

Miracles

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Our tribe did not read the Bible. We got it in doses, daily or weekly, from a priest bound by the lectionary to give us bits and pieces in Collects, Epistles, Gospels, and Graduals, which, along with Confiteor and Kyrie, formed the front-loaded, word-rich portion of the Tridentine Mass. These were followed by sacred table work and common feed, to wit laving and consecration, communion, thanksgiving and benediction. On Sundays, it'd all be seasoned with some lackluster homiletics – linked haphazardly to the scriptures on the day. These liturgies were labor intensive, heavy on metaphor and stagecraft, holy theater. Possibly this is why few priests put much time into preaching, preferring, as the writing workshops say, “to show rather than to tell.”

Still, we knew the stories: Eden and the apple, the murderous brother, the prodigal son, floods and leviathans, mangers and magi, scribes and Pharisees and repentant thieves. I remember my excitement the first time I heard about the woman washing the savior's feet with her tears and wiping them with her long hair and anointing them with perfume. My father, a local undertaker, was especially fond of Joseph of Arimathea and his side-kick Nicodemus, who'd bargained with Pilate for the corpse of Christ and tended to the burial of same, in Joseph's own tomb newly hewn from rock “in keeping with the customs of the Jews.” My father claimed this “a corporal work of mercy.” This he'd been told by the parish priest, who furthermore gave him what my father called “a standing dispensation” from attendance at Mass whenever he was called, as he fairly often was, to tend to the dead and the bereaved on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.

The biblical narratives were told and retold through our formative years at school by nuns who had done their little bit of editing and elaboration, the better to fit the predicaments of our station. And though we had a Bible at home – an old counter-Reformation, Douay-Rheims translation from the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome's 4th Century text – we never read the thing. It was a holy knick-knack like the statue of the Blessed Mother, the picture of the Sacred Heart, the table-top manger scene that came out for Christmas, the crucifixes over each of our bedroom doors, the holy water font at the front door, all designed to suit our daily devotional lives. We prayed the family rosary in May and October, kept the fasts and abstinences of Lent and Advent along with whatever novena was in fashion and most likely to inure to our spiritual betterments. We abstained from meat on Friday, confessed our sins on Saturdays, kept holy the Sabbath, such as we knew it, and basked in the assurance that ours was the one true faith. Ours was a Holy, Roman, Irish-American, post-war-baby-booming suburban family – sacramental, liturgical, replete with none-too-subtle guilt and shaming, the big magic of transubstantiation, binding and loosing, the true presence, cardinal sins, contrary virtues, states of grace, and the hope for salvation. Litanies and chaplets stood in for scriptures and hermeneutics. That was a thing the “other crowd” did, godhelpthem, bound to their idolatries about The Good Book, lost, we reckoned, in the error of their ways.

I memorized, through the weekly instructions of Fr. Thomas Kenny, the responses

to the priests' incantations at Mass, attracted as I was to the stately cadences of Latin and the mystery of a secret language. I took up my service as an altar boy at age seven, sharing duties for the 6:20 AM mass with my brothers Dan and Pat, a year older and younger, respectively, three weeks out of every four, at our parish church, St. Columban's. Then we'd hustle off to Holy Name School across town where the day's tutelage began with a students' mass at 8:15 read by the saintly, white-maned Monsignor Paddock, beneath a huge mosaic on the general theme, the good sisters told us, of the Eucharist.

Old Melchizedek was on one side and Abraham and Isaac on the other, prefiguring the Risen Christ on his Cross occupying the mosaic space between them, each a different version of priesthood, sacrifice and Eucharist. This was the image I stared at all through the mornings of my boyhood, never knowing the chapters or verses I might have read for a more fulsome understanding of it all, how Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son prefigured the death of Jesus on the cross and how the bloody business of worship and communion became the loaf and cup of the last supper and the priesthood of Melchizedek became the holy orders of churchmen down the centuries. Priesthood is something I understood in the cassocked and collared, biretta topped celibates, the parish priests and curates, Jesuits and Franciscans in their habits who'd heard the voice of God – their vocation – and answered the call.

By twenty I was happily apostate, having come into my disbelief some few years after puberty when a fellow pilgrim showed me all that she could on the mystery of life. If the nuns had been wrong about sex, and they surely had been, it followed, I reasoned, that they were wrong on other things.

"Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?" Jesus asks the naysaying elders in Capernaum, in Mark's telling of the healing of a paralytic. They are trying to catch his blaspheming out, in the way we are always conniving against our spiritual betters.

I'd been named for a dead priest, my father's late Uncle Tom, and for the famously skeptical apostle whose finger and dubiety still hovers over the wounds of Christ, waiting, in the words of that great evangelist Ronald Reagan, to "trust but verify." True to which code, I questioned everything.

The deaths of children, the random little disasters that swept young mothers to their dooms in childbirth, their infants to their sudden crib deaths, young lovers to their demises in cars, perfect strangers to their hapless ends, seemed more evidence than anyone should need that whoever is in charge of these matters had a hit and miss record on humanity.

My work – I eventually got about my father's business – put me in earshot, albeit, over corpses, of some of the best preaching on theodicy available. The Book of Job, however godawful and comfortless it is, remained for me a testament of faith: "blessed be the name of the Lord." Nonetheless, I remained devoutly lapsed in my confession and praxis.

So I was fairly shocked when years later, having achieved the rank of former husband and custodial father, small town undertaker and internationally ignored poet, I got a call from one of my fellow Rotarians to say they were looking for "a good Catholic to join their Bible Study."

"Let me know if you find one," is what I answered, and we both laughed a little, but he persisted. "No, really, you'll like it. We're going to meet at the Big Boy on

Tuesday mornings at half past six. We'll be done by 8 so everyone can get to work." Before I had time to construct a proper excuse, he said, "See you then!" and hung up the phone. What harm I thought, it'll never last. A godawful hour and crummy eatery, not a great book, if a "good" one—like cocker spaniels, serviceable but ineluctably dull.

That was going thirty years ago. Our little study has outlived the restaurant, the Rotary, a few of our roughly dozen charter members, our denominations and divided politics, and still we meet – at my funeral home now – every early Tuesday morning, every season, every weather, to read and discuss various books of the Bible. We've done everything from Genesis to Revelation, all of the Gospels, some extra canonical texts, the letters of Paul. Job we've done three times, James maybe twice. We'll likely never do the Apocalypse again.

I only go to church now for baptisms, funerals, or weddings. The mysteries of birth and death and sex are regular enough that I count as friends the neighborhood's clergy, whose personal charities and heroics I've been eye witness to for many years. But dogma and dicta defy sound reason, and the management class of The Church is uniquely wrong-headed and feckless. What's more, my own views on same-sex marriage, the ordination of women, priestly celibacy, and redemptive suffering would put me so sufficiently at odds with them as to render me, no doubt, an ex-communicant.

Oddly enough, the less observant I became in belief or devotion, the better the "good" book seemed to me. I didn't need the religious epic so much as a good story, something to share, a party piece. I can't remember not knowing about the healing of the paralytic, whether I heard it at mass or from one of the nuns or Christian Brothers who were in charge of my education or read it as part of our Bible study. There it is, in three gospels out of four, the details more or less the same. It is one of the three dozen or so miracle stories that punctuate the New Testament, from changing water into wine at Cana, calming the storm, and filling the fishnets to healing of lepers and the blind and lame and raising the dead, himself included. There are endless demons and devils cast out, sins forgiven, and apparitions after his death. It was a poem in a book published a few years back that brought it newly to life for me.

The last time I heard Seamus Heaney read was in the Glenn Memorial Chapel at Emory University. It was and remains a Methodist Church which doubles as an auditorium for gatherings of a certain size. It was the second of March of 2013, and I was occupying The McDonald Family Chair, a cushy sinecure with the Candler School of Theology at Emory, teaching a course with the great preacher and theologian Thomas Long on "The Poetics of the Sermon." Dr. Long and I were just putting the final touches on a book we'd co-authored called *The Good Funeral*, due out later that year and written for clergy, mere mortals, and mortuary sorts. And I was learning words like *exegesis* and *hermeneutics* and studying the dynamics of fiction, which Dr. Long regarded as a workable template for homiletics. We examined narrative arc and point of view, plot and character and setting. We read poems and short fictions and published sermons.

I was delighted that Heaney would be coming to town. His had been the most amplified and ever present voice of my generation of poets. His work, since I first encountered it forty-five years ago, reading by the fire in the ancestral home in County Clare I would later inherit, had never failed to return a rich trove of the word horde

and metaphoric treasures. Because so much of his poetry came out of a Catholic upbringing in rural Ireland, he became for me a useful guide for the parish of language and imagination.

