

# *The Courage to See*



DAILY INSPIRATION FROM  
GREAT LITERATURE

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*I*t has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. . . . Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?

MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *GILEAD*

# Foreword

When I was a child, I wanted to sleep with my books, something my mom wouldn't allow because I slept on the top bunk, and she didn't want them falling down and hitting my sister. I wanted to sleep with them not to secretly read them under the covers with a flashlight, but to have them near me, to curl up with them, like stuffed animals. Of course I loved the stories, the characters, the imaginary worlds, but I also loved the books as objects. The colors and patterns of the covers, the texture of the paper, the feel of the pages when I strummed them out with my thumb. I was scrupulous with my books, never leaving them splayed open to keep my place, never folding down corners, and absolutely never writing in them. *Very* rarely, if a book was particularly dear to me, I would put in one of the *Ex Libris* bookplates I got for my birthday one year. This still felt like some sort of transgression, as if I was occupying a space that didn't really belong to me, but which welcomed me nonetheless.

If I am honest, not much has changed. I still have a deep sense of reverence about books and still find them profoundly comforting as physical objects. I feel better when I am surrounded by them, whether shelves and shelves at bookstores, piles on the bedside table, or endless aisles at the library. In this I am surely typical of most English majors, for whom book love comes early and stays forever. And English majors or not, readers' book love is alive and well, despite the advent of e-books and audio books and online publishing. The resistance to letting go of the book

as object has been fierce and relatively successful. Many of us still want our stories to be physical.

Of course I also loved the contents of my books. Like any bookish child, I was always having to be torn away from reading to come to the dinner table, to get out the door; I just wanted to keep finding out what happened. I loved the unfolding of the characters, the buildup of the plot, the final telling of the end. I liked most endings—certainly the happy ones, sometimes the sad ones even more—and to this day I have a very particular feeling whenever I finish a book. When I was about ten, I remember finishing the last page of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wind in the Door* while I was taking a bath. I closed the book with a feeling I had never known before, an amalgam of chill, wonder, and mystery. I felt as though what had just happened to me was something beyond what I could put into words, yet somehow deeply resonant. I felt at the same time a profound *Yes* and a bewildering *What in the world was that?* I closed the book and held it pressed against my forehead for a while.

When I think about this relationship between object and contents, tangibility and story, I think about my interaction with Scripture. My relationship with God's story told in Scripture frequently changes shape. At times I can enter it with joy, and it feels vibrant, beautiful, and alive. Other times I find it baffling, difficult, hard to face. Or I *want* to want to engage the story but am tired or discouraged, stretched thin by deadlines and caring for kids and doing what needs to be done. In these harder times, it helps me to go to objects, to forms, to be OK with not thinking about content and instead allowing the container to be a means of grace. Hearing the Scripture read, but

not trying to analyze it. Sitting with my love over a beautiful meal. Letting the prayers of a friend be enough when I don't have any of my own. All of these things carry me along.

So too, in a way, reading books, whether “classic” or contemporary, fiction or nonfiction, can be a means of grace. It can be the *story in front of the story*—writing that pulls us into the Big Story, that allows us to come there by meeting us in the specificity of our human lives. The passages selected for this book range widely—writers from centuries ago, writers still alive today, men and women from countries around the globe—but they all shimmer with humanity, with our questions and affections and injustices and wonder.

In likening these works to *stories in front of the story*, I should clarify that I don't see them as simple conduits, or as stepping-stones, useful to help us get somewhere else. The fundamental Christian belief that human beings are made in the image of God casts a sheen over what we make, what we do, how we love, what we hope. These books and these passages, in themselves, show us what it is to be what we are. They make us realize our lives, take notice. Books can make us wrestle, find peace, get angry, feel consoled. We can see ourselves, catch glimpses of who we want to be, who we don't want to be. In many ways, books, stories, and words are about paying attention.

