



A DISPOSITION TO DUALISM

WE ALL HAVE A DISPOSITION to dualism in our hearts.

One morning I was standing in a large circle of folk in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church gathered for what was called "a holy and historic moment" for the city, a prayer breakfast drawing

black and white together for the sake of the city, hoping for the flourishing of their city. Hand in hand we sang "Amazing Grace"—"I once was blind but now I see"—with honest longing in our hearts, painfully aware of what the city has been, yearning for what the city can be and should be, gathered in a church building tragically known for the worst in the human heart, the malicious bombing that killed little girls in the midst of the civil rights tension of the 1960s. The former chief of police for Birmingham, an African American woman, led us in song, which itself seemed a remarkable window into what has changed in the city; no longer Bull Connor bullying his way through town, but the great-great granddaughter of slaves given the responsibility for the city's safety. A hint of hope in every important way.

But from beginning to end, I was struck by the irony of history too, the ironies of providence written into the song being sung in that place by those people. In the very room where we were meeting was a glass case with a model of a slave ship, asking us to remember to remember what once was, the reality that every black person there was a descendent of someone who had been stolen away from an African home, chained to hundreds of others in the hold of a ship that made its way across the "Middle Passage" as the trip was called from Africa to America. Those who made it across the Atlantic were sold as slaves in the Savannahs of these United States; those who didn't were thrown overboard along the way, chattel as they are, disposable property as they were.

And as most everyone knows, John Newton, composer of "Amazing Grace," was a slave-ship captain. In our fantasies we imagine that he did the unimaginable and horrible before his conversion, but that soon after he came to faith he understood the wrong written into his work, "I once was blind but now I see," and

then urged his young friend William Wilberforce to stay in politics and work for the abolition of slavery.

That would be a happier story. But from what we know from history, Newton kept at his slave trading for years, continuing to captain ships full of slaves while on the top deck leading other officers in the study of Scripture—seemingly unable to connect his worship and his work, his beliefs with his behavior.

For a thousand complex reasons of the heart, like Newton, we are disposed to dualism. We choose incoherence rather than coherence, a fragmented worldview over a seamless way of life. For example, painfully so in the political seasons of life, we are first of all liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats, our social and political ideologies shaping our identities; then we are good Baptists too, good Catholics too, good Methodists too, and on and on and on.

What particularly struck me about the irony of singing Newton's song while in the room with the slave ship was the sober reminder that the work of thinking Christianly is hard work. We do not come to it naturally. We are disposed to dualism, to carving up our consciences to allow us to believe one thing and behave as if another thing is true. "Did God really say . . . ? Of course not!" is the temptation coursing its way through the human heart.

It was a long pilgrimage for Newton, perhaps twenty-five years, maybe longer. While he stopped slave trading some five years after his initial repentance, it was not until thirty years later that he made his first public statement, acknowledging his sorrow. "It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

I don't despise him for that. How could I possibly, so very clay-footed as I am? So very frail a man that I am? To learn to see clearly

is a long and always difficult work—disposed to dualism that we are. We are idolatrous people, twisting our hearts and world to make our choices for autonomy more comfortable in our conflicted consciences. We will do what we want to do when we want to do it, almost always.

That it took thirty years for Newton to begin to recognize this strange grace is worth pondering. Blind as we are, hoping for sight as we do, most of the time the work of grace is more "slowly, slowly" as the Africans describe their experience of life in this wounded world. Grace, always amazing, slowly, slowly makes its way in and through us, giving us eyes to see that a good life is one marked by the holy coherence between what we believe and how we live, personally and publicly—in our worship as well as our work—where our vision of vocation threads its way through all that we think and say and do.

The Hebrews called this *avodah*, a wonderfully rich word that at one and same time means "liturgy," "labor," and "life." A tapestry woven of everything in every way. That is the world we were meant to live in, and that is the world that someday will be. But now, in this very now-but-not-yet moment of history, we stumble along, longing for grace that connects our beliefs about the world with the way we live in the world. Over time, grace found Newton, transforming him heart and mind: "Now I see." May it be so for every one of us, blind as we are to our own disposition to dualism, hungry as we are for something more.

Photo of the stained-glass window in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama; a gift of the children of Ireland to the church, remembering the bombing that killed the five girls.



A HARD QUESTION

A HINT OF HOPE—and sometimes that is all there is.

I gave a lecture in Charlottesville hosted by the Center for Christian Study, the “father” now of study centers throughout the United States. The center has a long history of offering resources of mind and heart for the students of the University of Virginia. My lecture asked, “Can We Know the World and Still Love the World?”—not a surprising question for anyone who knows me, but it is always a hard question, one that is asked from my heart.

The main room was full of folk, mostly undergraduates, some graduate students, and a few faculty. As I am wont, I made an effort to step into the world they inhabit, believing that they were just like me. And so I first said something about my assumption in coming into the room: we have all been hurt; we all have known sorrow; we all have experienced the wounds of the

world. I don’t wonder about that, but I simply assume it is true for everyone everywhere.

