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Education and Learning Beyond Schooling
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In My Father’s House, or Public Pedagogy and the Making of a Public “Interleckchul”¹

RETA UGENA WHITLOCK

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. —John 14:1–3, KJV

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light… —I Peter 2:9, KJV

A priceless scene from Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby, depicts Ricky, played by Will Ferrell, saying grace around the family table. “Dear Lord Baby Jesus…we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest: Dominos, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell…,” he begins. He continues to thank Baby Jesus for his family that includes his boys Walker and Texas Ranger (“or TR, as we call him”), his “red hot smokin’ wife Carly” (“who is a stone cold fox”), and her father Grandpa Chip, on whose behalf he asks Baby Jesus to use his Baby Jesus powers to heal his “horrible” leg. (“It smells terrible, and the dogs are always botherin’ with him.”) Mid-prayer, Carly interrupts Ricky’s supplication and reminds him that Jesus actually did grow up. “You don’t always have to call him baby; it’s a bit odd and offputtin’ to pray to a baby.” “Look,” Ricky declares, “I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I’m sayin’ grace.” The scene proceeds with family members and his “best friend and team mate Cal Naughton, Jr., who’s got my back no matter what” describing the particular version of Jesus to whom they pray: Jesus in a tuxedo tee shirt that says “I wanna be formal but I like to party too,” Jesus the ninja fightin’ off evil samurai, Jesus with giant eagle’s wings singing lead vocals with Lynryd Skynard.

Like my fellow Southerner Ricky, I would prefer to be atoned by Baby Jesus, the Christ Child, for whom shepherds left their flocks, for whom wise men followed a star. The one whose arrival offered hope of peace on earth, “good will toward men” [sic] (Luke 2:14). But unlike Ricky, I require a more formidable Jesus through whom to approach the Almighty, as I require more than a blessing for my Taco Bell. My Jesus, and I suggest the Jesus of many fundamentalist Christians, resembles the one who haunts Hazel Motes, Flannery O’Connor’s protagonist in Wise Blood:
Later he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown. (WB, p. 11)

So, were I to sit around Ricky Bobby’s table, the Jesus to whom I would offer up my thanks would somewhat resemble Ebeneezer Scrooge’s ghost of Christmas future. Arm outstretched, bony finger both beckoning me and pointing to my fate at the first misstep. Like Scrooge, and Hazel Motes, most of the time I am terrified at the thought of drowning in illumination.

My “Flannery O’Connor” Chapter has been trying to write itself for quite some time. For this volume on public pedagogy, I originally intended to propose the fundamentalist Christian pulpit as a site of public pedagogy by juxtaposing two of O’Connor’s most prominent “back-woods prophets and shouting fundamentalists” (MM, p. 207), Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater, with my father—my own personal and beloved backwoods prophet—who runs from his own “ragged figure” (WB, p. 11) in his epic struggle with good and evil. And that component is certainly here; however, as an autobiographical methodologist, I was having trouble locating my own narrative within my theorizing. So I looked again at O’Connor, particularly to her letters in which she is self-effacingly mocking of “interleckchuls” (Gordon, 2000, p. 46), and I found myself and produced my own humble theory about public pedagogy. This chapter frames narratives of my lived experiences as a fundamentalist Christian through O’Connor’s fiction and letters/commentary and Henry Giroux’s (2004) “Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals.” In it, I offer up “my Father’s house” as a location of public pedagogy, one central to the formation of a public intellectual or two. Which Father and which house will be left up to the reader to interpret: interleckchuls do not always show all our cards.

I discovered O’Connor in Athens, Alabama, in an undergraduate Southern Lit class. And, typical of most new readers of her work, the two most prominent features of it were the comedic language of her Southern country folk and what I was taught was the grotesque nature of the images she drew forth. As I began teaching high school American Lit to 17-year-olds, those were the two features I taught and had my students write about. One of the high points of the school year was reading aloud to my class the exchange between Lucynell Crater and Mr. Shiflet in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”—“Teach her to say ‘sugarpie,’” she said. Mr. Shiflet already knew what was on her mind (CW, p. 177). It was a privilege I allowed myself just to get to hear those words out loud. After I left the classroom to get my doctorate, O’Connor stuck with me, and I kept writing about her. At Louisiana State University, I started writing about Southerners and fundamentalist Christians and working class folks, folks just like me. Just like me, but they reminded me of some other folks—the “good country people” whom O’Connor presented with opportunities to realize their moments of grace. Mary Doll (2000) calls fiction “the lie pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human” (p. xii), and O’Connor’s sacramental fiction lays our humanity bare as she illustrates the intervention of grace in the physical world, or, as she terms it, that “which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it” (MM, p. 72, 111). It just seemed to make sense to me to turn to O’Connor, turn again—in this the continued evolution of my “O’Connor piece”—in my curriculum theorizing, particularly in this study that examines the Southern fundamentalist pulpit as a site of public pedagogy.

