriptures, or the biology of a rose.

I'm not kidding. I spent a whole day this week looking for any kindness expressed toward the learned approach. Here, unfortunately, are the most common quotations I could find about people whose approach to life is neither flashy or lit by lightning, but who move slowly through the world using the patient tools of scholarship and study.

Cynical novelist George Orwell says scholars are only finding out “useless facts.” *Ya gotta be practical, you know.* The philosopher Schopenhauer argues that the scholars are only those who want “to chatter and put on airs.” *Ah. They're all phonies.* Playwrite George Bernard Shaw accuses “the learned” of being mere “idlers who kill time with study.” *Ah, I see, scholarship is not work. It's sloth.* Autobiographer Margaret Anderson says that scholars have a preference for “learning things rather than experiencing them” *...as if learning is not an experience.* And of course, the infamous vice-president of the United States in 1969 accused the learned of being “an effete corps of impudent snobs, who characterize themselves as intellectuals.” *Ah.*

Even Walt Whitman, one of the greatest poets of all time, considered by many to be the crown jewel of American literature, and a poet I personally adore usually, wrote these words in the 1900 edition of Leaves of Grass. The poet clearly sets himself apart from the astronomer, whose approach makes him feel “tired and sick.”

*WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures,
were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and
the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard
the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-
room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

The transcendental experience of looking at the stars overhead, alone in the moist night air, is depicted as an experience that outweighs the

experience of the astronomer with his charts and graphs. The assumption the poet seems to be making, is that he has chosen the better course...momentary direct mystical experience instead of endless calculations.

But I would like to assert that the charts and graphs, for some, can also be a source of wonder and awe, grounding and health, mystical or spiritual experience if you will. That to weigh the star Antares in a mathematical scale, or bend light around the sun's gravity in an experiment demanding great patience and waiting is just as spiritual and awe-inspiring an experience as that soulful glance up at the night sky. It may not be as sizzling as a lightning bolt, it may be slow in pace, but it can be beautiful and transforming.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm the one, after all, who calls looking up at the stars "instant religion." But I am sorry to say...and I apologize for that now... that I have not made it clear enough over the years that it's my long study in astronomy which clarifies and grounds my religious approach. The graphs and charts, too, offer me drink from the clear stream of wonder and astonishment.

Same thing when I spend time studying Unitarian or Universalist history, dates, Latin, and everything, or when I spend my time parsing the western scriptures in Greek, joining people like Dr. Julian Hills of the Jesus Seminar in looking at the ancient texts deeply, using the tools of historical criticism, sociology, textual analysis, comparisons with other texts of the period, etc. This is not boring to me, nor dull, but deep and inspiring. It's slow. It's not snazzy. But it feeds me.

And frankly, in a world where there are many fellow citizens using *uncritical* approaches to these ancient texts to hurt people, twist laws, establish prejudice, absolve violence and systematize injustices, I don't see how dissing the learned approach to religion as being "merely intellectual" is anything but foolish. Does any one really believe that to be intellectual and critical is to give up feeling and passion?

I like what Dr. Hills says in his essay: “This challenge resembles what many of us regularly face, who dare to question the so-called prophecy scholars of the Christian right—who are sure they can tell us where to find the grave of Moses, the resting place of Noah’s ark, and even the Garden of Eden. From the perspective of responsible scholarship it is so easy to recognize that they are mistaken, and it is so tempting to ignore them. But an intelligent lay audience needs to know *how* and *why* any story is to be rejected.”

In other words, it’s easy to ridicule and make fun of the folks who go around looking for Noah’s Ark or the Ark of the Covenant, but the spirituality of responsible scholarship, like any authentic spiritual approach, *is not interested* in being righteous or superior or in stooping to ridicule. Instead, its intent is to slowly work with others to uncover the truth so that all can see it and test it. This is the brilliance of the Jesus Seminar, who constantly publish their findings and get their study into the press, so that their tentative findings are not hidden away, but broadcast. For this slow, scholarly approach is not for private pleasure alone, but for public conversation and cultural transformation. All of this work is peer-reviewed, criticized, open. Thus, scholars are not people with final answers but with endless questions, who freely change their minds when evidence supports such a change. Their interest is not in being right, or being doctrinally true, but in moving always in the direction of truthfulness. On a pathway of questions.

The folks who have clear answers, who can tell you where Noah’s ark is, who can tell you, like Mr. Von Daniken with his *Chariots of the Gods*, that the pyramids were not built by ordinary people, but by space aliens, are the ones that worry me. And the ones who channel mysterious sources I can’t test, that I have to only accept on trust, are the ones who scare me.

But of course, all of us in the West are living in the post-Reformation world. Although the Reformers were certainly correct to challenge abuses of power and authority, they also made a very serious mistake, one that has distorted Western culture ever since. They gave all of that

authority they criticized in the Pope over to a single book, namely, the Bible. Critics of the Reformation justifiably and cynically called the Bible “the paper Pope,” because it was given absolute authority, infallible and unchanging as the Pope.

As the centuries rolled on, yes, some people gave up on the Bible. But they didn't give up on the Reformation mistake that you can find all the truth you need in One Book. And so, over the years, people have insisted I read singular books which they claim *explain everything*. Whether it was *Chariots of the Gods*, or Velikovsky's books or some book on the Shroud of Turin or Atlantis. Even books like *The DaVinci Code*, which are found in the fiction section, are lifted up as revealing secret, once-and-for all truths, buried for a thousand years by evil church leaders, and only now revealed in this exciting text. Fun fiction, perhaps, but without a whit of scholarship behind the assertion. Or I have had people tell me they read the Gospel of Thomas and now they know “what really happened” during the life-time of Jesus. Not really. And I have read people claiming to be humanistic who claim they can disprove that Jesus ever lived because they found contradictions in the gospels, and amassed a few footnotes to show that they are serious. And then there is that guy who assures us that Jesus lived, but got himself all caught up in some bizarre Passover Plot. All of these, at best, are examples of irresponsible scholarship, unaccountable to the larger community.

