

The Way Don Tells It

Storytelling helps humans process their experience. I tell these stories in class to model the importance of storytelling today and in the world of the Bible.

That's the Way Don Tells It!

Artists are people who have the courage to undress in public. Even when people achieve a remarkable level of technical skill in a medium, they are still not artists until they can use those technical skills passionately. Incarnating themselves in their work peels away not only their clothes, but also their thoughts, their feelings. Art is a radical act of self-disclosure. Artists are only artists to the extent that they can forgo the privacy which most of us protect with our lives.

Memoir is an even more invasive art than other genres of writing. Memoirs not only disclose the private lives of their authors, but also all those people who come and go in their lives.

I have always told stories in the classes I teach in biblical and Near Eastern studies. I find it easier for my students to understand the importance of storytelling in ancient cultures if they first learn to understand the importance of storytelling in their own cultures. When I tell them stories about my own life they are not only a good audience, but also developing their skills as a good audience for the stories from the world of the Bible which are the focus of the classes. I hope that their interest in me leads to an interest in the Bible.

Generally, my classroom storytelling strategy works. I am always flattered when former students reconnect with me.

Don Sr.

My father was a soldier. He fulfilled his 2-4 years compulsory service in the Navy Reserve. Then he went to work for the telephone company – known then as *Ma Bell* – in Omaha. He worked for a friend of the family – Ray Blaine, who not only found him a job, but served as his mentor. Ray told Don Sr. that he could never have a family on what Ma Bell paid pole climbers, and that Dad needed to go back to school.

Dad's family was poor. His father, James Byron, had served in the Army during the Spanish American War – as an infantryman and engineer. His dispatch papers describe him as an *artificer* who distinguished himself in the trenches during the battle for Manila. Dad – I called my grandfather *Dad*, and my father *Daddy* – then supported his family as a carpenter. In the beginning he worked on the railroad – traveling through the Dakotas. When I was growing up, he and Nana had settled in Omaha, built their own two story home from scratch. Dad bought derelict mansions, and converted them into apartments, flats or condos. In fact they rented the second floor of their home to a couple – the Flowers.

Consequently, there was no money in my Dad's family for school. Ray told my Dad that if he went into the Army, the Army would send him to school, and he would also get the experience he needed to make a decent living at the phone company. It would mean a commitment of 4-6 years, but Ray promised my Dad to save a job for him.

Dad entered the Army, and fell in love with it. Ray kept pressuring him to leave the Army and come back to work for him. I think Dad was a major before Ray accepted the fact that the Army and not Ma Bell was Dad's career. He served for more than 30 years.

Dad never talked about his war years – more than 10 during his career. I do remember an in-law – Jose Perez Chiesa – telling stories about my Dad. Jose was from Puerto Rico. He married my cousin Adelaide. Jose was also a soldier – in the First Cavalry.

My Dad was in the Signal Corps. During wartime he traveled all over the front inspecting and repairing communications between units. He used his mobility to check on people for their families back home. When he was in Africa he traveled to the site of a plane crash to verify that one of the crew had, in fact, been killed. I forget just how he got that information back to my mother in code. Censors would have intervened if he reported back in clear English.

Jose's stories were about the Korean Conflict. He was wounded during the winter, and my Dad traveled to the MASH unit with blankets and winter socks for Jose. At the beginning of the war many American soldiers were fighting in summer uniforms, and freezing. Jose said that my Dad was a combat Santa. He rigged a refrigerator in the back of his jeep which gave it a clearly recognizable profile. Soldiers could see his "sleigh" coming. Although my Dad did not drink, the fridge was always full of beer and other luxury treats for soldiers on the front.

Korea was hard on my Dad in many ways. Physically his legs froze; consequently he suffered from varicose veins for the rest of his life. Emotionally, he was passed over for the third and final time for promotion to full or bird colonel. He would leave the Army as a lieutenant colonel. Not a bad accomplishment for a poor kid from Omaha who enlisted as a private. But in military culture – the goal is colonel, not lieutenant colonel. Another emotional challenge for him – which we only discovered after his death – was his disappointment in his children. He thought Mother was being permissive with us. From our perspective, Mother was, by no means, *permissive*. But my Dad had been away from the family for half their married life, and Mother was the head of household. He was clearly an outsider (*Tell story of do not call your mother Edith here*).

I like the memory of my Dad as a combat Santa – better than combat warrior!

4/25/2011 8:48 AM

Atlas's Ayn Rand Resists Hollywood's Call

By Caroline Baum - Apr 14, 2011
Bloomberg Opinion (Adapted by DCB)

How is it a novel so many readers describe as "life-changing" took 54 years and a gaggle of producers, writers and directors to bring to the screen?

One answer is Ayn Rand herself, author of *Atlas Shrugged*," which was published in 1957. Earlier attempts to make a movie based on the book were foiled by Rand's insistence on creative control.

The second reason is the nature of the 1,168-page book. It's about ideas. Rand's characters are caricatures that reflect her ideas and ideals. Businessmen are good, government bureaucrats are bad. There is no middle ground.

A third reason, one implied by those involved, is the nature of the material.

"She's a very controversial author," said John Aglialoro, one of the film's producers, who acquired the rights to *Atlas* in August 1992 from Rand's estate. *She*

thre selfishness as a virtue in the face of society.

That virtue is better described as rational self-interest. For Rand, capitalism was the only moral system, with each individual acting in his own self-interest. Productive achievement was the noblest activity and happiness, the ultimate goal.

You can see how Rand's philosophy, so outlined, might ruffle the feathers of Hollywood's do-gooders. Add that to the movie's history of false starts, including six screenplays commissioned by Agliandolo alone, and it's not hard to understand the industry's resistance.

It was clear we were not going to get support from the Hollywood machinery, including talent agencies, said producer Harmon Kaslow, who hooked up with Agliandolo in April 2010, three months before the rights were set to lapse.

Starting with a clean slate, the duo managed to assemble a team, come up with a fresh screenplay, cast the 41 speaking roles and begin *full principal photography* by June 15, 2010, according to Agliandolo

Atlas Shrugges, part 1 opens tomorrow in 298 theaters across the U.S. A press release classifies the movie as *drama/mystery*. Veteran Hollywood producer Al Ruddy, who was the first to acquire the rights to *Atlas Shrugged* in 1974, was taken by the love story before he parted ways with Rand because of her insistence on final script approval.

Atlas doesn't fit into either genre. For those unfamiliar with Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged* tells the story of the gradual disappearance of the nation's entrepreneurs as government bureaucrats impose increasingly burdensome rules and regulations to stifle their success and confiscate their wealth.

One by one, these captains of copper, steel, and oil industries quit, abandoning the businesses they built, refusing to work for the benefit of anyone except themselves.

Atlas Shrugged, part 1 takes place in 2016 and ends before we even meet Rand's hero, John Galt, who is the first to quit and inspires others to join him in his effort to stop the world. (Readers should look for the mysterious man in the raincoat.)

Atlas is unlikely to win the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival this year. I say this as both an admirer of Rand's ideas and a devotee of the book.

No one can accuse the producers of type-casting. The actors, pretty much a cast of unknowns, are too young. James Taggart, president of Taggart Transcontinental, looks 22, unlike the middle-aged, pathetic character, reliant on government favors that Rand paints for us in the book.

Everything was built around Dagny, Kaslow told me.

Dagny Taggart, James' sister, is the story's protagonist, struggling to save her family's railroad from government bureaucrats out to destroy it. She is young, played by a 26-year-old Taylor Schilling. Therefore everyone else is young.

It was hard to look at the actor playing Francisco d'Anconia, heir to the d'Anconia Copper Empire. Couldn't the producers have found someone more dapper who could speak with a Spanish accent?

The pressure to start shooting before the rights lapsed forced the producers to focus on the ideology at the expense of potential cinematic qualities.

We put words from the book into the characters' mouths, Kaslow said.

I suppose if it had been possible to do otherwise, someone would have done it by now.

Fans of the book, 7 million and counting, may not notice or care. They'll get chills, as I did, when Dagny's new railroad line, the John Galt Line, makes its first run on tracks made of Rearden metal, a new alloy created by fellow industrialist Hank Rearden that threatens to put steel producers out of business.

The government tries to scare the public by fabricating stories about the dangers of the new metal. Defiant, Dagny and Hank man the train's locomotive as it speeds across the Colorado landscape, over the new Rearden Bridge made from, of course, Rearden metal.

Above all, the movie is faithful to Rand's philosophy, which is known as *Objectivism*: the idea that reality is objective. Or, as encapsulated by Galt in a 60-page monologue near the end of the book, "A is A."

No wonder the faithful are heaping lavish praise on the movie. For them, adherence to Rand's ideas is enough. A is A. *Atlas Shrugged* is *Atlas Shrugged*.

I never read Ayn Rand in college, but I was a witness to how profoundly her world view impacted my college classmate, Joe.

Joe grew up in Los Angeles. He was quiet, too quiet for a college kid. Good athlete, serious student, but never said much in class.

After we finished school, Joe and I both took jobs at Mt. Carmel High School in South Central Los Angeles (7011 S. Hoover). This Catholic school for boys opened in 1936 and by the 1960s has a student population of some 600 - mostly white, mostly from working class families. Following the Watts Riots in August 1965 the student population dropped below 300 -- mostly African American, mostly from

working class families. Mt Carmel closed in 1976 and was torn down in 1983 to create Mt. Carmel Park.