What a number of the passages selected here pay attention to is mystery. It might be that I have gravitated toward these because of the phase of life I find myself in, approaching “middle age,” with my children just getting old enough that I have some space in my mind and heart and body to take notice. And what I notice is how bewildering everything is—in ways both marvelous and terrifying—and how in the face of that bewil-

dering, what I want more of, every day, is gratitude. All the stories are so much bigger and more meaningful than I realized, and I want to pay attention to them. I want to be a witness.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens describes a “wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.” I would go even farther than this, to say that quite often each of us is a mystery and secret even to ourselves. Books can reveal us to ourselves, in ways that are surprising, unsettling, or completely apropos for our particular space and moment. They can give us that feeling I had as a ten-year-old, where something true about the world is uncovered, where something of our true identity is reflected back to us. Books can make us attentive to our lives and, therefore, attentive to the places in which God is meeting us. It is in this one simple, astonishing life that there is the possibility of God meeting us. And, as incarnational theology attests, meet us God did. God’s story, God’s self, made physical.

A favorite painting of mine is *Ida Reading a Letter*, by Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi. Like nearly all of Hammershøi’s paintings, *Ida Reading a Letter* feels subdued, cool, and sparse: in a nearly monochrome room, a woman stands in profile next to a table and looks down at the letter in her hands. The ebony of her dress and her dusky hair pulled back in a bun are a dark anchor on the canvas. The curve of her body, the tilt of her head, serve as soft counterpoints to the stark geometry of the doors, the table, the molding around the room. The reader is a common subject in paintings: one individual quietly absorbed in the world of a book or a letter, seemingly oblivious to his or her surroundings. To me these reading paintings always feel like

images of the unseen in the midst of the seen, a strange witnessing of someone who is in the act of witnessing something else. What world do the readers occupy? Where is the story leading them, and what reality is taking shape in their imaginations? *Ida Reading a Letter* is a deceptively simple painting—it seems quiet and quotidian, with its coffeepot and dishes, the minimalism of the interior, the firm serenity of the woman—but the more you look at it the more you see going on. One closed door and one open door, their strong verticals tethering the painting. One woman, by herself, but not lonely. It is a painting of the plain, physical, everyday world. A world that is stunningly beautiful.

When I look at a Hammershøi painting, so silent yet so eloquent, I am drawn into that experience of the world. Drawn into the vision of someone who reminds us that the everyday is replete with meaning, if only we will pay attention to it. Great art, whether visual, musical, written, or otherwise, ushers us toward this kind of attention. The Marilynne Robinson quote from which the title of this book comes reminds us: “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?”

This is the experience of living a life, realities that will “shine like transfiguration,” yet which can so easily slip by unnoticed. My children, caught up in wonder in the woods. Seeds we planted in the garden, miraculously sprouting out of their darkness. Words written by someone I will never meet, but which still somehow speak directly to the specificity of my right-now life.

Sometimes I wonder why it is that seeing these things takes courage. Perhaps because seeing might ask us to change, which



is hard, or, even harder, seeing might implicate us somehow, bring to light something we would rather not face. Maybe seeing will make us newer, wiser, more deeply rooted people than we thought was possible, and there is a special kind of fear for what we long for but are afraid will elude us. Life is potential. Life is disappointment. In both cases, life is more than we thought, more holy and hard and full of meaning than we anticipated. And we are asked to be witnesses of that. Of all of that. As we read the words of the authors included here, it is my belief that they attest to what the authors have seen and that they serve as an invitation to us as readers to be courageous enough to see along with them.

The beloved books of my childhood are having a second run in my life, now that I have my own young children. Reading to my twins, I find myself wondering what it must be like to encounter the stories for the first time, the slate so amazingly clean, the ending unknown. Happily, I find that my own reaction to these books hasn't diminished, however distanced I am now from my very first encounter with them. I am still enchanted by the candy world of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (every child's dream!), I still cry when Aslan dies in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and I laugh even more at the quirky humor of the *Frog and Toad* stories. Some books from my adult life have the same power as childhood ones; I will always get angry that Laurie marries Amy in *Little Women*, my heart will always race in the nefarious unfolding of *Crime and Punishment*, I will always have to stop reading and pause after so many arresting lines in *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

Whether we are reading a work for the first time or the fifth,

books shape who we are and how we think. In childhood, books somehow create our stories along with us, molding our expectations and affections, giving us a sense of the arc of a story or of a life. When we are older, that shaping is different, colored by recognition as well as epiphany. We come to stories with more of a past, more opportunities to see our lives reflected. As George Eliot writes in *The Mill on the Floss*, “Childhood has no forebodings; but then, it is soothed by no memories of outlived sorrow.” When we are older, everything is not new, but everything is infused with memory. In adulthood we come to books as, to adjust D. H. Lawrence’s phrase, “people who have come through.”

