

Kate Amoss: Pleasantville Blues

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

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Epiphany. A time when we see signs of god breaking into our world. At Epiphany the three Magi, who were learned men and students of the celestial sky, arrive in Bethlehem guided by a star. Certain scientists are now saying that such a star may have actually existed as an occultation of Jupiter or a super nova. It is also the time of the baptism of Jesus when the skies opened and the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove. In Epiphany, the divine order becomes manifest in the ordinary world.

Against this backdrop, Celebration Circle has asked those of us who are preaching this season to consider three questions:

- What is your work and how does it represent a calling for you?
- How does your spiritual life underpin what you do?
- How does your work relate to the theme for Epiphany, to your life, and to our life in Seekers?

The timing of this sermon feels fortuitous to me. Next week I am about to begin a group that I hope will provide support and inspiration for each of its members to explore the creative process. It is informed by the work that I have done as a psychotherapist. This work is as close to my heart as any work that I can imagine doing at this time. And it comes naturally to me not because I am so magnificently creative but rather

because I know deep in my bones what it is like not to feel creative. There was a time in my life when I was on intimate terms with the feelings of numbness, inadequacy, jealousy, and shame that often go along with the belief that one is uncreative. I come to this work as a wounded healer.

When I speak of being creative, I am not speaking of the conventional understanding of creativity, which involves making something that has never been made before. Rather I am referring to a certain passionate connection to the world, which necessarily evokes one's imagination. It is a shift in awareness. In working with my individual clients, I find that people have many different ways of describing this shift. This is a description of what I am talking about written by Adriana Diaz, a woman who has taught at the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality, the center that Matthew Fox founded:

The drawing class was teaching me to develop my eyes to see the things I normally took for granted. I was amazed to realize that I had hardly seen a thing in eighteen years. In class, we were looking at the shapes of shadows, the shapes of the spaces between leaves, the surface quality on the edges of objects. This new seeing was awakening me to the world as it was an entirely new place, and despite the joy of the experience, I would leave drawing class exhausted. The end of class usually meant a reversion to my "regular vision" vision, which meant that my eyes were at rest. One morning, however, my eyes did not go back to their old pattern. Instead, the sight I was cultivating stayed with me, and as I left the art building and crossed the patio on my usual route to science class, I was literally stopped in my tracks. Every boulder, every leaf, every wooden bench seemed to be speaking to me. I can only say that I felt as if each thing were revealing itself and calling out to me. A window to another dimension had opened to me. I felt stunned at first, and then privileged, as if I had been allowed into another realm of the universe. The experience lasted about two days, and then

the "window" closed. I cannot explain this phenomenon in any scientific way...I simply experienced the incredible shimmering life that is usually invisible to us. This remains a cherished, life-changing event that has been an ongoing inspiration in my life and work.

Such an experience is life changing. Nothing is ever quite the same again. For that reason, it is dangerous.

Sometimes this experience is quite dramatic as it was for Adriana Diaz and sometimes it is subtle. Sometimes the catalyst is an intentional engagement with artistic expression or a decision to enter psychotherapy. More often, it is evoked by a professional disappointment or by a failure in love. Sometimes it is pure grace. Nevertheless, no matter how or why it arrives, it feels like an experience of falling in love with the world. The divine enters the ordinary. It is an epiphany.

The movie, *Pleasantville*, which was, by the way, highly recommended by our premier movie critic, Manning Dyer, gives a memorable image of this phenomenon. One by one, the townspeople of Pleasantville, who have been caught in the anemic, black and white world of a 1950's television program, burst into color as they discover the true meaning of love. I also remember a wonderful sermon that Diane Wilkens gave about five years ago. She brought in a large, painted, hazy gray canvas. She talked about the time early in her life that felt black and white and how that had eventually shifted to a muddled gray. Finally, she reached into slits cut into the canvas and pulled out vividly colored streamers, one by one. She talked about the experience of each color breaking into her life. For me this is the gospel message. It is what Jesus meant by the realm of god. It is like the pearl of great price, the epiphany of great price. Once it is found we must sell everything we own in order to buy it. It is also what Jesus meant when he spoke to the people and said, "I am the

light of the world; those who follow me will not be walking in the dark, they will have the light of life. Brenda Seat once helped me to understand what that meant. At the end of a silent retreat, she described how she had sat on the porch and watched the sun go down. With the eyes of a true poet, she spoke of the slow fading of the light, of the precise way the color was drained from the trees, the bushes, the meadow and the sky. The light of Christ brings color and complexity to our world. Its absence brings not darkness but rather various shades of black and white.

Alternatively, this is a description of living a life in the spirit. This brings us to the lectionary for today. Both Paul in Acts and Mark in his gospel remind us that there are two kinds of baptism. There is the baptism of repentance, the experience of being cleansed by the holy waters and there is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Baptism first by water and then by fire. "John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And he preached saying, 'After me comes the one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but the one who comes will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And having come up out to the water, immediately Jesus saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from the heaven, 'You are my beloved Child, with you I am well pleased.'" A sense of belonging to the universe is the hallmark of this experience. I imagine that this is like the experience that Adriana Diaz whom I quoted earlier described, "I felt stunned at first," she wrote, "then privileged, as if I had been allowed into another realm of the universe."