Possibly because I first encountered prayer as poetry, or at least as language cast in rhyme and meter, addressed to the heavens as a sort of raised speech, poetry had always seemed sacerdotal, proper for addressing the mysteries of happenstance and creation. That Heaney held the natural world and human work – the chore and toil of the mundane, earth bound, and near-to-hand — in awe and reverence, seemed more attuned to the holy than the politicized religiosity of the culture. Still, the Latin I'd learned as an altar boy in the 1950's, the sacraments, devotions, and sensibilities I'd been raised with found many echoes in the early poems of the Irish master, even if my own life's experience and further examinations of scripture and secular texts had left me apostate.

Though freighted with doubts and wonders and religiously adrift, I treasured the language of faith as an outright gift — the hymns of Charles Wesley, the angel-wrestling contemplations of John Calvin, the exile and anchoritic adventures of Columcille, and the rubrics of holy women and men — I retained some level of religious literacy given me by nuns and Christian Brothers, but rejected the magisterium of the church. By the time I'd arrived at Emory in the late winter of 2013, I was deeply devoted to a church of latter day poets, skeptics, and noncompliant but kindly sorts. The irony of such a backslidden fellow as myself teaching at a school of theology named for the Methodist bishop and first Chancellor of Emory, whose brother was the owner of our national sugar water, Coca-Cola, was not lost on me. Though I had been schooled in my apostasy by H.L. Mencken, Robert Ingersoll, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, and by the feckless malfeasance of bishops and abusive priests, I had also witnessed, over four decades in funeral service, the everyday heroics of the reverend clergy and their co-religionists. These were men and women of faith who showed up whenever there was trouble. Their best preaching was done when the chips were down, in extremis, at death beds, in the hospitals and nursing homes and family homes and funeral homes. They pitch in and do their part even though they cannot fix the terrible things that happen. They are present, they pray, they keep open the possibility of hope. And I'd been schooled by my semester among the Methodists and seminarians at Emory and by my friendship with The Reverend Thomas Long, whose scholarship and work in words has re-formed me in a way I thought impossible.

Thus, Heaney's reading from the raised sanctuary of Glenn Memorial Chapel seemed a "keeping holy" of a Sabbath, and his poems, portions of a sacred text. And when he said, deep into what would be one of his last public readings, that he'd like to read some poems from his "last book," and then corrected himself to say "my most recent collection..." I thought the insertion of the shadow of death was a deft touch by a seasoned performer of his work. It is also true that his "most recent collection," *Human Chain*, seemed so haunted a book, dogged by death and impendency and the urgency of last things.

On the day he read one of my favorites of his poems. "Miracle" proposes a shift of focus in the scriptural story of Jesus healing the paralytic, my favorite rendition of which occurs in Mark 2:1-12. Jesus is preaching in Capernaum, and the crowd is so great, filling the room and spilling out the door into the street, that four men bring-

ing the paralytic to be healed have to hoist him up to the roof, remove the roof tiles, or dig through the sod and lower him down on his bed by ropes, whereupon Jesus, impressed by their faith, tells the poor cripple his sins are forgiven. Of course, the begrudgers among them — and there are always begrudgers — begin to mumble among themselves about blasphemy, because “Who can forgive sins but God, alone?” Jesus questions them saying which is easier, by which he means the lesser miracle — “to say, ‘your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’?” It is, of course, a trick question.

Because forgiveness seems impossible, whether to give it or to receive it, and impossible to see, it would always take a miracle. Nor is God the only one capable of forgiving. Do we not pray to be forgiven our trespasses “as we forgive those who trespass against us”? Who among us is not withered and weighed down by the accrual of actual or imagined slights, betrayals, resentments, estrangements, and wrongdoings done unto us most often by someone we’ve loved. And in ways I needn’t number, we’re all paralyzed, hobbled by our grievances and heartbreaks, by the press of sin, the failure of vision, by fear, by worry, by anxieties about the end.

Whereas the scripture directs our attention to the paralytic and to the quibbles between Jesus and the Scribes, Heaney’s poem bids us be mindful of the less learned toil and utterly miraculous decency of “the ones who have known (us) all along,” who lift us up, bear us in our brokenness, and get us where we need to go. On any given day it seems miracle enough.

