

THEOLOGY AND FICTION ARE ESSENTIALLY AUTOBIOGRAPHY PAY

ATTENTION

At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography.

Those words from Frederick Buechner introduced the 1969 William Belden Noble lectures at Harvard, later published as The Alphabet of Grace, Buechner's normative work of non-fiction.

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The life of each person is marked by a series of notable events that create the framework - the theology - through which that human life unfolds. Equally important, since each human life connects, intersects with many others, there are major parts of one person's story that replicate what is vital in the lives of others.

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Buechner's words bring to mind moments that loom large, moments that create a theology encased in a story.

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Three years old, apparently too old for my afternoon nap, the routine continued. After lunch, eaten alone in the breakfast room off the kitchen, I made my way up to my small bedroom at the top of the stairs. It is spring time. May, clear and sunny. I lie on the top of my bed, covered by a single blanket, alone except for my yellow, very woolly, Teddy Bear, who knows all my secrets. No books. This is naptime. The window to the east, nearest the Gerrity's house, is open. The curtains are drawn; the shade in the open window flaps in the breeze.

The room is fully lit by strong, filtered sunlight; the walls, pale yellow, woodwork glossy white, recently painted, the smell still fresh. Wide-awake, completely sleepless, I decide to talk to myself, something I do frequently as a much younger, virtually only, child. The conversation is a single

question, "Who am I?"

I ask the question aloud, "Who am I?" There is no answer. I ask the question again. "Who am I?"
Still no answer.

Lying all alone, flat on my bed, looking up at the ceiling and the single light fixture, for no reason I repeat the question over and over and over again. "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I?" I have no reason to do anything else. There is nothing else to do. I keep asking and asking and asking the same question until an amazing thing happens.

Without warning, the question is suddenly not subjective, but objective. I am no longer lying in the middle of my bed but asking the question from beyond, above, outside, my own body. Now, I can plainly see myself from the vantage of the light fixture. There I am - stretched out flat - way down there - on my bed. "Who am I?" "Who am I?"

And then, from this new and distant perspective, there is an answer - clear, strong authoritative.

"Who am I?"

"You are mine."

The experience never recurred, but the assurance remained. I am God's.

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The summer of my seventh birthday my father gave me a one horsepower outboard motor made in **Muncie**, Indiana. It drove our wooden **rowboat** at a speed of only three miles an hour, but no one, absolutely no one whom I knew, had an outboard motor in the year 1940. My Muncie meant that I could go anywhere, anywhere at all, all by myself, to fish on **Squam Lake**.

And I did just that until, returning home one brilliant Saturday afternoon, crossing the largest expanse of the lake, there was a loud clanking sound, metal hitting metal, and the motor stopped. I wound, rewound, pulled and pulled, the starter cord, but to no avail. So I took out the oars, rowed

home, put the outboard in a wheelbarrow, wheeled it to Mr. Williamson. He saw me coming, and when I entered his work shed, he greeted me and asked, "Well, what is it you want me to do for you?"

"Fix it," I pleaded, "Please fix it. Fix my outboard motor."

He did. It took several weeks, but he did it.

Saint John Williamson, a native of Texas and graduate of Hampton Institute/ was my mentor and idol. He ran all the outside operations of the family camp where we spent our summers, drove a truck/ smoked a pipe and was a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Iowa. Day after day, I was his shadow, following him wherever he went, asking questions, one after another. He answered them, all of them. He became for me not only a source of wisdom, but of understanding and solace, the model of what a grown person ought to be and what I hoped to be.

After studying the manual, Williamson ordered the necessary parts, and the last day of summer vacation, I took him for a ride with my Muncie.

Thirty years later Dr. Williamson attended a professional conference in Boston, and he and his wife, Ola, came to visit us in Maine. As we sat for dinner, I asked, "Do you remember the outboard motor?"

"Remember! Of course I remember. To this day I know nothing, absolutely nothing about gasoline engines. When my lawn mower stops, I take it to the shop on the corner. But when you brought me your outboard and said, 'Tix it! Please fix it.' I knew I could."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you believed in me."

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The expectation of the prevailing culture of my particular childhood was that most boys - and some girls - would go away to boarding school. There was family discussion, but essentially everyone went where he was told. This, however, was not to be the case for me.

