

THE REMARKABLE ORDINARY

It has been my experience that at a cocktail party or any sort of social occasion, the conversation usually works around at some point to somebody asking, "What do you do?" And I always envy the person who can answer that simply by saying, "I'm a computer expert, or a farmer, or a dietitian, or a sausage stuffer, or what have you. When it comes to me, I have no easy answer to that question. I always stumble over it. I usually start by saying I'm a minister, which is what I think I basically am. The next question, of course, is "Where is your church?" And then I have to say, "Well, I don't have any church." And you can almost always see sort of a glaze go over the eyes of people. And the following question is apt to be "If you don't have a church, what do you do?" and when I say, "I write books," very often their eyes turn up so you can only see the whites of their eyes. They are confused by that. Life is confusing. A minister should have a church, and a writer should write books, and the two are separate and so on, and to have somebody doing both is somehow hard to focus on. I understand that reaction because, in a way, it is hard for me to focus on.

I made the decision when I was at Union Seminary not to go on and be a regular church minister but to write books, and it was a hard decision to make. I remembered people like Gerard Manley Hopkins who, when he went Jesuit, took all of the poems he'd written up to that point and burned them because he figured he was going to give his life to Christ. To him, it meant giving *everything* to Christ. And I know what that means, and I still feel somewhere deep within me a little bit of that, but not much, because I've decided that writing books is a kind of ministry, a sort of weird kind, but a kind. And I also decided that art and religion, though the people whose eyes roll up in their heads don't immediately think so, have a great deal to do with each other. They're both working in very much the same ways and to very much the same end. To explore this idea, let's first look at what art at its best really does.



Consider first of all the simplest, most minimal form of literature I know, a haiku—those little seventeen-syllable poems that grew out of that form of Japanese Buddhism known as Zen and became popular in this country in the '50s and '60s. What I love about the form is that lots of things that literature usually does, haiku don't do at all, but what they do do, I think, is what all literature does. Let me just run one haiku by you. It's not among my favorites, but it's apparently the most famous haiku, and anybody who knows them knows this by heart. It's by the seventeenth-century haiku master Matsuo Bashō:

An old silent pond.
Into the pond a frog jumps.
Splash. Silence again.

Read it again:

An old silent pond.
Into the pond a frog jumps.
Splash. Silence again.

As I said, what I love about this haiku is that so much of what literature normally does is not being done here. The language could hardly be more commonplace. Simple words. Only three of them have more than one syllable. The subject could hardly be more pedestrian. Simply walking along the edge of a pond, frightening a frog who jumps into the pond, then the noise of the splash, and then the return of the silence.

The whole genius of haiku is that they don't mean anything. People who try to figure out what a haiku means are beating up the wrong path. The frog doesn't stand for anything. The pond doesn't stand for anything. The splash has no symbolic value or anything like that. All of these things that other literature might be attempting are not attempted by the haiku at all. The haiku settles for doing, as I read it anyway, one very simple but very crucial thing—it tries to put a frame around the moment. It simply frames a moment. Of course, as soon as you put a frame around anything, you set it off, you make it visible, you make it real. Haiku enable us to see, to experience, this moment that is framed, and in this case, as I say, the most commonplace kind of moment of walking along, the frog plops, the silence comes back, and so on. If you and I had been along by the side of the pond, the chances are we wouldn't even have noticed the frog jumping into the water. We have other things on our mind. We have a place we're going and a place we've come from, other things are happening, your head itches, a cloud passes over the sun. We wouldn't

have noticed it, perhaps, or if we had noticed it, chances are we would've dismissed it by naming it. Just a frog jumping into a pond. We do that all of the time, I think. We name it out of existence. Or we think about it. Maybe we'd think about it sickly, like that phrase in *Hamlet*: "Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." We'd have thought it out of its reality.

But what the haiku does is simply to say, no, no, no, don't do any of those things, don't think about it. Don't name it, just experience it. Hear it, see it, smell it, participate in it. I think that is what all literature, basically, is doing.