For me what I have learned from the Bible and what I have learned in my Psychology texts complement each other. There is no distinction. Psychologists talk of self-esteem, defenses,

true and false selves, transitional space, projections. Jesus speaks of all the same things using the metaphors of lamps under bushels, mustard seeds, wedding feasts, splinters in the eye and treasures in the ground. In therapy, I feel incredibly honored to share the struggle of those who are groping towards an authentic and spirit-filled engagement with the world and I recognize the labyrinthian twists and turns in their paths because I have been there myself.

This brings me to my own story. I found for me that my emotional experience of baptism came in two parts. The lectionary reading for today helped me to recognize that distinction. My own experience of repentance was rather dramatic. Some of you have heard it before. Twelve years ago, I was visiting a friend when a man with a gun broke into her house. She and I tried to hide in her bedroom but he broke the door down. In those moments, when I thought that I would die, a realization came to me that was cold, hard and unrelenting. I knew with certainty that I had never been alive. Nevertheless, I was lucky. I was not hurt. I did not die. I was given a second chance. All the police tape is on the altar for a reason. In the following weeks, I do not remember doing anything differently. I did not know what to do differently. Yet, I could not forget that I had looked in the mirror and had seen the emptiness of my life.

Within a month, I met Jim Hall and his wife Cheryl Hellner, long time members of Church of the Savior, who told me of Seekers. Billy and I visited during holy week in 1989. We thought that we were just coming for the benefit of our children. When I first came to Seekers, I was terribly shy and timid. I remember sitting in the back near the piano and cringing every time the word God or Christ was used. Fortunately for me, I arrived during a fairly secular time during our history. We did not read the Old Testament or the gospel back then. The litanies were more likely to be about frogs leaping into ponds than about Christ. I had grown up in

a family that was not just agnostic but atheistic. In my childhood, religion had been the enemy. Nevertheless, something about Seekers caught my attention and I kept coming back. I was certain that I was in the presence of people who knew what it meant to embrace life.

I also remember feeling safe. I did not have to pretend that I believed when I did not. There was room for questions. I felt a profound sense of liberation when I came to understand the concept of call. A church that did not use guilt as its primary motivator was a completely novel concept to me. Occasionally, a phrase or story from the Bible would become very vivid and exciting to me. I can remember my first silent retreat I randomly opened the Bible to the story about the man by the pool at Bethsaida who had waited by the pool to be healed for thirty-eight years. I was thirty-seven at the time and I felt as if my whole life shifted into sharp focus as I read the story.

That summer I took a class in the school of Christian Living with Marjorie and Ron. We spent the whole time studying the Sermon on the Mount. I began to appreciate that the Bible is a dangerous and radical text. In the book, *Call to Commitment*, Elizabeth O'Connor tells us that the original brochure about the Church of the Savior had included this warning:

This is a dangerous pamphlet about a demanding way of life and a vigorous institution that would propagate it. It is dangerous because you may find yourself digging with a shovel, or tracing current theologies, or reading the Bible, or changing your job, or explaining what the word "ecumenism" means or praying as you've never prayed before. It is indeed dangerous, for if one becomes committed to this way, all life will be different and every sphere of one's existence involved in the change.

That year I began to appreciate the truth of that statement.

On September 10th of the following fall, I had an experience that did change me. I remember the date because it was the day after my father's wedding. That morning when I returned from having taken Phil and Chris to school, I discovered that I had locked myself out of the house. Feeling impatient, I impulsively picked up a loose brick and tapped one of the small windowpanes in the door so that I could unlock the door. The brick was heavier than I thought and my hand went sliding past a sharp shard of glass as it passed through the pane. I sliced my wrist and the blood started to gush. Horrified, I ran up and down my street before finding a neighbor who could drive me to the emergency room for stitches. There I was told that I was lucky to be alive. The gash had just missed the main aorta. This attempt to break into my own house marked the beginning of an altered state that lasted five months. At great risk to life and limb, I had finally succeeded in breaking into myself. I started writing poetry for the first time in my life. It seemed so easy because the world was astounding and magical. I was floating. I remember feeling that I could finally die because I had finally lived. I was also alarmed and I started to see a therapist to help me understand what was happening. This decision would later have a major impact on my decision to become a psychotherapist myself. On January 17th of the following year, my awareness returned to normal. I remember that date because it was the day that the US started to bomb Baghdad.

For several years following that experience, all my efforts were directed toward finding intentionally that which had been first given to me by grace. There are too many details to cover in a sermon but I will simply say that I found that real life and creativity and joy were to be found in a series of little epiphanies rather than one grand one. This community was crucial in helping me to understand that. I began to live in the moment instead of in some distant time that might or might not arrive. Slowly over the years, I began to re-

experience my past. I remembered how I had loved to ride my bike. It was shiny, bright and blue. I thought of the quilt that I made in college in yellows, reds, and shocking pink. And of the azure sky in Egypt on my honeymoon. And of the bright green suit that the nurses put Philip in when he was brought to me as a tiny infant on Easter morning.

In Christ, there is redemption. In Christ, there is no fear of death.

Today the offertory is a round sung by the group Libana. The words of the round are: Be like a bird who halting in her flight on a limb too slight feels it give away beneath her but sings, sings knowing she has wings but sings, sings knowing she has wings. I asked the music group to play it today because you are a community of people with wings. Every single one of you has wings.