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TSF BULLETIN
THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1985

Vol. 8, No. 3 $3.50

Annie Dillard: Praying With Her Eyes Open

by Eugene Peterson

Annie Dillard is an exegete of creation in the same way John Calvin was an exegete of Holy Scripture. The passion and intelligence Calvin brought to Moses, Isaiah, and Paul she brings to muskrats, rotifers, and mockingbirds. She reads the book of creation with the care and intensity of a skilled textual critic, probing and questioning, teasing out, with all the tools of mind and spirit at hand, the author's meaning.

Calvin was not indifferent to creation. He frequently referred to the world around us as a "theater of God's glory." He wrote of the Creator's dazzling performance in putting together the elements of matter and arranging the components of the cosmos. He was convinced of the wideranging theological significance of the doctrine of creation and knew how important the understanding of that doctrine was to protect against the gnosticism and manicheanism that are ever-present threats to the integrity of the incarnation. Matter is real. Flesh is good. Without a firm rooting in creation religion is always drifting off into some kind of pious sentimentalism, or sophisticated intellectualism, or snobbish elitism. The task of salvation is not to refine us into pure spirits so that we will not be cumbered with this too solid flesh. We are not angels, nor are we to become angels. The Word did not become a good idea, nor a numinous feeling, nor a moral aspiration; the Word became *flesh.* It also *becomes* flesh. Our Lord left us a command to remember and receive him in bread and wine, in acts of eating and drinking. Things matter. The physical is holy. It is extremely significant that in the opening sentences of the Bible, God speaks a world of energy and matter into being: light, moon, stars, earth, vegetation, animals, man, woman (not love and virtue, faith and salvation, hope and judgment, though they will come soon enough). Apart from creation, covenant has no structure, no context, no rootage in experienced reality. Calvin knew all this, appreciated it, and taught it.

But, curiously, he never seemed to have purchased a ticket to the theater and gone in and watched the performance. He knew that it was going on and knew that it was essential that it go on. But he was busy reading scripture and seemed not inclined to attend the theater himself. He lived for most of his adult ministry in Geneva, Switzerland, one of the most spectacularly beautiful places on earth. Not once does he comment on the wild thrust of the mountains into the skies. He never voices awe at the thunder of an avalanche. There is no evidence that he ever stooped to admire the gem flowers in the alpine meadows. He was not in the habit of looking up from his books and meditating before the lake loaded with sky that graced his city. He had other fish to fry. He would not be distracted from his scripture exegesis by going to the theater, even the legitimate theater of God's glory.

Annie Dillard has a season ticket to that theater. Day after day she takes her aisle seat and watches the performance. She is caught up in the drama of the creation, of the glory. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a contemplative journal of her attendance at the theater over the course of a year. She is breathless in awe. She cries and laughs. In turn she is puzzled and dismayed. She is not an uncritical spectator. During intermissions she does not scruple to find fault with either writer or performance—all is not to her liking and some scenes bring her close to revulsion. But she always returns to the action and ends up on her feet applauding, Encore! Encore! "I think that the dying pray at the last not 'please,' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door. Falling from airplanes the people are crying thank you, thank you, all down the air; and the cold carriages draw up for them on the rocks. Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And like Billy Bray I go my way, and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen': in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise" (*PTC, pg. 270–71*).

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (*PTC*) was published in 1974 when Annie Dillard was 28 years old. It won the Pulitzer Prize and brought widespread but short lived acclaim. Nothing she has written since has commanded an equivalant attention. This is unfortunate, because American spirituality needs her. It is difficult to account for her neglect, especially in the evangelical Christian community, which should know better. Her unpretentiousness (the telephone call that told her that she had won the Pulitzer pulled her out of a softball game in which she was playing second base) and her youthful beauty (she has long yellow hair and smiles winningly) account, perhaps, for the failure to take her seriously as a mystical theologian, which she most certainly is. Subsequent books have developed the articulation of her spirituality. *Holy the Firm* (*HF*), 1977, wrestles pain to the mat in a wild, unforgettable agon. If it were a poem, which it started out to be, my entry for a title would be "Annie Agonistes". *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (*TST*), 1982, takes up listening posts and watchtowers from Atlantic to Pacific coasts and in both American hemispheres, contemplatively alert for the sacred voice and presence. *Living by Fiction* (*LF*), 1982, shifts ground slightly, searching for meaning in what people create with words (fictions) using the same critical and contemplative disciplines with which she examines what God creates with word. Her early volume of poems, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (*TPW*), provides many of the texts and images that are developed in the prose works.