Writing does a lot of other things, of course. People write books to instruct. They write books to move us, to scare us, to enlighten us in all sorts of ways. But basically what these works of literature or of art are doing is to say, *Stop thinking*. Stop expecting. Stop living in the past. Stop living in the future. Stop doing anything and just pay attention to *this*. To this boy and this black man floating down the Mississippi River on a raft, this old king going crazy on a heath because two of his three daughters have done terrible things to him; pay attention to this young woman named Anna Karenina who is about to drop in front of a train because her love has failed her. Literature, before it is saying anything else, is saying, Be mindful. Stop whatever else you're doing and notice. Allow yourself to be seized by this, whether it's the frog, or the king, or the black man on the raft.

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Not only, I think, does writing, in a way, ask us to stop, but it also enables us to stop. One of the things I'm always looking for in my old age is a way to stop the chatter that goes on inside of all of us. Of course any book that really works for you stops that

chatter. It enables you to escape—for as long as you're reading it, as long as you're grasped by it—the confines of being you. You can sort of cast off the uniform of your own flesh in some funny way and put on the uniform of somebody else's skin. You can escape the little world that's inside your skin and live inside the world that the writer produces for you. It can be an escape in a frivolous sense, just escaping from you—which is not to be sneezed at, it's rather nice to have happen—but escaping from you into something richer, realer, more immediate, and more shimmering, even if it's only the moment of the frog jumping into the pond. Or a prayer, like the one I heard in a little staff meeting. Everybody was praying at the end of it, it was marvelous, but then a man started singing his prayer and it was at that instance like a work of art. I was so caught up in it. The shimmeringness of it, the un-repeatable-ness of it, the un-verbalizable-ness of it.

So, art is saying *Stop*. It helps us to stop by putting a frame around something and makes us see it in a way we would never have seen it under the normal circumstances of living, as so many of us do, on sort of automatic pilot, going through the world without really seeing much of anything.

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It's even easier to see this, I think, in the case of painting—that art where the painter literally puts a frame around something. And you can think of whatever painting you choose to think of. My wife and I recently went to this marvelous exhibit of Monet, our favorite impressionist, and there's that marvelous series of paintings of a haystack out in some field in France. If you've ever seen those, you know what I'm talking about. Just a simple sort of haystack-shaped haystack, but painted in dawn,

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painted in rain, painted with frost and snow, painted at dusk, painted in such a way that this totally ordinary object simply shimmers with life, shimmers with suchness. It's not asking you to go anywhere away from that haystack. Just to see it. To see the miracle of it.

This is particularly true, it seems to me, in the case of great portraits, the way in which a face is framed in a way to make it unforgettable. And to me the great portraitist of all is Rembrandt. I remember as a child going to my grandparents who lived not far from the Metropolitan Museum in New York and going there again and again. He's so good, and I think especially of one portrait—I wish I could name it for you but I can't—of an old Dutch woman in a black dress and a tight-fitting white cap and a starched ruff and a sort of waxy pale skin, wrinkled, her upper teeth are gone, her lip is sunken in, her hands folded looking out from that frame. In no sense a remarkable face. If you saw that face sitting across the aisle from you on an airplane, or if you saw it coming down pushing a cart full of groceries, you'd never notice it at all. Not a remarkable face, but a face that has been so remarkably seen by Rembrandt that we are jolted into seeing it remarkably. And that old woman's face somehow becomes all faces. And all faces are somehow contained in that face.

And what I think the artist, the painter is doing, as the writer is saying *Stop*, the painter is saying *Look*, look at each other's faces the way Rembrandt looked at the old woman's face. Or look at your own face, maybe that's the hardest of all, in the mirror the way that Rembrandt looked at that old woman's face, which is to say look at it not just for the wrinkles and the sunken upper lip and the white ruff, but look at it for what lies within the face, for the life that makes the face the way it is.

You'd think that would be easy. It's so easy to look and see what we pass through in this world, but we don't. If you're like me, you see so little. You see what you expect to see rather than what's there.

When I was at Princeton, a psychology class conducted an experiment to make this point to people. There was a room that you peeked at through a little hole, and they told you what to look for—a position of a certain object and so on—and you would come away having looked through the peephole and answer questions about what you saw. Then they would ask, "Did you notice anything else about the room?" And people for the most part said, "No, we didn't." Well, the room was a crazy room. One wall was that high and the other wall was that high, and the ceiling went this way, and the floor went that way, but they didn't see that because they hadn't been told to expect to see that.