I arrived in spring 1969. Joe had started teaching there in the fall 1968.

Joe was still quiet, had lost his athletic weight, and was almost completely silent outside of his classroom. I questioned the changes until he confided in me that he had embraced Ayn Rand's Objectivism.

I still have not read *Atlas Shrugged*, nor have I studied Objectivism, so I only know what Joe told me, and how it affected him.

For Joe, Ayn Rand believed that all evil in the world – from the heartbreak of psoriasis to the depletion of the ozone layer – was a consequence of altruism. Christians, for example, who teach *Love One Another*, are condemning each other to a lifetime of suffering. Happiness, for Rand, is practicing the discipline of self sufficiency – what her critics call selfishness.

To prevent suffering humans need to be absolutely clear about what they are getting for what they give. No random acts of kindness. Everything has a price, and should only be exchanged on par or for profit. For Joe this even applied to conversation. Speech could only be used for business, not pleasure.

On one occasion Joe came into my office to ask if I have a sleeve of staples. I gave it to him, and he wrote me a receipt!

When I tried to talk with Joe casually, he would put his finger across his lips, and turn and walk away.

I rose to the challenge. One evening after school I cornered him and attempted to convince him of the socially redeemable value of just bull shit conversation. My premise was that when we come to a point where we desperately need to talk with someone – about a problem, about an investment – about anything for which Rand would approve the use of conversation, we cannot know with whom to speak if we have not done consistent research in just casual conversation with one another.

Joe was good enough to listen to me. I waxed eloquently, and long, but – in the end – he was unconvinced. He was intellectually trapped in the commitment to avoiding relationships without price tags.

Joe quite teaching – too interactive, and took a job as a checker at a big box store. Everything had a price. No conversation necessary.

11/9/2009 8:02 AM

WWJD?

As a kid I was never much good at lying. Of course I was the oldest of four, so I was always more responsible than ordinary children. There was not much to be gained by lying to my mother and dad, who expected the truth from each of us. Furthermore, their discipline of us was never violent, nor unreasonable – which teaches children to lie.

So I came to storytelling not because of a childhood of lying, but rather because of a lifetime of teaching. I used the stories of my life to make my point.

I did not think that my life as a whole was an outstanding example of living or living well. Writers are encouraged to write what they know, and so I told what I knew – my experiences – good and bad, large and small.

When students come back years after our time together in high school or college has ended, I am always flattered when they say: “You were the first person who made me think about Eve – the biblical woman in the garden – as intelligent, moral and self-sacrificing. I had always thought everyone hated her!” More often, however, students come back and say: “I have never forgotten the story about your dad staying home to bake biscuits while the rest of the family went off to Mass.”

I was a sophomore in a Catholic High School in Tucson. The first day of religion class, the Carmelite priest asked: “Who in here would tell a lie to save the world.” Without hesitation I raised my hand, only to realize, almost immediately, that mine was the only hand in the air.

The Father glared at me and shouted: “Lying is a sin!”

“I know,” I replied, “but even if I go to hell, everyone else gets to heaven.” I could not help thinking that I had done what Jesus would do by laying down my life for the whole world.

Nonetheless, the Father would not give it up. He spent the entire period trying to break me. After the first couple minutes, I was no longer a theologian, I was just stubborn. I would not be moved.

The Father stormed out of the room at the end of class, and I resigned myself to a long, long year. But God was good. The next class a new Father appeared to teach us, and I never found out whether the first Father was more afraid of me than I was of him. It was the beginning of a promising career for me in religious studies.

Stories are my signature as a teacher, and the art of storytelling is my focus as a scholar. So here is an anthology of the stories I tell about my living. They help me remember, and they help me learn. Perhaps they will do as much for you as well.

The Mercy Papers: A Memoir of Three Weeks.

By Robin Romm (2009)

When Robin Romm's *The Mother Garden* was published, *The New York Times Book Review* called her "a close-up magician," saying, "hers is the oldest kind [of magic] we know: the ordinary incantation of words and stories to help us navigate the darkness and finally to hold the end at bay." In her searing memoir *The Mercy Papers*, Romm uses this magic to expand the weeks before her mother's death into a story about a daughter in the moments before and after loss.



With a striking mix of humor and honesty, Romm ushers us into a world where an obstinate hospice nurse tries to heal through pamphlets and a yelping grandfather squirrels away money in a shoe-shine kit. Untrained dogs scamper about as strangers and friends rally around death, offering sympathy as they clamor for attention. The pillbox turns quickly into a metaphor for order; questions about medication turn to musings about God. The mundane and spiritual melt together as Romm reveals the sharp truths that lurk around every corner and captures, with great passion, the awe, fear, and fury of a daughter losing her mother.

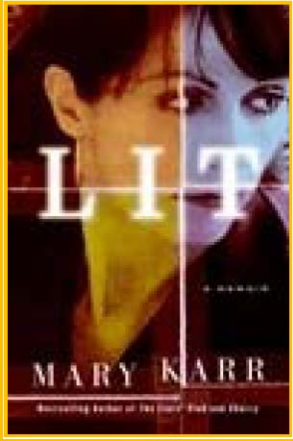
The Mercy Papers was started in the midst of heartbreak, and not originally intended for an audience. The result is a raw, unsentimental book that reverberates with humanity. Robin Romm has created a tribute to family and an indelible portrait that will speak to anyone who has ever loved and lost.

Robin Romm is the author of the critically acclaimed short story collection, *The Mother Garden*, which was a finalist for the 2008 PEN USA Fiction Award. Born and raised in Eugene OR she currently lives in Berkeley CA and New Mexico, where she is assistant professor of creative writing and literature at the College of Santa Fe.



Lit: A Memoir.

By Mary Karr (2009)



In *Lit*, the long-awaited sequel to her *New York Times* bestselling memoirs *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry*, Mary Karr chronicles her descent into the inferno of alcoholism and madness, and her astonishing resurrection. A recollection of her struggle to come to terms with her Christian faith after years as an agnostic that explores the relationship between spirituality and substance abuse and depression, *Lit* is also about getting drunk and getting sober; becoming a mother by letting go of a mother; and learning to write by learning to live.



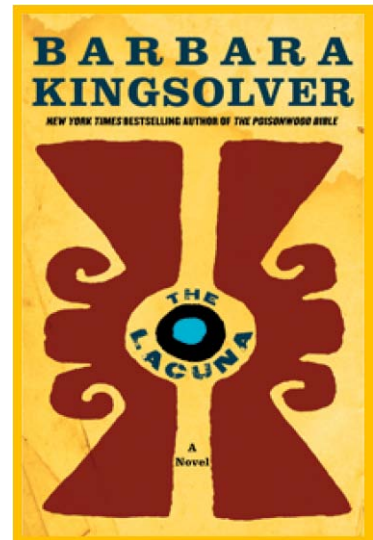
Mary Karr was born in January 1955 in Texas, the daughter of J. P. Karr, an oil refinery worker, and Charlie Marie Karr, an artist and business owner. She had a difficult childhood which she describes in *The Liars' Club* and she left home when she was seventeen. Karr enrolled at Macalester College in St. Paul MN but left after two years in order to travel. In 1978, she was admitted to Goddard College in Vermont where she met writers Tobias Wolff and Frank Conroy, both of whom encouraged her to write.

The Lacuna

by Barbara Kingsolver (2009)

The Lacuna is a poignant story of a man pulled between two nations as they invent their modern identities, told on a journey from the Mexico City of artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo to the America of Pearl Harbor, FDR, and J. Edgar Hoover.

Born in the United States, reared in a series of provisional households in Mexico — from a coastal island jungle to 1930s Mexico City — Harrison Shepherd finds precarious shelter but no sense of home on his thrilling odyssey. Life is whatever he learns from housekeepers who put him to work in the kitchen, errands he runs in the streets, and one fateful day, by mixing plaster for



famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. He discovers a passion for Aztec history and meets the exotic, imperious artist Frida Kahlo, who will become his lifelong friend. When he goes to work for Lev Trotsky, an exiled political leader fighting for his life, Shepherd inadvertently casts his lot with art and revolution, newspaper headlines and howling gossip, and a risk of terrible violence.

Meanwhile, to the north, the United States will soon be caught up in the internationalist goodwill of World War II. There in the land of his birth, Shepherd believes he might remake himself in America's hopeful image and claim a voice of his own. He finds support from an unlikely kindred soul, his stenographer, Mrs. Brown, who will be far more valuable to her employer than he could ever know. Through darkening years, political winds continue to toss him between north and south in a plot that turns many times on the unspeakable breach—the lacuna—between truth and public presumption.

“Unlike some authors who begin with a period of history they're fascinated with, or a voice that starts speaking to them, she begins with a big question. A "big question so compelling that everyone would be compelled by it." Then she begins to write her way to "some sort of illumination" for herself and her readers.” (Britt Kaufmann, Interesting Theory (on-line))

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955. Other than a brief time (1963) spent in a small village in central Congo, she grew up "in the middle of an alfalfa field," in the part of eastern Kentucky.