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Annie Dillard Enters Holy Orders

Shadow Creek. It started out as Tinker Creek, burgeoning with life: "The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously, with an exuberance that would seem to be unwarranted, and with an energy sprung from an unfathomable font. What is going on here . . . that it all flows so freely wild, like the creek, that it all surges in such a free, fringed tangle? Freedom is the world's water and weather, the world's nourishment freely given, its soil and sap: and the creator loves pizzazz" (*PTC* 137). Then one night when she was out walking, Tinker Creek vanished and Shadow Creek blocked its banks (*PTC* 68). The meaning leaked out of the creek. Imbecility replaced beauty. She praises anyway. Dark shapes intruded: the giant water bug, the dragonfly's terrible lip, the mantis's jaw, the parasites that make up ten percent of living creatures (she calls them "the devil's tithe"). Brutality, pain, mindlessness, waste. "Shadow is the blue patch where the light doesn't hit" (*PTC* 69). It is child's play to "appreciate nature" when the sun is shining and the birds are singing. Something far more strenuous is involved when we face and deal with the cruelty and terror which the creation also deals out in spades. How we handle "the blue patch where the light doesn't hit" is the wilderness test for creation-exegesis. It is this test that pushes Annie Dillard into a religious vocation, into holy orders.

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Annie Dillard does not go in for nature appreciation; she is no gossip of the numinous. Nor is she an explainer, flattening existence into what will fit a rationalizing diagram. "These things," she says "are not issues; they are mysteries" (*TST*, pg. 64). She is after bigger game—after meaning, after glory, after God. And she will not, attempting a shortcut in her pursuit, brush aside a single detail of the appalling imbecility that she meets in the shadows.

Here is where she parts company with most of her contemporaries and becomes such a valuable ally in Christian pilgrimmage. Avoiding the camps of neo-pagan humanists who go to the wilderness to renew their spirits, and neo-darwinist scientists who drag specimens into the classroom to explain them, she explores the world's text with the ancient but unfashionable tools of sacrifice and prayer. She embraces spiritual disciplines in order to deal with lost" (*HF* 24).

She seeks orientation. She draws a map of the islands visible on the horizon, fixing their locations, giving them names. She is looking around—seeing, smelling, listening: "All day long I feel created . . . created gulls pock the air, rip great curved seams in the settled air: I greet my created meal, amazed" (*HF* 25). Even so, all is not well. She remembers a night in the mountains of Virginia when she was reading by candlelight and moths kept flying into the candle. One incinerated moth served the candle as a wick, and the flamed soared through it, "a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk" (*HF* 17). There is pain out there. And death. There is also an immense mystery in it, something that has to do with sacrifice: the death gives light. The book she is reading is about the poet Rimbaud who burned himself

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a Creator and a creation: "Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes down to that, choir the proper praise" (*PTC* 9).

Persons in the middle ages who withdrew from the traffic of the everyday to contemplate the ways of God and the mysteries of being, giving themselves to a life of sacrifice and prayer, were called anchorites (from the Greek, *anachoreo*, to withdraw to a place apart). They often lived in sheds fastened to the walls of a church. These spare shacks commonly had a world-side window through which the nun or monk received the sights and sounds of the creation as data for contemplation. These barnacle-like rooms were called anchorholds. Annie Dillard calls her cabin on Tinker Creek an anchorhold, and plays with the word: "I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the rockbottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about" (*PTC* 2). She announces her exegetical agenda. First, the active mystery of creeks: "Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the presence, the intricacy of beauty, the nature of perfection." And then the passive mystery of the mountains: "Theirs is the one simple mystery of creation from nothing, of matter itself, anything at all, the given. Mountains are giant, restful, absorbent. You can heave your spirit into a mountain and the mountain will keep it, folded, and not throw it back as some creeks will. The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I live there. But the mountains are home" (*PTC* 2).