Fundamentalist Christianity is the South’s “Bible-centered and Christ-haunted faith,” according to O’Connor (in Wood, 2004, p. 11). It has a powerful influence and pull here. Since it goes against the grain of my understanding of public pedagogy to center conversations around deficit models, I am encouraged by the invitation to consider my contested sites, the South and the religion of my faith, as sites of teaching and learning. My challenge is finding a way to facilitate
my own discussion. When I talk about fundamentalism, I use the language of fundamentalism. So I employ this language, specifically the ideas of grace, love, and communion to help me talk. O’Connor, who held a “real affinity for the absolute terms of the fundamentalist’s conviction,” according to Sarah Gordon (2000, p. 44), illustrates Southern fundamentalist moments of grace through her narrator voice. A large part of her appeal for me is that we as readers and scholars too must seek out our grace from the fiction, just as her characters did, from “stringent style and wildly unconventional plots” she employed (p. 33). O’Connor reminds me that my language of fundamentalism is no pious language for the faint of heart. It is brutal and stark and hard, and it offers us a grace and love that are equally as hard. Her characters are usually White Southerners who seek to elude in about equal measure both the devil and the “ragged figure” (WB, p. 11) of the redeeming Christ. O’Connor is, as Gordon (2000) calls her, a “fierce narrator” (p. 32) who holds us accountable for acknowledging our moments of grace.

My own consideration of pedagogical moments located in fundamentalist pulpits is contextualized in Southern place, from my perspective as a female growing up white, working class Christian parents. Even if I were to offer descriptions of my religious experiences—“dinner on the ground” or “Decoration Day,” for example—without acknowledging place, my Southern accent would still ring through. O’Connor (CFO) also wrote about the region in her accent to gain access to the “true country” (p. 110) of the writer as artist. “The Georgia writer’s true country is not Georgia….One uses the region in order to suggest what transcends it, that realm of mystery which is the concern of the prophets” (CFO, p. 110), she writes. Because they are not stories about the South, not written in a rage, as Hobson (1983) describes, to “tell about the South” (Hobson, 1983), realities about the place emerge from the author’s strategic use of accent to achieve essence; the violent blow of grace upon her characters is violence inflicted within Southern place. Likewise, from my own writer’s true country emerges my own little piece of the mystery: some thoughts on an unexpected, unconventional site of pedagogy and intellectual formation. I will return, as I so often do, to O’Connor and my stories of living with and running from the ragged figure following a framing of the narrative by Giroux’s conceptualization of pedagogy and the responsibility of the intellectual. However, the groundwork, the framing, of this work was begun some time ago: from the manger to the cross, Jesus was a public pedagogue.

**Intellectual Responsibility: Going Public**

Where there is no vision, the people perish... —Proverbs 29:18

In their introduction to this collection, the editors reference Henry Giroux’s (2004) groundbreaking work theorizing public pedagogy as a vision of “public intellectuals” and our roles in crafting counterhegemonic education and practices. (Yes, while I do include myself in this group, I am more comfortable with O’Connor’s “interleckchul,” which keeps me humble and helps me rationalize that I am not acting above my raising.) I am pleased and gratified by this opportunity to engage in what I believe to be a different kind of conversation about fundamentalist Christianity and Christians ourselves. The inclusion of this essay implies the possibility and opportunity for discussing Southern religion in ways that speak of, well, possibility and opportunity. This is in keeping with Giroux’s (2004) liberatory, and, I would suggest, transcendent (in keeping with O’Connor’s realm of mystery), conceptualization of pedagogy as “a political and moral practice” (p. 61) that extends beyond schools and classrooms. For Giroux, pedagogy is a political and cultural act. He writes, “Pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions
among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations" (Giroux, 2004, p. 61). Further, he contends that pedagogy expresses the “regulatory and emancipatory relationship among culture, power, and politics” (p. 62). Public pedagogy, then, takes place at sites where political and cultural engagements play out in performative moves that are a constant entanglement of regulation and emancipation. As these are the nature and promise of the house of religion—the church—including it in a discussion of pedagogy is both appropriate and provocative.

