

## **Annie Dillard: Getting a Feel for the Place** **Burton Carley**

### **Introduction**

"We are here on the planet only once, and might as well get a feel for the place. We might as well get a feel for the fringes and hollows in which life is lived . . . "

-Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

There is more than one way to get a feel for a place. Let us imagine that the place is a giant roller coaster with miles of ascending, dipping, turning, hair-raising track. Dillard and her Prairie Group companion are in the first car, open space before them. We rise to a high peak of track, and before racing down into oblivion there is the briefest pause. In that instant we are suspended between past and future. I am the passenger who in this moment closes his eyes, fuses his white-knuckled hands around the safety-bar, draws a deep breath, and wonders what craziness brought him to this place. (An unholy trinity of faces flash in the mind's eye. About them circles an airplane trailing a banner that reads "Program Committee.") Dillard is the wide-eyed passenger who raises her hands high into the sky, breathes with excited anticipation, and wonders at the view from her high perch. The point of no return passes. The plunge sends the stomach somersaulting over the heart upward the throat. In the rush and roar of the wind there reactive words sputter out of my mouth. "Oh, my God!" It is a hopeless plea for mercy. Then I hear Dillard chanting something in the midst of the madness. It sounds like "Carpe Diem . . . Carpe Diem."

The Prairie Group man is simply happy to endure the ride, to survive it in one piece so that he can talk about it. The Pilgrim Poet woman surrenders to the experience and discovers in the journey clues to the mystery of another world. She waves to the gods while being flung about while he clings to anything that has "safety" printed on it. There is more than one way to get a feel for a place.

### **The Secret of Seeing**

"What if the man would see Beauty Itself, pure unalloyed, stripped of mortality and all its pollution, stains, and vanities, unchanging, divine,...the man becoming, in that communion, the friend of God, himself immortal;...would that be a life to disregard?"

-Plato, quoted by Dillard in *The Writing Life*

*An American Childhood* is a portrait of Dillard's Pittsburgh childhood. That literary canvas about a place and a life, as in her nonfiction prose and narrative essays, goes beyond the reporting of facts and events. She combines experience and reflection to paint with words what it feels like to be alive and awake. The words

describe and evoke consciousness.

Dillard tells a story in her memoir about an incident one winter morning when she was age seven. Taking advantage of a fresh snow, she and some friends engaged in the dangerous sport of throwing snowballs at passing cars. Though the white missiles often hit the chosen target, never had a driver stopped to retaliate. On this morning, however, a black Buick pulled over and a man burst from it. The chase was on. The children scattered, running for their lives. Dillard took off with one of her partners in crime, and the driver chose to pursue them.

The amazing thing to Dillard is that the man refused to give up. Block after block they ran, through backyards and hedges, over picket fences, between the narrow passages of houses, down an alley, across streets and up a woodpile in the attempt to escape the relentless man. No matter how crafty the navigation it is impossible to lose him. The running man earns her admiration and he teaches her something: "It was an immense discovery, pounding into my hot head with every sliding, joyous step, that this ordinary adult evidently knew what I thought only children trained at football knew: that you have to fling yourself at what you're doing, you have to point yourself, forget yourself, aim, dive" (*Childhood*, p. 47).

Overcome with fatigue, Dillard and her friend are finally captured. Everyone struggles to breathe. When the man begins the expected lecture the spell is broken. The scolding words are "beside the point." The hunt is everything, the drama of it. The chase invigorates the senses and challenges the imagination. The glory is that it requires so much: "The point was that he had chased us passionately without giving up, and so he had caught us" (*Childhood*, p. 48).