It is clear now that this is not academic exegesis, weighing and measuring, sorting and parsing. This is contemplative exegesis, receiving and offering, wondering and praying. She describes her vocation as a blend of nun, thinker, and artist: "A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker lives in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pool of materials. (Or, a nun lives, thoughtful and tough, in the mind, a nun lives, with that special poignancy peculiar to religious, in the exile of materials; and a thinker, who would think of something, lives in the clash of materials, and in the world of spirit where all long thoughts must lead; and an artist lives in the mind, that warehouse of forms, and an artist lives, of course in the spirit)" (*HF*, pg. 22).

Her vocational self-understanding is most explicit in *Holy the Firm*, written in three parts as the contemplative result of three consecutive days in her life when she lived on an island in Puget Sound.

On November 18 she wakes. The world streams in through her world-side window ("I live in one room, one long wall of which is glass" *HF* 22) and she is stunned by divinity: "Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time" (*HF* 11). She "reads" the world as a sacred script: "The world at my feet, the world through the window, is an illuminated manuscript whose leaves the wind takes, one by one, whose painted illuminations and halting words draw me, one by one, and I am dazzled in days and out in the life of art, word-flames that illuminate the world.

Still, the day is, incredibly, fresh and full of promise. She notes that Armenians, Jews, and Catholics all salt their newborn. And all the first-offerings that Israel brought to the Lord were "a convenant of salt" preserved and savory. And—the "god of today is a child, a baby new and filling the house, remarkably here in the flesh. He is day" (*HF* 29). She salts the day, as she salts her breakfast eggs, anticipating delight, exultant.

On November 19 an airplane crashes in a nearby field. She hears the sound of the crash. The pilot pulls his seven year old daughter from the wreckage and as he does a gob of ignited fuel splashes her face and burns her horribly. On November 18 she wrote, "I came here to study hard things—rock mountain and salt sea—and to temper my spirit on their edges. 'Teach me thy ways, O Lord' is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend." (*HF* 19). She hadn't bargained on having to deal with a seven year old girl with a burnt off face.

On November 18 God "socketed into everything that is, and that right holy" (*HF* 30). Now, on November 19, a child is in the hospital with her grieving parents at her side and "I sit at the window, chewing the bones in my wrist. Pray for them . . . Who will teach us to pray. The god of today is a glacier. We live in his shifting crevasses, unheard. The god of today is delinquent, a barnburner, a punk with a pittance of power in a match" (*HF* 49).

What is God up to? What is real? What is illusion? She asks all the hard questions: "Has God a hand in this? . . . Is anything firm, or is time on the loose? Did Christ descend once and for all to no purpose, in a kind of divine and kenotic suicide, or ascend once and for all, pulling his cross up after him like a rope ladder home?" (*HF* 47–8). And she faces the worst: "We're logrolling on a falling world, of time released from meaning and rolling loose, like one of Atlanta's golden apples, a bauble flung and forgotten, lapsed, and the gods on the lam" (*HF* 50).

She looks out of her world-side window and sees an island on the horizon that she hadn't noticed before. She names it God's Tooth.

On November 20 she walks to the store to buy the communion wine in preparation for Sunday worship at the white frame congregational church in the fir trees. Is there any accounting for this juxtaposition of the best and the worst, this grandeur and this obscenity of the past two days? She recalls and meditates the medieval idea that there is a created substance at the absolute base of everything, deep down "in the waxy deepness of planets, but never on the surface of planets where men can discern it; and it is in touch with the Absolute, at base . . . the name of this substance is: Holy the Firm" (*HF* 69). Everything eventually touches it. Something that touches something that touches Holy the Firm is in touch with the Absolute, with God. Islands are rooted in it, and trees, and the little girl with the slaughtered face.