Kingsolver has always been a storyteller: "I used to beg my mother to let me tell her a bedtime story." As a child, she wrote stories and essays and, beginning at the age of eight, kept a journal religiously.

Kingsolver left Kentucky to attend DePauw University (IN) where she majored in biology. She also took one creative writing course, and became active in the last anti-Vietnam War protests. After graduating in 1977, Kingsolver lived and worked in widely scattered places. In the early eighties, she pursued graduate studies in biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she received a Master of Science degree. She also enrolled in a writing class taught by author Francine Prose.

Kingsolver's fiction is rich with the language and imagery of her native Kentucky. But when she first left home, she says, "I lost my accent . . . [P]eople

made terrible fun of me for the way I used to talk, so I gave it up slowly and became something else." After graduate school, a position as a science writer for the University of Arizona soon led her into feature writing for journals and newspapers.

From 1985 through 1987, Kingsolver was a freelance journalist by day, but she was writing fiction by night. Married to a chemist in 1985, she suffered from insomnia after becoming pregnant the following year. Instead of following her doctor's recommendation to scrub the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush, Kingsolver sat in a closet and began to write *The Bean Trees*, a novel about a young woman who leaves rural Kentucky (accent intact) and finds herself living in urban Tucson.

The Bean Trees (1988), and reissued in a special ten-year anniversary hardcover edition in 1998, was enthusiastically received by critics.

For Kingsolver, writing is a form of political activism. When she was in her twenties she discovered Doris Lessing. "I read the *Children of Violence* novels and began to understand how a person could write about the problems of the world in a compelling and beautiful way. And it seemed to me that was the most important thing I could ever do, if I could ever do that."

The Bean Trees was followed by the collection, *Homeland and Other Stories* (1989), the novels *Animal Dreams* (1990), and *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), and the bestselling *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now and Never* (1995). Kingsolver has also published a collection of poetry, *Another America: Otra America* (Seal Press, 1992, 1998), and a nonfiction book, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983* (ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 1989, 1996). In 1998 she published *The Poisonwood Bible*, a story of the wife and four daughters of a fierce, evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959. A tale of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction, over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa, *The Poisonwood Bible* is set against one of history's most dramatic political parables. It is a compelling exploration of religion, conscience, imperialist arrogance and the many paths to redemption—and Barbara Kingsolver's most ambitious work ever.

Barbara Kingsolver used to live outside Tucson but now lives in Southern Appalachia with her husband Steven Hopp, and her two daughters, Camille and Lily.

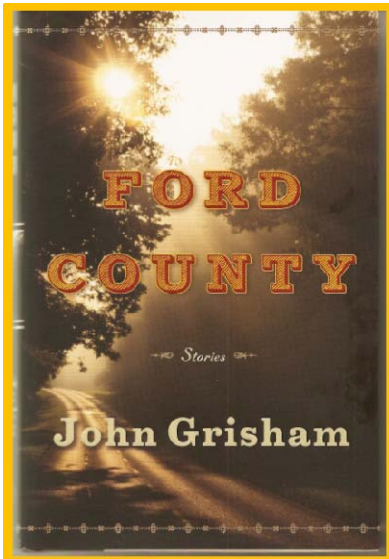
Given that Barbara Kingsolver's novels cover the psychic and geographical territories that she knows firsthand, readers often assume that they are autobiographical. However, Kingsolver says that this is not the case. She acknowledges that "there are little things that people who know me might recognize in my novels ... but my work is not about me. I don't ever write about real people. That would be stealing, first of all. Second of all, art is supposed to be better than that. If you want a slice of life, look out the window. An artist has to look out that window, isolate one or two suggestive things, and embroider them together with

poetry and fiction, to create a revelation. If we can't, as artists, improve on real life, we should put down our pencils and go bake bread."

Ford County Stories

by John Grisham (2009)

John Grisham's first collection of short stories is set in Ford County MS, the setting of his first novel, *A Time to Kill*. Featuring a cast of unforgettable characters, these stories bring Ford County to vivid and colorful life. Often hilarious, frequently moving, and always entertaining, this collection makes it abundantly clear why John Grisham is such a popular storyteller.



Grisham was born in Jonesboro AR February 8, 1955. His father, a cotton farmer and itinerant construction worker moved the family frequently, from town to town throughout the Deep South, settling in Southaven MS in 1967. Although his parents lacked formal education, his mother encouraged him to read and insisted that he prepare himself for college. After graduating from the University of Mississippi law school, he returned to Southaven and established a small private legal practice. He was elected to the Mississippi

House of Representatives in 1983.

For years, Grisham arrived at his office at five o'clock in the morning, six days a week, to work on his first book, *A Time To Kill*. His manuscript was rejected by 28 publishers before he found an unknown publisher who was willing to print a short run.

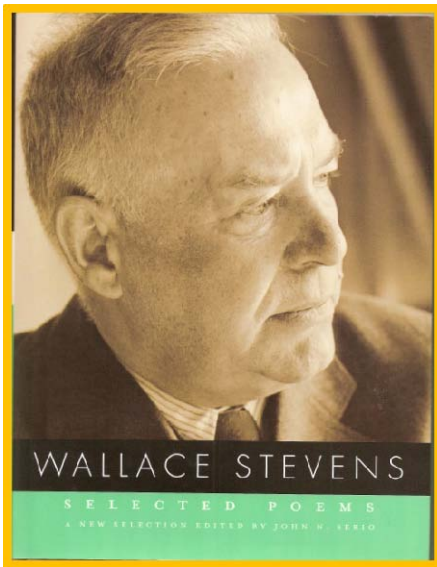
At age 36, his career as a novelist bloomed when movie rights to *The Firm* were sold, even before the book had found a publisher. *The Firm* sold more than seven million copies and spent 47 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

Today, Grisham, his wife and two children, keep homes in Oxford MS and near Charlottesville VA. Apart from his writing, Grisham is a generous



supporter of Little League teams in Oxford and Charlottesville and has endowed writing scholarship at the University of Mississippi. He is also a board member of the Innocence Project, an organization that promotes the use of DNA evidence to exonerate the wrongly convicted.

Collected Poems By Wallace Stevens (1955)



Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was born in Reading PA. He attended Harvard University and planned to travel to Paris as a writer, but after a working briefly as a reporter for the *New York Herald Times*, he decided to study law. Though he had serious determination to become a successful lawyer, Stevens had several friends among the New York writers and painters in Greenwich Village, including the poets William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and E.E. Cummings.

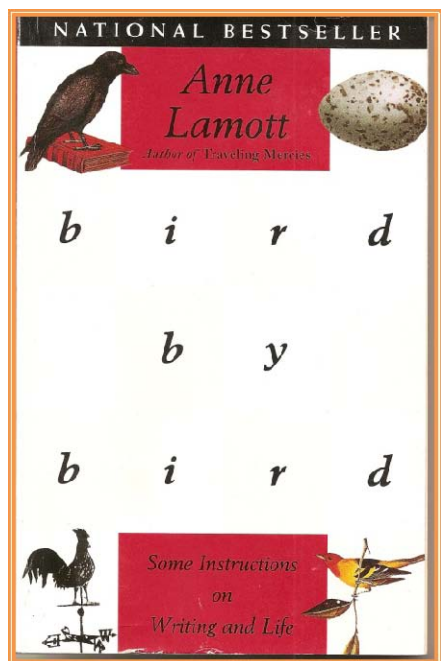
Stevens moved to Connecticut in 1916 to work for Hartford Accident and Indemnity and eventually became its vice president. He had begun to establish an identity for himself outside the world of law and business, however, and his first book of poems, *Harmonium*, published in 1923, exhibited the influence of both the English Romantics and the French symbolists, aesthetic philosophy, and a wholly original style and sensibility: exotic, whimsical, infused with the light and color of an Impressionist painting.

More than any other 20th century poet, Stevens was concerned with the transformative power of the imagination. Composing poems on his way to and from the office and in the evenings, Stevens continued to spend his days behind a desk at the office, and led a quiet, uneventful life. He did not receive widespread recognition until the publication of his *Collected Poems*, just a year before his death. His major works include *Ideas of Order* (1935), *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction* (1942), and a collection of essays on poetry, *The Necessary Angel* (1951).

Bird by Bird: some instructions on writing and life

by Anne Lamott (1994)

"Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write [it] was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened



books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

With this basic instruction always in mind, Anne Lamott returns to offer us a new gift: a step-by-step guide on how to write and on how to manage the writer's life. From "Getting Started," with "Short Assignments," through "Shitty First Drafts," "Character," "Plot," "Dialogue," all the way from "False Starts" to "How Do You Know When You're Done?" Lamott encourages, instructs, and inspires. She discusses "Writer's Block," "Writing Groups," and "Publication." Bracingly honest, she is also one of the funniest people alive.

If you have ever wondered what it takes to be a writer, what it means to be a writer, what the contents of your school lunches said about what your parents were really like, this book's for you. From faith, love, and grace to pain, jealousy, and fear, Lamott insists that you keep your eyes open, and then shows you how to survive. And always, from the life of the artist she turns to the art of life.