The everyday and deeply human miracle, void of heavenly hosts or interventions, has especial meaning for Heaney who, in August of 2006, woke up in a guest house in Donegal paralyzed by a stroke. He had attended the birthday party for Anne Friel, wife of the playwright and Heaney’s schoolmate and lifelong friend Brian Friel. After the night’s festivities, the Heaneys were spending the night with other friends and fellow poets in the local B&B. He awakened to paralysis on the left side of his body. So it was his wife, Marie, and Des and Mary Kavanagh, Peter and Jean Fallon, and Tom Kilroy — ones who had known him all along -- who helped strap him on to the gurney and get him down the steep stairs, out of the building and into the waiting ambulance to ride with his wife to Letterkenny Hospital. In the poem, which took shape in the weeks of what he called “rest cure” in the Royal Hospital, Donnybrook, in Dublin, the narrative power proceeds “not to the one who takes up his bed and walks,” but rather, to “the ones who have known him all along and carry him in,” who do the heavy lifting of his care and transport. They are the agents of rescue and restoration, their faithful friendship miraculous and salvific. Their hefting and lifting and large muscle work is the stuff and substance of salvation. Here is the short poem.

Miracle

Not the one who takes up his bed and walks
But the ones who have known him all along
And carry him in —
Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked
In their backs, the stretcher handles
Slippery with sweat. And no let up
Until he’s strapped on tight, made tiltable

and raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for healing.
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait
For the burn of the paid out ropes to cool,
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity
To pass, those ones who had known him all along.
(*Human Chain, Poems*, Seamus Heaney, 2010, FSG)

This language of shoulders, aching backs, and waiting *for the burn of paid out ropes to cool* honors the hands on, whole body habits of human labor the poet learned as a farm boy in Derry. From comparing his father's spade work in the turf bog to his own excavations in meaning and language in his poem "Digging" to the town and country indentures of blacksmithing, well-gazing, and kite-flying at the end of *Human Chain*, Heaney's work upholds the holiness of human labor and the sacred nature of the near-to-hand.

Hearing its maker read "Miracle" from the pulpit at Emory put me in mind of my conversation with him at the funeral of our friend Dennis O'Driscoll who had died less than three months before on Christmas Eve, 2012, and was buried near his home in Naas, County Kildare.

Seamus had been Dennis's principal eulogist on the day, just as Dennis had been Heaney's most insightful interlocutor. His book of interviews with Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, is the nearest thing to an autobiography we will ever have of the Nobel Laureate and more thoroughly than ever examines the life of the man in relation to the work.

Following O'Driscoll's funeral liturgy, I walked with Heaney and his wife in the sad cortege from the church to the cemetery, half a mile or so, following the coffin and the other mourners. We chatted about our dead friend and the sadness we all shared. Maybe his stroke six years before and my open-heart surgery the year before eventuated in our bringing up the rear of the entourage. We were taking our time, huffing and puffing some at the steeper bits, as we made our slow but steady way up the town, out the road, to the grave behind the hearse. In Ireland the dead are shouldered to the opened ground and lowered in with ropes by the pallbearers. After the priest has had his say, the grave is filled in by family and friends. The miracle of life and the mystery of death are unambiguously tethered by a funiculus of grave ropes and public grieving, religiously bound by the exercise of large muscle duties – shoulder and shovel work and the heart's indentures, each a linkage in the ongoing, unbroken human chain. And the strain of pallbearers at O'Driscoll's open grave, as they lowered his confined body into the opened ground with slowly paying out the ropes, seemed like the faithful and existential labor of the paralytic's friends lowering his bed through the opened roof in Capernaum to the foot of his healer for a cure.

The witness of these things drew a catch in my breath that New Years Eve morning when we buried Dennis O'Driscoll in the new row of St. Corban's Cemetery. Watching his pallbearers lower him into the vacancy of the grave, these mundane mortuary chores replicating the miraculous narrative of the gospels where the paralytic's pals lower him into the place of his healing, the "slight lightheadedness and incredulity" perfectly articulated in Heaney's poem, remains caught in my chest, not yet exhaled, and like the scribes in Capernaum that day in Naas, though I'd seen such things all my workaday life, I'd "never seen anything like this before."