Two weeks before, the little girl's parents had invited sixteen neighbors to their farm to make cider. Annie Dillard brought her cat and the girl played with it all afternoon. "All day long she was

dressing and undressing the yellow cat, sticking it into a black dress long and full as a nun's" (*HF* 40). She and the girl resembled each other in appearance.

She names her little look-alike friend, Julie Norwich. Juliana of Norwich was a fourteenth century English nun, an anchorite, who steadily and courageously, through a suffering lifetime, looked the world's pain full in the face, and summed up her contemplation in the remarkable sentence, "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." From anyone else that sentence would risk ridicule as glib gibberish, but from this nun, "thoughtful and tough . . . in the exile of materials" it is tempered truth, flexible and hard. Annie Dillard gives the name of the nun whose life of prayer transmuted pain to wellness to the girl whose face two weeks before was much like her own but now puts every concept of beauty and meaning and God to hazard, and in meditative prayer addresses her: "Held fast by love in the world like the moth in wax, your life a wick, your head on fire with prayer, held utterly, outside and in, you sleep alone, if you call that alone, you cry God" (*HF* 76). She invites her into the full goodness of life in the years ahead of her healing: "Mornings you'll whistle, full of the pleasure of days, and afternoons of this or that, and nights cry love. So live." (*HF* 76).J

Then an abrupt turning, returning to her own vocation. Earlier she observed that "a life without sacrifices is abomination" (*HF* 72). Now she embraces this sacrifice, burning in a life of art and thought and prayer through the canonical hours. While "elsewhere people buy shoes" she kneels at the alter rail, holding on for dear life in the dizzying swirl of glory and brutality, and calls to Julie Norwich that she herself will be Julie Norwich. The last words of the book: "I'll be the nun for you. I am now" (*HF* 76).

Annie Dillard Reads Scripture

Even though her field is creation, not scripture exegesis, Calvin would not, I think, be displeased with her competence in scripture. She has assimilated scripture so thoroughly, is so saturated with its cadences and images, that it is simply at hand, unbidden, as context and metaphor for whatever she happens to be writing about. She does not, though, use scripture to prove or document; it is not a truth she "uses" but one she lives. Her knowlege of scripture is stored in her right brain rather than her left; nourishment for the praying imagination rather than fuel for apologetic argument. She seldom quotes scripture; she alludes constantly—there is scarcely a page that does not contain one or several allusions, but with such nonchalance, not letting her left hand know what her right is doing, that someone without a familiarity with scripture might never notice the unobtrusive ubiquity of biblical precept and story.

The verbal word of scripture is the wide world within which she gives her exegetical attention to the non-verbal word of creation. The revealed world of torah and gospel is the spacious environment in which she works out the localized meanings of sycamores, weasels, eclipses and sunlighted minnows. A sense of proportion develops out of her scripture reading in which the so-called "general" revelation is subordinate to and enclosed by the "specific" revelation of scripture. She would agree, I think, with P.T. Forsyth: "It is a vast creation, but a vaster salvation."

One example: the title essay in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, where I count seventeen allusions to holy scripture (not counting repeats) and three quotations.

She tells the story of Larry, her neighhbor on a Puget Sound island, who is trying to teach a stone to talk. He keeps the stone on his mantle, "protected by a square of untanned leather, like a canary asleep under its cloth. Larry removes the cover for the stone's lessons" (*TST* 68). The quirky story of the island crank is representational: "Nature's silence is its one remark" (*TST* 69); we are restive with the silence and are trying to raise a peep out of mute mother nature.

She finds the orienting background to the story of Larry in the story of Israel, scared witless at Siani with its thunder and lightning, asking Moses to beg God, "Please, never speak to them directly again. 'Let not God speak with us, lest we die.' Moses took the message. And God, pitying their self-consciousness, agreed. He agreed not to speak to the people anymore. And he added to Moses, 'Go see to them, Get into your tents again" (*TST* 70).

