

Annamarie White: Jesus on the Shore

Annamarie White

26 April 1998

Jesus on the Shore

As a writer, I've always loved the story in [John 21](#). It's so wonderfully tied-together and satisfying. Here are the disciples back in a boat, fishing, the original activity that Christ called them to abandon, when he invited them to become fishers of men instead. Here they've come full circle in their grief and sense of abandonment over Jesus' death, and Peter says hell with it, I'm going a'fishin, who wants to come along. They sit all night in the boat and don't catch anything. They must be cold, hungry, and dejected. Then Jesus appears on the shore and builds them a campfire with coals and starts to grill some fish, and he has bread for them too. When he calls to them to set their nets on the right side of the boat, they catch 153 fish, more than the net should be able to hold, but the net doesn't break. John, the Beloved one, whispers to Peter that the man on the shore is the Lord. And Peter, in what I think is the most hysterically funny episode in the gospels, pulls on the nearest piece of clothing he can grab, for he is naked, and jumps into the water. (Peter has jumped into the water to meet Christ before, as we recall.)

Back at the campfire, Jesus feeds the disciples and in another literally satisfying moment, he ties past and prophecy together by asking Peter thrice whether he loves Him. Peter grieves at the question, but affirms three times that he loves Jesus, and is thus reassured that his previous denial of Christ (also three times, near another campfire in a moment of weakness) will not disqualify him from Service. He will go on

to feed God's lambs and sheep.

This is Jesus' third and final appearance to the disciples after his death, and before the Pentecost. He wants them to be the leaders, the foundation, of His spiritual community. But He understands they are human. He asks them to wait until Pentecost, until the arrival of the Holy Spirit in their midst, to wait until then before starting their Mission, and not before. Why is that? This gospel lesson is full of implications (and reassurance) for leadership in spiritual community, and because it starts off with the theme of coming to grips with abandonment, we must look at that first.

Psychologists say that before one can become truly strong, one has to come to grips with one's losses. Accepting loss as real loss leads to an evolutionary leap in our emotional and spiritual growth. And conversely, repressing or denying loss usually leads to replacing it with some form of idolatry vis-a-vis a lover, a career, or even a religion. We are advised not to disguise these losses, but to acknowledge them to ourselves, for example, my mother is gone or my father is gone or my lover is gone. No one can truly replace him or her. Only after that acknowledgment can other deep relationships come.

We have just come through the long Lenten period in the Church, and we have commemorated the wilderness symbology in a number of ways. Being orphaned or abandoned in some way is such a powerful and necessary archetype to experience that every religion has a version of it, from Christian mysticism to Buddhism, to the Jewish Kaballah. The alchemists even called the philosopher's stone the "orphan stone." Theologian Madonna Kohlbenschlag says, "Like the stone that is both precious and worthless, the orphan is an empowering metaphor because it is a self-image born of mourning."*

We have all had an "orphaning" experience or two. I'd like to tell you briefly about one of mine.

I lived in Wyoming for 5 years (1978-1982). I taught English to freshmen at the University in Laramie, and every year during elk season the boys were let out of class without penalty to go "bag an elk" with their fathers and uncles and brothers for a couple weeks. After that, the girls would disappear from class because they were helping their mothers and sisters and aunts clean and freeze the elk parts. You could see elk hanging on lines in backyards and the blood would drip for a couple days, then every part was cut up and used, the "yuck parts" for dog food. Everywhere you went for dinner that winter, no matter whose house it was, you had elk, elk roast, elk steaks, ground elk. They'd pound it with meat hammers and pressure cook it but it was still tough. Sometimes they'd add bear steaks to the pile on the platter, especially if it was breakfast, and then you had to really watch out because although the bear steaks were more tender, they were very risky for trichinosis.

I spent my first 27 years in Detroit. For me, Wyoming came to mean high-altitude sickness, smug small town personalities, and locked-in roads from blowing snow October through June. It meant rotting, trucked-in vegetables, uninformed medical care, water that took 12 minutes to boil, grade school teachers with substandard English. Native Americans and Hispanics were separated from the white university by social and literal railroad tracks. There was only one radio station – country music – although if the wind wafted it right you might get Texaco opera on Saturdays from Colorado. (The wind would always seem to shift out of range just as Pavarotti was about to hit that high C.) There was no political or global awareness beyond whatever could benefit the rich oil ranchers. And forget finding good clothes, cosmetics, or chocolate beyond what you might scrounge in a hardware store or grocery.