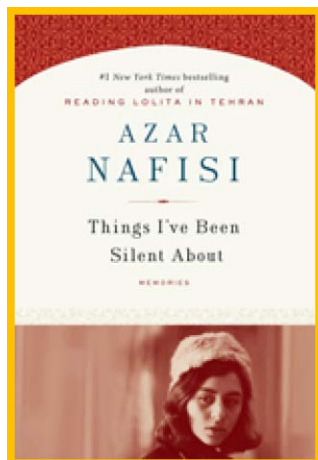
Anne Lamott was born in San Francisco (1954). She has authored novels and works of non-fiction. She is also a progressive political activist, an acclaimed public speaker and a teacher of writing. Her works are largely autobiographical, with strong doses of self-deprecating humor, marked by their transparency. She writes about her alcoholism, single motherhood, and Christianity. "I try to write the books I would love to come upon, that are honest, concerned with real lives, human hearts, spiritual transformation, families, secrets, wonder, craziness — and that can make me laugh. When I am reading a book like this, I feel rich and profoundly relieved to be in the presence of someone who will share the truth with me, and throw the lights on a little, and I try to write these kinds of books. Books, for me, are medicine."

Lamott is a graduate of Drew School (San Francisco CA). Her father, Kenneth Lamott, was also a writer and was the basis of her first novel *Hard Laughter*. She has one son, Sam, who was born in 1990. Lamott's life is documented in Freida Lee

Mock's 1999 documentary *Bird by Bird with Annie: A Film Portrait of Writer Anne Lamott*. Lamott is a writer who captures well the style of narrative nonfiction called "particularism", coined by Howard Freeman.

Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories

by Azar Nafisi (2009)



Azar Nafisi is best known as the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, a compassionate and often harrowing portrait of the Islamic revolution in Iran and how it affected Nafisi, a university professor and her female students. The book is an incisive exploration of the transformative powers of fiction in a world of tyranny. She is currently working on *Republic of the Imagination*, which is about the power of literature to liberate minds and peoples.

Nafisi lives in Washington, D.C. and is a visiting professor of aesthetics, culture, and literature at Johns Hopkins University where she also teaches courses on the relation between culture and politics.

In *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories* Nafisi gives us a stunning personal story of growing up in Iran, memories of her life lived in thrall to a powerful and complex mother, against the background of a country's political revolution. A girl's pain over family secrets; a young woman's discovery of the power of sensuality in literature; the price a family pays for freedom in a country beset by political upheaval.

Nafisi's intelligent and complicated mother, disappointed in her dreams of leading an important and romantic life, created mesmerizing fictions about herself, her family, and her past. But her daughter soon learned that these narratives of triumph hid as much as they revealed. Nafisi's father escaped into narratives of another kind, enchanting his children with the classic tales like the *Shahnamah*, the Persian Book of Kings. When her father started seeing other women, young Azar began to keep his secrets from her mother. Nafisi's complicity in these childhood dramas ultimately led her to resist remaining silent about other personal, as well as political, cultural, and social, injustices.



Things I've Been Silent About is a deeply personal reflection on women's choices, and on how Nafisi found the inspiration for a different kind of life.

Istanbul: memories and the city

by Orphan Pamuk (2003)

"NEAR the end of "Istanbul," a dissolute and errant architecture student called Orhan Pamuk sits in the family apartment with his mother -- his father is out with his mistress and his older brother, Sevket, is studying in the United States -- while she lays out with appalling precision how his passion, which is to paint, will lead him either to the bottle or to the asylum. "Everyone knows that van Gogh and Gauguin were cracked," she says, and goes on: "You'll be plagued by complexes, anxieties and resentments till the day you die." Seized by guilt but revolted by the bourgeois life his well-born mother has mapped out for him, Pamuk steps out into



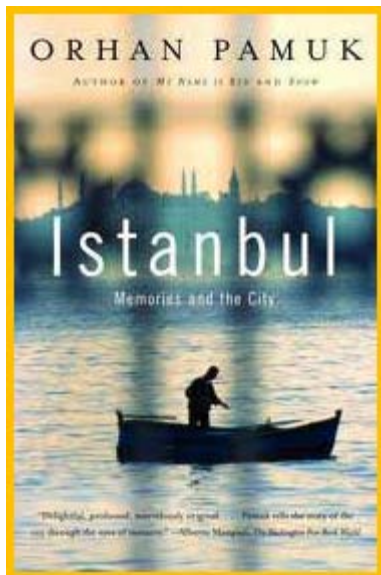
Istanbul's "consoling streets," but not before experiencing a dramatic conversion. In a parting shot to his mother -- and also to the reader, for these are the book's final words -- he says: "I don't want to be an artist. . . . I'm going to be a writer."

"To judge by the spasms of self-abasement that Pamuk records here -- "I belong to the living dead," he writes in a late chapter, "I am a corpse that still breathes, a wretch condemned to walk streets and pavements that can only remind me of my filth and my defeat" -- the old lady had a point. Pamuk is not a sunny memoirist, but neither is he a sunny novelist. In this memoir of his youth, as in the six novels he has set in the city, Istanbul bears only a fleeting resemblance to the smiling and vibrant place many Westerners know from vacationing there. Pamuk's hometown is rarely consoling; it is more often troubled and malicious, its voice muffled and its colors muted by snowfalls that happen more often in the author's imagination than in real life. "From a very young age I suspected there was more to my world than I could see," Pamuk writes, and so it goes. Far from a conventional appreciation of the city's natural and architectural splendors, "Istanbul" tells of an invisible melancholy and the way it acts on an imaginative young man, aggrieving him but pricking his creativity.

"As a Turk, a painter and -- eventually -- a writer, the journey Pamuk depicts

in "Istanbul" lies between what many outsiders, in his sardonic observation, "like to call East and West," but which he terms past and present. The past is represented by the Ottoman Empire, a vast many-limbed polyglot whose heart once beat in Istanbul, its dazzling capital. But the empire no longer exists, and its surviving memorials -- the imperial mansions and expanses of woodland, the marble fountains and clapboard waterside villas --are being devoured by developers, fire and neglect. The present is the Turkish Republic, Ataturk's secular, Western-oriented, homogenizing nation state, which has its seat in a big Anatolian village. Istanbul is no longer a city of consequence, let alone a world capital. It is an insular little place sinking in its own ruins, "so poor and confused that it can never again dream of rising to its former heights of wealth, power and culture."

"Pamuk is himself a product of the Ataturk revolution. Born in 1952 into a quarrelsome, irreligious family, surrounded by "positivist men who loved mathematics," he grew up, as he tells us, in a family-owned apartment building in the upmarket Nisantasi district, free to read Freud and Sartre and Faulkner, drink alcohol and have a love affair -- beautifully evoked in Maureen Freely's fine translation -- with a schoolgirl. As a young painter, he saw his city through the pictorial and written accounts left by visiting Europeans, and also through four republic-era Turkish writers who have been, "at one point in their lives, dazzled by the brilliance of Western (and particularly French) art and literature." Naturally, the reader pauses to reflect on Pamuk's own debt to the West -- on the architectonic precision of his novels, on their assured leaps from Proustian introspection to a narrative sorcery that recalls Borges and García Márquez. If, as Pamuk writes, "there is no Ottoman painting that can easily accommodate our visual tastes," it is because "we" have been schooled to see things in a different, Western way. He is drawn to the 18th-century painter Antoine-Ignace Melling because Melling "saw the city like an Istanbulu but painted it like a cleareyed Westerner."



"Pamuk's achievement in "Istanbul" is to show the human damage done by Ataturk's revolution without succumbing to the benighted nostalgia of many Turkish Islamists. He is appalled that many secular Turks -- including, presumably, Pamuk himself -- must "grapple with the most basic questions of existence -- love, compassion, religion, the meaning of life, jealousy, hatred -- in trembling confusion and painful solitude" but he offers no solution. Mapping his own complexities, he turns to the streets of his hometown, to the "last traces of a great culture and a great civilization that we were unfit or unprepared to inherit, in our frenzy to turn Istanbul into a pale, poor, second-class imitation of a Western city." One of Pamuk's qualities is his constant striving to be worthy of that inheritance; all his novels,

and particularly "My Name Is Red," testify to the author's self-education in the Persian and Islamic origins of Ottoman culture --an education that had no place in

the progressive curriculum of his private high school.

“For many secular Turks, that word "imitation" has a disagreeable resonance. Naturally, they bridle at suggestions that their pursuit of a European identity is mimicry. Pamuk is an exception, a secular Turk who has too much integrity to seek authenticity in so contrived a national mission -- which he finds exemplified in his parents' house, where the piano is untouched and the porcelain is for show and the Art Nouveau screen has nothing to hide. Again, he turns for meaning to Istanbul's decrepit outlying neighborhoods, and to the photographer Ara Guler, whose images illustrate Istanbul and who shares Pamuk's fascination with decay and snow. Above all, Pamuk identifies with his four "lonely, melancholic" Turkish writers, who use European tools to evoke a peculiarly Turkish sense of loss.