Passionate engagement and a kind of spiritual urgency are the hallmarks of Dillard's mystical vision. To get a feel for the world one must be dedicated to seeing it. She tells her students that they must give their lives to writing: ". . . you can't be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadax" (*Holy the Firm*, p. 18). Her plea is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's assertion that the purpose of a book (and likewise a sermon) is to serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us. Dillard would be the instrument breaking through the frozen separating the modern self from the world. She wields prose as if it were an axe, a powerful and compelling means of penetrating the tundra of modern consciousness. She points the way and beckons with a quote from Jacques Ellul: "Launch into the deep and you shall see" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 33).

What stops us from launching into the deep? It is the attitude of walking up to things and telling them in advance what they're doing. We cannot get a feel for the place because we imagine that we are in control of it. Dillard describes the problem in *Pilgrim* (pp. 11-12):

An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn't the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he'll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why.

In an essay published sixteen years after *Pilgrim*, Dillard talks about the same problem with a sense of irony (*Incarnation*, p. 32):

Our lives are complex. There are many things we must consider before we go considering any lilies. There are many things we must fear. We are in charge; we are running things in a world we made; we are nobody's little flock.

Absorbed in a world we made, there is a failure to take the created world seriously. The good question according to Dillard is the one Allah asks in the Koran: "The heaven and the earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them *in jest?*" Near the conclusion of *Pilgrim* she affirms: "Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest" (p. 270).

Dillard makes frequent use of words like "creator," "creatures," and "created." In *Holy* (p. 25) one short paragraph is seeded with "created" four times:

I salt my breakfast eggs. All day long I feel created. I can see the blown dust on the back of my hand, the tiny trapezoids of chipped clay, moistened and breathed alive. There are some created sheep in the pasture below me, sheep set down here precisely, just touching their blue shadows hoof to hoof on the grass. Created gulls pock the air, rip great curved seams in the settled air: I greet my created meal, amazed.

These lines elicit a particular kind of consciousness. To feel created is to participate in a given world, one in which all things mineral and alive are no happenstance. Thus we should not take stones or songbirds for granted. "We are here to witness," to pay attention to "the whole inhuman array" and be amazed (*Teaching*, p. 72). To see and appreciate the physical creation is to hallow it. It is the work of faith.

It is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, thought by Dillard to be the great religious thinker of the century, who maintained that there is an important relationship between awe and faith. For Heschel awe is the cornerstone upon which faith is built. Awe precedes insight. Wisdom is not the result of "shrewdness" or "calculation," but comes in moments of awe when there is a rapport with the mystery of creation.

The repair of faith in our age begins with the recovery of sight; the ability to see with new eyes, to feel created and placed on earth as a pilgrim to hallow the world by wandering through its power and beauty with eyes open, in awe. To be so alive is to admit (*Pilgrim*, pp. 8-9):

We don't know what's going on here . . . We don't know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.

There is a secret to really seeing the place. Dillard distinguishes between two kinds of seeing. There is the seeing with the mind: "When I see this way I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head" (*Pilgrim*, p. 31). The second way of seeing is more rare. It is seeing with the spirit. The eye can be informational, the organ of phenomenal observation that sees with the mind. The eye can also be transformational, the religious symbol of seeing beyond appearance with the spirit. When Dillard sees with the spirit it: "involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied" (*Pilgrim*, p. 31). The eye of the mind has an objective curiosity. The spiritual eye has a holy curiosity. This is the mystical premise at the heart of seeing with the spirit. It is the positing of an inner world that is as real as the world around us.

Revelations and epiphanies abound in Dillard's books. One occurs in *Pilgrim* (p. 33) after she reads about a healed blind girl who, seeing for the first time, describes in excitement a "tree with lights in it" :

Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power.

How does one see this way, see with the spirit? Thoreau went to the woods to live deliberately. In *Teaching* (p. 15) Dillard goes to Hollins Pond: "not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it." Since we forget where we are we must forget ourselves to remember. It is self-consciousness that hinders getting a feel for the place: "Self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies" (*Pilgrim*, p. 81). Woe to Unitarian-Universalists!