Only post-Reformation people who believe that, even though they don't accept the Bible, there must be some single Book somewhere with the “real truth,” could believe any of these things uncritically. And only people who think sudden revelation has come to them like a lightning bolt can write a book not subject to peer criticism, while claiming that ultimate truth has been revealed to them alone. All of such assertions simply make me nervous. I assure you, there are no secret gospels hidden away someplace that will reveal what “really happened” one day, making critical study irrelevant. There are no hidden blood lines that can be proved even provisionally by DNA tests or any other. There are no secret Indian tribes or Australian peoples with hidden prophecies that come directly from the ultimate source of truth. I say all such assertions

share a common weakness: they are closed off from invited scrutiny, they claim finality, and they are given to a false universality. They may be non-Christian and certainly non-Protestant in content, but in form they are still worshipping a paper Pope.

Now some of you may worry about why all this stuff seems to work me up. And it does.

But, as I said, there is a lot of tumult in the world right now, from the killing fields of Darfur to the joblessness in our own cities. And thus I worry when folks look for The Answer in a singular book, be it the literally understood Bible or one of its modern descendants, because I observe that their main purpose seems to be to excite security, not compassion, or a social conscience. True scholars, on the other hand, feel and face outrage, and study situations carefully so as not to respond to them impulsively, shooting from the hip with localized prejudice.

Or some may fear that the critical mind can't look at the gospels simply as stories. Or notice the beauty of the rose without dissecting it into pulp.

Not true. For me, the critically studied gospel stories move me far, far more than I was ever moved by the stories told within the confines of doctrine. In fact, I read the gospels more now than I did when I was a devout child, because faithfulness toward truthfulness among the scholars, who have been studying these texts for the last ten years, has given me *back* the stories that had been buried under layers of cultural piety.

And, as to appreciating roses without dissecting them first, listen to Mary Oliver:

Count the roses.

Do you have a question that can't be answered?

Do the stars frighten you by their heaviness
and their endless number?

Does it bother you that mercy is so difficult to
understand?

The body is not much more than two feet and a tongue.
Come to me, says the blue sky, and say the word.
And finally even the mind comes running, like a wild
thing, and lies down in the sand.
Eternity is not later, or in any unfindable place.
Roses, roses, roses, roses.

Roses too, you see, are instant religion for me. I don't know as much about them as I know about the stars, but my grandfather taught me some basic rose horticulture, and I stand in awe of the shaggy blossoms, all the more for that knowledge.

And thus I have to imagine that the roses and the stars are for me true symbols of that amazing chapel experience of Thomas Aquinas. He had spend a life-time studying and learning. Although I am in no way either the brain he was or a saint, I certainly have spent most of my life studying too, in school, but also as a preaching minister in congregations. And I think Aquinas experienced, not a lightning bolt, but the logical culmination of all his study. His heart opened in a new way.. He reframed everything. It all came together afresh. But I don't imagine that he actually *repudiated* everything he studied. I think instead he only came, over a long, slow period of time, to understand it in some new and more awesome way.

That is how I feel when I look at the stars. That is how I feel when I drink in a rose. Because I too am well aware that everything I write about religion is like straw when compared to a golden rose too. And everything I preach is like chaff when compared to a single wink of the star Sirius when it disguises itself as the evening star. I think I understand what Thomas was trying to say by his silence. Not that study is worthless, but that study always leads the wise back into the sensual world, to see it as if it were born anew.

Had he not died so soon after this experience, I really think Aquinas would have gone back to writing, eventually. We'll never know. It's one of those questions which Mary Oliver promises us will never be

answered. It's the mercy that is so difficult to understand. It's the heaviness that radiates from the stars, as well as the lightness.

But, for me, the critical, scholarly life, while not for all people by any means, is a form of spiritual life. It may not be as exciting as a lightning bolt, but I say roses are no less beautiful because they open so slowly. It's important that they open. And it's important that we are open, too. And it's important that there are more of them than just one, and that we are all in this together.

Offering

As a response to the reality of the roof and the piano, as a response to the reality of heat and encouragement, as a response, to the walls of rooms and carpets beneath our feet, as a response to roses and readings, as a response both to fun and serious, life-changing conversation, we set aside

a portion of each Sunday celebration for the offering of pledge payments and gifts. We are all in this together, after all. The responsibility is on our shoulders.

The Star of Truth: A Prayer in One Act

You know that bright star over there? That star up there is very far away. It took the starlight eight whole years to travel across space and finally enter your eye.

*Then I am not seeing the star as it is.
I am seeing the star as my eye is, right?*

Well, yes and no. The star *is* real, after all.
Real as your eye.

But from what you just said, we don't know that. Maybe it exploded seven years ago, and we'll find out next year when it just winks out in the middle of the night. Maybe all we have is the light we see now,

incomplete, partial, never finally arriving. Maybe all we really have is our questioning mind, that can measure distance, and place the elements of the far stars onto our scales.

Or maybe all we really have is our sense of wonder, our amazement that we exist among the stars in the first place.

Maybe we can't ever see things as they are, once and for all, perfect and finished. Maybe like the light that comes from stars, we too have a long and amazing way to go.

Amen to that!