

What writers have to teach preachers

Learn to coax the spirit more than bend the mind

“Pay attention to what gets your attention.” The phrase sums up St. Augustine’s advice in *De Doctrina Christiana*, his treatise on Christian preaching. Augustine emphasized results over rules. “If a speaker moves you,” he wrote, “then go back and study the speaker’s strategy.”

In other words, don’t rely on formulas. If you desire to move your listeners, you must probe the depths of the heart.

The allure of contemplation

Ron Rolheiser’s recent review of *Grass, Sky, Song* by Trevor Herriot makes the same point: “[The writer] walks that fine line: powerfully moral without a trace of bad moralizing, mature without a hint of cynicism, a book about death that leaves its reader with hope.”

The book is a study of the ecological demise of songbirds on the western prairies. Its central message, however, is as moral as it is scientific. Herriot summarizes his message with a single metaphor: the cradling of an injured bird in the palm of one’s hand. The description of this clumsy, tenuous moment captures the moral imperative of leaning toward creation without wanting to possess it; a way of paying attention to a particular place that deepens one’s connection to it.

This is what effective writers do: They help us lean toward mystery and, in so doing, goad us to contemplate the face of God. Effective homilists share the same goal. Set within the ambiance of the church’s worship, liturgical preaching is concerned with coaxing the spirit more than bending the mind. In terms of technique, this places the use of vivid description above that of doctrinal analysis. Or, as Mark Twain would say, “The strong grip of the hand descends not from the gray matter of the brain, but rushes up from the red blood of the heart.”

Find a mentor

What sort of writer moves you? Chances are, it is a writer who illumines new depths of meaning in seemingly ordinary experiences. Such writers accomplish their task, in part, through leading the reader into the inner, “unlit” recesses of the human quest for meaning and purpose.

In Wendell Barry’s novel *Remembering*, the feeling of alienation is conveyed in a farmer’s experience of a tragic accident. He describes the man grieving the loss of his hand “as Adam grieved paradise,” having known his hand “as a man knows his homeland.”

A young man rides to the far end of a ranch in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*. With the setting sun coppering his face, the youth observes the remnants of a Comanche war trail: “[He] dismounted and dropped the reins and walked out and stood like a man come to the end of something.”

Writers like McCarthy and Barry revel in illuminating moments of decision and poignancy, moments preachers refer to as “conversion” and “grace.”

The next time you encounter a writer that opens the door to a deeper sense of mystery, follow Augustine’s advice and emulate the skills that writer employs.

“Abba, Daddy!”

Human attempts to describe the Trinity are inherently flawed. Analogies, from shamrocks to triangles, are doomed to fall short.

What does God make of our stammering attempts to speak his name? In *The Horse Boy* by Rupert Isaacson, a father’s attempts to heal his autistic son shed some light on the matter.

I broke all the rules. I had to. The first time I took Rowan to the barn to saddle Betsy up, Rowan ran amok, climbing on the gates to the stalls, knocking over bottles and pots, repeatedly slamming the door to the feed room, chasing the barn cat...squealing up and down the barn’s central alleyway.

Betsy stood like a rock, moving not a muscle, even when Rowan darted in and out under her belly just as I placed the heavy Western saddle on her broad back.

“Do you want to ride?” I asked him, not expecting a response.

“Up!”

It was the first time I’d received a direct answer to a direct question. I bent down, scooped him up, and put him in the saddle. Immediately the flailing and shouting stopped. His grin was so wide it seemed to stretch off the sides of his face.

“Go!” said Rowan.

“You want Betsy to go?”

“Go!” he confirmed. This was amazing.

“To the pond or to the woods?”

“To the pond!”

I never experienced back-and-forth conversation like this. So to the pond it was.

The door to Rowan’s world had opened a tiny crack.

(THE HORSE BOY, RUPERT ISAACSON, LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, 2009, PP. 35-36)

When it comes to the reality of God’s unfathomable love, all of us, like Rowan, are but learning to talk.