In the place of self-consciousness Dillard urges the cultivation of a healthy poverty, a self-forgetting attention and new found innocence. The innocence she

recommends is not sentimental: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state of any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration" (*Pilgrim* p. 82). To be quiet, still, watchful and expectant contributes to a self-stripping which makes possible a deeper way of seeing. The absence of self is not an absence to the world. One does retreat inside the self but outside the self. There one waits because seeing with the spirit cannot be manufactured. Self-conscious effort gets in the way: "you don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled" (*Pilgrim*, p. 33) The filling, however, is not automatic. When it comes it is as a gift and there is total surprise.

To get a feel for the place one must see with the spirit by letting go of the self and launching into the deep. It is the secret of seeing, "the pearl of great price" that "may be found" but never "sought" (*Pilgrim*, p. 33). It is the communion between the one who sees and what is seen, between one who feels and that which one feels. It is to be the friend of God by "hallowing" the things of this created place. It is to make a life into a psalm: "I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of house and the place where dwelleth thy glory" (Psalm 26:8 used as the epigraph in *Childhood*). Would that be a life to disregard?

### **The Transcendental Impulse**

"We learn nothing rightly until we learn the symbolical character of life.  
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is more than one way to see. There is also more than way to interpret the world. The material view is that what you literally see is what you get. There is no meaning to be found behind, beyond or underneath the physical world. One can describe the material universe, try to understand how it works, even enjoy it, but there is little curiosity about why there is something rather than nothing and what the universe is for. The imagination wavers at this point and may wink out because there is so much more to do than contemplate the impossible. In *Living by Fiction* (p.136) Dillard makes the following observation:

Christianity and science, which on big issues go hand in hand intellectually as well as historically, everywhere raised the standard of living and cut down on the fun. Everywhere Christianity and science hushed the bushes and gagged the rocks. They razed the sacred groves, killed the priests, and drained the flow of meaning right off the planet. They built schools; they taught people to measure and add, to write, and to pray to an absent God. The direction of recent history is toward desacralization, the unhinging of materials from meaning. The function of Western knowledge is to "de-spookify."

The material view weakens the idea that the world has any meaning in and of itself. In terms of meaning the world is still-born. Look not or seek for there is

nothing to be found or discovered. There is nothing to interpret. If you want meaning you must make it up as you go. Thus the mute world does give birth to something. Its name is relativism.

There is another way to interpret the world. The spiritual view claims that reasoning women and men may discover from their experience of the world some meaningful coherence. One may, then, investigate the world as it actually is for clues to a reality that is not immediately apparent. One probes the universe and attends to the resulting experience in the hope that human life is purposeful within a larger context than the individual meanings we assign it. Dillard is drawn to this way of interpreting the world (*Living*, p. 144):

May we not analyze the breadth of our experience? We can and may--but only if we first consider the raw world as a text, as a meaningful, purposefully fashioned creation, as a work of art. For we have seen that critics interpret artifacts only. Our interpreting the universe as an artifact absolutely requires that we posit an author for it, or a celestial filmmaker, dramatist, painter, sculptor, composer, architect, or choreographer. And no one has been willing openly to posit such an artist for the universe since the American transcendentalists and before them the Medieval European philosophers.

Dillard mentions the American transcendentalists. These are men and women she resonates with. Her favorite author is Melville, and she considers *Moby Dick* the best novel in English. Emerson, Dickinson, Thoreau and Whitman are among the other writers with whom she feels a strong rapport. With them she shares the 19th-century emphasis on seeing or vision, and the assumption that events and objects have a spiritual meaning. Another common interest is the belief that there is a connection from self to the world and the world to God.

There are many parallels between Dillard and the transcendentalists she admires. Emerson thought of himself as a poet. He wrote in his essay "The Poet" that the poet's insight is "a very high sort of seeing," a way of transcending conventional modes of thought in order to attend directly to the forms of things. In a similar way Dillard thinks of herself as an artist, and she makes the distinction between seeing with the mind and seeing with the spirit. Both the poet and the artist interpret the spiritual meaning of events, reading nature as a divine text. They share a mystical faith that the particular gives evidence of the universal. They share a relationship to religion. All use symbolic language that gives rise to larger realities. Literature as art and poetry, however, aims not to impart doctrine or creed but inspiration.