"Istanbul" is full of byways that lead the reader into Pamuk's fiction --sometimes with a jolting literalness. The quarrels between young Orhan and Sevket mirror the rivalry of two siblings, also called Orhan and Sevket, in "My Name Is Red." In "Istanbul," the young Pamuk recalls reading that Flaubert once imagined writing a novel about a Westerner and an Easterner who "come to resemble each other, finally changing places"; this happens to be the plot of Pamuk's "White Castle." But it is "Black Book," the story of a quest that begins (and ends) in a family-owned apartment building in Nisantasi, that flickers most vividly across the pages of "Istanbul." There is so much of Pamuk in the novel's solitary flâneur, Galip, and also in Galip's missing cousin, Jelal -- a collector, like Pamuk, of semihistorical trivia about Istanbul and forgotten curiosities of Turkish history. "Istanbul" stops when Pamuk is still a young man. A sequel would reflect subsequent changes. As Turkey puts its economic house in order and edges closer to European Union membership, parts of Istanbul are acquiring gentrified airs. Three formerly down-at-the-heels streets in Pamuk's beloved Beyoglu district were recently transformed into a sort of Disneyfied "French Quarter," with security guards, chic boutiques and outside tables where rich Turks can nibble Camembert and lip-sync to the Brassens soundtrack. It would be nice to hear what Pamuk thinks of that.

Unaccustomed Earth

By Jhumpa Lahiri (2008)

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London and raised in Rhode Island. . She lives in Brooklyn. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and author of two previous books. Her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award and The New Yorker Debut of the Year. We first became acquainted with her work when we saw the movie

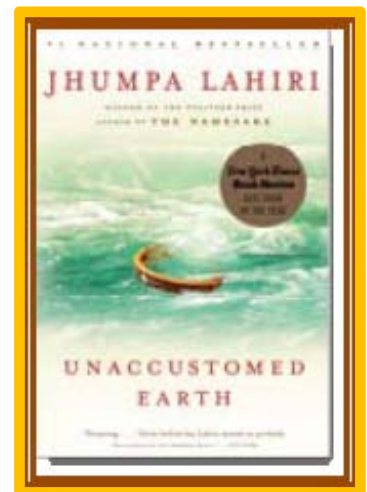
adaptation of her novel *The Namesake*.



The Namesake begins when newlyweds Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli emigrate to Cambridge, Mass., in 1968, where Ashima immediately gives birth to a son, Gogol—a pet name that becomes permanent when his formal name, traditionally bestowed by the maternal grandmother, is posted in a letter from India, but lost in transit. Ashoke becomes a professor of engineering, but Ashima has a harder time assimilating, unwilling to give up her ties to India. A leap ahead to the '80s finds the teenage Gogol ashamed of his Indian heritage and his unusual name, which he sheds as he moves on to college at Yale and graduate school at Columbia, legally changing it to Nikhil. In one of the most telling chapters, Gogol moves into the home of a family of wealthy Manhattan WASPs and is initiated into a lifestyle idealized in Ralph Lauren ads. Here, Lahiri demonstrates her considerable powers of perception and her ability to convey the discomfort of feeling "other" in a world many would aspire to inhabit.

Most recently when we were in Boston, I read her collection of short stories about expatriate Bengalis set in Boston. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a superbly crafted new work of fiction: eight stories—longer and more emotionally complex than any she has yet written—that take us from Cambridge and Seattle to India and Thailand as they enter the lives of sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, friends and lovers. Lahiri is a master storyteller. Her language is exquisite. With true genius she probes the challenge of belonging – can outsiders ever become insiders? Can any of us who build bridges between two cultures live anywhere but on the bridges we build? The penalty for leaving home is excommunication, and the hospitality of our new culture never completely integrates us.

In the stunning title story, Ruma, a young mother in a new city, is visited by her father, who carefully tends the earth of her garden, where he and his grandson form a special bond. But he's harboring a secret from his daughter, a love affair he's keeping all to himself. In "A Choice of Accommodations," a husband's attempt to turn an old friend's wedding into a romantic getaway weekend with his wife takes a dark, revealing turn as the party lasts deep into the night. In "Only Goodness," a sister eager to give her younger brother the perfect childhood she never had is overwhelmed by guilt, anguish, and anger when his alcoholism threatens her family. And in "Hema and Kaushik," a trio of linked stories—a luminous, intensely compelling elegy of life, death, love, and fate—we follow the lives of a girl and boy who, one winter, share a house in Massachusetts. They travel from innocence to experience on separate, sometimes painful paths, until destiny brings them



together again years later in Rome.

Tuesday, May 31, 2011

Memorial Day

In *Flowers for My Grandfather* (Arizona Republic (Sunday May 29, 2011): B10) Patricia Biggs writes: *It's likely that few people will spend Memorial Day on Monday as its founders intended by scattering flowers on the graves of Civil War soldiers.*

The national holiday Congress established for federal workers in 1887 had grown out of community events throughout the North and South since 1866. This year marks 150 years since the Civil War began. It is hard to imagine the deep grief and overwhelming loss survivors faced four years and 600,000 deaths later.

The tradition of placing spring flowers on graves had become commonplace before 1861, but the practice grew quickly after the war ended. Women in the South and North tended the graves of the men they'd known, loved and lost during the war. They brought flowers, requested prayers at church services and sang hymns in attempts to assuage their deep grief.

Veterans, many missing arms or legs, joined in the practice to honor the men with whom they had served. They struggled to fashion some meaning out of the battles they'd survived.

In time, grief subsided and Memorial Day shifted away from its sense of personal loss. Today, people might think that Congress undermined the importance of the day of commemoration when it passed the 1971 Monday Holiday Bill. But as early as the 1890s, veterans groused that the day had become a holiday rather than a solemn day of remembrance.

Today, none of us has direct connections with the Civil War. But I come from a family of writers; storytellers and packrats...

My grandmother – Blanche Susan Landaker Benjamin – was born in Kankakee IL. I called her *Nana*.

At some point her people moved to Ames IA. She referred to Memorial Day as *Decoration Day*. Her people were farmers, and she once told me that they rode in a cream cart out to the cemetery to clean the grave and leave flowers. She remembers as

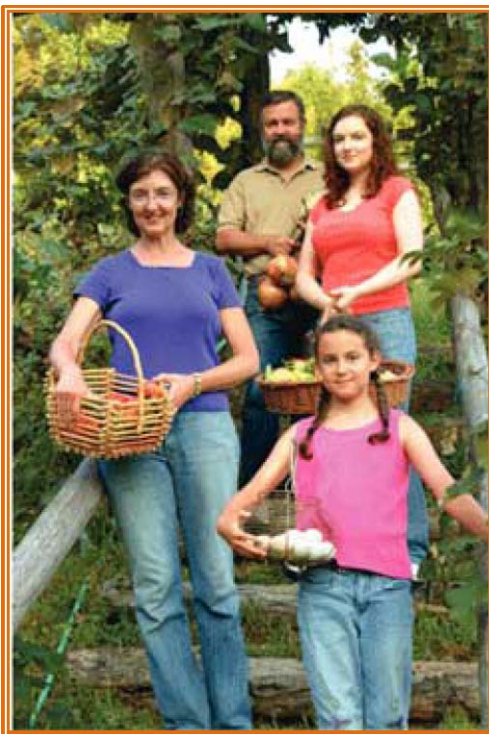
a small child falling asleep in the cart.

I was touched by the image of my grandmother – whom I considered old – as a small girl, sleeping in the back of a farm wagon.

Nana also told me about going to her grandmother’s funeral in Kankakee when she was very young. Her grandmother was laid out at home in her own bed. When I asked her if she was afraid of being in a room with a dead person, she told me: *No, I thought she looked like she was asleep.*

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life

By Barbara Kingsolver (2007)

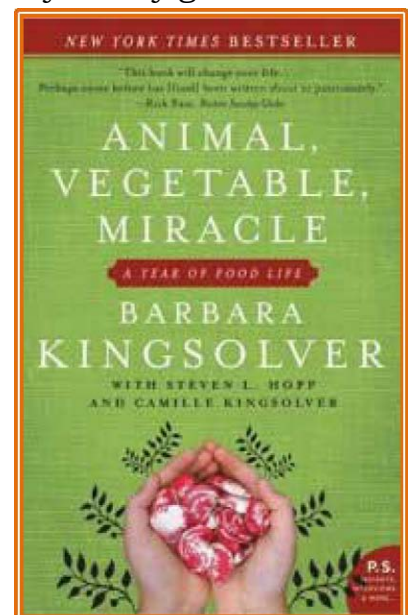


Growing up in rural Kentucky, Barbara Kingsolver did not know that she would also become a best-selling writer: *The Bean Trees* (1988), *Animal Dreams* (1990), *Another America* (1992), *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), *High Tide in Tucson* (1995), *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), *Prodigal Summer* (2000), *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007), and *The Lacuna* (2009).

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle; A Year of Food Life is a memoir explaining how she and her family carried out a vow to eat only locally grown food for one year and why food has become a political and environmental issue, about the challenges involved with finding a variety of local food year-round,

and how the commitment ultimately changed her family’s life for the better. Her family produced about 70% of what went on their table from their own farm in Virginia—everything from tomatoes to turkeys. What they could not grow they mostly bought from local farmers.

Since June 2004, Barbara and her family have lived on a farm in southern Appalachia. Barbara believes her best work is accomplished through writing, raising



her children, and being an active citizen of her own community

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

Why Religious Studies?

