

## **The Light by Which We See (Or, How to Reconcile the Inherent Conflict Between Faith and Art)**

*"There's two ways you can go about writing if you're a Christian. You can write about the light. Or you can write about what you see by the light."*

-- T-Bone Burnett

A friend who's a youth minister in California wrote to me after reading my novel *Blue Winnetka Skies*. He wanted to tell me he liked the book – took a day off work to read it straight through because he didn't want to put it down – but wondered why I wrote so much about darkness, why my characters didn't find grace. Why I didn't write more about God touching lives.

I wrote him a long letter back. In fact, that letter formed the bones of this talk. The gist of it was that's what I'm always writing about. Because it's the way I see the world. But I feel compelled NOT to name it as such, because doing so too often results in bad art. Sermons masquerading as stories.

*"I could have been a priest instead of a prophet. The priest has a book with the words set out. Old words, known words, words of power. Words that are always on the surface. Words for every occasion... (that) do what they're supposed to do: comfort and discipline. The prophet has no book. The prophet is a voice that cries in the wilderness, full of sounds that do not always set into meaning."*

-- Jeanette Winterson

My subject in fiction is...

This is a sentence any serious fiction writer will wrestle with and try to answer, walk away from and come back to, any number of times. It's an unavoidable impulse. If you're serious about your work, you know there are recurring themes, compulsions. But you also resist that knowledge, because the strength of narrative is that it isn't argument. Its power doesn't lie in presenting a case and building to a conclusion. It examines humanity in all its complexity. And tries (honestly, when it's at its best) to present some of the truth of what it is to be human.

I think many of us who are drawn to narrative are drawn to the gray areas of human experience.

Full and fair disclosure: I am a Christian, a fact I acknowledge grudgingly. Because of the cultural baggage it suggests. Because I despise much of what has been done in this

country under that name. Because, as a writer, I resist labels. I don't want readers putting on certain lenses to construct a narrowed interpretation of my work. A writer must in some sense be a nomad, living in a tent. Never too comfortable – too rooted – anywhere. Never too certain.

The writer and environmental activist Rick Bass has talked about the danger of advocacy in art. How having a preconceived notion of what you wish to communicate, of how you hope to influence or sway readers – is an enemy of good art.

I think he's right.

*"Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement."*

-- Italo Calvino

I believe that narrative is better suited to exploration than explanation. The impulse to tell story can be illustrative of a point, but more deeply, the impulse is toward situations where explanation is inadequate to reflect what draws us. When summary and illustration leave us wanting. To frame it from my tradition, God's ways are above our ways: the realm of mystery.

A word from one of my literary heroes, Flannery O'Connor, whose discussions of the integrated nature of her faith and her fiction have been instrumental to my development (the male pronouns are hers, not mine): "if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it to an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do... He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves - whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not."

There's an essay I love by Czech novelist Milan Kundera, writing about Tolstoy, in particular about "Anna Karenina." Kundera claims that the early drafts of Tolstoy's masterpiece were unsuccessful; one-dimensional; moralistic. Weakened by Tolstoy's insistence on imposing his moral judgment on the novel (to be sure that the adulterous couple at the heart of the novel were punished for their actions, and viewed as

specifically punished), and that the novel only came fully alive when he allowed the book to be bigger than his personal moral conviction.

"I do not believe that Tolstoy had revised his moral ideas in the meantime," Kundera says. "I would say, rather, that in the course of writing, he was listening to another voice than that of his personal moral conviction." Kundera describes Tolstoy listening to something he calls "the wisdom of the novel." I could also call it the leading of the spirit; following the sniff of deeper truth. Again, Kundera: "Every true novelist listens for that suprapersonal wisdom, which explains why great novels are always a little more intelligent than their authors."

The kind of fiction that interests me – the fiction I would describe as art – is that which begins not from a conviction or truth the writer sees and seeks to illuminate for others, but from a place of yearning. A yearning to catch a glimpse of the truth of human experience – the deep truth at the heart of creation, a truth I believe we can only apprehend in glimpses. Fragments.

*"For now we see in a mirror dimly..."*  
-- The Apostle Paul

Art as argument doesn't work. Work that claims to see the whole picture strikes me as fundamentally dishonest. The strength of narrative is its willingness to go beyond what the author knows to be true. In reaching into mystery. Acknowledging that we see in a mirror dimly.

I'd describe my own efforts at fiction as the continual attempt to catch a bit of reflected light off a shard of broken mirror. Sometimes in my living I'll have an inkling of something - some moment– that resonates true deep. And I'll follow that inkling out into experience, as far and as deep as I can go to try to capture that bit of light.

Another way to say this is that maybe people are interested in different kinds of truth. Or have different notions of truth. For me, truth is a web where any one strand is connected to countless others and to capture some bit of it in any meaningful way, to offer it as something that will resonate, is to discover that strand in its relation to others. To capture, however imperfectly, a snapshot of that complicated, beautiful interrelation.

