

***LEADING WITH HOPE: EXCURSIONS THROUGH THE ARTS***

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***Prelude***

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without words,  
And sweetest in the gale is heard...<sup>1</sup>*

A real hunger exists in each of us not just for food but for meaning. The key to understanding our personhood is found in that search for significant being, a hope-filled struggle for meaning, in which all humanity is engaged. In one way or another, we are always involved with meaning. What we do with our lives may be creative or destructive of meaning; we may be faithful to the meaning we search for or we may betray the promise that meaning holds. The lure towards meaning draws each of us deeper into the quest. I am reminded of what the narrator in Walker Percy's novel, The Moviegoer, discovered about the human search, the quest that "anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."<sup>2</sup>

Anguish, despair, and boredom are occasioned more often by the fear of meaninglessness than by the search for meaning. The widespread despair that affects so many in our communities may come from the inability to hear deeply and personally the challenge that confronts each of us as religious educators - What am I here for? What is required of me? Abraham Heschel illuminates the essence of vocation in this way:

Over and above personal problems, there is an objective challenge to overcome inequity, injustice, helplessness, suffering, carelessness, oppression. Over and above the din of desires, there is a calling, a demanding, a waiting, an expectation. There is a question that follows me wherever I turn. What is expected of me? What is demanded of me?... Over and above all things is a sublime expectation, a waiting for.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important experiences in life is this "mysterious waiting", a deep sense that something is being asked of me. Every waiting can become hope. By learning how to wait in hope, we may begin to know how to live active, alert, and attentive lives.

Martin Buber urges belief "in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe, and the meaning of that waiting, that alertness, that 'craning of the neck' in creatures will dawn upon you."<sup>4</sup>

The development of attentiveness, this receptivity, the opening of eye and ear and heart, requires that we be silent and empty, simply waiting for the gift to be given. I am reminded of Donatello's sculpture Maddalena. It stands as a stunning witness and embodiment of what it means to wait in hope even for the one who herself is so broken.

In this age of "savage inequalities"<sup>5</sup> and unspeakable crimes against the human spirit, we need to be fearless in our vocation to hope, to dare what we really desire for ourselves and those we lead and teach. As religious educators, we need to pause, to reflect on our vocations, to linger with the questions that surface, and to dwell with the hope that "*perches in the soul/and sings the tune without the words/ and never stops at all.*"<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, each one of us is called to "give an account of the hope that is within us."<sup>7</sup>

### **Pursuing Purpose**

I intend to draw on the work of William Lynch, S.J., specifically his writing on the hopeful imagination. Lynch's theoretical framework will ground the paper as I seek to explore the role of the arts in illuminating the hopeful imagination. In order to nourish our vocation as religious educators and to lead our communities with hope, I argue that we engage with a broad repertoire of texts, scripts, and scores, as well as develop an appreciation for the visual arts not only ourselves but with those whom we teach. By attending to the aesthetic dimension of our own lives and the lives of those to whom we minister, through engagements with literature, poetry, and drama and with heightened appreciation for music and the visual arts, we may awaken dreams of possibility and hope that we might otherwise not have had. The paper will draw on a rich selection of literary and art works to suggest how we may lead in times of great uncertainty because

*Hope is the thing with feathers...  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.*<sup>8</sup>

### **The Hope-filled Imagination**

Hope lies at the very core of being human. It is both a fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of whatever entrapment may be entangling us. According to William Lynch, hope involves three basic ideas: "What I hope for I do not have or see; it may be difficult; but I can have it - it is possible."<sup>9</sup> In the limit situations of life, hope searches for alternative pathways, openings for transcendence. It is present in every moment even as it looks forward to the future. "We move into the future,

therefore, to the degree that we have hope."<sup>10</sup> The future promises a fulfillment that the present only hints at but can never realize. Hoping in the promise moves us toward horizons of possibility that challenge the way we see things as they are in the present reality.

We live by hope, a hope that grows as we grow. One of the ways in which hope matures and becomes more steadfast is that it develops a vision of being able to live within a context, within a field - a field of life, a field of dreams.<sup>11</sup> Hope comes to know that things have their own contexts and are not absolute.<sup>12</sup> In the face of the impossible, hope enables us to look the difficulty straight in the eye and understand it in its context.