I've often thought too that if an angel appeared at this moment and outspread his golden wings, the chance would be that none of us would see it. Who expects to see an angel stretch out his golden wings? Remember that old *Candid Camera* show? The thing that fascinated me about it was so often some totally impossible thing would happen, like a car driving down the street with no driver in it or the parrot in the dry cleaner's shop making remarks about the World Series. Or I remember once a man was sitting in a restaurant and the flower on his table leaned over and sipped his Coca-Cola. What happened again and again was when people were confronted with these impossible situations, they did not see them, or they pretended not to see them, because life is confusing enough.

So, to help us out of our blindness, part of what the painter

is doing is saying. See *what's there*, not *what you expect to see*. See *what is really present in your life*. See *yourself*, see *each other*.

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And then music, whatever music is—I don't really know what music is, it's sound—but it seems to me the medium of music is basically time, whereas the medium of painting is space. In a painting you put one thing next to another thing, put the blue background next to the red heart on the wall, and so on. But the musician doesn't deal in space; he deals in time, one note follows another note the way one moment follows another moment, the way tock follows tick. And I think that what the musician is trying to do is to say, *Listen to time, pay attention to time, pay attention to the sounds and the silences of time. Experience the richness of time.*

The Greeks with their wonderful gift for distinctions made that distinction, which anybody who's ever gone to theological seminary knows well, between *Chronos* time—chronological time, watch time, calendar time, time to eat, time to go home—on the one hand and *Kairos* time on the other, which is not time thought of quantitatively, but rather qualitatively—it was a good time, it was a sad time, the time had come to do something, a confusing time. And I think what the musician, or what music, is doing at its best is to say, *Pay attention to the quality of time, to the Kairos time*. I even amuse myself sometimes, because I'm a verbal person, by trying to put words to what it is that a particular composer is trying to have us hear about time.

I've listened to a lot of Bach lately. We went to a wonderful Bach Festival in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, this spring and heard the Christmas oratorio and those great plumes of music.

And it seems to me that Bach is saying, *Listen to the grandeur of time, listen to the stateliness of time*. Or Mozart . . . Karl Barth once said something about when the angels of God appear before the throne of grace, they're all singing Bach, but when they chatter among each other, it's all Mozart. Whatever Mozart is saying—there's a phrase in Mozart that I hear in everything I've ever heard of him almost, a plaintive little *la-da-da da*. The *poignance* of time maybe, I don't know. And Debussy, the strange sort of *illuminance* of time, whatever word you want.

But each one of these composers is saying, *Pay attention to the quality of time. The Kairos-ness of time*. And in a way I think of the phrase *keep time*. You can think of keeping time in the normal sense as keeping to the meter of music, but music, in a way, is saying *keep time in another way—keep it, keep in touch with it, keep your hands on it somehow*. Keep in touch with the sadness of your own time, with the joy of time, with the marvelousness of time, with the terror of time, with the emptiness of time, with the fullness of time.

It is also saying, *Listen to the sounds, listen to the music of your own life*. Listen to the voices of the people you live with, listen to the songs that they sing. I don't mean the song they sing—tra-la-la—but I mean listen to the music of their voices. Listen to the slamming of the screen door. Listen to the patter of feet walking back up the path. Listen to the turning of a tap in the tub, because that is in a very profound and touching way the music of your life. It is the song out of time that sings to you. Keep in touch with time, not just as rush and tumble.

I think of rivers I've known. A lot of the time the river's surface is white, it's tumbling over rocks, but then it reaches a bend maybe, or a deep place, and then suddenly the surface stills and you can see down through it to the bottom, and what

the music is saying, I think, is learn to do that somehow, to move yourself away from the tumble, the rush, the surface of time, chronological time, time as an everflowing stream, and look deep into time for whatever it is that lies at the heart of it, whatever quality it is, the mystery of time.