Now the entire non-human world is silent. We told God, like we tell a child who is annoying us, to shut up and to to his room. He heard our prayer. After these many centuries we are bored and fitful with the unrelieved patter of human speech. Even our scientists who earlier seemed to be the most determined of all to confine speech to the human are trying to teach chimpanzees to talk, decipher the language of whales, and listen for messages from some distant star.

The island in Puget Sound on which Larry is trying to teach a stone to talk is one result of Israel's prayer; the Galapagos Islands are another. Since Darwin's time scientists have gone there, treating the island as a laboratory in which to find meaning in a world dissociated from the living voice of God, to study the process of evolution, to unravel the biological story of the race. Annie Dillard goes there reading a different text, a creation text that is environed by a biblical text. She calls the Galapagos a "kind of metaphysics laboratory" (*TST* 73). She might as well have called them a prayer laboratory.

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The sea lion is the most popular resident of the Galapagos, gregarious and graceful, welcoming and sportive, "engaged in full-time play" (*TST* 74). Visitors joke that when they "come back" they would like to come as a sea lion. "The sea lion game looked unbeatable." After long reflection and another visit to the island, she made a different choice: the *palo santo* tree. She had hardly noticed them on her first visit. The trees were thin, pale, wispy—miles of them, half dead, the stands looking like blasted orchards. If she were to "come back," she decided it would be not as a sea lion, evolved into the nearly human, but as a *palo santo* tree, devolved into the nearly dead. She chose the *palo santo* because even though "the silence is all there is," (*TST* 76), it is not a silence of absence but presence. It is not a sterile silence but a pregnant silence. The non-human silence is not because there is nothing to say but because in disobedience or unbelief or sheer terror we asked God not to speak and he heard our prayer. But though unspeaking, God is still there. What is needed from us is witness. The *palo santo* is a metaphor for witness. The premier biblical witness, John the Baptist, said "He must increase but I must decrease." The witness does not call attention to itself; what it points to is more important. Being takes precedence over using, explaining, possessing. The witness points, mute, so not to interfere with the sound of silence: the *palo santos* ". . . interest me as emblems of the muteness of the human stance in relation to all that is not human. I see us all as *palo santo* trees, holy sticks, together watching all that we watch, and growing in silence" (*TST* 74).

Witness is the key word in all this. It is an important biblical word in frequent contemporary use. It is a modest word—saying what is there; honestly testifying to exactly what we see, what we hear. But when we enlist in a cause it is almost impossible to do it right: we embellish, we fill in the blanks, we varnish the dull passages, we gild the lily just a little to hold the attention of our auditors. Sea lion stuff. Important things are at stake—God, salvation—and we want so much to involve outsiders in these awesome realities that we leave the humble ground of witness and use our words to influence and motivate, to advertise and publicize. Then we are no longer witnesses but lawyers arguing the case, not always with scrupulous attention to detail. After all, life and death issues are before the jury.

Annie Dillard returns us to the spare, simple, modest role of witness. We live in a time when the voice of God has been extin-

guished in the creation. We want the stones to talk, the heavens to declare the glory of God, but "the very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree . Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few" (*TST* 70).

Our necessary and proper work in such a world is witness— like the *palo santo* trees. Out in the open, in our desacralized and much-studied Galapagos Island world, perfect witnesses, watching, mute, and waving our arms, calling the world's attention to what is, the silence—for "whereever there is stillness there is the still small voice, God's speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town" (*TST* 70).

("On a Hill Far Away", the anecdotal story that follows "Teaching a Stone to Talk", makes the same point with different materials. It is a winsome-pathetic account, told with sympathy and understanding, of parishioners of Jerry Falwell who have been instructed by their pastor to witness to every person they meet with, "Do you know the Lord as your personal savior?" But the witness is intrusive, inappropriately verbal, obsessive with duty, insensitive to context. Larry teaching his stone to talk and Jerry Falwell teaching his parishioners to accost everyone with, "Do you know the Lord as your personal savior" are more alike than different, both noble but grotesque parodies of witness.)