The transcendentalist conviction is that the ordinary course of nature is endowed with symbolic significance, and the intimations of the unseen may be grasped by direct intuition. As Captain Ahab says in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks." In *Pilgrim* (p. 137) Dillard writes: "What I aim

to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to keep myself open to their meanings . . . " Nature is not a phenomenon simply to obtain information about, but can yield a sense of the numinous. Facts, information, and events are used metaphorically. A moth flying into the flame of a candle, a burned child, an encounter with a weasel, the struggle of a captured deer, a total eclipse, a neighborhood Santa Claus, and the buying of wine for communion point to revelations and mysteries beyond themselves for Dillard. She attempts to get a feel for the place where facts, information, events and things exist in order to catch a glimpse of this other world. She does this to learn the significance of facts, information, events and things. She does this in the hope of discovering something important about the human condition.

So Dillard agrees with Emerson about the importance of learning the symbolical character of life. The transcendental impulse, however, carries her closer to Melville than to Emerson. There is a keener sense of irony in her writing. The world, full of glory, is not a safe place to be. Dick is contrasted to the havoc it wrecks. The whiteness of Moby Dillard also shows a lack of interest in utopian or reformist goals. Her message is one of hallowing creation by bearing witness to it, and honoring the divine mystery it reflects. Emerson had a more noble goal. His vision saw the transfiguration of the world through the soul. There will be nothing disagreeable in this world of harmony where all "swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies" will vanish (*Nature*, p. 42). Dillard wants to get a feel for the place as it is rather than reshape it into something it is not.

The transcendental impulse flows through Dillard's view of the world. She goes out into the world to truly see it, and to attend her experience of it. Then she reflects on that experience, and gives expression to it as the artist paints the landscape. In order to see she yields herself in an act of faith which is a particular way of interpreting the world. Her faith is that the raw world is a text that may be apprehended though often difficult to decipher. She is a pilgrim stalking the world for its revelation and meaning. It is a pilgrimage of faith, seeking if that confidence is well founded or not.

### **The Inscrutable Ways of God**

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it."

-Amos, quoted by Dillard in *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*

To and fro goes Dillard, from sea to sea and across the land, seeking the signature of God. The subject she seeks to discern is God. The object of that discernment is nature, what the special seeing identified with spirit can observe.

What she notices in nature is troubling. It is not all beauty. That is only half of the picture. It is also terrifying. One day she discovered a frog that didn't jump. A giant water bug was sucking out the dissolved contents of its victim (*Pilgrim*, pp. 5-6):

He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink.

Beauty and violence are equal parts of the mystery of the world. What does this say about God? In a poem she writes (*Tickets*, p. 110): "I no longer believe in divine playfulness". Getting a feel for the place is something more than a romantic adventure. It involves suffering, and being a witness to random acts of terror. What she sees does not convince her that the author of creation is necessarily beneficent by human standards. "That something is everywhere and always amiss is part of the very stuff of creation" (*Pilgrim*, p. 180). She is cautious of an easy-going pantheism, a mindless mysticism, that projects God everywhere and assumes all is right in the divinely illumined world.

The tension in Dillard's writing is created by her unwillingness to strip God of power in the name of goodness. The text of the world does not indicate that God is a manageable deity. In *Pilgrim* (p. 270) she calls God "a maniac," and in *Holy* (p. 46) she says "that this one God is a brute and traitor, abandoning us to time, to necessity and the engines of matter unhinged." She does not stalk the God domesticated by goodness and tamed of anything alien. The vapid God of modern sensibilities is not real to her. Nor is she seduced by God's replacement, self-important ego. She does not nail God down with niceness but allows God to be I Am Who I Am or I Will Be Who I Will Be. At least the God of Job's whirlwind had the freedom to act contrary to human motivations. Getting a feel for the place restores the size of creation so that in its context humanity may exceed the environs of self-improvement. The inscrutable ways of in this place make faith an adventure again.

