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Responding to the Wreckage Around Me

—Peter Stockland—

At the annual spiritual exercises of the Catholic fraternity to which I belong, we spent the weekend oscillating between questions and Christ.

Not, I must quickly add, the sophomoric, pseudo-theological questions of our era's anti-theists who witlessly insist that corrosive doubt can paradoxically fill the existential void in their lives. Nor, for that matter, the sincere questions of the serious faithful who labour under the misconception that a finite amount of Scriptural textual explication is the key to unlocking the eternal Word.

Rather, we were asked to reflect on Christ as question; more precisely the question that has Him as its only, irreducible answer.

In the words of Father Julian Carron, who led our exercises: "There will be no faithfulness unless there is the question to which Christ is the answer. We can repeat Christ's name over and over for the rest of our lives, but the experience we will have is not Christ."

Christ's irreducibility is indisputable, of course, because of his relation to the Father. The Father created all things. Christ is always with Him and so extends to us, historically and immediately—now!—the freedom to fully become what we have been created to be.

As Father Carron said, "I discover Christ is the answer to what I am." Or in Saint Paul's words: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Here we have the reason, I think, that Christianity is at once such a joyful and such a terribly difficult faith. It brings us the peace of Christ but also the onerous demand not just to behave like Him but to "be" Him within the human, all too human, limits of our lives. And "be" here does not mean what it means in the Buddhist tradition of just letting be whatever is at the present moment. No, it means actively, implacably, perpetually enfolding Him within our spiritual and even physical selves through the act of Communion that he gave us as a gift, and which constantly reminds us how sorrowfully we fail.

Each of us knows how sorrowfully he or she fails individually. What we too often fail to grasp collectively as Christians, it seems to me, is that we cannot come blinking out into the light of the wreckage of our culture, our politics, our humanity and either presume to be above it all in Christ's name or, alternatively, repeat His name over and over in front of it like a magic healing spell.

To do either is an attempt to reduce Christ to an escape hatch from, or a bulwark against, the powers that confront and beset us. Each is an attempt to reduce Christianity to ethics, liturgy, text, devotions, nostalgia. All of those things can be good in themselves. But precisely because they are reductions, they must never become for us the fullness of Christ, irreducible.

My sense, unfortunately, is that is exactly what I do far too frequently in responding to the wreckage around me. I have a sneaking feeling I'm not alone. And it's a natural response for political Christians. Our faith is foremost in our lives, after all. More, we are the remnant defenders of Christendom so our way of thinking, our language, our logic, automatically draws from the tradition of Christ and confuses the result with Christ.

The question arising is not even so much how to stop doing that as it is how to start being more consistent in making Christ the answer to what I am. At the end of the spiritual exercises for our fraternity, Father Carron had a concrete suggestion: Start over, every day, until it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Writing Life

—Milton Friesen—

My children surprised me last week with a ticket for the Miriam Toews luncheon here in Hamilton. Toews was going to be reading from her latest novel, Irma Voth, and taking questions from the audience. Upon entering the hall, I realized that I was among a small minority of men in attendance. I also learned that it was the Na'amat Canada Hamilton group that had sponsored the luncheon (Na'amat is a humanitarian women's movement that provides support to women and children in need). Here is my interpretation of some of the things that Toews shared in her response to her post-reading questions:

Writing requires courage. You have to face life when you write, particularly when you write about people. It may be something about yourself or about what you see, fear, hope for, or get angry about, but if you are afraid and give in to the fear, you lose your ability to say anything that matters.

Writing can bring you into conflict. While we think of writing and reading as solitary and even peaceful, because it is about ideas, expressions, explorations, and possibilities, your voice will clash with the voices of others. It shouldn't surprise us, but it is essential and persistent.

Writing can produce insight. As you try and understand what you've seen and experienced through your writing, certain themes and patterns clearly emerge. You might not know about all this in a complete sense but as you spend time thinking about, structuring, writing and re-writing, certain realities become clear.

Writing can create misunderstanding. You may end up being conflicted with your family or community and they may end up feeling conflicted about you. That isn't the same as being in conflict (though that happens, too). It's about the way that your interpretations and expressions produce reactions and ideas in your readers that are different than your own. Generally we don't write to confuse but we also don't write to remove mystery and reduce life to concrete barrenness. Even when we write about the past, we are creating something new.

Writing reflects who you are. When you write a novel, you assume a voice, a posture, a vantage point. It can't be otherwise. There is a significant part of who you are mirrored in those decisions, whether you take an oppositional stance or are trying to integrate complications. You may look at something you wrote years ago and be ashamed of it, but you shouldn't be—it reflects who you were when you wrote it.

Miriam Toews

Writing reflects what you are. We are flawed but capable of kindness. We generate heat and light but we also destroy and break things that are beautiful. The people around us may feel our love but we can burden and warp them with impositions, fundamentalisms, confinements, and rejections. If that is true of life, how can it fail to emerge in what we write?

Writing is an action that seeks to understand. At some point in your adult life, you begin to see that your upbringing gave you both gifts and wounds and sometimes the two exist together. The act of sorting, thinking, imagining, and physically writing drives you to take stock of these dynamics. There is a desire in all of us to understand the contradictions and puzzles. Writing can give us hope that understanding is possible even when that same writing adds new layers of complication.

Writing can lead to books and books can sometimes save us. It may be obvious to say it but when we write enough words and they seem interesting to someone who publishes books, the words we create can result in books. These books can be a means of escape, a way to be somewhere else, to hear a new voice, to imagine a new possibility. In that way, books can sometimes save us, make us stronger, fuel our intelligence, and expand the scope of our own artistic possibilities. They may also disturb us and cross the moats of our own intellectual comforts.