And ballet, I wasn't going to mention ballet because I don't know any more about it than I do these other arts, even less—but my wife and I went to Saratoga, which is near us in New York, where they have this one little performing arts center, and we saw the City Ballet do a couple of wonderful dances, one on Bach's Goldberg Variations. And I realized this art is working in both time *and* space. It's both music and it's spatial on the stage, and it's saying *listen* to this time, right now, and look, *look* at what you're looking at, look at the language the body speaks, the language the face speaks, the language the hands speak, these wonderful things the young, supple, beautiful bodies are doing up there on the stage to the music. These are the kind of things we all of us do less young-ly, less supple-y, less beautifully, but with our hands, with our bodies—pay attention to that. So generally—and this is not a complicated point, God knows—the arts frame our life for us so that we will experience it. Pay attention to it.

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The nearest big town to us in Vermont is Rutland—it's not all that big, but big enough. To get to Rutland from where I live you go through a tiny little town called Wallingford. I've made that trip six billion times and have often found myself, when I'm driving alone, asking myself, "Now, have I been through Wallingford yet or not?" I can't remember. I find out only when I've gotten to a certain point, and I think, "Oh, here I am at

Rutland. I must've gone through Wallingford!" My point, not altogether a comic one, is that if somebody had taken a photograph of me as I was going through Wallingford, they would've taken a photograph of a human being who was not at that moment living his life. I was not present inside of my skin then. I did not see anything because I was so caught up in an inner dialogue.

So, stop and see. Become more sensitive, more aware, more alive to our own humanness, to the humanness of each other. Look with Rembrandt's eye, listen with Bach's ear, look with X-ray eyes that see beneath the surface to whatever lies beneath the surface.

I think the writer who first led me to see with X-ray eyes, to think in those terms, was J. D. Salinger—that mysterious old man who hadn't published anything for years before his death in 2010. But he wrote some marvelous books, and in *The Catcher in the Rye*, one of the things that I remember best is the protagonist Holden Caulfield, that poor, lost, confused little preppy who makes his way through Manhattan to wherever he thinks he's going. He runs into a lot of characters, some of whom are unpleasant: There's the pimp in the hotel who tries to bring him a girl, and he doesn't want the girl, and the pimp beats him up. He goes to a nightclub and there's a black pianist who plays very well, but he's become a professional black pianist—his true blackness is lost, and he's sort of playing the game; he's a phony. There are other characters like that who play a sort of negative role in his life, but Holden Caulfield says again and again, "I miss old so-and-so, I miss the pimp, I miss the phony black pianist," as if he sees beneath the phoniness, beneath the crookedness, beneath whatever it was about this person that was unpleasant and negative to something

touching and human and to be missed, as if the party wouldn't have been complete even without old so-and-so.

And then of course, supremely in *Franny and Zooey*, the ability to see more than meets the eye. That book is really twin stories that were published together about the Glass children. The Glass children were on a radio quiz program called "It's a Wise Child" where they would answer questions. Through their experience on the show, Zooey learns to see with X-ray eyes from her brother Seymour:

Seymour'd told me to shine my shoes just as I was going out the door with Walker. I was furious. The studio audience were all morons, the announcer was a moron, the sponsors were morons, and I just damn well wasn't going to shine my shoes for them, I told Seymour. I said they couldn't see them anyway, where we sat. He said to shine them anyway. He said to shine them for the Fat Lady. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but he had a very Seymour look on his face, and so I did it. He never did tell me who the Fat Lady was, but I shined my shoes for the Fat Lady every time I ever went on the air again—all the years you and I were on the program together, if you remember. I don't think I missed more than just a couple of times. This terribly clear, clear picture of the Fat Lady formed in my mind. I had her sitting on this porch all day, swatting flies, with her radio going full-blast from morning till night. I figured the heat was terrible, and she probably had cancer, and—I don't know....

But I'll tell you a terrible secret—Are you listening to me? *There isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady.* . . . There isn't anyone anywhere that isn't Seymour's

Fat Lady. . . . And don't you know—listen to me, now—*don't you know who that Fat Lady really is?* . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy.'