Although my attendance at boarding school was assumed from an early age, my father made clear that the choice of school was to be mine, not his, no one else's but mine alone. We had lengthy conversations, engaged in careful planning, visits, interviews, studied and reviewed catalogues, but my father never tipped his hand, never told me what he thought. Fourteen years old, this portion of my future was in my hands and my hands alone.

I chose The Phillips Exeter Academy, a place where I believed I could be myself, not forced into a mold. It would be a place to grow. All of that - and far more - proved to be true. What I had not anticipated, however, was the extent of the demand and the competition. It was far beyond anything I'd ever imagined. All through my early schooling, I'd been the best and the brightest little boy in my small, protected world. Exeter drew students who had also been the best and the brightest from far wider and more challenging environments. In the October marking period I received a D+ in French, a C- in Latin. Things improved, to be sure, but this was the beginning, and it made a lasting mark.

For so began my most significant learning from Exeter: I am ordinary. Much later I was to learn this is true for all persons. Only God is God. Everyone else is ordinary: Abraham Lincoln, Mother Theresa, Jackson Pollock, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., Arthur Nobel, Helen Keller, Adolph Hitler. Sooner or later we all learn it. We are ordinary.

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Once upon a time there was a little boy. At first he was not just any little boy, he was unusual. People told him he was cute, and when it came time to go to school, he was smarter than all the others. He received prizes and praise; the world smiled.

But then he grew up. He had some friends, not many. More and more he was alone. One had to earn friendship, even love. People were more affectionate and offered approval when you proved you deserved it, and approval was important.

Then he went to a big important school, and suddenly, sadly, the boy was very much alone and certain that no one loved him. For at that big important school, there were big, important people, and you were only loved if you were big and important too, and the boy was really very little and lonely and scared, and the school told him he was just ordinary and not worth being loved.

Summer came, and back at the lake he saw the girl he had met for the first time right before he went away to school. She was not just any girl. She weighed one hundred and ten pounds and had a

turned up nose, and she liked to listen and talk, and he liked to talk and listen. Sometimes at night, in the woods, all alone, together, they would talk to each other about everything - happy times and sad times, questions and loneliness. They were not in love; they really didn't know what they were, only that they were little and lonely and scared

When it was autumn, they both returned to school. Sometimes they wrote; then summer came again. Suddenly, wonderfully, they were never quite sure how or why, they were best friends, and then they were lovers, and that was an amazing thing. Not because there is no love in the world, but because most of it is conditional. This was different. It wasn't earned. It was given, given from one person to the other, even though each knew really all there was to know about the other, and it wasn't all good. Yet they discovered as a great gift on a beautiful starry night, alone in the middle of the lake, that they were in love, and that was the best discovery of their lives.

Years after, late at night, they would lie in bed, together, and wonder how they could possibly be so lucky. Their story was a miracle. Gradually, sometimes painfully, they came to realize something more - that this miracle story was like another, well-known story about a man who offered the same kind of unconditional love to the same kind of ordinary people. He loved them so much that he was willing to die for them, and this made all the difference, for then no one had to be little and lonely and scared.

After the boy and girl grew up, finally, sometime between the ages of thirty and forty, they realized that everything they knew, everything they valued, everything they learned, everything that was important, all started with that special moment when they knew they were no longer ordinary, but loved.

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"Ted. It's for you. Why not take it upstairs in the guestroom." I climbed the stairs deliberately, studying the pattern on the well-worn blue and gold Chinese carpet that ran down the middle of the front stairs. The wall on the left, a banister rising on the right, to the turn at the top, then three more stairs and straight across the hall into guestroom. It's all very clear, even in slow motion; I don't recall closing the door.

Inside, a fireplace opposite, bookcases to its right, window to the left, before the wall turned to meet two more windows, framing a bureau that stood opposite twin beds, bedside table, lamp, telephone. Around the room three thumb-backed side chairs matched the room's rock maple.

Walking to the far side, I sat down next to the other door, partially open, leading out onto the back hall, bedspreads on the twin beds, matching, white, tufts swirling in great arks. Shades half way down, windows partially covered by translucent white curtains, drawn back with ties. Walls painted bright yellow; woodwork glossy white. Beige carpet remnant at my feet had seen years of service. I reached around and picked the phone from the bedside table, set it down on the bed and lifted the receiver.

"Hello." I said.

My father's voice. "Teddy. It's Daddy."

"Where are you?"

"Siesta Key, our house at Heron Lagoon Lodge."