For people who don't read much, the work of an author can seem to be an extravagance, something left to people who aren't busy keeping the world running. Voracious readers are implicated as well—book nerds who would rather experience life vicariously than engage with it directly. I'm sure some of that is true on both counts. However, I had little doubt, as I walked away from a lively and engaging hour spent contemplating books, that there is a profound service offered to us by people like Miriam Toews who dare to tangle with the intimidating triumvirate of the good, the true, and the beautiful, armed only with words.

Broken Union

—Joshua Reinders—

When the Quebec student protests started, my earliest feelings were of sympathy. These were fellow student, with whom I felt a kinship. Finally someone had taken up arms against ever-increasing tuition prices!

On the surface, a student protest is impractical, by definition. How do students have leverage over a government, especially enough to paralyze that government into making concessions to them? They aren't employees bringing a valuable skill to an employer, so how do they effect change? And their form of protest is . . . skipping class? I do that too, but usually I do it with the knowledge that I'm losing valuable learning time and paying the university to not teach me. I'm not hurting the university by playing hooky, I'm hurting myself.

While the idea is a little ridiculous, it's worked in Quebec. Students there have not simply voiced their disagreements; rather, they impressed upon Premier Jean Charest a position of some power, and actually made someone listen.

Yet as the protests drag on, my sympathy has waned. And now, with news that protesters are preventing other students from attending classes, my kinship has been eclipsed by dismay.

The minute they attempted to bully others students into submission, they went too far.

I have personally been privy to two separate strikes while attending university classes. In my second year, the teaching assistants exercised the right to strike and in my third, the food services workers did likewise. Both strikes were exceedingly frustrating as they blocked cars from entering campus (for a legally determined amount of time) and used other means to achieve a deal they felt made sense. I swallowed my frustration, however, as they legally had the means to do this. My support of the right to strike ended shortly after talk started of classes potentially being cancelled (this was only in the case of the teaching assistants' strike). When I was going to be prevented from attending a class I paid for, my patience was at its end. My ability to study was being impeded by another; my choice to study was being taken away from me.

News stories hit the wire this week that protesters were storming classrooms and forcibly disturbing students in classrooms. That's ludicrous. What right do they have to restrict someone else's right to learn? These students who still want to attend classes aren't scabs. They don't belong to a labour union and they haven't broken any unsaid rule about working for a company while others strike for better wages. They are paying students only going to class for what they paid for. They worked hard to get into university and they likely worked hard to earn the money needed to attend those classes.

It's even more astounding that picketing and bullying would be the means the protesters would use. How can a group claiming to fight for accessibility and inclusiveness in the post-secondary system claim legitimacy when they themselves are attempting to restrict other students from studying?

My colleague Brian Dijkema had a compelling idea. Students don't want to go to classes they paid for? Great, open their spots up to those that wouldn't take the opportunity to get a post-secondary degree for granted. I'm sure a student from Britain or the United States would be happy to pay $3,800 dollars to go to McGill. As Quebec's tuition rates are still near the lowest in Canada, it would certainly be cheaper for foreign students than the tuition rates they face in their respective countries.

I support the right to protest and strike. It's a right that has been recognized in our country. But when that right starts to infringe upon the ability for others to study, as the popular internet meme goes, you're doing it wrong.

Beware the Cross Police

—Richelle Wiseman—

In 1984, British rock star Madonna took to the stage to perform "Like a Virgin" sporting a very large cross on a chain around her neck. The song was a major hit. So was the cross. Suddenly everyone was wearing large crosses on chains, and the cross has remained a fashion item available at most costume jewelry retail outlets ever since.

In particular, it is the symbol of choice for the "Goth" movement, adherents of which wear jet black hair and clothing, chains, tattoos, and sport crosses, skulls, insects, and dragons. They also carry purses and backpacks in the shapes of coffins with crosses on the lids.

Meanwhile, two British women are currently involved in a fight with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg over their right to wear crosses in their places of work. Officials within the British government have weighed into the case by arguing that because the wearing of the cross is not a "requirement" of the Christian faith, employers can ban wearing the cross, and employees who insist on doing so may be fired (*The Sunday Telegraph*, March 10, 2012).

The women, Nadia Eweida and Shirley Chaplin, want the European court to rule that they have the human right to manifest their religious beliefs, based on Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

Eweida was fired by British Airways in 2006 for wearing a cross on duty. Chaplin, a nurse, faced disciplinary action for wearing a cross in a hospital, which ended her 31-year career as a nurse.

The British government is arguing that "the applicants' wearing of a visible cross or crucifix was not a manifestation of their religion or belief within the meaning of Article 9, and . . . the restriction on the applicants' wearing of a visible cross or crucifix was not an 'interference' with their rights protected by Article 9."

Christian leaders, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, now accuse the British government of "sidelining Christianity," and point out that Sikhs are allowed to wear kirpans, kara bracelets, and turbans, and Muslims are allowed to wear hijabs.

There are likely many British citizens, and other European citizens, who every day trot off to work wearing crosses with no consideration of faith or belief whatsoever. It would be interesting to know if any "Goths," for instance, have ever been disciplined in the workplace for wearing symbols which have no particular meaning for them.

Perhaps people of no faith are allowed to wear symbols of faith if they don't actually believe in those symbols, but people for whom those are actual manifestations of faith might find themselves accosted by the "cross police."

The erosion of religious rights in Europe is distressing evidence that secularism is becoming the only religion tolerated in the public square. In the case of Christian crosses, perhaps the solution would be for the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury to declare that from now on, cross-wearing for Christians is mandatory. Perhaps then Christians would have the right to wear them to work.

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