Then there's that wonderful passage in C. S. Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm* where Lewis speaks of having met a European minister who had seen Hitler. Lewis says, "What'd he look like? What did Hitler look like?" and the minister says, "Like Christ, of course." Like Christ. Tremendously moving.

Our secret face is that face. Paul's right—the whole creation is moving, the whole great complex show has started so that we may eventually obtain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, but to see it, the artist says, you have to stop and really *look*, look for it with X-ray eyes.

So there's a quick run-through of the arts, and the question is, what's it all got to do with religion? Stop, look, listen—a lot, I think. I think in a sense that is what biblical faith is saying almost before it says anything else: *Stop*, and *look*, and *listen*.

TO SEE IS TO LOVE, TO LOVE IS TO SEE

When religions like Buddhism and Hinduism look at the world, they see an illusion. Impermanence. Something that has come into being almost by accident. Something circular. The great wheel of the universe that goes around and around and around—you were born only to die and only to be reborn, only to die again. The whole point of those Eastern religions is that the world is to be escaped. That's what Nirvana is: the snuffing out, the final relinquishing of this awful grasp you will have on the wheel of life into this ineffable bliss of whatever Nirvana might be, something quite different from life. Creation is an accident, the creation of a dream that ultimate reality dreamed. It has no permanence. It has no purpose. It has nothing of any lasting value.

Not true with the Christian faith. The biblical faith says creation is of enormous importance because God created it. He made it, he sustains it, he speaks in it, he moves in it. He sent the Christ into it, who walked on it, who got sick from it,

who ate on it, who wanted a job on it, who preached on it, who loved on it, who died on it. It is of enormous importance. Pay attention to it. It is crucial. Souls are lost and souls are saved in this world; therefore live, watch, pay attention to it as if your life depended on it because, of course, your life does depend upon it. It seems to me almost before the Bible says anything else, it is saying that—how important it is to be alive and to pay attention to being alive, pay attention to each other, pay attention to God as he moves and as he speaks. Pay attention to where life or God has tried to take you.

The prophets were also saying to pay attention, especially to history. Pay attention especially to what's going on in the headlines, with Amos, for instance, thundering out, Pay attention to the way the rich exploit the poor, to the way there are people living off the fat of the land in air-conditioned bedrooms and more to eat than they can handle while there are other people who are starving to death, who are sleeping in the streets of New York and San Antonio and God knows where in bags and cardboard boxes. Pay attention to that, says Amos, because God is speaking a terrible word through that, of judgment and of wrath, and of hope, in a way. Or the prophet Isaiah, who says, Watch the foreign policy of the nation, read those headlines, the powers in the north are coming to punish Israel for her running off after foreign gods every chance she has, and so on.

These prophetic voices continue, of course, and sometimes history itself becomes prophetic. I remember watching those students holding demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and there was a period when the students were being gentle, and the soldiers were being gentle, nobody was shooting, and nobody was shouting, and something so precious was

starting, was trying to happen. I thought I could hardly watch without tears in my eyes. And then, of course, the shooting did start, and the tanks rolled in, and the bodies fell, and some were arrested, and here history itself was saying, *Pay attention* to what's happening because these are the prophetic words being spoken to you on your television screen about the kingdom at hand.

Pay attention not just to the mighty acts that get into the headlines, but *pay attention* to the mighty acts that you are about to do. Maybe they are not so big in terms of history, but they are mighty acts in your own life. The epiphanies in your own life. I think that is what a lot of psalms are about.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;

he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. . . .

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .

PSALM 23:1-4

The Psalmist is talking about moments when it was as if the Lord had led him into green pastures. When he did indeed walk through the valley of the shadow of death, there was a sense of the presence of God, nonetheless, that kept him from being afraid. The Psalms are directing us to those moments in our own lives. Don't neglect those moments. Don't miss those moments when God speaks to you, as he did in a funny way to me through the bird in song this morning, as he does to all of us, in all sorts of ways, and all of the time.



STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN FOR GOD

And then, of course, the New Testament tells us to stop, look, and listen again. I think of Jesus, and I think of Emily Dickinson, of all people, who said a wonderful thing in a letter she wrote: "You know, there is only one commandment I have never broken"—which is wonderful, for I can't imagine Emily Dickinson breaking any commandments, though I'm certain she has broken as many as the rest of us—"and that is the commandment, 'Consider the lilies of the field.'" Wonderful. She is referring, of course, to what Jesus says to the crowd on the hillside—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28–29 RSV).