Complexity and ambiguity are inherent in the human experience of living in this place. Faith and experience are often at odds. Dillard would know God firsthand without denying the reality of the harsh or ugly. Her mysticism will not abandon hard fact. The relation between good and evil continues to trouble the garden. In this place the sublime mingles with the brutal; the same energies support and destroy life



Perhaps this is why things that burn are prominent in Dillard's imagery. Fire, fire-- everywhere flame and fire. In the opening chapter of *Holy* Dillard recalls a camping experience when a large golden female moth flew into the mesmerizing light of a candle. There it became one with the hot light, sizzled, and stuck to the melting wax. The shell of the moth acted as a second wick, "glowing within . . . like a flame-faced virgin gone to God" (p. 17). For two hours the immolating moth gave Dillard more light for reading.

The theme of flame and sight continues when Dillard's cat dragged in a winged creature, smoldering but alive. Dillard rescued the "god." Later that day the god rides on her shoulder as she takes a walk. Singing in her ear, the god called attention to new islands in the sound.

The images of burnt moths and a scorched god serve as an introit to the central event of the book. Out of the beautiful sky falls a plane. Its engine has stalled after takeoff, and a fir tree snagged one wing. The pilot grabs his daughter Julie and runs for safety away from the crashed plane. Then the plane explodes and flaming debris hits the seven-year-old child's face. She alone is singled out for brutality. Her face is burnt off.

The Absolute is associated with the power of holy fire. The character of fire is that it not only illuminates but sears too. What inspires as light also burns as flame. Holiness is a grace and a terror.

The suffering of the creatures of this place is likewise the theme of "The Deer of Providencia." Dillard is visiting the village of Providencia in the Ecuadorian jungle. In the clearing of the village is a captured deer roped to a tree. The villagers will eat it that night. All day long the handsome deer struggled hopelessly to free itself. At lunch Dillard learns that she is eating stewed venison: "It was good. I was surprised at its tenderness. But it is a fact that high levels of lactic acid, which builds up in muscle tissues during exertion, tenderizes" (*Teaching*, p. 63).

The scene changes. Home after the trip, Dillard wakes up and combs her hair. On the mirror she looks into is a newspaper clipping with the photograph of Alan McDonald who is covered in bandages. For two years she has kept the article in view. It reports that McDonald is in serious condition from burns when a bowl of gunpowder exploded on him. The pathos of the man's plight is reinforced by the knowledge that as a boy he had been horribly burned in another accident involving gasoline. He had endured years of reconstructive surgery. The man's plaintive cry begins the story: "Why does God hate me?" Dillard writes (*Teaching*, pp. 65-66):

I read the whole clipping again every morning. This is the Big Time here, every minute of it. Will someone please explain to Alan McDonald in his

dignity, to the deer at Providencia in his dignity, what is going on? And mail me the carbon.

Getting a feel for the place arouses disturbing questions. Dillard struggles with the idea of divine providence. Is there a plan for creation? Is there a purpose at all? For a pilgrim, for a faithful pilgrim, questions abound (*Holy*, pp. 48-49):

Has God a hand in this? Then it is a good hand. But has he a hand at all? Or is he a holy fire burning self-contained for power's sake alone? Then he knows himself blissfully as flame unconsuming, as all brilliance and beauty and power, and the rest of us can go hang . . .

But how do we know--how could we know--that the real is there? By what freak chance does the skin of illusion ever split, and reveal to us the real, which seems to know us by name, and by what freak chance and why did the capacity toprehend it evolve?