Giroux’s broad notions of pedagogy support the inclusion of spiritual-based organizations as pedagogical locations; he quotes Roger Simons’ work on cultural studies. Simons suggests a range of “multiple, shifting and overlapping sites of learning” (in Giroux, 2004, p. 61) that lie beyond conventional organizations designed strictly for learning, i.e., schools. Simons writes, “This means being able to grasp, for example, how…groups organized for spiritual expression and worship,…designate sets of organized practices within which learning is one central feature and outcome” (p. 61). While there are more tacit objectives than worship and learning taking place in church, those two are often mutually constitutive, with the teaching and learning built-in to the rituals of worship. From my own experience, I figure if I attended church three times a week (Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday Bible Study) for the first 35 years of my life, and allowing myself approximately two years of non-attendance, that still adds up to over 5,000 services. And, while moral education of democratic citizens, a primary objective of churches, is certainly a direct goal of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004, p. 74), political and cultural instruction is more implicit than outright in some denominations. Politics, for example, falls under the “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21, KJV) line of thought in the congregation where I grew up; however, Giroux emphasizes “the very processes of learning constitute the political mechanisms through which identities are shaped and desires mobilized, and how experiences take on form and meaning within and through collective conditions and those larger forces that constitute the realm of the social” (p. 62). So, public pedagogy takes on different shapes depending upon which pulpit one is sitting in front of, and whether or not those pulpits acknowledge it, a mutual rendering is going on among the institution, its members, and the state. Although probably an exasperating thought for our Lord and Savior, Jesus realized the inevitable: his church and his message are political.

Following his discussion of cultural studies as a contextual basis for pedagogy, Giroux presents what he believes to be the public responsibilities of intellectuals, beginning with our resisting the transformation of the academy into sites of corporatization and commercialization. Now, before going any further with what it is Giroux charges us to do, I am obligated to try to explain what a public intellectual is and why I count myself among them. The first I do for the reader and for me; the second, for my brother, who, if he ever reads this, will perform a strange mix of raucous laughing, eye rolling, and pointed zingers about “my sister, the intellectual.” My brother Tracy is one of the three best men I know, and he is proud of my academic and scholarly accomplishments. To paint a clearer picture of him, rather than comment upon his identity or character, I will point out that he is a boot-wearing, horse-riding, ball cap-sporting, construction-working, guitar-playing Southern White man. He is also one who writes songs and poetry, and who, I suspect, like me, channels Elvis occasionally in his own way (and Johnny Cash, which I do not do). All I would have to do is mention that I am a public intellectual, or private one for that matter, and Tracy would have comedy material for the remainder of my visit home, and quite possibly running through the next holiday season. So, I will attempt to define and contextualize.

Michael Berube’s 2002 essay for the Washington Post, “Going Public,” noted the death of the public intellectual, brought about most immediately by Richard Posner’s Public Intellectuals: A Story of Decline (2002), a 607-person list of, yes, public intellectuals. Berube himself made the
list and did not fail to see the irony in making it as the group was collectively on its way down. In addition to working the word *chiasmus* into the essay three times (*his wit was sharp, and fast his pen* would be a poor, if original, example), Berube identifies three circumstances that created favorable conditions for Posner’s killing off public intellectuals: (a) the career of Cornel West, and I would suggest, other high-profile intellectuals; (b) the public performance of public intellectuals in general; and (c) the academic institutionalization of the idea of the public intellectual (Berube, 2002). I do not believe Giroux’s public intellectual will ever actually be in decline or dead altogether; neither, I think, does Berube. Rather, perhaps those in decline—or those whom Berube *hopes* are in decline—are those who cause people like my brother to roll their eyes and chuckle when they consider them.

Giroux assumes the reader has some concept of what an intellectual is, and so offers no handy definition. He does, however, refer to the work of Gramsci and Stuart Hall and subsequent cultural theorists who “acknowledge the primacy of culture’s role as an educational site where identities are being continually transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic…” (Giroux, 2004, p. 60). For my purposes, I will adapt, however simplistically, Gramsci’s (1971) “organic intellectual” (p. 10) to fit a working description of “public intellectual”:

> The mode of being the new intellectual can no longer consist of eloquence, […] but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator… (Gramsci, 1971, p. 10)

In other words, Gramsci believed in the creation of working-class intellectuals, who might not always be called upon to intellectualize, but who would help in the creation of a social consciousness and create a counter hegemony (Burke, 1999, 2005). For our purposes here, I would expand working class thinkers to include those who emerge from spaces of public pedagogy—non-conventional thinkers from non-conventional sites of learning. Active participants in practical life from sites of their participation. Giroux, for example, explicitly names teachers as “public intellectuals in higher education.” I am satisfied I could convince my brother.

