

**Brushed With a Clean Wing: A Response to "Annie Dillard: Getting a Feel for the Place" by Burton Carley
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It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.

Annie Dillard, Teaching A Stone To Talk

Ah, Burton. If ever you encounter some hardy character with the temerity to send you anywhere, and the compassion to make it worship for the rest of your days, will you ask them to send me, too? I would go joyfully, I promise, -- humanist, pagan, feminist that I am, -- to spend my hours in contemplation and praise. It is that impulse, for as long as I can remember, that has drawn me to the church and to ministry; that longing to be lost in the chorus of gratitude and wonder, to be still in the presence of eternity, to bend, washed and flowing in the tide of the universe. And yet, before we depart, will someone, of their mercy, please answer me one question: what, or whom, shall we worship, and how?

My heritage is the flat-earth humanist orthodoxy of Unitarian Universalist religious education in the 1960's. Religious experience, especially anything remotely mystical, was understood as an aberration of human psychology; responded to as Scrooge originally does to Marley's ghost; "You are nothing but a bit of undigested beef." I don't start with God; I start with the conviction that the world is the only revelation there is, and my experience the only authority worthy of trust. Yet that very experience has a quality I am taught to call Beauty, though I cannot define beauty; a quality I am taught to call Justice, though I cannot enumerate its rules; a quality I am taught to call Love, even though I can never prove the existence of love. The quality of experience that I would call Holiness is, if anything, more real to me than these others, though it remains equally intangible and undefined.

Am I, then, a mystic? Is Annie Dillard one? It seems to me, as powerfully as I respond to her work, that the answers to these two questions are not unrelated. And does it make any difference, in either case, that we are women? I want to suggest that in a certain kind of odd, inverted, modern way, I am a mystic, and that Annie Dillard speaks to my spiritual condition because to some extent she shares it. Let me confess immediately that my mystical proclivities are perhaps precisely what Evelyn Underhill describes as "an exquisite form of hedonism." What I know of mystical experience, in its perverse UU humanist variety, was not attained through any arduous self-conscious effort of my own, and has not been the fruit of intentional struggle or sacrifice. The yearning comes unbidden, even in a sense forbidden, and my response - spontaneous, passionate, painful - is what I can manage in the moment. I do not cultivate it; I have enough work to do.

The classical understanding of mysticism, as related by Underhill and M.L. delMaestro in his introduction to the Showings of Julian, concerns the aim or experience of union with God, of the soul being caught up into a divine oneness, a complete identification with the whole and that which creates and sustains the whole. This kind of image seems fairly inaccessible to agnostic and humanist modernism. From Carol Flinders I receive a clue to what the project is for me. She says, "no one is to be called a mystic who has not made the experiential discovery that the source of all meaning -- the God of truth, beauty and love, if you will -- is a living presence within herself or himself." Well, I knew that. In fact, that's all I ever knew; God the source of meaning and truth, has always been within me. Where else would it be? How can I seek a state of union with that which is already inherently a part of my being? I don't need mystical experience to know that God is a living presence in myself; the question for me is whether I can externalize God enough, even in imagination, to be able to have a relationship with it. Is it a living presence or reality anywhere else?

My union with God is not in question; that is the pre-supposition. The point of the mystical experience for me is to establish the Otherness of God in such a way that either love or worship has meaning, or makes any sense. I understand the need to love myself as a form of psychological hygiene, but that's not what I want in the love of God, and certainly to worship myself gets to be a dangerous proposition. It is here that the analogy of human sexuality is helpful, for just as it is the encounter with otherness that makes passionate sexuality possible, so it is the encounter with otherness that makes passionate spirituality possible. Experience shows that sexual satisfaction is available as a do-it-yourself proposition; however, making love with an Other is both more interesting and potentially more fruitful. John Dewey would call this sense of otherness "opposition," and say that it is a necessary part of any fulfilling experience. The rock needs its weight, its resistance to us, in order for us to have an experience of lifting it. I need to find a way back from Catherine of Genoa's ecstatic "My ME is God!" to discover the God that is not me, the God that I can engage, in worship and in love.

It is here that Annie Dillard meets me, dragging me down to the creek, and shouting "Look! Look! For heaven's sake, look!" right in my ear. You want a God that is not you? Look at this benighted universe! Would you have done this? It's created, created damn it; it's out there, totally beyond us, the light show slamming into town when we least expect it, reality floating like calved icebergs or island trees, adrift on the sea of our undependable awareness. She does not talk about the disciplines of meditation as an emptying of the mind into the pure presence of God; she speaks of stalking, of the self-control and self-effacement that allow us to see what is really out there in the world. This, I can understand. "I walk out;" she says, "I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten hell." Yes. So have I been brushed, so have I reverberated; shaken, exalted, afraid. But the bell does

not ring of itself; the clean wing is clean precisely because it is not me; if this experience has any integrity, it is something more than merely my resolution of that undigested bit of beef.