These questions evoke the memory of another skilled writer perplexed by the inscrutable ways of God: "He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The ancient preacher and the modern pilgrim rattle God's chain without success. They share an unfulfilled yearning: "I said, 'I will be wise'; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" (Ecclesiastes 7:23-24).

Bereft of answers, what is a pilgrim to do? The burden of faith is also a blessing. It allows one to hope and Dillard hopes that before the unaccountable One love is greater than knowledge. While she is reading this hope floats up to her consciousness (*Holy*, p. 45):

Angels, I read, belong to nine different orders. Seraphs are the highest; they are aflame with love for God, and stand closer to him than the others. Seraphs love God; cherubs, who are second, possess perfect knowledge of him. So love is greater than knowledge; how could I have forgotten?

The passion of Dillard's writing is that of an earth-bound seraph. It is the passion of love, and words like sacrificial fagots are thrown together and ignited. The smoke of them rises as incense to the fathomless God. Her questions are spoken as a mystic in a lover's quarrel with Divinity. The fiery demands are not those of a cynic outside of faith, but of one who is almost defiantly faithful to the Other. The complaints come from within a relationship. Her pain is the pain of a lover. The intensity erupts from an investment in fidelity

In an interview for *Bostonia* magazine (published at Boston University, Summer 1995, p. 21), Elie Wiesel was asked if he had felt God to be indifferent. His response echoes Dillard's posture of faith:

I went through many stages. At times I felt that God was cruel, that God was absent. The main thing I felt was that God was silent. But it's still a question Was He indifferent? Was He cruel? Was He trying to punish for love? My questioning of God goes on. But even from the beginning I believed in questioning God from inside faith, not from outside faith. It is because I believe that I am all the time questioning.

Questions asked from within faith are more than rational observations. What Dillard's reason demands is a pale reflection of the fire in her heart. In *Holy* (p. 62) there is a moment of resolution when she reflects: "There are no events but thoughts and the heart's hard turning, the heart's slow learning where to love and whom. The rest is merely gossip, and tales for other times. " After knowledge fails there is love. The earnest protests have a ring of Yes to them. Thus she confesses (*Holy*, p. 55): "I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand." To write and tell stories about the mysterious things of this place is her agency. Out of the hot smithy of her heart words and images are hammered out. In the blaze of them, through the suffering of all things alive and the silence of God, there shines a hopefulness. It is the hope of the lover for the beloved. Bearing witness to the mystery of this place and pursuing its inscrutable creator is an act of worship.

Emerson said that the purpose of worship is to enlarge us. Getting a feel of the place also increases our spiritual depth. In this place one sees beauty without end and untold suffering. Speaking before students and faculty at Brigham Young University in 1989, Dillard talked about the "hard truths without which faith and our optimism would be mindless and small and sentimental." She said: "We have minds and we have creative imaginations so that we can use them, I think, to test our beliefs against all that we can learn and so to enlarge and strengthen them in the complexity of truth" (*Listening for God* videocassette, Augsburg Fortress, 1994). The puzzle of this place, its elaborate interweaving of glory and terrible truths, does not yield to a final solution. The endeavor, however, of using our minds and creative imaginations to survey the physical landscape for its spiritual meaning enlarges the ability to live and feel deeply. It gives dimension to faith. For Dillard it requires everything. It is a labor born of love and the desire to worship God by any means at hand.

### **God's Spy**

"If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

-George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Mystics are not in the business of solving everything. They live at the intersection of two worlds, the "gaps" Dillard would say where time and eternity comeingle. They see with the spirit and speak of their experience. There is a metaphysical

strain in their thought. When pondering the subject of carnivorousness Dillard states: "These things are not issues, they are mysteries" (*Teaching*, p. 64). Mystics have more of a vocation than a business. The concern of that impulsion is consciousness.