In addition to re-claiming higher education as sites of emancipatory thought, what, according to Giroux, are some responsibilities of intellectuals? They involve the uses of language: the language of theory, the language of civic engagement, and the language of socio-political activism. He points out what is often painfully accepted by traditional intellectuals: we write for each other, for the gatekeepers. If any non-academics, that is, normal people, *can* understand our highly specialized, that is, sterile scholarly writing, they would probably not be engaged enough by it to continue reading anyway. He writes,

> Such writing needs to become public by crossing over into sites and avenues of expression that speak to more general audiences in a language that is clear but not theoretically simplistic. Intellectuals must combine their scholarship with commitment in a discourse that is not dull or obtuse but expands the reach of their audience. This suggests using opportunities offered by a host of public means of expression including…the church pulpit…. (2004, p. 71)

Accessible theory, written in language and style of the popular culture need not be any less scholarly or rigorous than high theory written to, by, and for academics, and might actually engage a wider popular audience, and thus, facilitate the proliferation of ideas to a public eager to participate. Otherwise, we insult and dismiss people; expanding their reach to include intellectual ponderings means simultaneously expanding the intellectual’s command of popular language.
Giroux’s inclusion above of the church pulpit as a public “means of expression” and creation of culture may be directly connected to another responsibility of intellectuals, that of “protecting public and higher education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation, and open to people and communities whose resources, knowledge, and skills have often been viewed as marginal” (p. 74). And to meet this objective, he challenges intellectuals to “to reclaim the language of the social, agency, solidarity, democracy, and public life as the basis for rethinking how to name, theorize, and strategize a new kind of politics, notions of political agency, and collective struggle” (p. 65). I suggest Giroux describes theorizing for social justice in language that not only facilitates naming but also strategizing for civic engagement. Realizing that what makes theory theory is that it is somebody’s thinking written down to explain or contemplate something, when theory becomes practice, the result is practice. The twain may not exist, I propose, in the same place and time. In other words, those of us who do this for a living need not fear our services will no longer be required; but if we take up Giroux’s challenge, we can do our thinking while mindful of people’s everyday lives and their socio-political agency. It is all too easy to ascribe fundamentalist thinking as “anti-intellectual,” yet considering it as a site of public pedagogy in light of this new concept of intellectualization troubles this simplification. I am careful to refrain from imposing social justice objectives upon Southern fundamentalist ministers—especially conservative ones. One need only look at these spaces in historical contexts to refute the notion. Many preachers would outright reject the idea anyway. However, the pulpit is a public space from which a myriad of messages emerge, where pedagogy is practiced and learning takes place. It is a site where the individual meets the social, where the everyday meets the greater good, where faith meets works. It is a site for contemplating and interrogating moments of grace for congregants, and for collective society, where Giroux’s intellectual meets O’Connor’s interleckchul.

A Violent Bearing

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away. —Douay Version, Matthew 11:12

One of the central tenets of fundamentalist Christianity is the belief that Jesus died, arose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and will someday return—like a thief in the night (II Peter 3:10)—to claim those believers who, throughout the ages, have been faithful to him. Depending on which denomination one belongs to, there are some variations and differing interpretations of the particulars of these events, but going to heaven with Jesus is the reward of a righteous life. On the flip side is eternal damnation to hell. There is no in-between. While volumes and volumes of theological works have been written in contemplation of these concepts, I purposely stay away from them here. Instead, I am more concerned with love, the central tenet of my fundamentalist belief. When one is queer and still identifies as a fundamentalist Christian, still holds to a faith nurtured in conservative congregations, one must find some teaching in the scriptures that does not condemn but comforts and offers hope. Love is what I cling to. It is what I believe in. And, as my faith was cultivated by sitting in front of the pulpit those approximately 5,000 times, I contend that the pedagogical offering therein was the 2,000-year-old message of a master teacher: love.

In this section I employ O’Connor’s thoughts on grace and one of her most comprehensive illustrations of it, her novel The Violent Bear It Away (1960), to support my argument that the fundamentalist pulpit is a site of public pedagogy and a site where public intellectuals may be cultivated. My thinking about O’Connor is dispersed throughout the narrative I craft of my
father, a modern-day prophet every bit zealous as Old Tarwater. And, as I have done in previous writing (Whitlock, 2007), I would offer my humble disclaimer and apology to Miss Flannery O’Connor for what I am about to do to her work. She expressed on more than one occasion her frustration that critics and the reading public did not grasp the message of grace and our participation in Divine life in her work. My favorite example is when she had finished reading her story “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” at a liberal arts college when an earnest and eager young professor began to ask her one question after another. Not finding her responses satisfactory, he finally asks, “Miss O’Connor, what is the significance of the Misfit’s hat?” She replied, “The significance of the Misfit’s hat is to cover the Misfit’s head.” “And after that he left me alone,” she said (HB, p. 334). I am not certain how she would feel about a shouting Southern fundamentalist using her work to discuss fundamentalism. I am hoping by keeping the focus on grace and the backwoods prophets, she would not be too awfully displeased. I would also point out that the section is tribute of sorts to them both, O’Connor and my daddy.