Two pithy quotations (but not marked as quotations), the first from the Old the second from the New Testament, conclude this essay: Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

Quit your tents. Earlier she had quoted from Deuteronomy: God ordered the Israelites who did not want to hear his voice, "Get into your tents again." It is time now to come out. Get out into creation. Our task, though, when we come out is not to put creation to use either for profit or piety: "All we can do with the whole inhuman array is watch it . . . We are here to witness. There is nothing else to do with those mute materials we do not need . . . We do not use the songbirds, for instance. We do not eat many of them; we cannot befriend them; we cannot persuade them; we cannot befriend them; we cannot persuade them to eat more mosquitoes or plant fewer weed seeds. We can only witness them—whoever they are" (*TST* 72–3).

Pray without ceasing. Prayer is personal openess to God, however he may present himself. It is the decision to be intimate with the holy. It does not demand, it is. The eccentric effort of Larry in teaching his stone to talk centers into prayer: " . . . like any other meaningful effort, the ritual involves sacrifice, the suppression of self-consciousness, and a certain precise tilt of the will, so that the will becomes transparent and hollow, a channel for the work" (*TST* 68). The effort to teach a stone to talk and undo the results of our earlier (Israel's) prayer is admirable and understandable—but futile. What is required is to listen to the silence. And the way to listen is to pray, for it is God to whom we are listening—not chimpanzee speech, not whale language, not extraterrestrial messages. "You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence" (*TST* 76).

Annie Dillard Goes To Church

The American writers with whom Annie Dillard is often grouped—Henry Thoreau, Waldo Emerson, John Muir—didn't go to church. They distanced themselves from what they saw as the shabbiness and hypocrisy of institutional religion and opted for the pine purity of forest cathedrals. Emily Dickinson gave them their text: "Some worship God by going to church/I worship him staying at home/with a bobolink for a chorister/and an orchard for a throne." Their numerous progeny spend Sunday mornings on birdwatching field trips and Sierra Club walks. Annie Dillard goes to church: "I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand . . . there is one church here, so I go to it" (*HF* 55, 57). It doesn't matter that it is out of fashion, she goes anyway: "On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there; often I am the only person under sixty, and feel as though I'm on an archaeological tour of Soviet Russia" (*HF* 57). It is unfashionable because it is ridiculous. How can searchers after God and seekers after beauty stomach the "dancing bear act" that is staged in Christian churches, protestant and catholic alike, week after week? Annie Dillard, cheerfully and matter-of-factly, goes anyway. Her *tour de force* on worship, "An Expedition to the Pole", provides the image and rationale. Wherever we go, to the Pole or the Church " . . . there seems to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us" (*TST* 30).

In *Pilgrim* she wrote, "These northings drew me, present northings, past northings, the thought of northings. In the literature of polar exploration, the talk is of northing. An explorer might scrawl in his tattered journal, 'Latitude 82 15' N. We accomplished 20 miles of northing today, in spite of the shifting pack.' Shall I go northing? My legs are long." (*PTC* 249). She describes the parallel goals. The Pole of Relative Inaccessibility is "that imaginary point on the Arctic Ocean farthest from land in any direction." Reading the accounts of polar explorers one is impressed that at root they were seeking the sublime. "Simplicity and purity attracted them; they set out to perform clear tasks in uncontaminated lands . . . they praised the lands' spare beauty as if it were a moral or a spiritual quality: 'icy halls of cold sublimity.' 'lofty peaks perfectly covered with eternal snow' " (*TST* 28). That is geography. There is an equivalent Pole in worship: "the Absolute is the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility located in metaphysics. After all, one of the few things we know about the Absolute is that it is relatively inaccessible. It is the point of spirit farthest from every accessible point of spirit in all directions. Like the others, it is a Pole of the Most Trouble. It is also—I take this as a given—the pole of great price" (*TST* 19).