Consciousness is the common theme in Dillard's work. She believes that there is "a massive failure of imagination" (*Pilgrim*, p. 144) that blinds us to the place where we find ourselves. Her writing attempts to restore our dull vision and make us newly sighted. The moving images and stories stir up the imagination. The invitation is to dive and go below the surface with what Eliot called "a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life." Seeing with the spirit the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

In *Holy* (p. 22) Dillard describes herself in this way: "A nun lives in the fires of the spirit, a thinker in the bright wick of the mind, an artist lives jammed in the pool of materials." It is the nun that is inspired. Later in the book (p. 74) she talks about Julie, the burned child with no face: "You might as well be a nun. You might as well be God's chaste bride . . . There are two kinds of nuns, out of the cloister or in, you can serve or you can sing " In the end Dillard hopes Julie's face will be repaired and that she will be able to have a good life. The last words are (p. 76): "so live. I'll be the nun for you. I am now." Dillard serves out of the cloister. She will bear Julie's suffering for God's love.

A passage from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act V, Scene III) lifts up another aspect of Dillard's service to God. Lear and his daughter Cordelia have been captured. Believing they will go to prison, Lear encourages his once rejected Cordelia not to lose heart:

. . . So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too--  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out--  
And take upon's the mystery of things  
As if we were gods' spies . . .

In this place Dillard has taken upon herself the mystery of things. She quit her tent to keep an eye on things, God's nun out of the cloister, living in the fires of the spirit, giving witness to creation. She is God's spy. She is God's visionary, hallowing this place with her attention. It is her vocation (*Childhood*, p. 173):

Some days I felt an urgent responsibility to each change of light outside the sunporch windows. Who would remember any of it, any of this our time, and the wind thrashing the limbs outside? Somebody had to do it, somebody had to hang on to the days with teeth and fists, or the whole

show had been in vain. That it is impossible never entered my reckoning. For work, for a task, I had never heard the word.

## **Confession**

"You go to a Catholic church and there are people of all different colors and ages, and babies squalling. You're taking a stand with these people. You're saying: 'Here I am. One of the people who love God.' "

-Dillard, *New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 26, '92

Dillard is a Christian mystic, and her literary work may be interpreted as a confession of faith. Her institutional pilgrimage has taken her from the Presbyterian church of her childhood, through whatever church was at hand, to the Roman Catholic church.

Now I come to my own confession. After twenty-one years of ministry in our congregations I have come to notice that all the generations since Plymouth we have not shed our Puritan sensibilities. Family systems do get passed from generation to generation. Emotionally we tend to be Calvinists in sheep's clothing, ravenous in our appetite to get it right. Of spiritual things the people want knowledge, facts, information, graphs, techniques, the bottom line. Who can blame them? I share the questions. The problem is the answers. I have none to offer though I often do.

Blind faith I do not approve of, and yet my faith exists without sure justification. Knowledge did not call me to the ministry of the church though I gladly participate in what we so humbly call a learned profession. Someone, Something, seized my heart at a young age and left my mind free to roam the scattered universe. That is my condition. The mind will still me on an adventure or two, but I'm learning to live more at home in the heart. If an answer should surprise me one day, fine I will happily accept it. I will accept it because I suspect that it will not matter. That is the nature of love. My faults are mostly faults of love. The bad news is that I will never get it right and the good news is that I'm learning not to care. Why should I be embarrassed by my affection? If in the land of unbelief the love of God is a radical notion, so be it.

In the second half of life I seek to complete what started me on the pilgrimage of faith in the first place. I want to grow in my love of God until I flame out. It is one way to get a feel for the place that has been loaned to us. It is enough (I pray) for this pilgrim to close the circle and come home. Send me to worship for the rest of my days and I would live contentedly.

To the pilgrims instructing me along the way--before, now, to come--my gratitude is profound. If the human spirit is the candle of God, then I have been blessed by many illuminating lights on the journey of faith. Thank you.

And so, on a Dillard tune, I skip out of this paper and on my way, "and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen'"

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