And in that we are not alone. So I told the story of Walker Percy, a son of the South whose family was torn asunder by the suicides of both his grandfather and his father. Before he was out of adolescence, his mother died too, of what was always seen to be mysterious circumstances; that is, her car was found in a levee outside of town, and no one ever knew whether she intended the “accident” or it “just happened.” After his own undergraduate years at the University of North Carolina, he went to medical school at Columbia University. But before he began his residency, he contracted tuberculosis and eventually had to give up his plans to become a physician. Over the next twenty years he tried and tried to find a way forward—without much success. The world had been hard on him, losing both parents and his professional plans. What would he do now? Was there anything to do?

At age forty-five he wrote another story, hoping that someone somewhere would read it. And surprise of surprises, *The Moviegoer* won the National Book Award for Fiction, and that honor catapulted him into a place of prominence he never left. Over the next years he wrote several apocalyptically themed novels, *The Last Gentleman*, *The Second Coming*, *Love in the Ruins*, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and more. Once asked about his willingness to look the bleakness of the human condition in the eye, Percy responded, “Yes, I will do that . . . but there is always going to be a hint of hope in my work too.”

A hint of hope.

I spent some time that night on the heartaches of the world, pondering songs and songwriters who have artfully mourned for the sake of the world—from the Smashing Pumpkins to the Fray to Mumford and Sons. I even invited the students to choose a

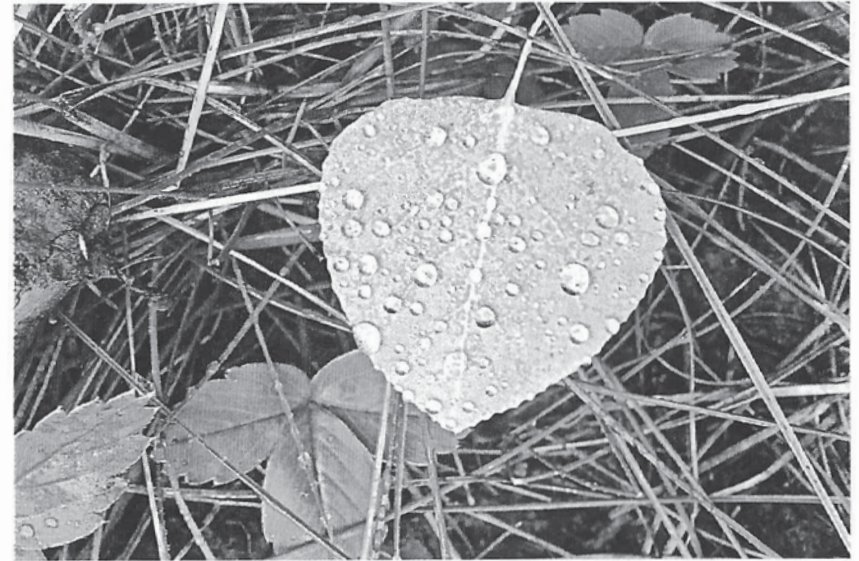
sorrow from that week. Would it be the martyrs in Libya, the burning to death of the Jordanian pilot, the murders in Paris? Or more locally, what about the Rolling Stone article on the rape culture at UVA, the story that wasn't true, and yet tragically and horribly is true. I wasn't trying to be mean but rather to have them think hard with me. Knowing what we know about the world, what will we do? How will we respond?

Can we know this world and still love it?

Most of the time we mused over the possibility of a way of knowing that implicates us, for love's sake, in the way the world turns out. A knowledge that means responsibility and a responsibility that becomes care. And of course I told several stories of former UVA students I have known and loved, who, having spent their years at Mr. Jefferson's university, are now working out their lives in the midst of the messiness of the world—its sociological and historical complexities, its economic and financial complexities, its medical and military complexities.

In their different ways, each is someone who understands life as a vocation, a life offered in service to the world born of a love for God. In their distinct ways, each is someone who sees their life as a way of answering the question of the night. Yes, in their own unique ways, each is a hint of hope—and sometimes that is the best we get.

Photo of the pavilions on the lawn at the University of Virginia.



ASSUMING COHERENCE

ONE MORNING I spent a couple of hours in a Google Hangout with several people in Chicago, taking part in a dissertation proposal meeting, hoping on hope that one day a PhD would be granted for the completion of good work well done. I was asked to participate because the student has drawn on ideas I have written about; the focus of her work for the degree has been the focus of my work.

At one point, her dissertation adviser commented that something she had written showed “conceptual congruity,” an image that intrigued me. For most my life I have been drawn to the vision of coherence, believing in the deepest possible way that that is the truest truth of the universe. There is an intended seamlessness to human life under the sun. If we have eyes to see, there is congruity, and our task is to make sense of what is there. Life is meant to be