

That Pesky Third Bit

—Alissa Wilkinson—

Following on from my blog post last week—which seems to have struck quite a nerve, judging from the feedback I got (which showed that many, many people are grappling with these vocational questions all the time)—I’d like to say just two things.

First: someone helpfully pointed out that this neatly aligns with that very popular quote from Frederick Buechner: “The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” A worthy thing to keep in mind.

Second: The other piece of the article that I quote in the post says that there’s actually a third piece, something that Buechner leaves out—our *skills*. This seems to me to be worth pausing on for a moment.

That you need to foster a skill set in your vocational area seems completely obvious. But I’ve been editing and teaching (and living) long enough to know that this is not counsel we actually listen to comfortably.

The most common case, in my experience, is the beginner who has a knack for something (for the sake of argument, let’s say a knack for writing). *I’m a writer!* the beginner thinks. *I like it. I have a knack for it. My deep gladness is here. And I think the world’s deep hunger is, too.* (Very true. The world is always hungry for good writers.)

That budding writer, feeling daring, submits a piece of writing to a magazine, or brings it along to a workshop. And then, in most cases, it gets both praised and ripped apart.

Unfortunately, in many cases, this is where Buechner’s quote breaks down. *But I love writing!* the budding writer thinks. *And the world needs me!* And then one of a few things might happen. The writer, discouraged by not entirely glowing feedback, decides that she can’t actually hack this writing thing, and she quits. Or, irate and certain of her own destiny, she rejects the correction.

I’ve seen this happen over and over, not just to writers—and sometimes in my own heart. This is why the third piece is so important. Because, maybe the budding writer is in fact destined to be a great writer, but there’s a long stretch of preparation ahead, first. Or maybe the budding writer has actually misread the signs, assuming that she’s meant to be a great writer when, in fact, she’s meant to be something else, because she’s just not gifted in that way—but she has heart set on being a writer. (Alexander Chee talks about this syndrome a bit in an essay I often assign to students.)

Whatever the case, I think discerning this third bit is vital when thinking about vocation. Where are your skills? And where do they overlap with your passions and the world’s big problems? And what work will you have to do, what risks will you need to take, to figure this out? This is profoundly scary stuff—but it’s vital.

What the Monks of Tibhirine Teach Us about Faith and Public Life

—Brian Dijkema—

Faithful presence. Those two words returned to my mind again and again as I reflected on the movie *Of Gods and Men*.

The film depicts the life of eight Trappist monks at Our Lady of the Atlas monastery in Algeria during Algeria’s civil war in the 1990s. Unlike *Into Great Silence*—another excellent film portraying the lives of monks—*Of Gods and Men* focuses not merely on the day-to-day practices, routines, and disciplines of the monastery, but on how such routines can be maintained in the face of a deadly, and very real, threat of Islamic terrorists and the violence of war.

I think it was Clint Eastwood who, responding to the question of why his films contained so much violence, said (forgive me for paraphrasing) that all good films involve conflict. People love conflict and the most dramatic conflict of all involves violence.

Of Gods and Men is a violent film, but it is so good because the conflict—the seed of drama—is not one between men with guns, but within the hearts of men who self-consciously exist to love God and love their neighbours, and they do so within an institution dedicated to that task. The film’s greatest struggle is fought both within the hearts of the brothers and among them. In the face of terrible violence, violence which threatened their lives, the question “do we stay or do we go?” is more compelling than any showdown between snarling men with loaded .44 magnums.

James Davison Hunter—not a monk—writes in his excellent book *To Change the World* that “a theology of faithful presence calls Christians to enact the *shalom* of God in the circumstances in which God has placed them.”

Too often we read quotes such as this and imagine that a



A photo of the monks of Notre Dame De L’Atlas, Tibhirine, Algeria.

life dedicated to “enacting the *shalom* of God” will be a peaceful venture. It is, as the monks find out, most certainly not. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer and so many other Christian martyrs discovered, there is a cost to discipleship.

In the film worlds depicted by Clint Eastwood, the conflict is often resolved at the end of a gunfight. In this film, the conflict is resolved long before the men with guns show up. It is resolved by love. In one of the most touching series of scenes I’ve ever seen, director Xavier Beauvois depicts the resolve of the monks—as individuals and as a community—to remain. Why? Because they “remember that love is eternal hope” and that “love endures all.”

Says Hunter, Christians are called to relate to the world within the dialectic of affirmation and antithesis. If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world, it is precisely because it is not rooted in a desire to change the world for the better, but rather because it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God’s command to love our neighbor.

If you wish to see these words enacted in the flesh, I recommend watching *Of Gods and Men*.

Union Metaphors

—Robert Joustra—

President Obama opened and closed last night’s State of the Union with a series of auspicious military metaphors. In opening, “These achievements are a testament to the courage, selflessness and teamwork of America’s Armed Forces. At a time when too many of our institutions have let us down, they exceed all expectations. They’re not consumed with personal ambition. They don’t obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together.”

In closing: “When you’re marching into battle, you look out for the person next to you, or the mission fails. When you’re in the thick of the fight, you rise or fall as one unit, serving one nation, leaving no one behind.”

It’s not martial law, but the metaphors matter.

And for President Obama, the military metaphor is good one. Americans are united behind their military in bi-partisan ways that transcend political divides, and border more on the religious and the sacred than the mundane. Further, unlike in the economy, the President

has an enviable record in foreign affairs, and in military achievement.