The people are proud of their clean air and their personal ability to sleep under the stars in holofil sleeping bags at the top of the Snowy Range in below-zero temperatures. They

are so 'friendly" they will walk into your house at any time unannounced, flip open a couple six packs, turn on your TV and start watching – never mind if you are trying to get the babies bathed and to sleep. Even the English department was full of "cowboys" who drove pick-up trucks Wyoming-style with rifles mounted in the cab, wore brim hats stenciled with words I cannot say in Church, and drove 90 mph on the isolated mountain roads. In separate instances two of these would-be Hemingways went up the mountains never to return. One used a shotgun, and one drove drunk off a cliff.

Wyoming soon became, for me, a huge archetype of isolation, wilderness, and lack of identity. I had plenty of home demons as well. My marriage was falling apart. My baby daughter was born with a hole in her heart from a high-altitude plagued pregnancy. It took several anxious weeks to get an appointment in Denver to check it out. My kindergarten son's friends played with guns at home – scaring him (and me when I found out). We had little income, no savings.

I felt that I had nothing beautiful or cultural to go to for escape, and no family to call (my mother died when I was 17, my father remarried and basically told me not to drop by anymore). Then my grandpa back in Detroit died, and I had no money to go back to the funeral. My sister got married, and I had no money to go be matron of honor. I had given up not only my Michigan graduate school to go to this godforsaken Wyoming, but worse, I could not write. It was not writer's block; it was a terrible estrangement of the heart. I felt none of my usual excitement over being in a new place. Only a few years before I had enthusiastically begun the great American novel. I had boxes and boxes full of writing; I loved the whole process of writing and had felt I was finding my voice. I had known my calling. I had been energized. Now I was stuck. I lost my sense of calling, my sense of humor, and I felt abandoned. Maybe not unlike the disciples on the boat who had heard the word of God and knew their calling, but somehow the

Spirit had not yet come.

Let's return for a moment to Christ on the cross, the Christ that our disciples in the boat are still mourning. [Matthew 27](#) says that Jesus' last words on the cross were "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There was Jesus the man and Jesus the Son of God engaging in the ultimate abandonment metaphor. Now, remember that Jesus' previous temptations all had to do with identity questions. The devil tells him to jump off the cliff (and so on) to prove to Himself that He is the Son of God. Jesus chose not to give in to identity doubts, but to accept his gift of who He was by a different sort of leap, a leap of faith. The first idea of the wilderness is you have to separate in order to strengthen your identity. The second idea is to know that we each have a unique gift too. No one else has your particular gift no matter what it is. I think that part of accepting that gift is accepting the abandonment or aloneness that goes along with it, because whatever your gift is, it is unique and no one else can go there.

His death and immediate transfiguration followed Christ's final declaration of abandonment on the cross. For the rest of us, the transfiguration we receive after we've emotionally accepted abandonment isn't so immediate. It *may* well be so when we physically die, but while we are alive we usually have what is affectionately known as 'the delayed reaction.' Christ knew this, and that's why he recommended to his disciples that they wait for the Pentecost before they started their mission. That's why, when he appeared on shore, he didn't yell out "Hey, I already told you to be fishers of men, what do you think you're doing out there in a literal boat again?" No, he was full of compassion, and love, and made a fire for them, and cooked for them, and sat with them.

Christ knew that his disciples were in a funk, that they felt abandoned and confused, like orphans, and that what they were truly meant to do hadn't sunk in yet. Peter naked in the boat – I don't care what season it was, out all night on the sea,

it was cold, Peter sitting naked – he was downright depressed. We've certainly all felt that depression in between receiving some good word or guidance or inspiration and actually being able to fulfill it. Here's where patience with each other in community is essential. People are always at different places in accepting their losses or in accepting their gifts, and often are in that delayed-reaction space. The waiting-for-Pentecost message is that we are larger than the sum of our losses. Let me say that again. You are larger than the sum of your losses. The Resurrection message was that we are free to follow our own imaginations and the intensity that is in our souls and thus be aware of the ever-fresh divinity within us. That's the Resurrection message. The Christ-on-the-shore message is we don't have to do it all at once. He tells his leadership community to have patience for the larger goal, enjoy love and compassion, food and warmth together. Those who survive the orphan archetype, as the disciples did, will (in Kolbenschlag's words) "come to live in the context of sacred interdependence, will transform old myths, parent each other, and give sanctuary.'