This great traditional meaning of hope as that which helps us transcend our endless forms of impossibility, of prison, of darkness, is complimented by an equally classic understanding of the word imagination. For one of the permanent meanings of imagination has been that it is the gift that envisions what cannot yet be seen, the gift that constantly proposes to itself that the boundaries of the possible are wider than they seem.<sup>13</sup>

William Lynch describes the imagination as the healer of hopelessness that break through virtue to new reality. According to Lynch, the imagination is not a single or special faculty; rather, it is all the resources of a person, all faculties, the whole history, one's entire life and heritage brought to bear upon the concrete world inside and outside, in order to form images of the world, and thus to discover the world, cope with it, shape it, and even re-create it. The life of hope is intimately connected to the life of the imagination because hope imagines what is not yet seen. However, Lynch's vision of hope carries the act of imagination one step further insisting that it becomes an act of solidarity. Hope not only imagines; it imagines with.<sup>14</sup>

This public act of imagination, which occurs, I believe, through engagements with the arts, enables each one to gain from aesthetic experiences. Joseph Conrad speaks of his understanding of art in this way:

[The artist] speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain...and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear which binds men [sic] to each other...<sup>15</sup>

I am suggesting that religious educators cultivate awareness and encourage patterns of action for remembering the bonds that we share with one another, for critiquing structures and processes that violate those bonds, and for transcending visions that would limit us. Imaginative literature is rich with texts for illuminating awareness and encouraging actions, which I am suggesting religious educators develop within themselves and in the learning communities within which they teach and lead. Experiences with works of

literature have the power to prompt and provoke the continued fresh thinking we desperately need.

What I am pressing for is the continual expansion of human capacities when we see and promote literature as enlarging religious education programs to include the aesthetic as a way of re-educating the hopeful imagination. I have in mind three literary works that reveal ways of being and acting in the world worthy of critical and creative reflection. Arthur Miller's drama, *After the Fall*, calls us to remember the high price of pretending innocence in the face of unspeakable crimes. Albert Camus's novel, *The Plague*, helps us to see things as they are and summons the only hope in times of pestilence, critical action. Willa Cather's novel, *The Song of the Lark*, tells the story of the one young woman's heroic journey far beyond the limiting vision others had of her.

It is not my attempt to explicate the rich meaning that each of these works holds. All I hope is to invite us to cross thresholds into worlds of imaginative literature, to open doors to multiple meanings, and to act from that central quality that is the root of our lives and spirits as religious educators.

### **Traditions of Remembrance**

We remember so as to hope for a more just and lovelier world. There are memories which are hard to bear, memories of Dachau and Auschwitz, of Hiroshima, of Rwanda and Bosnia. There are acts so terrible that we would rather forget. Is there a history that could be told that could bear all that suffering? It is not enough just to name and see these places of unspeakable human suffering. These are places where hope and the work of imagination need to be done. If we allow memory the space that it needs to re-vision and re-construct reality, it will display the ambiguities, contradictions, and surprises that keep us open to a future.

Literature is rich with texts for remembering the evidence of a tortured world. The literature which we read must break open our hearts. In this, I am reminded of what Franz Kafka wrote:

I think that we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us...we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone whom we love more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be an axe for the frozen sea within us."<sup>16</sup>

Arthur Miller's drama *After the Fall* serves as such a text for remembering the wounds we bear.

The play has as some of its main concerns the death camps in Germany, the anti-Communist hearings in the 1950's here in this country, and the tensions that Quentin, the main character, has with these issues. Guilt and innocence are dominant themes throughout the play with the stark resolution that none of us are ever innocent. We share the responsibility for the actions of all human beings.

Quentin spends most of the time wanting to believe he is innocent. He pretends that innocence especially in the scene when he agrees to defend his friend who is being

investigated by the McCarthy administration for communist activity. When his friend commits suicide, Quentin is secretly filled with joy because the risk he faced to his own life and career in representing his friend is gone.