Sometimes students ask: *What's a nice guy like you doing in Religious Studies?*

I was not called to cave by the angel Gabriel like Muhammad. I did not hear the voice of Yahweh calling to me from a burning bush like Moses. I did not hear the voice of Jesus call my name on the road to Damascus like Paul. When I was a student -- like most students today -- I wanted to make a living, and I also wanted to make a difference. So I looked around to see who was making a difference in the world I was about to enter and it was people connected with religion. There were scholars like Hans Kung and pastors like Martin Luther King Jr. who were making a difference. I was drawn to that light.

Religious studies struggles with the big questions – life, death, suffering, selflessness, for example -- and those were the questions I as a student was asking.

I was also fascinated with a field which challenged students to step fearlessly to the edge of darkness and shout: *Who's out there?* And then to ask what difference it makes if there is someone out there for how we understand who we are here, and how we should treat other humans and all creatures who share this earth with us.

Every department on every university campus deals with questions first raised by religion. If humans are going to ...*love their neighbor* then they have to understand humans which is the work of anthropology, sociology and psychology. If humans are going to care for poor and the suffering then they have to understand suffering, disease and healing which is the work of medicine, education, and economics.

Marty is one of my heroes – he is both a scholar and a person of faith. During his career he taught, he published, he has spoken all over the country and around the world – even at ASU. He has written more than 50 books! In my career I have written five books, and I am no slouch.

His colleagues tell good natured jokes about how much Marty gets done in a single year. One joke goes. Someone calls his office at the University of Chicago and asks to speak with Marty. The admin says to the caller: *I'm sorry but Dr. Marty is*

writing a book! To which the caller responds: *That's alright, I'll wait.*

Enjoy reading Martin Marty – he is more passionate than I am about how important it is to study religion in college.

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

The Sacred Canopy

Why read Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* at the very beginning of the semester? Berger wrote the book more than 40 years ago. *The Sacred Canopy* is, without doubt, the most difficult book I will read with you this semester. Finally, why read such an old book and such a difficult book to understand first in the semester?

I have had any number of students come back and tell me that they were the only one in some other class who even knew who Berger is. They were absolutely amazed to discover how much influence Berger has had. I have only had one student who came back more than once to tell me that reading Berger changed her life!

Berger, Eliade and Turner were part of movement in the middle of the 20th century which radically changed the way scholars study religion today. Before their work religious studies was *theology*. Theologians assume that there is a body of divine revelation which must be deciphered. Theologians work to understand the mind of God.

Berger, Eliade and Turner approach the study of religion from an entirely different direction. Theology focuses on God; religious studies focuses on people who have experienced God. Berger, Eliade and Turner assume that all humans experience the divine. They study how humans react to their transcendent experiences. Religion for Berger, Eliade and Turner is not something which God reveals, but rather something which humans create when they experience the divine to preserve and to pass on their experience to others.

Berger taught in the US, but was born in Germany. He is an old world professor who punctuates his chapters with Latin phrases and big words. That is how professors talked in the 1960's – even in American universities. The style demonstrated to their students that they were learned. Of course, if your instructors today talked to you online or in class the way Berger writes, no one would take their courses. Don't spend time looking up all the words you do not know, just keep reading. You may want to start by reading only the first paragraph

in the chapter and the last paragraph, and then take some time to think about what you have learned.

Monday, June 20, 2011

Poder es Servir

You were wonderful yesterday! I have always understood the vocation of any of us in authority to be to affirm what God is doing in the lives of others. By nature, and hopefully as well by continuing to sharpen our sense of the presence of God through living a reflective life, we are smitten by divine creativity. We are like children on an Easter Egg hunt – never tiring of finding God in all the people who come our way. All the sermons and sacraments are simply elaborate ways of saying: *Yep! That's God.*

Sounds simple, and truly it is, but it has a powerful impact. The *Love Story* interview was such a powerful – and painful -- demonstration of how religious authority saying: *Nope! That's a sin* can torment and derail the life of a woman with stunning talents for almost 20 years. Then you watched and listened and admired and kept repeating like a child writing standards in class – *Yep! That's God* until finally she believed you – and believed God could love her, and could bless her love.

I also found your exchange with one of the Asbury members who were there when you came, and her first memory of you. *I took a class with you on Sex!* Your response was telling – *And then you worked on the first commission here to develop a policy on inclusiveness which led to this congregation becoming a welcoming church where GLBT people could find a full church home.* Not your words, but mine, yet it made me aware of what lies ahead at Via de Cristo.

It took 18 years to move from that class on sex to the *Love Story*, but what a difference it made in the lives of so many. Via de Cristo is not where Asbury is – times have changed. Perhaps it will not take 18 more years of watching and listening to make that community grow, but if you can find the patience it will. *Poder es server.*

Monday, August 01, 2011

Sr. Mary Eileen

a Sister of Charity in Convent Station (NJ)

When my students ask: "What's a nice guy like you doing in a low paying job like teaching?" I tell them about Sr. Mary Eileen. She was a Sister of Charity of Convent Station NJ, and my kindergarten teacher.

I always finished her assignments quickly, but before I could get bored and start acting out, she would come to my desk and ask: "Would you like to learn to write cursive, like first graders?" or "Would you like to learn how to add and subtract like first graders?" She even sent me home with a first grade math book, which I carried around like an Oscar.

I am sure I thrived on the intellectual stimulation she gave me, but I know that I thrived on her attention.

When my dad was transferred from Ft Monmouth NJ to Ft Gordon GA after kindergarten, I was allowed to skip first grade and go straight into second!

Years later while I was in graduate school at Catholic University in Washington DC, I met another Sister of Charity, who was also a graduate student. She had worked at the Covenant Station infirmary and cared for Mary Eileen after she retired. She told me that Mary Eileen got up every day and put only her old time undergarments that religious women in those days wore. Then she would go to the day room, sit in a rocker and teach. She would call her former students by name; she would teach, take them out for nutrition breaks and recess.

My friend told me that Mary Eileen was a delight to care for -- and that she wished she had known my name then to listen for it as Mary Eileen called role.

One of my students at ASU is an Assyrian Orthodox Christian from Iraq. At the end of the semester he invited me to talk to the graduates his parish was honoring. I told the graduates my story about Mary Eileen, and about what a difference good teachers make in our lives.

Native Son

I have a special bond with the writer Richard Wright (1908-1960). His *Native Son* was – sort of – the first book I read, according to my mother. Here is the story.

I moved to Washington D.C. in the fall of 1964 to begin work on two graduate degrees: one in Semitic languages, one in theology. My mother and father were

stationed at Ft. Meade MD not far away. Shortly after starting graduate school I also began working in the Civil Rights Movement.

Both my parents grew up in poor families in the Midwest. Black people were not part of their world, and they did not understand why I was making civil rights for African Americans such a big part of my world.

Neither of my parents went to college. Nonetheless, my mother was an avid reader. For example, she read the *Reader's Digest* every month as well as the other magazines which came into our home while I was growing up. She also read fiction. She also subscribed to the *Reader's Digest* Book-of-the-Month, which became the key which unlocked the door of her understanding my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

My mother called me one day and announced: "Now I understand why you have such sympathy for those people!" She was completed unaware how prejudiced "...those people" sounded.

"Tell me", I said.

"When I was pregnant with you, I read *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

Native Son was the first novel by an African American to become a Book-of-the-Month selection (1940). Wright tells the story of a young black man who commits murder in a moment of panic. It was a best seller and the first novel by an African American writer to enter the mainstream of American literature.

I was fascinated that my mother was absolutely convinced that not only what she ate and drank would affect her unborn child, but also what she thought and read as well. I will always be grateful to Richard Wright for his gift to her, and to me. In 1969 when I started my high school teaching career in South Central Los Angeles, my white, African American and Asian students and I read *Native Son* in my English class together again.

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Henry

My mother and I were among the first 25 American families to go to Japan at the end of World War II. Douglas McArthur, the commander of Allied Forces in the Pacific and the Military Governor in Japan, issued some very enlightened directives for these American families.

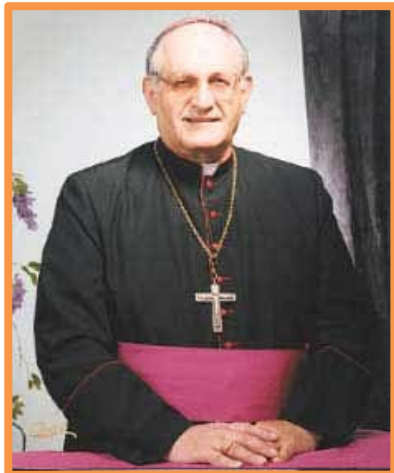
Americans could not live together in compounds. We were required to live among the Japanese families. Therefore, the army confiscated a Japanese home for my mother and father and me. It was a large two-story building – bigger than anything we had ever lived in together. Too big for three people. The floors were bamboo, not tile or carpet. The inside doors slid back and forth on tracks. I had never seen sliding doors. The doors were paper stretched on thin strips of wood like model airplanes.

One day a Japanese family came to the house. The family came to the back door, not the front door. The father of the household wore a tuxedo and a top hat. The women wore traditional Japanese kimonos. They asked to see my father, and presented him with the first crocus which had bloomed in their yard that spring.