"Teddy," he went on. "I'm afraid I have very bad news."

He paused, cleared his throat. "Mother drowned this afternoon." He seemed very tired, still at the other end of the telephone. But all I could hear, echoing again and again, like a record stuck in the same groove, were his first words. "Teddy. I'm afraid I have very bad news. Mother drowned this afternoon."

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What was chiefly on my mind as I waited by the front door, looking out through the screen, for the President of the Board to arrive, was the need to make a change. It was time. The sabbatical began in two weeks. I couldn't wait. After the sabbatical ended, then what? I didn't know and had often said, "The only thing wrong with a sabbatical is that it ends."

Anne was far upstairs, in the recesses of the attic, spending the afternoon organizing the remnants of the fifteen years we'd spent in this house, as if ready for a new adventure. It never occurred to either one of us, not right then, not on that sunny September afternoon, that long ago, while we were growing up, someone should have told us the truth. Someone should have warned us. Someone should have spoken the secret, maybe one night sitting on the bed at bedtime as we

struggled to go to sleep. Maybe we should have been taken aside for a private chat and told the obvious: conclusion is inevitable. Death happens. The time comes to change, to leave, to go, to let it all go and turn to something new. No one had done that, no one ever told us. We had to discover it for ourselves.

The occasion this Sunday afternoon meeting was to plan the Executive Committee of the Trustees on the following Tuesday morning. The real agenda was conclusion.

As the visitor walked from his car up the front path, I was standing behind the screen door, and saw him before he saw me. The only thing that came to mind was that I didn't like him. I was the one who had asked him to serve on the Board of Trustees, and I was the one who had chosen him to be President of the Board of Trustees, but we were not friends. We had little - no, we had nothing -in common. He would never be a friend or a colleague, never be one bit like his three predecessors, who were among the most important persons in my life.

I opened the screen door. We greeted one another and walked to the solarium. Conversation was clear, brief, intent.

Sitting in chairs at opposite sides of the room, we faced one another. He never looked at me as we spoke, but stared away, into the distance, out the window, as if searching for a far away landmark. The conversation began slowly, carefully, each of us summoning words with care.

"Jim," I said. "I'm happy to meet and think about Tuesday's meeting, but it's really impossible for me to think about what's going on at school, not right now. Getting out of here, the sabbatical, writing, is where I'm focused. Six months from now, after we get back, it'll be different."

There was silence before he began. "I'm glad you've chosen the sabbatical. It's time, and you deserve it. You've put in fifteen great years. Really great years. The schools a new place, transformed. You need a break, something different, totally different." His voice trailed off. "The future, as for the future ... who knows."

I knew what he wanted to say. Maybe he needed to say it, but I took him off the hook.

"The future? I just can't think about it, not yet, not right now. I can only see as far as driving out this driveway, going west and something new, something I've wanted to do for a long time. Once I'm there, and the book has been written, then I'll think about what's next. But not now. Not now."

"Let yourself go," Jim broke in. "Give yourself permission. Dream a little. Maybe this is the time for something new - after the sabbatical, I mean." It was if he had stumbled and lost his way.

We both knew what had happened - would happen. Neither was ready to say the words, not yet. There would be time enough.

Two months had passed when I knew what should happen, sat down, wrote a letter of resignation, effective the end of the academic year. The sense of loss, being cut adrift, separation, sadness was overwhelming, at times, unbearable. Death is death and never easy, but it happens. Without it, there would be so much less, so little that is new and challenging and invigorating.

But there were days when Anne and I were both numb, paralyzed, immobile, anesthetized, moments when some voice kept shouting, "This is it. This is it! It's happening. It's happening. You're cutting yourself loose. What will happen next? Where will we go?" And then the same voice said, "Don't think about that, not right now. There's no other choice."

A death blow is a life blow to some, Who, 'till they died, did not alive become.

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December 21st. My daily walk in the early morning dark began at 5:45, later than usual. As I walked up the steep driveway from our house to the Seminary Chapel, I became dizzy, disoriented, and stumbled onto the wooden bench in the courtyard outside the Chapel. Minutes later, I hurried, unsteadily, across the lawn, back down to our house, called for Anne, collapsed on the living room couch. She found me, passed out, mouth agape, eyes glazed, unresponsive and called 911.