A recent CBS News/*New York Times* poll found that 48 percent of Americans approved his handling of foreign policy, compared with 35 percent who did not. The same poll showed even stronger support for his handling of the terrorist threat. Osama bin Laden appeared early in the speech.

Withdrawal from Iraq, a surge and slow withdrawal from Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt and more are all tests this President has seemingly passed, if not by his prudent foreign policy, then from a fortuitous chain of events more abroad than at home. “Good job tonight,” the President congratulated Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on his way to the podium, hours after the Special Forces group that killed Osama Bin Laden attacked a Somali pirate hideout, freeing two aid workers held hostage for three months.

The military both reinforces the best aspects of Obama’s record, and appeals to the common, sacrificial unity of the American republic.

But absent the military metaphor is the dignity of the mean-

Bring Back the King

—Peter Stockland—

Having been a small child in the last years before Canada dumped its red Royal Mailboxes into the dustbin of history, I have always considered the British Crown a useless necessity.

It has always baffled me how anyone who has so much as skimmed history could regard the horrifying legacy of the British Royal family (see persecution of Irish Catholics, prosecution of the First World War, palling around with Nazis before the Second World War, *et al*) and avoid feeling green.

I am, at the same time, almost ferociously anti-republican. Frankly, anyone paying the slightest attention to the absurdist electoral shenanigans in the United States must be.

The interminable primaries are bad enough, but hearing that President Obama will con-tort tonight’s State of the Union address into a campaign pitch is beyond the pale. One might expect the State and the Union would be protected from use as debased gee-gaws for voter bemusement. Apparently not.

Being both anti-republican and a monarchist-with-caveats creates a conundrum for a contemporary Canadian.

Canada is, after all, enjoying a Royal moment. Last summer’s post-wedding-bliss visit of Kate and What’s-His-Name appeared to marry populist sentiment and the Harper government’s vows to restore the Crown’s lustre.

Whippersnappers such as my colleague Father Raymond J. de Souza, editor-in-chief of Cardus’ new magazine *Convivium*, advocate so fervently for the British monarchy that they seem to think, consistent with their generation’s habit of mind, they invented it.

More seasoned sorts, too, are suddenly belting out huzzahs for Queen first and then country. Senator Hugh Segal writes a lovely essay in the February/March issue of *Convivium* on the political truths he learned long ago watching young Queen Elizabeth shake hands with a local rabbi.

The eminent Toronto writer John Fraser, Master of Massey College, has a book due out in March revealing the secret to Canadians’ love affair with the Crown. Fraser argues that we will never as a country bend the knee to the false god or republicanism.

The problem with the argument, as with the champagne blush of Crown fever currently dizzying young Father de Souza

and his generational soul mates, is that it is based on a false dichotomy of republicanism or the monarchy as currently constituted.

Of course, we must say ‘no’ to republicanism. Human beings, being political animals, require subjection to a Sovereign. Common presidents are good enough for private corporations, but not for the common good.

We need a check on the presumptions of citizenship. It can come only from a structure of authority created to constantly remind us that we are subjects first, and therefore subordinate to something far beyond our democratic whims and whistles.

Claims for the continuation of constitutional monarchy in Canada will always fall short of ringing true, however, so long as the current ignoble interlopers remain on the Throne. True, we do not get to select our monarchs. Evelyn Waugh is said to have refused to vote because he did not presume to tell his Sovereign how to choose her government. So much less would any of us imagine we should do something so vulgar as to cast a ballot for our Head of State.

Yet anyone who has brush history knows aed up against the least a matter of fact that for more than 400 years, the British Crown has been in the hands of thieving brigands who usurped the Throne from its rightful occupant and his heirs.

If you have the stomach and the hangover-carrying capacity to attend a Robbie Burns dinner this week, you might notice a few among the crowd making a small, circular motion over their water glasses during the toasts. This is a sign and symbol of enduring hope for the restoration of the King Over the Water, that is of the James II and VII who was overthrown and forced to flee to France. As a result, of course, Catholics have since been illegally denied the British Crown.

For Canadians, more important than the last Stuart king’s Catholicism is his embodiment, as sovereign, of toleration for religious freedom and what we today call minority rights. Indeed, in many ways, Canada expresses the Jacobite ideal.

It is not enough, then, to merely restore the word ‘Royal’ as a kind of patriotic marketing brand. The very necessity of a Sovereign demands that a constitutional monarchy be not just utilitarian but legitimate.

Jacobites, unite! We have more to restore than our mailboxes.

ing of that Union. Words like fairness and equality recurred . . . but the gridlock is in the definition. Whose fairness? And which equality? One kind of fairness asks the rich to pay their share for the vulnerable, while another cuts the intrusion of government from unbalancing the market.

Certain goods in the State of the Union were transparently obvious: “We know a good teacher can increase the lifetime income of a classroom by over \$250,000,” the President said. How markedly particular. Everything economic, from kitchen sinks to unfair Chinese trading of kitchen sinks, was on display. The State of the Union, in short, is a state of economic obsession.

Even classrooms of students can be monetized and justified on that basis.

None of which would be new to Canadians watching our own federal Conservatives, or the English, or much of the European Union crisis unfolding. The means are ever martial, and the ends are ever material, and the existential meaning of it all has been lost somewhere in the stack of defeatist toil pundits call public debate. Will America be content with a call to arms to raise the lofty GDP ever higher, with new trickles of fairness for all? President Obama is right: America has done it before. But then, it also used to have something bigger to believe in.