I asked my mother who they were. She said that they owned the house where we lived. I asked her where they lived. She said she did not know. When I asked why they gave dad a flower, she told me it was a sign of great respect. Their oldest child – a son – had been very sick. They did not....

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Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza



Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza

I met Joseph A. Fiorenza at Our Lady of Mt Carmel parish in Houston in 1978. He was the chancellor – chief operating officer -- of the Catholic Diocese of Galveston-Houston. Roger Bonneau, a friend who was also a priest and a hospice chaplain at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, had invited me to hear Ernesto Cortes, Jr., the Southwest Regional Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), speak to The Metropolitan Organization (TMO) at the parish.

I had only recently moved to Houston to accept a one-year teaching position at Rice University. During the previous 10 years I had worked in South Central Los

Angeles organizing the 24 Catholic parishes in that area of the city. After Ernie's talk Roger introduced me to Monsignor Fiorenza. As I remember, he shook my hand, said "Joe Fiorenza" and welcomed me to Houston.



Ernesto Cortes, Jr.

Some weeks later I paid a courtesy call to John L. Morkovsky, the bishop of Galveston-Houston. At the receptionist's direction, I opened the door to the bishop's office and stood in front of his desk.

"I am Don Benjamin" I began "I am teaching in the Religious Studies Department at Rice University."

"So where did you get your education?" the bishop asked. He had earned a Doctorate in Sacred Theology (STD) at the Gregorian University (Rome) in 1935.

"I have a Ph.D. in Religion and Old Testament from the Claremont Graduate University (CA)" I answered.

"Don't you have any Catholic Old Testament?" he asked.

I had no idea what the bishop meant by "Catholic Old Testament", but I answered. "I studied Old Testament with Roland Murphy, O. Carm. and New Testament with Christian Ceroke, O. Carm. for four years."

"Just the kind of priest Nielson would hire" he grumbled.

Niels C. Nielsen, Jr., who had hired me, founded and chaired the Religious Studies Department at Rice University. He was an institution at the university and in Houston. His reputation was built on creating strong relationships with faith based communities in the city. "We are here to serve these good people," he would say, "not antagonize them." He had wrongly assumed that Bishop Morkovsky would be pleased to have a priest with a Ph.D. teaching an Ivy League school like Rice.

"Did you receive permission from me to say Mass in the diocese?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Good."

The interview ended as quickly as it had begun with me still standing in front of the bishop's desk.

As I stepped out of the door of the bishop's office, I saw Msgr. Fiorenza sitting at his desk, strategically placed, I assumed, to spot casualties emerging from their meetings with the bishop.

He was on the phone. Nonetheless, he waved me over to his desk, motioned for me to take a seat while he finished his phone call. When he hung up the phone, he reached across the desk shook my hand, and said: "Don, it is good to see you again." He remembered my name. He asked me about my work at the university, and ended with words of appreciation that became the routine with which our meetings over the next many years would close.

"Don, I appreciate what you are doing for our students at Rice. Thank you for representing us there."

Whether at clergy gatherings or when he was on campus to offer a benediction at commencement, Bishop Fiorenza always sought me out, asked about my work, and thanked me for my presence in the diocese and at the university. He acknowledged me both as a priest and as a scholar. I felt wanted. I felt needed. I was glad to be where I was and doing what I was doing. My one-year appointment at the university was renewed annually for more than 20 years. During all that time I basked in the acceptance and appreciation of that good man.

My experience of Bishop Fiorenza was my experience of so many priests who inspired me to become a priest. He was good; he was hard working; he was pastoral; and he was kind to me. I would say much the same about Bishop Markovsky -- who softened his approach to me as time went along -- and Bishop John E. McCarthy, who also served in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston.

In 1997 I accepted a position as the dean of a school of theology for the laity in the Catholic Diocese of Phoenix. Then Bishop Fiorenza wrote Thomas J. O'Brien, bishop of Phoenix, a letter of recommendation. The gesture was not necessary, but it was another welcomed endorsement by him of me.

Although I should have known that all bishops are not created equal I was completely unprepared and ultimately completely unsuccessful at working with Bishop O'Brien, who was both embarrassingly anti-clerical and admittedly anti-intellectual. By nature he was a shy and anti-social man who disliked being around people; most of all he disliked being around his own priests including me. He was also unlearned and threatened by learning. He liked to joke that he only read one book a year -- on vacation. He would announce the titles at his meetings with me and the other directors of diocesan ministries. *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* by Thomas Cahill (1997) was one summer's selection. O'Brien considered my scholarship to be pride, not a profession.

Bishop O'Brien's director of education, Dolorette Farias, once tried to counsel me: "Don't think your Ph.D. means anything."

"Of course it does," I protested. "In 2000 only 1.2% of the population in the US held Ph.D.s" (National Center for Educational Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov/prorams/digest>). She walked away.

Bishop O'Brien never acknowledged me as a priest or as a scholar. I never felt wanted in his diocese. I never felt needed. I was unhappy to be where I was and doing what I was doing. What a difference words – both kind and unkind -- make.

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A Contemplative Corner

Almost two months ago, Patrice and I decided to launch a remake of our home at 3910 E. Marconi Ave in Phoenix to welcome ourselves into retirement on February 1, 2013.

We replaced the white eight inch tiles which the developer had installed in 1986. The new tile in the kitchen, family room, baths and hallway is 18 inch porcelain in warm earth tones, installed diagonally.

We replaced the interior slab doors with new six panel doors. Each door had new brushed nickel hardware.

We painted throughout. The ceilings are frosting cream white. The accent wall in the living room remains whipped strawberry red framed by three walls painted frosting cream. The kitchen remains laurel mist green; the family room, hallway and laundry room are frosting cream. The bed rooms and bath room walls are Coral Gable Biltmore Mediterranean Mocha.

Between December and April, we donated some 1500 novels, poetry and biographies to the Phoenix Public Library. Then, I contacted Jeff Ball of Dove Books to sell my academic library. I packed it all into boxes now waiting for shipment in the garage. My library was a physical monument to more than 30 years of scholarship and teaching. The separation began difficult, but soon became exciting.

I moved from my office from the family room adjoining the kitchen to a much smaller front bedroom, and began to build what Ann Morrow Lindberg calls "...a

contemplative corner” of my own.¹ Like her I am now searching for a new pattern of living. I need to build another rhythm in my life with more creative pauses. I need more space and time for my own needs. I need new and more alive relationships with myself and with others.

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Thank You, Teilhard

Thank you, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) for living during my lifetime. I am blessed, not to have known you personally, but to have been inspired by reading *The Phenomenon of Man*² and *The Divine Milieu*³ in college, and the *Hymn of the Universe*⁴ again today. I am blessed to have lived in a time of holy, learned and faith filled women and men like you.

Time magazine crowned you: *One of the 20th Century's most remarkable prophetic thinkers, an Aquinas of the atomic era* in October 16, 1964 – the year I began graduate school in Washington D.C. You looked beyond the ancient, but exclusive rituals of a Roman Catholic world, into the vast expanse of human life and of the cosmos. You were amazed at how great was God beyond the Church which cradled your faith. You saw God present everywhere. Although you were filled with reverence for the material world, you were continuously aware of all things spiritual.

I followed your invitation into that world with equal fascination, not as a paleoanthropologist in the Gobi Desert of China, but as a scholar of biblical and Near Eastern cultures. Like you my own journey into life and learning did not destroy my faith; it has strengthened it.

¹ Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), 9-11.

² de Chardin Teilhard, Bernard Wall and Julian Huxley, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959).

³ de Chardin Teilhard, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper, 1960).

⁴ de Chardin Teilhard, *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins (Fontana Bks), 1970).

You consecrated the sunrise, and embraced the entire earth on which that sun shed its light as divine. That your vision could be so grand not only for you, but also for so many who learned from you, frightened men of lesser vision like Alfredo Ottaviani (1890-1979).

On June 30, 1962, under the direction of Cardinal Ottaviani, the Holy Office decreed: "*Several works of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ...abound in such ambiguities and indeed even serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine.* The Holy Office ordered your work removed from all Catholic seminaries and universities.

A curious historical footnote to your condemnation by Ottaviani is the condemnation of the Holy Office under Ottaviani by none other than Josef Ratzinger – then secretary to Cardinal Frings, archbishop of Cologne. On behalf of his Cardinal, Ratzinger is said to have penned Frings' famous line about the Holy Office, asserting that its *...methods and behavior do not conform to the modern era and are a source of scandal to the world.* Ironically, Ratzinger himself would one day head the Holy Office, would be caricatured -- as Ottaviani was -- as the *...pope's Rottweiler*, and then as Pope Benedict XVI, to be as conservative an opponent of the Catholic Church in the modern world as Ottaviani himself!

Your grand embrace surrounded an ocean of humanity for which I am in awe; and your grand embrace surrounded me for which I am grateful. Like you *...it is to this deep that I thus desire all the fibers of my being should respond. All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those too that will die; all of them, I promise to ...try to gather into my arms...* as an offering one day at a time.⁵

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⁵ Ibid., 20

Courage: homage to Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich (1886-1975) delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University in 1952 – when I was only 10 years old. Nonetheless, his exploration of *The Courage to Be* would continue to be a defining influence not only on the academic world of philosophy, but on me – and my generation – during college in 1959-1964.⁶ Curiously, although I majored in philosophy, I did not meet Tillich in the classroom. My courses at a small Catholic college in Niagara Falls, Ontario focused only on the scholastic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. I read Tillich on my own.