I did not really know my father until I was 35 years old. This is not to say we did not live in the same house and interact every day. To be fair, I believe the more accurate statement is that we did not know each other until I was in my mid-thirties. There are, however, scenes I can remember of my daddy and me. One of my earliest memories is of jumping from the couch arm into my daddy’s arms for what seemed like hours at a time, or so I have been told. And the time I slipped out of the house when I was about three and climbed a mulberry tree. On my way out on a particularly inviting limb, I slipped and was left hanging by my underwear, the terry cloth kind little kids wore in 1966. Daddy heard my peals of laughter at being suspended mid-air from a tree, rounded the corner of the house, and lifted me down. When he tells that one, he tells it with a mix of bewilderment at my audacity and the remnant of sheer panic at me getting away from him. Actually, these little anecdotes have become such a part of daddy’s narrative of my young life that I do not know whether I remember it or I have just heard it so often I have formed it as a memory. Regardless, each time he tells the story, it is an affirmation of his love for me, his oldest child. His daughter.

Memories of my father are like so many other recollections of childhood: vignettes and particular images interspersed with a remembered knowledge of the daily life of many years ago. So, when I declare I have only known him after 30 years, I mean that if we had any insights into each other’s thoughts and character, we very seldom talked about them with each other. Only one stands out for me. It was the time— the only time—I ever saw daddy cry—the only time he ever cried to me. I was 18—it was right before I married—and mother, daddy, and I were sitting in the living room watching TV. Somehow, the conversation turned to reminiscing. It was times like these when I heard my childhood narrative recounted—the tree and chair stories, for example—and on this evening daddy turned to another familiar story. The funny thing is, I do not remember which one it was he began to tell. I was 18, about to be married, and still held an adversarial teenage stance toward my parents. I interrupted my father during his telling, something I had never done before.

I do not remember exact words. I never do; but I remember rolling my eyes and saying something about this being about the hundredth time I had heard this story. He stopped and had the most quizzical look on his face. His first reaction was anger. He reprimanded me for interrupting and being rude, for cutting him off. And, despite my betrothal and tenacious claim to adulthood, my daddy sent me to my room. I was unprepared for the conversation that followed when he joined me there. Rather, I do not remember a conversation at all. What I remember is being geared up for an uncomfortable lecture as I heard him come up the hall, but instead, there were tears in his eyes as he entered my room. He sat down on the bed and told me another story. Just a small one, but one that reinforced my life-long feeling that my parents never quite knew what
to do with me. He began telling me how easy it was when I was a child, how I would let him be
good to me, play with me, pet me. He told me how he cherished those days, and how he missed
them as I moved into adolescence and seemed like I did not want to know him at all. How it felt
to him and mother that I had “outgrown my raising,” and felt myself too good for my family. He
used the illustration of our family car.

My folks were still driving a ’68 Impala when I entered high school in 1977. Three bits of
background information are relevant here, I think. First, the car itself was not a classic beauty
that transcended body style changes in automobiles like, for example, BMWs or Mercedes. It
was bubble, or comet-shaped: larger and rounder in the front and coming to a smaller point in
the rear. It was out of style by 1970. Second, my parents had declined to have me skip second
grade seven years before, and given the opportunity to send me to a magnet school (also in the
city) two years after that, they said no again. Both times they had been approached by my teach-
ers and my principal with offers of enrichment for me, and both times they had passed on the
opportunity. And last, the high school I was attending was out of district for me, not the one my
elementary school fed into. Because it was a city school, my parents had believed it had more to
offer me—a smart girl—than the little country school I would have attended, and perhaps it was
their way of making amends for not advancing me years earlier. So, they took liberties with our
street address and enrolled me at Russellville High School. Daddy took me himself to the reg-
istrar’s office, wearing an orange and green tie-dyed tee shirt that was casual even for the mid-
seventies. This was a profound move for my folks; we were country people with rural comfort
zones. They realized early on, however, that their daughter did not exactly fit in the landscape—I
sensed it then and have felt it ever since. Russellville was a city of doctors and lawyers and bank-
ers; it would be their children that their child would be thrown together with. Children of the
children who had snubbed my father 20 years earlier. Daddy left high school feeling as though he
had barely escaped, glad to be done with the worst four years of his life. I began to thrive there,
making friends with the kids whose fathers and mothers had paid no notice to my father—the
men and women who approved or denied him bank loans and sold him cars. So, to me, the trap-
pings became important.