Emergency Room: oxygen, IV, blood pressure, poked and pawed. Three days of tests. Blockage in

the right carotid artery. Nothing wrong with my heart. I remember visits. Close friends. Dick and John held my hand; we prayed. As dusk settled the first day, I dozed in the poorly lit room, opened my eyes to see David, sitting across the room. He may have been there for minutes, silent, wearing dirty sneakers, painter's pants, flannel shirt and hooded sweatshirt. When he saw my eyes open, he smiled, asked how I felt, before he disappeared into the night. He called the next day just at dusk, the loneliest time, as he did on every single day for the next three months.

Christmas night, as I mounted the stairs for bed, I was again dizzy, disoriented. Something was seriously wrong. No one knew what it was, not yet. Was it treatable? I crawled into bed and cried. I wasn't ready to die.

When Anne came to bed, I was shaking. We lay side by side for a long time. She ran her hands through my hair, saying over and over and over again. "It's not time yet. It's not time yet."

Finally, in less than ten minutes my own physician, who could not visit in the hospital, made the diagnosis and arranged for me to see a cardiologist and heart surgeon. Progress. Two weeks to wait, write and pray, peaceful, reassuring days, highlighted by phone and mail messages from countless friends. A childhood friend, called to say, "Teddy. It's a lot better than the alternative."

February 1st. We awoke at four. Daughter Persis drove. Interviews and procedures. Two anesthesiologists began their work. The surgeon looked down over my right shoulder and shook hands. Our Rector stood next to me. We laughed, told jokes. Just as I started down the long corridor toward the operating room, he held my hand and prayed aloud, his words all that I heard and thought as I watched the ceiling pass above me, and we entered the operating room.

I awoke at one o'clock in the morning. ICU, all alone. It dawned on me -everything about my day had occurred many times every single day in this hospital and hundreds of others around the world. But the fact that it had just happened to me was a miracle. I had walked near to death, close to the precipice, and been saved, pulled back, born again. I'd never been more excited. Turning my head, I saw a monitor. Numbers. Two changed repeatedly: one said 205, the other 102. Blood pressure. I'd better calm down.

I closed my eyes, began to pray. Sleep. The nurse appeared. I told her I was fine. But the sense of precisely just how fine did not leave me, has not left me. The life that had been almost taken from me had been given back to me. We all know that we are going to die, but, most often, we'll do anything, anything at all, to avoid the thought of death. The gift of heart disease is that you have to think about it. There's no choice.

Two days later, as I sat up in my hospital bed, David, he who had visited me my first night in the hospital, appeared in my room with his wife, Peggy, who carried a large bouquet of flowers, David a small wrapped package.

David loves antique stores where often he seeks old silver baby cups. He removes and renews the engraving, presents the cup to the newly baptized. I should have known, but my senses had been dulled. I opened the package. A silver baby cup. E. S. G. My initials. The date of surgery: 2-1-95.

David said, "For your new life, my friend."

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Eleven o'clock on a Friday evening in late September, just as Anne and I turned into our driveway, we saw her. We stopped and stared, transfixed as she was too, caught in our headlights, a screech owl, still as a statue, just at the edge of the flower bed.

In awe and silence, neither of us moved or spoke. The owl remained a statue. A minute passed, and then another, before Anne opened her door, silently, slowly, tiptoed toward the owl, who twice moved her head to the left, then back again, listening, immobile. Drawing ever nearer, now close enough to reach out and touch the owl's head, with no warning the bird flew away, up into the tall tree next to our house, near and present, out of sight. We wept - in joy and in awe -and for no reason we could really understand.

Sitting in the far corner of the garden,
She is statue still.

Our headlights catch the reflection of the
Screech owl's eyes –
Yellow-brown marbles.

No movement.

We freeze, caught in the moment
Of surprise.

Mystery surrounds us.

Pay attention.

Sometimes
If you move carefully
Through the forest

Breathing
Like the ones
In the old stories

Who could cross
A shimmering bed of dry leaves
Without a sound,

You come
To a place
Whose only task

Is to trouble you
With tiny
But frightening requests

Conceived out of nowhere
But in this place
Beginning to lead
Everywhere.

Requests to stop what
You are doing right now,
And

To stop what you
Are becoming
While you do it,

Questions
That can make
Or unmake
A life,

Questions

That have patiently
Waited for you

Questions
That have no right
To go away.

(David Whyte)

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If you move carefully
Through the forest

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Like the ones
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