It's a joke, in a way, the thought of commandments like this, but in another way it is the kind of commandment that it seems to me Jesus gives in different ways again and again, that this life is, in a way, a parable: Consider the lilies of the field. Consider what it was to find that thing you had lost, that coin, that ring your mother gave you, that photograph that could not be replaced and suddenly it is there. Consider your heart itself . . . consider that. Consider the lost sheep. Consider the dead sparrow. Consider the way leaven works in bread. Consider the way the seeds grow, that tiny little bit of a seed that grows and grows and grows until it's a tree as big as Texas. Pay attention to these things.

And, of course, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is this: loving God and loving our neighbors. I don't know what it means to love God—really, I'm not all that good at it—but I think one of the things it means is, just as in the case of loving anybody else, you stop and watch and wait. *Listen for God*, stop and watch and wait for him. To love God means to *pay attention*, be mindful, be open to the possibility that God

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is with you in ways that, unless you have your eyes open, you may never glimpse. He speaks words that, unless you have your ears open, you may never hear. Draw near to him as best you can.

One Christmas Eve in Vermont when my children were small, we did the things you do when your children are small on Christmas Eve. We stuffed and hung their stockings. We put out a draught of cider and a cookie on the mantelpiece for Santa Claus—who would be tired by the time he got there through all that snow—and we put them to bed and then went upstairs and got the presents out of the closet off the guest room, and we dragged them down and put them under the Christmas tree. Somebody at some time had given me Charles Dickens's recipe for wassail, and I said, "Well, I've never tasted wassail. Let's make it." It's a hideous mixture of beer and sherry and toast. But I made it, we drank it, and it was awful, and then we were just about to tumble exhausted into bed when I remembered that our neighbor just a short distance down the hill had gone off to Florida, I think, for a couple of weeks and had asked me if I would feed his sheep while he was gone. Late as it was, I knew I had to do it. So my brother and I put on our boots and our coats, and we trudged down the hill through a lot of snow to the barn where we each picked up a couple of bales of hay and carried them out to the sheep shed in the back and pulled the string on the 40-watt bulb, and the sheep came bumbling around the way sheep do, and we split the strings of the bales and shook the dust out and put them in the rack. And there was the smell of the hay and the bumbling of the sheep and the dim light and the snow falling outside and it was Christmas Eve, and only then did I realize where I was. Being a minister trained me to notice things, but it was only then that

I noticed the manger, though I might have not noticed it at all. And it seems to me the world is a manger, the whole bloody mess of it, where God is being born again and again and again and again and again and again. You've got your mind on so many other things. You are so busy with this and that, you don't see it. You don't notice it.

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There's one other anecdote that illuminates this somehow. My wife, Judy, and our youngest daughter, Sharman, and I went to SeaWorld in San Antonio one day. It's one of those great big aquatic jamborees, full of hoopla and hokum, and T-shirts and loud music and frozen bananas dipped in chocolate and all that, but don't knock it because the main attraction is something that everybody should see. Well, the main attraction, I am sure you know, is you sit in the stands and there before you is a huge tank of crystal clear, turquoise-colored water in front of a big platform on which stand these beautiful young women and handsome young men in bathing suits, and then at a signal, out come these creatures of such beauty. There is no describing them. They call them killer whales. (Why killer? I wonder what they call us . . .) These great big creatures are cousins of ours, these mammals of pearl gray, indescribably beautiful that swim at enormous rates through crystal clear water and jump through hoops that the young people hold for them, and the sun shines and the sky is blue and it is just unbelievable. As I watched it, I found tears streaking down my cheeks, and ah!—I was embarrassed by them. I'm a neurotic man a hundred ways to Sunday, but I thought, here I am crying at this marvelous thing. And I turned to my wife and daughter and they also had tears in their eyes. We were crying

because we caught a glimpse of the peace of God when man and beast and sun and water and hope were all somehow dancing together in this wonderful dance. We caught a glimpse of Eden, of the way things were supposed to be.