Like a latter-day Yahweh answering Job from the whirlwind, Dillard insists that God is not met with in the structures that we invent, however sensible they seem, but in the inexplicably complex and infinite objects of sense experience in the world, and, if that fails to get our attention, in suffering. Pain and suffering and waste make God necessarily other, they highlight the mystery that always exists but is not always easy to see. It is precisely our inability to wrap our minds in understanding or acceptance around the dissolving frog, or the doomed and struggling deer, or the burned child, that forces our separation from God; that reminds us that something other than our consciousness does run the universe, and not the way we would. For this purpose, any suffering will do; it may be our own suffering, the suffering of the world, or even God's own suffering. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the fascination of the Christian mystics with the image of the crucifixion. The God that would allow this to happen -- to the silent and beautiful wildness of the deer, to the innocent humanity of a seven year old girl, to his own son, -- is clearly not the God of my invention. I do not approve, and I am not resigned.

Neither, it would appear, is Annie Dillard. We find ourselves, she observes, paralyzed at a fork in the road, ?unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness.?

?Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak.?

?Consider the former: the world is a monster. Any three year old can see how unsatisfactory and clumsy is this whole business of reproducing and dying by the billions. We have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as a man who flicks a beetle over on its feet. There is not a people in the world who behaves as badly as praying mantises. But wait, you say, there is no right and wrong in nature; right and wrong is a human concept. Precisely; we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world. The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die - does not care if it itself grinds to a halt. It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill. We are free and seeing; we can only try to outwit it at every turn to save our skins.

?Or consider the alternative: Julian of Norwich, the great English anchorite and theologian, cited in the manner of the prophets, these words from God: ?See, I am God: see, I am in all things: see, I never lift my hands off my works, nor ever shall, without end . . . How should anything be amiss?? But now not even the simplest and best of us sees things the way Julian did. It seems to us that plenty is amiss. So much is amiss that I must consider the second fork in the road, that creation itself is blamelessly, benevolently askew by its very free nature, and that it is only human feeling that is freakishly amiss. The frog that the giant water bug

sucked had, presumably, a rush of pure feeling for about a second, before its brain turned to broth. I, however, have been sapped by various strong feelings about the incident almost daily for several years.

?Do the barnacle larvae care? Does the lacewing who eats her eggs care? If they do not care, then why am I making all this fuss? If I am a freak, then why don't I hush?

?Our excessive emotions are so patently painful and harmful to us as a species that I can hardly believe that they evolved. Other creatures manage to have effective matings and even stable societies without great emotions, and they have a bonus in that they need not ever mourn. (But some higher animals have emotions that we think are similar to ours: dogs, elephants, otters and the sea mammals mourn their dead. Why do that to an otter? What creator could be so cruel, not to kill otters, but to let them care?) It would seem that emotions are the curse, not death –emotions that appear to have devolved upon a few freaks as a special curse from Malevolence.

?All right then. It is our emotions that are amiss. We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.?

If in fact it is our emotions that are amiss, then perhaps the goal of traditional mysticism is right after all; become absorbed into the consciousness of God, in which all is well and shall be well, world without end, and it will be genuinely all right about the frog and the deer and little Julie Norwich in the hospital with no face; move beyond the old, unanswerable mystery; recognize that we are not called upon to pass judgment. As Dillard says, you first.

As for me, I just want God to stay out there, somewhere, fixed for just a moment, long enough for me to take aim, and as Dillard suggests, heave the bloody shoulder of sacrifice right between the divine eyes. ?We are people,? she says, ?we are permitted to have dealings with the creator and we must speak up for the creation. ?Now look what you made me do. God look at what you've done to this creature, look at the sorrow, the cruelty, the long damn waste!?? This is, for me anyway, the necessary first movement of the genuinely mystical enterprise; the separation of the God that is eternally one with my own capacity for vision and meaning into an Other with whom dialogue, including accusation, is possible. As is evidently true of the classical mystics in their state of divine union, this externalization involves an effort of imagination that I cannot sustain for very long.

And yet, when it happens, it is powerful, and delicious. As hedonism goes, it is exquisite. For, as Burton points out, it is in the end a lover's quarrel, and he quotes one of my very favorite phrases in all of Dillard's opus: ?There are no

events but thoughts, and the heart's hard turning, and the heart's slow learning where to love and whom. The rest is merely gossip, and tales for other times. In that sweet, brief moment when God is out there, defenseless against my outrage, I in turn am seized and shaken, plunged into my own finitude as a created being - created by who knows whom, but not by my own will - and falling headlong through mystery, gratitude and praise. After knowledge fails (if there be tongues, they shall pass away; if there be prophecy, it shall cease), indeed, there is love. To use our minds and our creative imaginations to test our beliefs against all that we can learn, and so to enlarge and strengthen them in the complexity of truth is an act of faith, and a vocation born of love.

Annie Dillard is a pilgrim in a country whose landmarks are familiar to me, though she has perhaps arrived at a destination different from mine. Nonetheless she illumines my journey with her own, as Burton does, as inevitably these days of conversation among us do. She says, in the passage from *Teaching a Stone to Talk* that I quoted at the beginning that we are, in our spiritual hunger, vainly lighting matches under every green tree, hoping to see again the holy bush that burned and was not consumed. She does something better; perhaps the only possibility left in a desacrilized world, but therefore even more important. She shows us, in the passion of her writing, the green fire of living power that burns in every tree for those who have eyes to see and souls to look. It does not solve the problem of suffering, nor does it provide structures of infallible meaning, yet it points to a deep reality of what I know about my own existence. For her, for all of you, and for that green fire, I can never cease being gratefully amazed.