

PUT YOUR HARD HAT ON!
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Reading: “When People Come to Church” – Annie Dillard

**“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 of
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 no 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. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take
offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we
can never return.”¹**

When I was a junior in high school in 1965, I devoured
a book by Bertrand Russell entitled, *Why I am Not a
Christian*. I thought it the most liberating book I had ever
read. My uncle thought that Bertrand Russell was the anti-
Christ. Many years later I reread Russell’s book and
thought it not so original. Of course, the 19th century
Victorian God that Russell eschewed is one that any

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row 1982), pp 40-41).

reasonable mind would rightly reject. This is also the same god that Sigmund Freud determined was nothing less than a projection of the human ego. Freud thought that religious belief was rooted in an infantile past when the individual sought protection from parental figures in his or her life. He declared, "Religion is patently infantile, so foreign to reality." These infantile anxieties would later surface as the maturing adult was confronted by the reality of death. Again the individual would long to be protected from tragedy and death by the Father.

It must be said that religion in the 19th and 20th century certainly promoted God as a loving father who was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. God was thought to be the first cause of life and the final judge at death. God was personal and approachable who knew the numbers of hair on our head and had a blueprint for our future. The creeds and doctrines of the Christian church enforced this kind of anthropomorphic theology. The qualities of this god remain vivid in the faith of many people in the 21st century.

I am not here to decry or belittle such a faith. Nor do I think that Bertrand Russell and Sigmund Freud are the final word on such matters. In fact, I think that Freud's theory is itself infantile. I rather suspect that something more basic is afoot. I think that the image of God as Father figure is not the hope of infantile fear. I wonder if God the Father is an effort to domesticate God into a figure that we can identify with and control. We can put personal and cultural norms on "papa" or "daddy" and keep such a god more or less tame.

Annie Dillard is suggesting that the god that most people "worship" in church is an aged, toothless, and benign grandfather; good enough to play pickup sticks with or a quiet game of checkers. It is a god that we can manipulate for cookies and milk or ignore when we have something more important to do. This god is safe and warm and comforting.

But what if our word "god" is an entirely inadequate word for the powerful forces of creation and destruction? What if "god" is a source of life and hope as well as the

agony of decay and death? What if “god” is the energy of virtue that pushes human beings to define themselves by their moral agency? What if “god” is the light of hope that stands before the gales of fear and terror, even if the light is snuffed out? What if “god” is the beauty that insists on finding its place in the midst of war, manure, and waste? What if “god” is the pain and the patience that nurses the birth of children and the dying of soldiers and old ones? What if God is all of these things and more? What if God defies all categories and definitions and the best words that we have to speak of such a god are “source,” “light,” and “spirit.” What if Freud and Russell got God completely wrong and yet their very rejection of God is part of the sacred dance?

Annie Dillard is suggesting that we blithely evoke such a power. If that is true, we ought to wear our crash helmets and life preservers to church. Churchgoers ought to be harnessed to their pews because this God is not going to protect us from tragedy, accidents, disease, old age, and death. All of these occur in the spirit of life, in the midst of

grace, in the presence of the sacred. If you come to church hang on tight because we are going to ride the roller coaster of weddings, baptisms, divorces, and death. We are going to strap ourselves to the helm in the midst of violent storms, be they personal, national, or global. And I dare tell you, this is what it means when we say that we live and move and have our being in God.

If that is not enough, the church expects that we are going to change and grow up. The joys and sorrows of this life are meant to mature us and make us wise. We are expected to master the tools of love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, patience, and gentleness. If you come to church be prepared for transformation. Yes, if you are wounded you will be given comfort and love. Somebody will hug you, bring you hot meals, and send you a letter of love. Yes, if you are wounded you will be challenged to find the meaning of human suffering, see the face of God in your deepest peril, even unto death.

I can think of women and men in this church and beyond who are in deep physical, mental, and moral pain.

Their anguish is palatable. Some have a disease; some are broken by age and the deterioration of their bodies. Some are anguished by decisions or actions that they took that resulted in pain, even if their motives were benign. Our ministry to them must be a nurturing care and thoughtful reflection of the meaning of suffering and the good that we may create in its presence. And what if no meaning can be found? What if we can never make sense of it and are only left with a few fragments of insight and hope. I dare say, ever these are sacred fragments. It is an act of genuine faith to trust the fragments, the remnants, and the threads of purpose in the midst of senseless suffering and loss.