She quotes Fridtj of Nansen on polar exploration, referring to "the great adventure of the ice, deep and pure as infinity . . . the eternal round of the universe and its eternal death" and notes that everywhere "polar prose evokes these absolutes, these ideas of 'eternity' and 'perfection' as if they were some perfectly visible part of the landscape" (*TST* 28–9). And she quotes Pope Gregory who calls us to Christian worship "to attain to somewhat of the unencompassed light, by stealth, and scantily" (*TST* 44).

She tells the comic-tragic stories of polar explorers who "despite the purity of their conceptions . . . manhauled their humanity to the Poles" (*TST* 29). The Franklin Expedition in 1845, with 138 officers and men carried a "1,200 volume library, a hand-organ playing fifty tunes, china place settings for officers and men, cut-glass wine goblets, sterling silver flatware, and no special clothing for the Arctic, only the uniforms of Her Majesty's Navy" (*TST* 24–5). It was a noble enterprise and they were nobly dressed for it. They all died. Their corpses were found with pieces of backgammon board and a great deal of table silver engraved with officer's initials and family crests. Dignity was all.

Sir Robert Falcon Scott had a different kind of dignity: he thought the purity of polar search dictated a purity of effort unaided by dogs or companions. He also died. "There is no such thing as a solitary polar explorer, fine as the conception is" (*TST* 27). Some of the most moving documents of polar writing, expressing his lofty sentiments, his purity and dignity and self-control, were found under his frozen carcass.

The explorers who made it weren't so fussy. They abandoned their roles, their privileges, their preconceived notions, and adapted to the conditions of pack ice and glaciers in the light-drenched land.

Annie Dillard going to worship—"a kind of northing is what I wish to accomplish, a single-minded trek toward that place . . . " (*PTC* 251)—faces equivalent difficulties. Her experiences in the church's worship are interweaved with commentary on polar explorations. The amateurism is distressing: "A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years we have not worked out the kinks" (*TST* 20).

The attempts to be relevant are laughable: "I have overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing in order to attend Mass simply and soley to escape Protestant guitars. Why am I here? Who gave these nice Catholics guitars? Why are they not mumbling in Latin and performing superstitious rituals? What is the Pope thinking of?" (*TST* 18).

The blithe ignorance is frightening: "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? . . . On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have

the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews" (*TST* 40). Explorers unmindful of "conditions" died. Why don't similarly unprepared worshipers perish on the spot?

Never mind. She sheds her dignity, sloughs off schooling and scruples, abandons propriety. "I would rather, I think, undergo the famous dark night of the soul than encounter in church the dread hootenanny—but these purely personal preferences are of no account, and maladaptive to boot" (*TST* 33). So she manhauls her humanity to her pew, gives up her personal dignity and throws in her lot with random people (*TST* 31). She realizes that one can no more go to God alone than go to the Pole alone. She further realizes that even though the goal is pure, the people are not pure, and if we want to go to the Land we must go with the People, even when they are playing banjos, singing stupid songs, and giving vacuous sermons. "How often have I mounted this same expedition, has my absurd barque set out half-caulked for the Pole?" (*TST* 44).

So she worships. Weekly she sets out for the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, "where the twin oceans of beauty and horror meet" (*PTC* 69). Dignity and culture abandoned, silence and solitude abandoned, she joins the motly sublime/ludicrous people who show up in polar expeditions and church congregations. "Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens. Week after week Christ washes the disciples' dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, It is all right—believe it or not—to be people" (*TST* 20).

The spiritualities involved in going to the Pole (and the creek, and the mountains, and to Church) are essentially the same. Why choose between them? Annie Dillard embraces both. and she deals with the hard things in both ventures, the absurd vanities in the explorers and the embrassing shabbiness in the worshipers, with immense charity: "We are clumped on an ice floe drifting over the black polar sea. Heaven and earth are full of our terrible singing" (*TST* 34). She is blessedly free, whether in the wilderness or at worship, of sentimentalism and snobbery (the twin sins of touristy aesthetes). She is as accepting of absurdities in Christian worship as she is of absurdities in polar exploration. She is saying, I think, that we have put up with nature sentimentalism and liturgical snobbery long enough. If there are difficulties in going to church they are no greater than those encountered in going to the Pole. Besides, as she says, "nobody said things were going to be easy" (*TST* 18).