For Tillich courage defines humanity. As a philosopher and as an ethicist, the only authentic human beings are courageous human beings. Without courage humans are simply another species of great apes. The connotations of the title of his seminal work are: to be is to be courageous. Humans are not created at conception, but only in the moment of their first courageous act.

For me, the woman in the *Stories of Adam and Eve* (Gen 2:4—4:2) should be celebrated for her courage, not condemned for her original sin. The biblical traditions themselves acknowledge her intelligence. The snake asks about the garden rules, and the woman answers her correctly. The Bible also considers the woman to be ethical. She not only knows that the garden rules prescribe that she and the man not eat from the tree in the center of the garden; they must not even touch its fruit. In what would become characteristically rabbinical style, she builds a fence around the law. Finally, the *Stories of Adam and Eve* celebrate the woman for her selflessness. She lays down her life so that others can live. She is the *Mother of Us All*.

The woman is a primary model of Tillich's ...*courage to be*. She affirms her own being in spite of those elements of her existence which conflict with her essential self-affirmation.⁷ She chooses to embrace mortality with all its suffering, because it offers her a chance ...*to be*. Humans are most human not only when they conceive a child, but when they lay down their lives so that another can live. Humans become human only when they have the courage to be.

Bibliography

Paul Tillich. *The Courage to be*. London: Nisbet, 1952.

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⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to be* (London: Nisbet, 1952).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3

What Were You Thinking When I was...?

Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) was born in Sweden. In 1953 he became Secretary-General of the United Nations. He died in a plane crash en route to the Congo to negotiate a cease fire. I used his anthology of free verse poems – *Markings* -- for meditation in college.⁸

I felt a bond with Hammarskjöld. Our fathers were soldiers who believed that ...*no life was more satisfactory than one of selfless service to your country – or humanity. This service required a sacrifice of all personal interests, but likewise the courage to stand up unflinchingly for your convictions.* Our mothers were women of faith which ...*found natural expression in an unhesitant fulfillment of duty and an unreserved acceptance of life, whatever it brought them personally of toil, suffering – or happiness.*⁹

As a student Hammarskjöld inspired me because he was a monk in public life. As an adult he inspired me because he never ceased to be hurt by criticism from his opponents. I too wanted to be a Christian in the real world; I too wanted to remain sensitive to both the good and the bad which would be said about me.

Hammarskjöld was a professional man of action ironically living an intensely contemplative life. He was not a monk or a pastor. He was a public servant. His active life was driven by his commitment to contemplation. He did not belong to a church or take sacraments. Nonetheless, he held himself accountable to the Jesus of the Gospel day after day. I still have an intense need to be part of a community of shared faith, which allows me regularly to renew my commitment to my baptismal promises – to celebrate with me when I have been faithful, to forgive me when I have not. Often the community is not there for me, but as it was for Hammarskjöld, the Bible is always there for me.

Debate defines politics. Successful politicians develop an ability to ignore their critics and live relatively calm and peaceful lives of self-worth. Hammarskjöld was a consummate politician. Nonetheless, he remained emotionally vulnerable. Throughout his career in politics, he suffered from every negative comment as if it were an indictment of his personal integrity, and so do I.

I read and prayed Hammarskjöld with such reverence so long ago, that it surprises me today that I find his poems darker than Pascal's *Pensees*.¹⁰ He was defeated by criticism and felt guilty when praised. He faced life with resignation, not

⁸ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Vol. 1st American ed (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1964).

⁹ Ibid., vii-viii

¹⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* Pantheon Books, 1952).

excitement. I felt saddened that he could not see his own greatness. I read and re-read *Markings* seeking something which spoke to me.

In the end I kept:

It merely happens to one man and not to others ...but he can take no credit to himself for the gifts and the responsibility assigned to him ...destiny is something not to be desired and not to be avoid ...it is a mystery not contrary to reason, for it implies that the worlds, and the course of human history, have meaning.¹¹

...and

We have to acquire a peace and balance of mind such that we can give every word of criticism its due weight, and humble ourselves before every word of praise.¹²

Both were written the year I decided to leave home and begin my life as an adult. It was 1957. I was 15.

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Sept. 5, 2010 12:00 AM

Mother Time's tick-ticking, so I'm tap-tapping

by **Karina Bland** -
The Arizona Republic

I've been at the same company for 20 years. My hormones are all out of whack. My kid's teachers, the dentist and my personal banker all look like children. And I haven't done anything trendy with my hair in a decade. I'm due for a midlife crisis any day now.

But with working full-time, running the carpool, making dinner and walking the dog, I've only got time for a small one. I'm not interested in an affair or an overdose. There's no extra cash for a flashy new car, plastic surgery or even a weeklong

¹¹ Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, 144

¹² *Ibid.*, 151

spiritual retreat in Sedona. I can't take a year off to eat, pray and love. I've got to be at a PTA meeting Thursday.

Besides, the word "crisis," while fittingly melodramatic, seems wrong for my experience. We all grow and change constantly, erupting from childhood into teenagers and then morphing into women. By the time we hit 40, we're ready to transform again. The change can be exhilarating, even when forced by unhappy circumstances like divorce, a layoff or the death of a parent.

Men sometimes seem surprised to wake up one morning and discover that they're thicker around the middle, thinning a bit on top and unlikely now to become an NFL quarterback or president of the United States. Their stereotypical midlife crisis might take them to the land of hair plugs, Porsches and trophy dating.

I think women see it coming more, due to the steady tick, tick, tick of our biological clocks. The woman freaking out about her age may be coloring her gray hair, buying expensive skin cream and considering Botox. She may buy a motorcycle (12.3 percent of motorcycle owners in 2008 were female, up from 9.6 percent in 2003), make a career change or file for divorce (two-thirds of divorces are initiated by women now).

But if you look inside, in either gender, it all comes down to this: Where are you in your life now, compared with where you thought you'd be by this age? What didn't you do that you thought you would?

I don't want a motorcycle, and I don't need a divorce, but I do want to do something hip and cool. Oh, sure, my clothes are "retro" - but only because I've been wearing them since the first go-around. (I'm vintage but not on purpose.) I'm still listening to '80s bands. My Facebook posts are more about my kid's accomplishments than mine. He landed the lead role, got an "A" on his math test and sprouted three armpit hairs, but what have I done lately?

So many of the big plans I had - backpacking across Europe, a white-dress wedding, a best-selling book - didn't pan out. At this time in my life, I have to realize that maybe they won't. Somewhere along the way, while I was building my career and raising a son, I set aside some important things: my hiking boots, my paintbrushes, my dance shoes.

I've decided I need to find them again - and me. Not the me I know now, but the me I had planned to be. So I'm learning to tap-dance. No, really. Stop laughing.

I saw "Stomp" at ASU Gammage last year and was mesmerized by the dancing. It took me months to find a beginner's tap class that didn't entail me suiting up in tights with 8-year-olds. Saturday mornings now find me at the community center of a senior citizens' mobile-home park near my house, learning how to shuffle/ball change while lively cribbage matches take place on the other side of the room.

I don't care how ridiculous I look. It makes me deliriously happy, and not just for the hour and a half that I'm there. The feeling lasts through the weekend until the rush of Monday stamps it out of me.

I'm painting again, too. But instead of covering white canvas with bright hues, I'm painting the hull of a pirate ship across two king-size bedsheets for my kid's theater group.

For the first time in 20 years, I went camping - in an actual tent. No showers, no makeup and no worries. We got soaked by the rain and eaten alive by mosquitoes, and no brush could tame my tangled hair. But I could see the stars from my pillow.

And I took up unicycling - something I've wanted to learn since I was a kid - much to the delight of my neighbors. They have lined up with cocktails and lawn chairs on the sidewalk to watch me fall again and again. So maybe I don't backpack across Europe. But I can save for a week in London next year, and maybe a week in Italy the year after that. I'll tap-dance and not care who sees me. I'll worry less about writing a book and live a life that would be worth someone writing about someday. (Which I could read with my brand-new reading glasses.)

I'm trying to breathe deeply, even if it's just for a few minutes in the elevator at work. I'm sipping green tea that I brew myself. When my girlfriends worry, I'm feeding them chocolate.

And in my growing wisdom, I'm giving up the unicycle before I break my tailbone. I am, however, eyeing the pool man. He's 50, and may be having a midlife crisis of his own.

4/30/2012 4:13 PM

Car Wash

Mother Zenda, nee Emma Kmetz,

The 1976 movie *Car Wash* is the story of a day in the life of the employees at a Los Angeles car wash. Not all of the employees are black, there's a Mexican American and a Native American also out on the line. The man with the pop bottle is not thought to be a thief, but a madman known as "the pop bottle bomber". The chase around the car wash with the pop bottle and the scene with the "mummy" in the car are two classic scenes. Richard Pryor as the money-hungry preacher "Daddy

Rich" is loosely based on a famous Los Angeles money-hungry preacher from the 1970's. One of the DJ's heard in the movie is J.J. Jackson who later went on to be one of the original MTV Vee-Jays in the early 1980's.