In Romans 4:17, a verse I have always loved for both the enigmatic poetry and the promise of it, the apostle Paul describes God’s promise to Abraham. Abraham, Paul says, ultimately did not despair over his by-all-accounts-hopeless chances of having a child with his wife Sarah (though it has to be said that his faith was often quite circumspect, which should serve as encouragement to us all). Instead of giving up all hope of a child, Abraham chose to have faith “in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” The version I learned growing up says that God “calls the things that are not, as though they were” (Rom. 4:17b, World English Bible). I love the closely juxtaposed contradiction in the language, the fairy-tale, magic quality of it. It’s not that something metamorphoses, from not being to being. Instead, it simply does not exist, but God says, *It does*. God’s calling, God’s naming of things, effects both the renewal and the promise.

This is profound and radical seeing, taking all of our courage

to embrace. In this verse, God's naming is so far from our way of seeing things and goes against our settled-on version of how things are. The Bible is full of these transformations, new life that starts off in the most dubious and hopeless of situations. And these transformations are always rooted in the ordinary, simple, very physical reality of the world. An old man and old woman as the parents of a new and chosen people. A lowly shepherd as the king of that people. A young, unmarried girl as the one to carry the Savior. That Savior: a poor, vulnerable, common-yet-miraculous infant.

All of us as readers will come to these passages from literature and Scripture differently. We will bring to them the specificity of our experiences, our histories, our longings. We will come to them with youth or age, with varying degrees of health in our bodies, with our own places of deep joy and expectation, of sorrow and quiet shame. Most likely we will recognize ourselves in many of the passages, and even more likely, that recognition will change depending on the day, the year, the ways that life and time have changed our sight. That continual renewal of words—the ways in which something that slipped right past me when I read it before will all of a sudden stop me in my tracks—that is one of the moments of transfiguration I see. The transfiguring possibility and potential of language—Word and words—spoken, received, witnessed, and shared. *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”*

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# 1



Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.

O PIONEERS! BY WILLA CATHER, 1913

What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done;  
there is nothing new under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 1:9

*Holy One, help us to hear the stories of your children afresh, to grow in wisdom and compassion as we continue to sing of your love and mercy.*

# 2



As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word "beautiful."

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT AND OTHER STORIES  
BY NORMAN MACLEAN, 1976

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

ROMANS 8:18-23

*Holy God, instruct us in the rhythms that will set all creation free from bondage so that strength and beauty may be born within us.*

# 3



I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about.

*THE SUN ALSO RISES* BY ERNEST HEMINGWAY, 1926

I will meditate on your precepts,  
and fix my eyes on your ways.  
I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

PSALM 119:15-16

*Teach us, Lord, what matters in life, and how to live it so that we may live in you, now and always.*

# 4



**M**y eyes already touch the sunny hill,  
going far ahead of the road I have begun.

So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;  
it has inner light, even from a distance—

and changes us, even if we do not reach it,  
into something else, which, hardly sensing it,  
we already are; a gesture waves us on  
answering our own wave . . .

but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

“A WALK” BY RAINER MARIA RILKE, 1924

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother.

PSALM 131:1-2

*Holy One, may our souls, minds, and bodies find their rest with  
you, especially in the face of things we can't understand.*

# 5



Love can't be pinned down by a definition, and it certainly can't be proved, any more than anything else important in life can be proved. Love is people, is a person.

*CIRCLE OF QUIET* BY MADELEINE L'ENGLE, 1972

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

1 JOHN 4:10-11

*Lord Christ, may your life capture us, that we might be filled with love that gives itself to others.*