We give each other sanctuary by recognizing each other's sacred immensity. John O'Donohue the Celtic priest and poet who grew up in Western Ireland between a mine and a shore, has a beautiful explication of this concept in his shoreline imagery. He says our persona is the shoreline, with different facets of our ocean-like immensity lapping up into our immediate visage at any one time. This is Christ on the shore, reminding us that we are meant to see ourselves with a great sense of sacredness. When we do so, O'Donohue says, a lot of former psychological, spiritual, and inner political agendas atrophy and become irrelevant, and then we look back and say why did I do that to myself for all these years when I could have actually been celebrating?

So, after being away from Wyoming for marry years, I felt it was time to go back to it (in my writer's mind) and I

challenged myself to find some beauty there, amid all that I'd experienced as wilderness, abandonment, and fear. Suzanne Langer also says that it is impossible to approach an unsolved problem except through the door of metaphor. I believe that is why Jesus spoke through parables, and also why his last appearance to the disciples was so lyrical in nature.

So I put myself in the mind-frame of someone who likes Wyoming, and focused on the few good things instead of the many bad things. Doing this gave me an unexpected artistic payoff; I discovered a more efficient, lyrical, positive writing style. The boxes full of long drafts of bad fiction went by the wayside, and I was baptized into poetry. Before, I had written a lot of negative stuff about Wyoming; now, I saw it was time to cast my net on the other side of the boat.

* For more on the positive values of the orphan archetype, see Madonna Kohlbenschlag's book "Lost in the Land of Oz."

[Seekers] [Write us] [[Seekers Sermons](#)] [[Fair Use](#)]

Wyoming

Wyoming is a good place
to leave
your demons
here's how
clear your car
of tissues, lipsticks, novels,
pack a red plaid jacket
holofil sleeping bag
hot dogs
and beer.
I realize
you will have to buy some
of these things, I did,

and make sure the bag is guaranteed
to forty below –
even the Rockies
can kick up snow.

Now drive
it might take days
from where you are,
your car will complain
about the altitude
just gun it
it will still
pass all the trucks.
When you see petrified bluffs
lava-bloated rocks
aspens turning topaz
like no postcard –
you are mere
cattle guards
away.

Go past
the piton-pounding
climbing students
the vulgar radios
of picnickers
without a mission
to the angling twilight
along ledges
of sunblanched sage'
and dead bitterroot
until you are by yourself
with the long-ago
worshipped
rock.
By the melancholy nightshade
gather sticks

and spruce cones,
hold your hands
for warmth
over your fire
which roars without coaxing
examine
your plaid wrists
'till it simmers down
and eat
all the hot dogs
drink the beer
loosen your belt
and sit
against the rock,
wooly lichens at your back
one boot
on top the other.

You're disappointed
it's too dark
to see the Indian paintbrush
falling dead trees
and bears
I told you about,
but a goshawk calls
some stray thing answers
with a brief yelp, a
and these sounds puncture
mother nature's male side
as you've pictured it
so far –
you roll a cigarette
and smoke
and
finally
look up.

A thousand thousand
confusion of stars
close as counting
far as light year –
what are all these shining oars
among the constellations,
they never appeared
above your roof before
yet here is constant
celestial proliferation
moving kaleidoscope –
you take a cold breath
you want to call
Van Gogh
and all your family
but you must
look away
the falling snow
like silent salvo
sparks and leaps
into your fire,
you dump the hot dog grease
new colors spatter up
then blacken
your plaid cuffs
one finger
gets singed
and later
miles later
after-mincing back
over cowpied paths
and the interstate
someone asks
someone always asks
how snow
and stars
could be

going on
at the same time.

– Annamarie, 1995