So loving God means, as Jesus says, consider the lilies of the field. Consider SeaWorld. Consider feeding your neighbor's sheep on Christmas Eve and loving each other. Jesus says, Love the Lord thy God with thy heart and soul and strength, and also your neighbor. And that is the same thing.

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To love your neighbor is to see your neighbor. To see somebody, really to see somebody, you have to love somebody. You have to see people the way Rembrandt saw the old lady, not just a face that comes at you the way a dry leaf blows at you down the path like all other dry leaves, but in a way that you realize the face is something the likes of which you have never seen before and will never see again. To love somebody we must see that person's face, and once in a while we do. Usually it is because something jolts us into seeing it.

The faces we lose track of most easily are the faces of the people who are closest to us, the people we love the most whose faces we see so often that we can't really see them anymore. There's Judy. There's Sharman. There's George. There's Mary. We name them as we name the fog, they become just words, we name them out of existence, and that's it. Imagine.

I preached all one winter long at a church in Manchester, a Baptist church, the minister of which had left and they hadn't gotten a new one. My job was supposed to be just preaching, the pastoring part, and all of the other things that go on in churches was done by other people. One day I was shaking

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hands like my old friend George Buttrick used to after the sermon and saying the usual amenities, exchanging that how-do-you-do, when one old woman came out of that church whom I had never noticed before. Sallow, hollow-chested, grim looking, and I said, "How are you?"—dumb question—and she said, "I'm just as well as can be expected." I'll always remember those words. They were not the expected words, and somehow those words made me afraid. I could not help but fear for her faith, and even though my arrangement was not to do anything but preach, I thought I can't not go see somebody who says, merely, *I'm as well as can be expected*.

So I went to see her, and I dreaded it because I thought there would be tears and it would last too long and she would tell me all of her troubles and I wouldn't know what to say. I wouldn't be able to help her. What can you do for a lonely old woman? But none of those things happened. Instead I fell in love with that old woman, and I went to see her, not for her sake but for my sake, year after year for about seven years until one St. Valentine's Day she died. My life was enriched by her. I experienced love and I was able to love her too, all because I happened to see her face by grace. By grace. I didn't think, "I'm a minister. I'm supposed to be good to people." I didn't—no such thought as that. Quite the reverse. I wanted to distance myself from anybody whose need I thought was answerable by me, but I couldn't help myself. So sometimes we see them, sometimes we hear them. I heard her as she spoke. But to love means to look and to listen, listen to the sounds of your life, and sometimes we do and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we don't see people because we choose damn well not to see them.

I remember another incident where I went to the office of a man who had a job at a printing business. I had some printing

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to do, of course, but also I knew lots of things about him. He was having trouble with his marriage. He was having trouble with alcohol. He was having trouble with his business. His whole life was falling apart, and again it's funny the question we always ask each other—*How are you?* What more human question is there than *How are you?* but whoever expects an answer? It's not supposed to have an answer. And I said to this fellow when I went into his office, "How are you?" knowing, of course, how he was. And there was what seemed to me an almost unbearable moment, a series of moments, when he didn't answer. And I thought to myself, *My God! He's going to tell me!*

Well, he laughed, but why were we laughing at that? Because if he told me how he was—which was dying, really—what would there be for me to do but to try to somehow lift him up? I dreaded it. To my infinite relief, after a moment he said, "I'm fine. How are you?" and we went on with the busi-ness of the day.

So we are told to love. We are told to listen. We are told to look. But a lot of the time we don't because we choose damn well not to, and because only a saint could do it all the time, I think. You have to choose who to listen to because if you listen to *everybody* and you look at *everybody*—seeing every face the way Rembrandt saw that woman's face—how could you make it down half a city block? You couldn't. If you listened to what *everybody* says to you, how could you survive a day? But we can do more than we do—more than we do, surely we could do that.