I believe that all is sacred and that all occurs within the sacred sphere we call life. But the challenge is how we appropriate it all. We are prone to look only for the bright and beautiful. We are quick to affirm the beautiful sunset, the giggle of a baby, and the opulent night of darkest sky and brilliant moon. We tend to romanticize nature and humanize the habits of her creatures. Thus we attribute to animals intellect and personality beyond their proof. We

dress chimpanzees in diapers and clothes and train them in rudimentary language responses. They entertain us and make us laugh – until they rip the face off of a neighbor and mangle their keeper. We attribute nobility to the lion, king of the jungle, for his prowess but look away when he devours his own young.

It is always at the point of human suffering and the calamities of nature that Christian theology is found wanting. God is benevolent and loving but we wonder where God is in places like Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia, and a tsunami that devastates entire islands and coastlines. Why did God allow it to happen? Why did God not intervene? It is a question that the parent of a dead child asks. It is a question that a sole survivor of an accident asks. It is a question that the cancer riddled must wonder. Why me?

I believe that the questions cannot be answered if we keep God in such narrow confines, however aesthetic. Either the source of life pervades all of life or none at all. God is the picnic and the rain that falls upon it. God is the

tickertape parade down Main Street and the cold bitter wind that keeps everybody in doors except the homecoming queen and the marching band. Our highest principles and our dirtiest secrets are displayed before the presence of the Spirit. We will never have an adequate faith until we can appropriate the entire range of the Holy One.

Do you know the difference between cattle and bison? One of the differences is their approach to storms and blizzards. Bison will face into the storm and walk through it, coming out on the other side more or less intact. Cattle will turn away from the storm and walk with it. Therefore, they are in the storm for longer periods of time and suffer disastrous consequences. There are Christians like that. Rather than turn into the rage of suffering, or even difficulty for that matter, they run away from it imagining that they can out run it. Avoidance and denial leave us more deeply wounded than we had imagined. Avoidance and denial rob us of the opportunity to experience the Spirit of life at its most profound depths and transform us into women and men of incalculable character.

In other words, faith is a matter of seizing upon everything in human experience and our life within the world of nature that may reveal the possibility of intimacy with God. This is an experience with the sacred that will, in Annie Dillard's words, "draw us out to where we can never return." We will be like an iron rod thrust into the smithy's fire until we glow red and orange and then pounded on the anvil into some new instrument or tool. We are never the same!

Now some preachers would tell you an amazing and inspiring story at this point to illustrate my meaning. Perhaps they would tell the story of a teenager who narrowly escapes death in an automobile after a night of binge drinking. Or they might tell the story of a selfish tycoon whose only daughter narrowly escapes a dread disease and his life is changed into one of selfless service. Well, sometimes those things happen. But that is not the story or stories of most of us.

My life is changed by frequent encounters of love and loss. My life is changed when I experience grace in the

midst of wildest joy and dreadful events. I remember a psychiatric patient who committed suicide by slitting his wrist and forearm, blood coagulating in the bathtub. I remember a parishioner who had Lou Gehrig's disease and the absolute frustration of being unable to communicate with her as the disease worked its way up her body and finally took her tongue, though her eyes told me she had more to say. And what to make of the divorces, mine as well as friends, family, and parishioners? I have buried women and men I loved, total strangers, and infants from families I cherished. I have friends who have loved and left me and I am not the same with or without them. I witnessed people emboldened or destroyed by simple twists of events or purposeful ill will.

This is the stuff of life. This is the body of God. Such a life and such a faith requires crash helmets, life preservers, flares, and seat belts. It never leaves me the same and I cannot go back to a time when life was nostalgic or simple, bucolic or provincial. More often than not it has expanded

my heart, made me more tolerant and forgiving, and rendered me less judgmental.

I cannot offer to you from this pulpit simple Christian charms or palliative thoughts. If you came here for comfort foods and tepid tea I cannot help you. But, we can break the bread of courage. We can drink the cup of hope. We can hold hands and walk into the storms of life together and see what wonders God may yet reveal.

We will be changed, so put on your hard hat!

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