Where that meets ground: I know I'm really on to something if I can't easily express it, can't even fully grasp it.

*"In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning... it comes down to gut instinct. A true (war) story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe."*

-- Tim O'Brien

O'Brien was talking about war stories, but he could have been talking about any story. Where's your gut?

The places that feel alive to me as a writer are the ones where people are in interaction with the dark parts of their nature, and the uncertainties - the best of us and the worst of us and the stuff that isn't at all clear either way, all in play at any given moment. That uncertainty is always present in me, and it is where most people I know live, and it feels like what is most tender and most urgent. There is reverence in working to present what I can see, by the light available to me.

The place I find my stomach believing -- with fiction, with my own life, with fellow humans, with God -- is around brokenness. Far as I'm concerned, it's what we all have in common. How broken people seek wholeness, which is another way of saying how fallen people seek grace, even if we don't know it, or don't know it by that name. How we sometimes find it, or at least moments of it, and how we sometimes don't.

To use whatever skill and insight I have to the best of my ability. To love the characters who come to inhabit the pages, in all of their strengths and all of their faults, wishing and hoping they'll grow and change, but not forcing them to. One of the privileges of this work is understanding a little of how a Creator feels in relation to creation.

Vocation, says novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner, is "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

*"I am trying to clear my head of all the junk in there – the assholes, the flags, the underpants. I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago. The things other people have put into my head.... are often useless and ugly, out of proportion with life. I have no culture, no humane harmony. I can't live without a culture anymore."*

-- Kurt Vonnegut

I have spent a career distancing myself from Christians, embracing artists. Mostly that's been a healthy impulse. It has helped me hone my thinking. It has broadened my perspective. It has cultivated in me a habit of listening first, talking second. It has also birthed a fierce bond of community with those of my tribe.

But in the last few years I find my hackles rising, increasingly unwilling to cede my heritage to – forgive me – assholes.

Now I don't want to be the poster boy for anything. I distrust that kind of certainty. I am a writer who believes we must be observers, with only one foot in our culture, in order to do our job well.

I think it's important for a writer to be elusive. But not evasive.

So I'm ready to claim a kind of authority, that speaks "this is what I have seen, and here is what I make of it, by the light that I can see. That calls out to – and calls attention to – companions on the journey.

Wole Soyinka has said, "I am a writer and therefore an explorer. My immediate tribe remains the tribe of explorers." Wole and I are of the same tribe. My tribe is writers and artists who stand in the light of their beliefs to bear witness to what they see. Who don't know what they believe, and live that struggle, that uncertainty, out in the open. Boldly and proudly blaze trails with it. Some are quoted here. Many work outside my tradition. Some I've met. Some are friends I haven't met. Marilynne Robinson. Andrei Tarkovsky. Wim Wenders. Lori Anderson Moseman. Joel and Rebecca Russell. Gertrude Stein. Jehanne Gheith. Jeffrey Bell.

What matters? Community matters. The kind of truths that come from a shared journey of discovery.

*"Now that everything is so completely moving the name of anything is not really anything to interest anyone. So perhaps narrative and poetry and prose have all come where they do not have to be considered as being there. The thing that is important is the intensity of anybody's existence."*

-- Gertrude Stein

Stein shook narrative down to its very syntax, and in doing so, opened up for some of us a world of possibility. Fragments. Torrents of language. She broadened the range of narrative speech and that matters to me.

Because I care about truth. And sometimes speech is halting. Sometimes in our grasping at what we can't quite describe, we can only honestly identify a word or two. A complete sentence would misrepresent – skew – what we see. Other times, in our effort to capture something ineffable, we need to hurl words at it before it flies away, and in the urgency the only honest thing to do is sail forward in a rush without comma without pause without stop.

Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – indeterminacy can be a way to push past the surface of things and force the gaze toward a deeper reality.

*“Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing.” So what is seeing? “The habit of art – a way of looking at the created world and of using the senses so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things.”*

-- Flannery O'Connor

Maybe the best way to describe my sense of vocation in fiction writing is as a lifelong apprenticeship to chasing the light. Capturing what glimpses I can, and reflecting them. It's a sacred privilege, and it's both the work's deepest satisfaction and deepest irony that it will always be imperfect, incomplete.

The late, great jazz singer Abbey Lincoln never shrank back from telling it as she saw it. In her 70s, she fully blossomed as a songwriter. At age 70, she wrote a song called “Learning How to Listen.” Listen to someone who'd been plying her craft for 50 years:

“I'm learning how to listen, how to hear a melody.  
How to hear the song I'm singing, how to feel and let it be.  
Learning how to listen, for the song was given me.  
I'm learning how to listen and be free.”

Thanks for listening.