

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

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It's been six and a half years now since I first attended a gathering of the Literary Club. I was the guest of the venerable Lewis Gatch, who had invited his new rector to sample the peculiar delights of these Monday evening exercises. I confess that I have no recollection whatsoever of that evening's paper, nor of the one who came with it. What I do remember are some seasoned words of experience from Lew on the drive

downtown. Lew explained that members of the club can write about virtually anything they want, but two topics in particular would almost certainly earn the displeasure of the audience. You may wonder: what are those two topics? They are: 1. MY TRIP ABROAD. 2. A DAY AT MY OFFICE. Said Lew, "Beware of papers bearing such titles." This got me to thinking: what on earth would I write about should fate ever stand me on that stage in the house at 500 East Fourth Street? Outside the discipline of a Sunday sermon - which accounts for many of my days at the office - do I really have anything to say?

Tonight I come with the answer: No, I don't. You see, with a weekly deadline forever over my head, I have to assess everything I see for its homiletical possibilities. Call it an occupational hazard, but that makes every little thing and every little event potentially A DAY AT MY OFFICE. In this respect I feel a kinship with the prophet Amos. Amos lived in the northern kingdom of Israel nearly three-thousand years ago. He was prone to bouts of very bad temper, but also frequent visions that he claimed were from God. One day Amos was standing beside a newly built wall. Nearby was a plumb line that the builder had used to make it straight. And the Lord said to Amos, "Amos, what do you see?" Amos looked at the plumb line and correctly identified the ordinary object in front of him, replying, "A plumb line." And the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. . .the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. . ." In other words: look again Amos; you may see a plumb line, but I see judgment in the midst of Israel.

On another occasion Amos notices a basket of summer fruit, perhaps resting on his kitchen table or set out at the market place. And again the Lord said, "Amos, what do you see?" Amos looked at the basket of summer fruit and replied, "a basket of summer fruit," thinking again that he'd hit the nail right on the head. Wrong again, Amos, said the Lord. You may see a basket of summer

fruit, but I see that "the end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by." On the surface, Amos saw a basket of summer fruit and a plumb line, but in each case his challenge was to look through these common, everyday things. They were doorways to the Divine, meeting places with the sacred, open windows into another realm.

And so it was for me one fine day in June of the year 2000. At the time I was doing nothing more remarkable than what Amos was doing when he looked at the plumb line and the basket of fruit. I was sitting on my screened porch feeding yogurt to my fifteen-month old son, James. My thoughts at the moment were hardly focused on any transcendent reality. I was entirely consumed with getting the spoonfuls of yogurt past James' goal-tending hands and into his mouth. His face and bib and high chair tray revealed that he was indeed blocking a fair number of my attempts to score. James did not seem to enjoy the yogurt, but he needed it and I was determined to get it into him. His pediatrician had declared that a diet rich in calcium was essential to his developing little body. "Give him all the milk he wants," she said. Being the obedient first-time parents that we were, Stacie and I immediately filled James' spill-proof cup with milk. He took one sip and reacted with such a comical combination of gags, shivers, and coughs that we quickly fetched the video camera in hopes of recording his second sip. Alas, he would not take a second sip. He simply would not drink milk. From where, then, was the required amount of calcium to come?

How about yogurt? I don't remember whose idea it was, but we thought it had promise. We set off to the supermarket to buy a large tub of plain, full-fat yogurt. When you are fifteen months old you don't need fat-free, fruit-at-the-bottom, sugar-all-the-way-through yogurt. You need plain, full-fat yogurt. But this was not to be found on the grocer's shelves. Amidst every conceivable flavor of fat-free, calorie-free yogurt, we could not find one container of the plain old stuff. And then it dawned on me: "we can make our own yogurt," I declared.

"We have a yogurt-maker in the basement; in fact I just saw it the other day on the back of a shelf while rummaging around for something else. I bet it still works!" "We have a yogurt maker," queried my spouse? "How did we come by a yogurt maker?" "Well," I said, "pull up a chair." Therein lies a story.

As far as kitchen appliances go, the yogurt maker has been around for a very long time. It had come into our family sometime in the early 1970's during a particular time of need. In those days the Waring's were just settling in to a new life. James Waring, my forty-year old father, had recently become the Rector of Christ Episcopal Church in East Orange, New Jersey. The rectory in which we would live was located a mere three exits north on the Parkway, in a town called Glen Ridge. It was my mother's dream house, and she immersed herself not only in making it our home, but also in the local Women's Club and other community activities. My two brothers and I ranged in age from five to eleven years, and we were thoroughly enjoying our new schools and friends. Life was full and good.

Christ Church in East Orange is a building of cathedral proportions, and at the time the congregation was full of promise and possibilities. The call was a definite step up for my father after serving nine years in a small, inner-city parish. For the first eighteen months at Christ Church, Dad threw himself into his new responsibilities with such gusto that people assumed his drained appearance and uncharacteristic fatigue were the result of too much work. He needed a rest. But something much more serious was wrong. Finally, at my mother's insistence, Dad went to his doctor for a physical examination. When the blood test came back from the laboratory, the doctor called both my parents in for a private consultation. The results showed his white cell count was seriously out of proportion. The initial diagnosis: chronic lymphatic leukemia.