I do not remember the actual comment I made to my mother about the car. I just recall her
waiting to pick me up after school, lined up with the newer, more stylish cars than the Impala,
by this time re-painted a luminescent metallic green. I must have made some remark that was
particularly hurtful, yet one that had a powerful impact upon mother and daddy regarding my
success at fitting in at this “city school.” Within a few months they had bought a used, but newer,
Impala, this one lemon meringue yellow with a half-vinyl roof, terrifically in style in 1977. On
this night, it was that incident my daddy needed to reference as a kind of proof of their love for
me and an admission that they had done what they could for me to help me academically. In
a broken voice, he told me of the sacrifices they had made on factory workers’ salaries to buy a
car—when we had a perfectly good Chevy Impala that had years of service left—just so that I
would fit in with the cliques and snobs of Russellville. Those stories, those of my being his little
child, remained all that he had of me. I had, he said, been lost to him for a long time.

My father became an elder in the Church of Christ in 2000, a year after I came out to myself.
My first thought was not that it was an honor for him or the culmination of over 50 years of
devotion and service to the Church. My first thought was of the list of requirements for an elder
listed in Titus that included this one: “having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly”
(1:6). I had been struggling with my own salvation in light of my sexuality for quite some time,
knowing that in my denomination, there would be no statement of acceptance of gays. The
“homosexual lifestyle” would always be willful sin. I would have to live somehow with my sinful
choice. Daddy’s new office presented a new wrinkle for me—a serious wrinkle. My queerness
now affected not only my spiritual condition, but also my father’s. My willful sin rendered me unfaithful, unruly; granted, I was 36 at the time—by no means a child, but still my father’s child—yet the Apostle Paul had not provided a statute of limitations. If my secret ever “came out,” I could be punished by the church and daddy would have to resign his office. In the years that followed, he and I began a game of spiritual cat and mouse that continues.

As a shepherd of his flock, daddy takes his duties as an elder very seriously, with the zeal of O’Connor’s prophets. She wrote, “You have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you” (HB, p. 229). My father pushes against the age—pushes hard. From him I have inherited my sense of time and place, as well as my nostalgic perspectives of them. Daddy believes if America could just return to 1956, we would experience a moral and spiritual renewal of sorts, a philosophy in keeping with fundamentalist privileging of an idealized past. For him, it is the past of his youth—after the war and before the turbulent, immoral 1960s. He often compares America with ancient Rome and, as I mentioned, points out the similarities between Rome’s actual fall and our impending one. He holds the kind of “skepticism under God” (CFO, p. 110) to which O’Connor referred, typical of the South’s “biblical vision” (p. 110). “It keeps our vision concrete,” she writes, “and forms a sacred heroic background to which we can compare and refer our own actions” (p. 110). Brinkmeyer (1989) contextualizes O’Connor’s Southern and Christian skepticism within his discussion of Yahwist vision, whose “central tenet is that an absolute gulf separates humanity from an all-powerful God” (p. 29). He continues,

The Yahwist vision works to decenter and demythologize not only society but also the individual. In the face of Yahweh’s omnipotence, the Hebrew prophets were displaced and decentered, alienated not only from those about them but also from their own selves. (Brinkmeyer, 1989, p. 31)

The Hebrew prophets, then, were “displaced and decentered”; as such, they not only acknowledged their own significance, they considered themselves and society from the perspective of the “ultimate other—Yahweh” (p. 31). Daddy worries over man’s sinful nature and believes that God will allow this state to continue for only so long before destroying earth in contempt. As one might imagine, holidays at the folks’ house are loads of cheer.

In 1962 O’Connor wrote to Alfred Corn, a young poet who had written her concerned about how to maintain his faith despite the secular teachings he was exposed to at university. She replied, “Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free—not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect and the intellects of those around you” (HB, p. 478). Prophets thousands of years ago and those in the present day living in Littleville, Alabama, hold fast to the belief in “something” larger than themselves to the point of their own absolute individual insignificance. Brinkmeyer contends the Hebrew prophets’ utter alienation of self as insignificant and incomparable to that of Yahweh lies at the root of O’Connor’s Southern and Christian skepticism. He not only notes her self-admitted affinity as a Catholic for Southern fundamentalists, but he also ascribes Yahwist thought to the fundamentalist doctrine in her work.