Good fathers, devoted sons, grateful that someone else will die, not they, and how can one understand that, if one is innocent? If somewhere in one's soul there is no accomplice - of that joy, that joy when a burden dies...and leaves you safe?<sup>17</sup>

Elie Wiesel confesses a similar experience when he and his were father separated in the death camps. "Don't let me find him! If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival and only worry about myself.' Immediately, I felt ashamed of myself, ashamed forever"<sup>18</sup> After such falls from grace, no one is ever innocent again.

Ultimately, however, Quintin's real struggle is his search for hope. In the opening scene of the play, he begins his story in this way. "For an instant there's some - unformed promise in the air...And then, it seeps in my room, my life and its pointlessness. And I thought - if I could corner that hope, find what it consists of and either kill it for a lie or really make it mine."<sup>19</sup> At the end of the play, he begins to understand both Holga's life of suffering which she endured with hope and his own painful search for a life worth living, a life of hope.

That woman hopes!...Or is that...exactly why she hopes, because she knows? What burning cities taught her and the death of love taught me: that we are very dangerous!... And that, that's why I wake each morning like a boy - even now, even now! I swear to you, I could love the world again! Is the knowing all? To know, and even happily, that we meet unblessed; not in some garden of wax fruit and fainted trees, that lie of Eden, but after, after the Fall, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all? And the wish to kill us never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of love - as to an idiot in the house - forgive it; again and again...forever?<sup>20</sup>

When we acknowledge that hope is within our reach, we demonstrate our willingness to be influenced by horizons of possibility. When we act out of traditions of memory that honor the search for truth about ourselves and about what is asked of us, we witness to the hope that is within us and that seeks expression in the way we live and work. Virtue lies in acknowledging the web of human relationships especially when we remember the bonds we share with others in human communities, and when we are willing to critique those structures and processes that violate that solidarity.

## Traditions of Critique

Literary artists intensify attentiveness to the concrete world within which we all live and move and have our being. They hover in thought and imagination about every moving thing, and their singular focus hollows life. Attending to things as they are, artists pursue paths that deeply honor local knowledge with all its character, color, and contours, while, at the same time, evoking a kind of sympathetic or tacit knowing that acknowledges the meanings which lie just below the surface of all things.

In powerful ways, literature lures us to examine the promise and the paradox that reside in particularities, to explore other perspectives and possibilities, and to imagine lovelier and more just ways of living in the world. On another level, literature can open us to feelings of immediacy, posture us for moves toward solidarity, and engage us in critiquing social situations that dehumanize. Such actions have moral and ethical dimensions, require thoughtfulness, and enlarge visions.

Learning to be thoughtful is not learning to perform a particular action nor is it acquiring a method of obtaining a particular result; it is developing a 'second nature' which transforms heart and mind.<sup>21</sup>

We see that "second nature" developing in Dr. Rieux, a leading character in Camus's novel, *The Plague*. In the beginning of the story, when the pestilence hits the little French town, the people are cast about, hopeless and resigned to the incurable and inevitable death-dealing disease. At first, Dr. Rieux fights the disease dispassionately simply because that is what his job requires. Only later when he sees in the faces of his patients the horror of the plague's devastation does he discover something deeper about his vocation. Instinctively, he knows he must rethink the manner of his work, re-vision the meaning and purpose of his practice. With renewed commitment, Dr. Rieux decides to fight vigilantly against the plague rather than conspire in its merciless mission against life. In his thoughtful effort to reclaim his vocation of healing, we hear him speak of those "unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences," those who "strive their utmost to be healers."<sup>22</sup>

I am reminded of the way Dr. Rieux first approached his work. After all what more can we do when crisis threatens the very enterprise to which we have committed ourselves. However, when we are willing to imagine with others, wider possibilities become evident. That is precisely what happened with Dr. Rieux. It was Tarou who helped Dr. Rieux see how together they could empower a people grown weary and hopeless to fight against the power of the plague. Thus, Dr. Rieux came to understand his vocation in a deeper way. In re-reading this novel, I wonder what are the "pestilences" in our religious communities today to which some of us will refuse to bow. I wonder what it will cost us "to strive" our "utmost to be" religious educators.