The severity of my father's illness was not something I was aware of at the time. Nor do I recall

any treatment program intruding upon our everyday routine. From my vantage point life continued on as always; I don't remember Dad even missing any work. What I did notice, however, was a sudden change in the food we normally ate. In the effort to give my father every possible fighting edge over the disease, my mother turned to health food. No longer would Wonder Bread suffice, even if it did build strong bodies in twelve ways. From then on our bread would be home made. Home made bread is a delight straight from the oven, but the next day it makes for crumbly sandwiches that draw odd stares from fellow students in the school cafeteria. How I longed to have a sandwich on "regular" bread just like everyone else. My mother also introduced into our diet numerous recipes from Prevention magazine. One of these that I remember well was called Tiger's Milk. Tiger's Milk was a noxious brew of wheat germ, soy milk, and other healthy ingredients. Straight from the blender, tiger's milk looked like chocolate milk, but it sure didn't taste that way. Nevertheless, we all drank our glasses of tiger's milk with Dad, pretending to enjoy it, yet all the while wondering what on earth it was.

Into this mix of home made, healthy fare came the Salton Yogurt Maker. The Salton Yogurt Maker was billed as "handsome, strong, reliable and thermostatically controlled to make the best yogurt - fresh, natural, and nourishing - without artificial additives. You'll like it, and you'll like saving 70% of the cost of commercial yogurt." It made five individual servings in five glass jars - one for each of us. So in addition to tiger's milk, wheat germ, vitamin E supplements, and home made bread, we began eating yogurt as we had never eaten it before. The homemade yogurt wasn't bad, just rather plain and bitter. To add flavor my brothers and I would mix strawberry jam into our jars, so much so that one might have guessed we had spruced up our jelly with a little yogurt, rather than vice-versa.

To me the yogurt was a mystery. I remember one time watching my mother make it. She boiled the milk, allowed it to cool to the appropriate temperature, and then - then - she opened the refrigerator, produced a container of commercial yogurt, and added a spoonful of the store-bought stuff to the batch she was making. "Why are you adding yogurt to the milk?" I asked my mother. She replied that this was the starter. "In order to make yogurt, you need yogurt," she said. This, to me, was an enigma wrapped inside a conundrum. If you needed yogurt to make yogurt, from whence cometh the starter for the first batch of yogurt? You just couldn't have an endless succession of yogurt stretching forth from before time and forever. At some point some original Starter must have declared, "Let there be yogurt!" But then, who provided the starter for the original starter. It was enough to make my head spin. I remember distinctly concluding something right then and there; today I could take you to the very spot in the kitchen of that Glen Ridge house where I decided it was only a fool who would ponder such mysteries for more than a moment. So much for the declarations of youth, says the one wearing the clerical collar around his neck every day.

In the meantime, Dad's health seemed to be improving. At some point along the way Mom made the last batch of home made yogurt. No one was conscious of the ending of this era at the time; instead, the yogurt maker simply fell into disuse. Then, after seven years of living in Glen Ridge, Dad accepted the call to become Dean of the Cathedral in Sioux Falls, SD. Where is that, we wondered? The best answer we received was, it's not the end of the world, but you can certainly see it from there. In preparation for the move we held a garage sale. Mom brought the yogurt maker out from the back of some kitchen cupboard and offered it up for sale. No one bought it, so it made the move with us. We lived in Sioux Falls for nine years, and in that time held at least two garage sales. Each time my mother brought the yogurt maker out of obscurity and dusted it off for the rummaging public.

It never sold. In 1985 my parents moved to Midland, MI. There they held more garage sales, and the yogurt maker survived every one of them. My father survived as well. While his blood count was never quite right, a few of his doctors had dared to say that the term leukemia was possibly a misdiagnosis all those years ago. Whatever his condition was, in all likelihood he would one day die with it rather than from it. Who knows: perhaps all the health food had made a difference.

Eventually the neglected yogurt maker became my possession. In 1989 I had graduated from seminary and was setting up my first "real" apartment. This was the opportunity for which my mother was waiting. She offered to help equip my kitchen, and convinced me that no bachelor should be without a yogurt maker. By this time it had been at least fifteen years since its last use, and it was covered with the yellowed price tags of many garage sales. It went straight to the back of my cupboard, and never one time in all my years of being a starving bachelor did it occur to me to whip up a batch of home made yogurt. I made moves in 1994, 1995, and finally into my current home in 1996. In none of these houses was the yogurt maker even granted a place in the kitchen: each time it went directly down to the basement to gather more dust.

That is where the yogurt maker was on a snowy day in February of 1996. One Friday morning after a vigorous game of tennis, Dad returned home and reclined for a nap. In his sleep he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage deep in his brain. He never woke up from that nap. All of us were able to gather at his hospital bedside for his final moments. Dad's doctor was right: my father died with - not from - his blood condition. For all of us, especially my mother, it was an unexpected end of the 25-year odyssey of keeping Dad healthy and well.