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To look with the imagination as well as with the eyes. To look with empathy and compassion. To see each other as Rembrandt

saw the old woman, as Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass with X-ray eyes, which, of course, Jesus supremely has. The most precious words from his lips—and to me I think the most precious of all—are, “Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” Those words are addressed not only to the people who are obviously laboring and heavy laden—the people in nursing homes, the poor, the dispossessed, the starving—they are addressed to everybody. They are addressed to the beautiful girl on her wedding day. They are addressed to the man who just made a million dollars. They are addressed to the young graduate of whatever it is, who is heading off into the great big world. Jesus sees that all of us labor and are heavy laden and are in need of rest or are in need of him or in need of peace. So we are to see each other like that, as Jesus sees us, framed as if each one of our faces is seen by him. And the frame he sees us in, if you have to give it a word, is the frame of love. He sees us because he loves us; he loves us because he sees us.

Imagine yourself in a big city in a crowd of people. What it would be like to see all the people in the crowd like Jesus does—an anonymous crowd with old ones and young ones, fat ones and thin ones, attractive ones and ugly ones—think what it would be like to love them. If our faith is true, if there is a God, and if God loves, he loves each one of those. Try to see them as loved. And then try to see them, these faces, as loved by you. What would it be like to love these people, to love these faces—the lovable faces, the kind faces, gentle, compassionate faces? That’s not so hard. But there are lots of other faces—disagreeable faces, frightening faces, frightened faces, cruel faces, closed faces. I find if you think of them as your family, it helps. You can do it, and it’s an exercise worth trying.

What it would be like to love each one of these faces, to see the face and to love the face for what lies there, to meet the face that is finally—as that minister said in answer to C. S. Lewis’s question “What did Hitler look like?”—“Like Christ.”

Ah, they are all peculiar treasures. I used that as a title of a book—it’s from Exodus where God said to Israel, “You shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.” God meant it for all of us. And when I think of God treasuring us, I often think of another art that I haven’t talked about yet—about television. I think of television as an art—abused and used for all the wrong purposes, and corny and dreadful in lots of ways, but in some cases enormously powerful. Like that old sitcom *All in the Family*, for instance—Archie Bunker and Meathead and Gloria and all that. It makes you laugh a lot, but it’s also moving, rather like Garrison Keillor who has the same great gift for being very funny and at the same time very moving. I remember one scene in particular where Meathead, Archie’s son-in-law, and Gloria, Archie’s daughter, were leaving for the West Coast, and this was the good-bye scene. Archie and Meathead were standing out on the front stoop of that little house where they lived and where Archie and Meathead had fought all those years. Archie is an arch-bigot, a racist, a sexist, and more, while Meathead is a fire-breathing liberal, and they’ve been tangling for years and years and years. Now here they were about to say good-bye to each other and speechless. Neither could think of a thing to say. All of a sudden, Meathead threw his arms around Archie Bunker and said, “You thought I hated you, but all the time I loved you.” An incandescent moment. And Archie’s face sort of folded in, like it was just punched with a fist. He had no words to say, but it was as if he spoke those words too—you thought I hated you, you thought I was indifferent to you, you thought

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I wasn't around, you thought I didn't exist . . . but all the time, I loved you.

Love each other like that. Love each other knowing that you are loved. Love yourself knowing that I love you.



The deepest mystery of all, I think, is the one to which biblical faith points, which is the idea that we are made not only of matter that comes from the earth and stars, but we are made in the image of God. Whatever that means. I don't know what that means altogether, but I think it means that we bear his mark upon us. Deep within us. The face of Christ is within us, his thumbprint is upon us. The world adds all sorts of things to that holy self that God made, but it still is there, and though we lose track of it in a million ways, I think it remains, if we are lucky at all, as a source of goodness, of flashes of insight, of good dreams, of good prayers that somehow pray themselves, of healing.

I think that is the place from which all true art comes, and by true art I mean art that doesn't just entertain—perfectly all right to do that—but true art that nourishes the spirit, that illuminates the mind, that deepens the understanding, that deepens our humanity. I think that what true art, and true religion, does at its best is to put each one of us in touch with that holy part of ourselves, with that source from which art and love comes, and from which all good, wise things come, so that we—by virtue of this painting, this poem, this ballet, this piece of music, this Scripture—become finally, truly, human at last.

LISTENING FOR GOD IN THE STORIES WE TELL