## **Traditions of Transcendence**

Literature has the power to nurture and nourish the life of hope and imagination. Without the ability to imagine, we are incapable of calling communities to see beyond narrow and oppressive visions. We need a recreated imaginative vision so that we can see the kind of defining marks that ultimately limit, and, perhaps even destroy the human spirit.

In suggesting that religious educators recognize capacities for transcendence, I am not speaking here about those mystical and extraordinary moments that some people may experience. Rather, I am encouraging two kinds of pursuits. One pursuit involves an inner journey where we find within ourselves and within our religious communities those unfamiliar landmarks that reveal so much more about who we are. The other pursuit involves setting out in the company of others to uncover the common ground between us. Both pursuits are important in defining who we are and the "more" we are called to be as hope-filled searchers.

The Song of the Lark by Willa Cather illuminates with lasting appeal this theme of stretching beyond boundaries. The story is one of personal struggle as Thea Kronborg fights her way through exacting engagements and dull details in order to give herself more freely to the music she loved. In essence, the story is about a young woman's awakening to something beautiful in herself, and her escape from a world too narrow in order to know and live that beauty through song.

To know Thea's story is to remember the image of her "when she was at her best and became a part of what she was doing and ceased to exist in any other sense."<sup>23</sup> It is to remember those "other times when she was so shattered by ideas that she could do nothing worth while; when they trampled over her like an army and she felt as if she were bleeding to death under them."<sup>24</sup> Later, she would discover that "as she went over her work in her mind, the passages seemed to become something of themselves, to take a sort of pattern in the darkness."<sup>25</sup> Her vocation as a musician was being defined at the same time that she was being stretched beyond the boundaries of the texts she played.

I can remember being both comforted and inspired by Thea. In my own vocation as a religious educator, I have known full well the experience of working long hours practicing to be at one's best and becoming so much a part of what I was doing that I almost disappeared. There is joy in this; however, that experience often followed one where I, too, felt "trampled over" by ideas, e-mails, so many unexpected calls. Sometimes, for me, it was only much later that some bigger purpose took on "a sort of pattern in the darkness." As a religious educator, I have come to believe that hope liberates narrow visions, sees beyond to some unformed promise, and sustains the work of imagination in realizing new horizons.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The paper has attempted to examine the intimate connection between hope and the life of imagination. In particular the paper has suggested excursions through the arts as ways for exploring images of hope. For the purpose of this paper, I have selected three literary works as one way that religious educators together with the religious communities within which they teach and lead could begin a process of critical reflection.

I have identified three movements that would be essential to such critical reflection, namely, traditions of remembering, critiquing, and transcending. Ultimately, such a process is rooted in the power of hope to imagine a more just and lovelier world.

*History says, **Don't hope**  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a further shore  
Is reachable from here.*

Seamus Heaney

#### Notes

1. Emily Dickinson, "XXXII" in The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson Martha Dickinson Bianchi (Ed),. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929.), 19.
2. Walker, Percy, The Moviegoer (New York: Knopfe, 1979), 13.
3. Abraham Heschel, Who Is Man? (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 107-108.
4. Martin Buber I and Thou (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 15.
5. This term has been advanced by Jonathan Kozol
6. Emily Dickinson, "XXXII", 19.
7. I Peter 3:15.
8. Emily Dickinson, "XXXII", 19.
9. William Lynch, S.J. Images of Hope (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 32.
10. Ibid., 34.
11. Ibid., 36.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 35
14. Ibid., 23.
15. Joseph Conrad, "Preface," The Nigger of the Narcissus (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1960) 26.
16. Franz Kafka from his letter to Oskar Pollak, January 24, 1904.
17. Arthur Miller, After the Fall (New York: Bantam Books, 1965) 83.
18. Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Avon Books, 1969) p. 118.
19. Authur Miller, After the Fall, 5.
20. Ibid., 162-163.
21. Frank Schrag, Thinking in School and Society (London: Routledge, 1988), 80.
22. Albert Camus, The Plague (New York: Knoff, 1948), 278.
23. Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (Boton: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 222.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 222-223.