And yet I saw it all again, months later in the late summer when Heaney's death stunned us all on Friday morning, the thirtieth of August 2013. I woke to texts and emails from Dublin. "Seamus is dead," is what they read. "Ah, hell..." I wrote back. Ah, hell, indeed. I called David Fanagan, the Dublin undertaker, and asked if I might ride in the hearse. Someone who knew the poems and the poet should ride along. I flew to Shannon and stayed at my digs in Clare that night and drove up to Dublin on Sunday morning, stopping in Naas to visit Dennis's grave. At Fanagan's in Aungier Street, Heaney was laid out in Chapel 3, the corpse horizontal and still, "silent beyond silence listened for." Marie greeted me and thanked me for making the long journey and was a little shocked to hear that I'd had my ticket in hand for more than a month, long before Seamus had any notion of dying. She told me she thought he must have had a heart attack on Wednesday, complaining of a pain in his jaw, then tripped leaving a restaurant on Thursday which got him to the hospital where they discovered a tear in his aorta. The only thing more risky than operating, she was told, was doing nothing. He was in extremis. A team was assembled to do the procedure at half past seven on Friday morning, just minutes before which he texted her, calm and grateful for the long years of love, and told her not to be afraid. "Noli timere" he wrote at the end, the ancient language englished: *be not afraid*. He was dead before the operation began.

All the way up there people lined the way, on the overpasses and in the halted cars at intersections who got out of their cars to applaud the cortege of the great poet. Women were weeping or wiping tears from their faces. Men held the palms of their hands to their hearts, caps doffed, thumbs up, everyone at their best attention.

"How did you get to be the one?" I asked the man at the wheel of the new Mercedes Benz hearse, no doubt hustled into service for the T.V. cameras. "I drew the short straw," he told me. "We used to get extra to drive in the North, what with the Troubles and fanatics. Now its just a long haul and a long day."

We picked up forty or fifty cars as we made our way, the roughly three-hour drive north from Dublin, then west around Belfast making for Derry, crossing the river that connects Lough Beg to Lough Neagh at Toomebridge, the crowds getting bigger the nearer we got. Police on motorcycles picked us up at the border just outside of Newry and escorted our makeshift motorcade all the way to the cemetery as we went down the boreen off the main road and drove by the family farm and onwards to Bellaghy, where a piper met us at the entrance to town and piped us through the village where the crowd spilled out of shops and pubs and houses and into the road, every man, woman, and child out applauding, crossing themselves, giving out with bits of Danny Boy and holding their hearts in signals of respect. The sadness on their faces and the tribute to the level man behind me in the box was like nothing I'd ever seen, and when we got to the grave, led there by a cadre of churchmen in white albs and copes and cowls, I took the family spray up to the grave through the cordons of paparazzi clicking photos of everything. I walked with Marie and her family behind the coffin as we went to the grave, where against my hopes that Seamus would pop out and proclaim it all a big mistake, his sons and his brothers and her brothers bent to the black ropes and lowered him into the ground, the paid out ropes and the burn in their arms and hands and the hush of the gathered multitude notwithstanding.

Leaves rustled in the overarching sycamores. The clergy struck up a verse of "Salve Regina" to re-insinuate their imprimatur on it all. We hung around in that

sad and self-congratulatory way mourners do after the heavy lifting is done. The limo had a slow leak in the right front tire that had to be tended to. Des Kavanaugh and his wife Mary came and spoke to me, wondering if I'd be in Galway anytime soon. Brian Friel's car pulled away; he nodded. Michael, Seamus' son, came over to thank me for going in the hearse with his dad, and I was glad of that. And grateful. I stayed until the sod was back on him, and the flowers sorted on top of that, and then we drove back down the road, arriving in Dublin right around dark. Anthony MacDonald, his short-straw, long day nearing its end, dropped me at the corner of Georges Street and Stephen Street Lower. I gave him fifty euros and told him to get something at the off license with my thanks for taking me up and back on the day, for getting Seamus where he needed to go, and for getting me where I needed to be. "No bother," he said, "Not a bit." Nothing out of the utterly ordinary, utterly pedestrian, a miracle.

Possibly these are the miracles we fail to see, on the lookout as we are for signs and wonders: for seas that part for us to pass through, skies that open to a glimpse of heaven, the paralytic who stands and walks, the blind who begin to see, the shortfall that becomes a sudden abundance. Maybe what we miss are the ordinary miracles, the ones who have known us all along—the family and friends, the fellow pilgrims who show up, pitch in, and do their parts to get us where we need to go, within earshot and arms' reach of our healing, the earthbound, everyday miracle of forbearance and forgiveness, the help in dark times to light the way, the ones who turn up when there is trouble to save us from our hobbled, heart-wrecked selves.