Annie Dillard Prays With Her Eyes Open

There are two great mystical traditions in the life of prayer, sometimes labeled apophatic and kataphatic. Kataphatic prayer uses: icons, symbols, ritual, incense. The creation is the way to the Creator. Apophatic prayer attempts emptiness: the creature distracts from the Creator and so the mind is systematically emptied of idea, image, sensation until there is only the simplicity of being. Kataphatic prayer is "praying with your eyes open"; apophatic prayer is "praying with your eyes shut." At our balanced best the two traditions intermingle, mix, and cross-fertilize. But we are not always at our best. The western church, and even more so the evangelical church, is heavily skewed on the side of the apophatic, "praying with your eyes shut." The rubric for prayer when I was a child was, "Fold your hands, bow your head, shut your eyes, and we'll pray." My early training carries over into my adult practice. Most of my praying still is with my eyes shut. I need balancing.

Annie Dillard prays with her eyes open. She says, Spread out your hands, lift your head, open your eyes, and we'll pray: "It is still the first week in January, and I've got great plans. I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises" (*PTC* 15). We start out with her on what we suppose will be no more than a walk through the woods. It is not long before we find ourselves in the company of saints and monks, enlisted in the kind of contemplative seeing "requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle" (*PTC* 32). She gets us into the theater that Calvin told us about and we find ourselves in the solid biblical companionship of psalmists and prophets who watched the "hills skip like lambs" and heard the "trees clap their hands" alert to God everywhere, in everything, praising, praying with our eyes open: "I leap to my feet, I cheer and cheer." (*PTC* 32).

THEOLOGY

Redeeming the Evangelical Experiment

by William Abraham

It is becoming increasingly clear that the recent renaissance of the evangelical tradition is proving to be more ephemeral than its advocates ever realized. The renaissance itself was real enough. In the 1950's and 1960's, there was a remarkable attempt to develop a conservative version of the Christian faith which would shed the worst of the fundamentalism of an earlier generation, incorporate what was best in critical scholarship, and include a serious social ethic. Billy Graham, perhaps more than anyone, launched this effort when he broke with fundamentalism and established an inclusivist policy in evangelism. He ultimately became accepted across the world. The cost to Graham was considerable: theologically, he had to rework his views in ecclesiology and on the activity of the Holy Spirit; personally, he had to endure the wrath of his fundamentalist brethren.

Graham, however, could never have made it on his own. He is an evangelist rather than a serious theologian, so it was fortunate that around him there gathered a new generation of scholars who provided the conceptual tools to cope with his break from fundamentalism. Chief among these were figures like Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, Bernard Ramm, Harold Lindsell, Edward Carnell, and Francis Schaeffer.[1] Their efforts proved so successful that in a short time they had established themselves as the standard-bearers of the evangelical tradition. Their vision of the heritage became rapidly institutionalized in educational centers like Fuller Theological Seminary and Wheaton College, magazines like *Christianity Today*, in para-church groups like IVCF, and in a host of media, from dictionaries to theological journals, publishing houses, conferences, and creedal announcements.

The material results and effects of the new vision are worthy of sustained applause. It spurred on evangelicals to take academic scholarship seriously. It pressed evangelicals to heed the cry of a hurting world. It introduced evangelicals to the classical tradition of the church. It led to a much less suspicious attitude toward other Christians outside evangelicalism. It provided a host of Christians with a plausible body of doctrine. It called the church at large to take evangelism seriously. It gave hope to those who feared that Christianity required them to send their brains on a permanent holiday. Above all, it provided the resources and motivation that was needed by evangelicals if they were to think seriously and responsibly about their faith.

So successful was the shift out of fundamentalism into conservative evangelicalism that it is now very difficult to lump the two movements together and interpret them as one. James Barr has skillfully attempted to do this, but his efforts owe more to deliberate polemical intent than they do to historical accuracy. Barr has persistently failed to note that there was a deliberate break between conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism; he has either not

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