For southern fundamentalists the powerful presence of God looms above all creation, devaluing all human values and the significance of earthly life…the center of all meaning resides for the fundamentalist not in oneself or the world but in Jesus, and how one stands with him is, finally, the only thing that matters. Every person must make a personal choice either to accept Christ into his life or to reject him. There is no gray area, no room for compromise: One lives by Christ or the Devil. (Brinkmeyer, 1989, p. 33)
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The last time I was home in Littleville, daddy spoke to me about my lack of church attendance. “If you don’t go, then you hate the church,” he said. Then he quoted the scripture: “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). “You either love the church or you hate it. That’s what God’s word says, and there’s no in between.” My protestation of my love of God notwithstanding, there is no gray area.

Despite their prophetic missions to the sinful world, neither of O’Connor’s prophets in The Violent Bear It Away—Old and Young Tarwater—display a particular love of the world. Sarah Gordon (2000) writes, “…Mason Tarwater, did not hate the sinful world, we question whether he ever loved it. Although O’Connor’s narrator asserts that, in the evolution of his prophecy, the old man ‘had learned enough to hate the destruction that had to come and not all that was going to be destroyed’ (VB, p. 333), we are not at all convinced that simply not hating the sinful world is tantamount to loving it” (Gordon, 2000, p. 217). Love of the world, God’s own creation according to Christians, contradicts prophetic exhortation. I remember broaching the subject of love as being central to Christianity and the church to my father. I had been grappling with my sexuality and the life I was living and struggling to find a way to believe I could avoid hell. I had, by this time, begun to allow myself to dare to believe in God’s love, and I suggested to daddy that the church might reach more people if this were its overt message. I tried to articulate this to him. He roared me down with a mighty tremble. “That’s what’s wrong with the world, with this country. It’s why we will fall like Rome fell. The devil wants us to think love is all there is; he wants us not to worry about sin. The church has got to preach against sin. People have got to see how sinful they are. Love? It’s the turning away from sin that saves, not hearing about love.” I have not brought the subject up since, but I have done a great deal of thinking about my father’s zeal, the notion of love, and where, exactly, I am located between the two. In this instance, O’Connor’s definition of love offers a space where my father and I can meet without much roaring. She writes, “I have got to the point now where I keep thinking more and more about the presentation of love and charity; or better call it grace, as love suggests tenderness, whereas grace can be violent or would have to be to compete with the kind I can make concrete” (HB, p. 373). O’Connor made grace concrete through her characters, the prophets, who bore messages similar to the one my daddy spoke to me. So, it is to my father, who strives to save others from a fiery consumption (beginning with me), I turn to find love.

Crucial to the discussion of the pulpit as a site of public pedagogy and the charge of public intellectuals is a conceptualization of love. In fact, love is a crucial concept for society in general, yet it is one about which we are reluctant to speak. Perhaps we do not know how to speak it because it has only come to mean tenderness, as O’Connor suggested, or weakness or vulnerability. O’Connor presented love, or grace, in her description of Rayber—Old Tarwater’s nephew and Young Tarwater’s uncle. In the following excerpt, from which I will quote selectively but at length, she describes Rayber’s love for his retarded son Bishop. Rayber was terrified of love as he conceived it:

It was only a touch of the curse that lay in his blood…[At] moments when with little or no warning he would feel himself overwhelmed by the horrifying love…If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him—powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal.

He was not afraid of love in general. He knew the value of it and how it could be used. He had it transform in cases where nothing else had worked…the love that would overcome him was of a different order entirely. It was a love without reason, love for
something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant.

The affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood that touched them, howling from some ancient source, some desert prophet or pole-sitter, until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him and, he surmised, in the boy. Those it touched were condemned to fight it constantly or be ruled by it. The old man had been ruled by it. He, at the cost of a full life, staved it off. (VB, pp. 401–402)

Sarah Gordon (2000) notes the ambivalence of this passage. The reader’s first assumption might be to ascribe Rayber’s fear of his loss of control as a rational man. Upon closer reading, however, the love that terrifies Rayber, that is a cursed affliction of his blood, is one that “rules,” which suggests, in Yahwist tradition, an utter subordination of human relations and connections to “the dictates of a fierce and demanding God who must constantly be satisfied with our allegiance” (p. 218). She concludes,

This Deity is, of course, far closer to the commonly held view of the wrathful and punitive Jehovah of the Old Testament than to the New Testament Christ, who, in what could surely be called the greatest example of mutuality the world has ever known, gave his life for the fallen creation. (p. 218)

Rather than a tender love of the Lamb of God—of Ricky Bobby’s Christmas Baby Jesus—Rayber recognized the frightful love of a wrathful God, one that could strike him down with its power. The fight would eventually cost him his moment of grace.