"And that," I said to my wife one fine day in June of the year 2000, "is how we came by a yogurt maker."

So I brought it up from the basement, cleaned off the dust, scraped off the price tags, and wondered if after 25 years it would even work. Lo and behold: it did work. And that brings us back to my screened porch, where I sat the very next day feeding yogurt to fifteen-month old James.

Even though James had sent several spoonfuls sprawling, I seemed to be winning the game of getting it into him. Then it happened. We were about half way through the jar when it happened: "Don, what do you see?" I looked at the yogurt maker jar and thought to myself, "I see a yogurt maker jar." No, look again. What do you see? I looked again at the yogurt maker jar and felt its weight in my hand. And then it struck me: the last time I had held that very jar in my hand was at least 25 years ago. I would have been barely a teenager, if even that, and could not possibly have imagined all that would transpire before this common thing would next be in my hand. For a brief instant it seemed that a window opened in the veil between yesterday and today, and the hands that held the jar were mine of the past and mine of the present, both at the same time. This yogurt maker jar, this utterly ordinary object had been bought long ago for the health of James Waring. When its job was complete we betrayed it on the auction block of many a garage sale, we forgot it on many a shelf. Yet somehow it had made its way through time and had remained in working order. And here it was providing for the health of another James Waring. Of all things to be a doorway to the Divine: a yogurt maker, a plumb line, a basket of fruit.

Look around you. What do you see? Karen Armstrong, author of many books on religion writes,

Perhaps the central paradox of the religious life is that it seeks transcendence, a dimension of existence that goes beyond our mundane lives, but that human beings can only experience this transcendent reality in earthly, physical

phenomena. People have sensed the divine in rocks, mountains, temple buildings, law codes, written texts, or in other men and women. We never experience transcendence directly: our ecstasy is always "earthed," enshrined in something or someone here below. Religious people are trained to look beneath the unpromising surface to find the sacred within it. They have to use their creative imaginations.

Likewise the poet Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Or they just sit round and eat yogurt. How about you: what do you see?

Go to Gettysburg, PA and look across the field where Pickett made his infamous charge. If you look long enough, and hard enough you will soon perceive that you are not alone. It will be nothing that your five senses can discern, but you will sense that all of those men who fought and died in those fields are strangely still there. It is as if the fabric of time has a tear in it right there at that little piece of geography. That, at least, was my experience. My rational mind gropes for an explanation: I am not a Civil War buff. Was it too much coffee that morning? Was it the sleep deprivation of a new parent? Was it too much sun that day? I don't think so. None of these can account for what I knew to be true in that fleeting moment: we were not alone.

Go to the city of York in the north of England and visit the great gothic cathedral there, also known as "the Minster." On MY TRIP ABROAD I did just that, and attended Evensong one afternoon. There I noticed that the stone steps leading to the choir stalls had been worn smooth by hundreds of years of choristers

ascending to their places to sing the praises of God. Go to Jerusalem and visit the Temple mount, if you dare. There you will see, still standing after two-thousand years, a wall of the Temple that Herod built, and many devout Jews seeking the experience of transcendence. Indeed, certain places seem to occupy a spot in the universe where the barriers between yesterday, today, and tomorrow appear to collapse. Some great conflict, some historic event, or centuries of prayer have imbued an otherwise ordinary place or object with the numinous.

But a yogurt maker? A plumb line? A basket of fruit? I remember a Peanuts cartoon from years ago. Charlie Brown was walking innocently along the beach. He picked up a rock, just any rock, one rock among hundreds of rocks and threw it with all of his might as far out into the water as he could. Of course, his great nemesis Lucy was not far away and saw what he did. Her comment, "Nice work, Charlie Brown. It took that rock fifteen-million years to make it to shore, but with one throw you've sent it all the way back!" No one would accuse Lucy of being a mystic, but perhaps in that moment she unwittingly affirmed that earth is indeed crammed with heaven, and that even every little rock can be afire with transcendent reality.

Religious people who are trained or perhaps just inclined to look beneath unpromising surfaces in search of the sacred need to beware. Said one cleric whose name I cannot recall: "Just because you're experienced something, doesn't mean it really happened." People of faith also must remind themselves that we live with an ambiguous relationship to the material order. On the one hand, Christians are warned again and again not to lay up treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt, and thieves break in and steal. We are asked to imagine how it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. The implication here is that we all have too much stuff: too much stuff that more often blocks our view of the Divine, rather than opens a

window into it. So it is perfectly acceptable, even commendable, to throw rocks into the water, and hold garage sales, and free ourselves from the tyranny of too many possessions.

On the other hand, you will occasionally stumble into a thin place in the veil between heaven and earth. You will occasionally hold in your hand a plumb line, or a basket of fruit, or even a yogurt maker: some common, earthy, otherwise throw-away item through which the Starter of all starters is seeking to make his presence known.

Look around you. Look in your attic. Look in your basement. Look in your kitchen cupboards. Use your imaginations.

What do you see?