Conclusion

Last Sunday, once again I attended the Sunday School class my daddy was teaching. It was a sad day for the congregation; one of the other elders—one younger than daddy—had died unexpectedly that week, and my dad’s consciousness of his own mortality was palpable. There was an urgency in daddy’s lesson, and it was melancholic in tone. He spoke about our sinful nature, about how we must return to God before it is too late. Then he paused. He mused about how fleeting life is and concluded by saying, “When I take my last heartbeat and face Jesus, I don’t want Him to say I didn’t tell them. People say I teach too strong, that my tone is stern. But I will not sugar coat the Lord’s message.” He then quoted, verbatim, the following verses from Acts 20: 26–28:

Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over that which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

“I teach,” he said, “so that I will not have your blood on my head when I draw my last breath. But what I teach, I teach out of love.” I had never heard him speak this way before, as though he were writing his own epitaph. I watched my father be as intimate with his flock as he had been with me that night in my room. Both occasions were expressions of love, a violent love—or moment of grace—about which O’Connor commented, “This notion of grace as healing omits the fact that before it heals it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring” (HB, p. 411). Sarah Gordon (2000) offers insight into the prophet’s receiving love:
We note that Tarwater has not learned the love and forgiveness of God through any experience of human love; as Lucette Carmody prophesied, the love of God that Tarwater experiences “cuts” and “burns.” …Just as we see that for…Francis Marion Tarwater, God’s love cuts and burns, so we conclude that for Flannery O’Connor the lessons of God’s love are hard ones, not found to be sure, in a sentimental piety, nor even in the usual sorts of communal affirmation and human connectedness by which most of us would feel that we as humans understand something of the love of God. (p. 231)

My father’s expression of love burns and cuts through sentimentality and aptly illustrates O’Connor’s contention as I understand it. He takes up the sword and accepts his moment of grace, even as he offers it to his congregational flock. This is public pedagogy of the pulpit. Hard love that requires something of us.

As I sit in my Father’s house, and listen to my father’s words, I am reminded of O’Connor’s comments about God’s love. She writes, “I believe that God’s love for us is so great that He does not wait until we are purified to such a great extent that He allows us to receive Him” (HB, p. 387). My daddy is haunted, as fundamentalists are haunted, as the South is haunted, by the ragged figure on the cross. He, we, are terrified—as was Rayber—of the overwhelming love that figure embodies. The “price of restoration” is that we are obligated to accept that love and, thus, be consumed by the crucible until all that remains is the healing love of communion. We commune with that which is greater than us and come to the conscious realization that it includes humanity. This is also public pedagogy of the pulpit. The greatness of love.

And from out of this ravenous, raging grace might arise public intellectuals, practiced in a public pedagogy that, sometimes against our will, decenters the self and insists upon communion—a common union of care and justice—with one another. The price of restoration for the public intellectual, therefore, is not merely being compelled to teach, but also being ever-conscious of the ragged figure, threatening love in the dark, where we are never sure of our footing, and, returning again to O’Connor (WB), “where [we] might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (p. 11). Like my daddy, public intellectuals realize the profound responsibility of the metaphorical blood of society upon our heads. We fear the knowledge that can drown, the love that cuts and burns. O’Connor wrote much of the concept of mystery, a revelation that comes from accepting one’s moment of grace. This is both the “reward” and the mission of public intellectual. She writes, “Mystery isn’t something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge” (HB, p. 489). Yet in this one instance, I call upon an image even more intense than one rendered by O’Connor. And fittingly, it is Greek in actuality and proportion, Edith Hamilton’s oft-quoted translation of Aeschylus, “And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God” (Hamilton, 1930, p. 156). We may never know grace, may never accept the moment or realize that it is upon us. In our own despite, however, the public intellectual catches a glimpse of the mystery, we come to know the awful grace of God. The price of restoration, as it is for my daddy, for Tarwater, for the public intellectual, is that we must rage to tell it. And this is public pedagogy of the pulpit.

Notes
1. In this chapter the works of Flannery O’Connor will be cited as follows. WB: Wise Blood (1952); MM: Mystery and Manners (1969); VB: The Violent Bear It Away (1960); CW: O’Connor Collected Works (1988); CFO: Conversations with Flannery O’Connor (1987); HB: The Habit of Being (1979).

2. Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964) remains an important voice in American literature. She was a self-proclaimed Southern writer and a Catholic writer. She wrote two novels and two books of short stories. Because of the
Southern imagery and Christian themes in her work, I employ O’Connor in my interdisciplinary and curriculum theory discussions of the South and fundamentalist religion. I do write with the assumption that readers are generally familiar with O’Connor and her works.

3. While Berube does not state precisely why he named these ideas, he suggests that “public intellectuals” might now more aptly be described as “publicity intellectuals,” marketed as “content providers” who provide soundbytes on various topics and in various venues—the History Channel, for example.

References


