

CHAPTER 1

“The Forbidding Discipline of Spiritual Reading”

Years ago I owned a dog who had a fondness for large bones. Fortunately for him we lived in the forested foothills of Montana. In his forest rambles he often came across a carcass of a white-tailed deer that had been brought down by the coyotes. Later he would show up on our stone, lakeside patio carrying or dragging his trophy, usually a shank or a rib; he was a small dog and the bone was often nearly as large as he was. Anyone who has owned a dog knows the routine: he would prance and gambol playfully before us with his prize, wagging his tail, proud of his find, courting our approval. And of course, we approved: we lavished praise, telling him what a good dog he was. But after awhile, sated with our applause, he would drag the bone off twenty yards or so to a more private place, usually the shade of a large moss-covered boulder, and go to work on the bone. The social aspects of the bone were behind him; now the pleasure became solitary. He gnawed the bone, turned it over and around,

licked it, worried it. Sometimes we could hear a low rumble or growl, what in a cat would be a purr. He was obviously enjoying himself and in no hurry. After a leisurely couple of hours he would bury it and return the next day to take it up again. An average bone lasted about a week.

I always took delight in my dog’s delight, his playful seriousness, his childlike spontaneities now totally absorbed in “the one thing needful.” But imagine my further delight in coming upon a phrase one day while reading Isaiah in which I found the poet-prophet observing something similar to what I enjoyed so much in my dog, except that his animal was a lion instead of a dog: “As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey ...” (Isa. 31:4). “Growls” is the word that caught my attention and brought me that little “pop” of delight. What my dog did over his precious bone, making those low throaty rumbles of pleasure as he gnawed, enjoyed, and savored his prize, Isaiah’s lion did to his prey. The nugget of my delight was noticing the Hebrew word here translated as “growl” (*hagah*) but usually translated as “meditate,” as in the Psalm 1 phrase describing the blessed man or woman whose “delight is in the law of the LORD,” on which “he meditates day and night” (v. 2). Or in Psalm 63: “when I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the watches of the night” (v. 6). But Isaiah uses this word to refer to a lion growling over his prey the way my dog worried a bone.

Hagah is a word that our Hebrew ancestors used frequently for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But “meditate” is far too tame a word for what is being signified. “Meditate” seems more suited to what I do in a quiet chapel on my knees with a candle burning on the altar. Or to what my wife does while sitting in a rose garden with the Bible open in her lap. But when Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditated they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines: Isaiah’s lion meditating his goat (if that’s what it was); my dog meditating his bone. There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs and low growls as we taste and savor, anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul-energizing morsel words — “O taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8). Isaiah uses the same word (*hagah*) a few pages later for the cooing of a dove (38:14). One careful reader of this text caught the spirit of the word when he said that *hagah* means that a person “is lost in his religion,”¹ which is exactly what my dog was in his bone. Baron Friedrich von Hügel compared this way of reading to “letting a very slowly dissolving lozenge melt imperceptibly in your mouth.”²

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I am interested in cultivating this kind of reading, the only kind of reading that is congruent with what is written in our Holy Scriptures, but also with all writing that is intended to change our lives and not

just stuff some information into the cells of our brain. All serious and good writing anticipates precisely this kind of reading — ruminative and leisurely, a dalliance with words in contrast to wolfing down information. But our canonical writers who wrestled God’s revelation into Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek sentences — Moses and Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Mark and Paul, Luke and John, Matthew and David, along with their numerous brothers and sisters, named and unnamed across the centuries — absolutely require it. They make up a school of writers employed by the Holy Spirit to give us our Holy Scriptures and keep us in touch with and responsive to reality, whether visible or invisible: God-reality, God-presence. They are all distinguished by a deep trust in the “power of words” (Coleridge’s phrase) to bring us into the presence of God and to change our lives. By keeping company with the writers of Holy Scripture we are schooled in a practice of reading and writing that is infused with an enormous respect — more than respect, awed reverence — for the revelatory and transformative power of words. The opening page of the Christian text for living, the Bible, tells us that the entire cosmos and every living creature in it are brought into being by words. St. John selects the term “Word” to account, first and last, for what is most characteristic about Jesus, the person at the revealed and revealing center of the Christian story. Language, spoken and written, is the primary means for getting us in on what *is*, on what God is and is doing. But

it is language of a certain stripe, not words external to our lives, the sort used in grocery lists, computer manuals, French grammars, and basketball rulebooks. These are words intended, whether confrontationally or obliquely, to get inside us, to deal with our souls, to form a life that is congruent with the world that God has created, the salvation that he has enacted, and the community that he has gathered. Such writing anticipates and counts on a certain kind of reading, a dog-with-a-bone kind of reading.

Writers of other faith traditions and writers who hold to none — atheists, agnostics, secularists — also, of course, have access to this school and benefit enormously from its training in the holiness of words. But the adjective “spiritual” does serve to identify the way the writers who collectively scribed the Bible used language to form “the mind of Christ” in their readers. The adjective continues to be useful in identifying the post-biblical men and women who continue to write journalism and commentary, studies and reflections, stories and poems for us as we continue to submit our imaginations to the shaping syntax and diction of our biblical masters. But Holy Scripture is the source document, the authoritative font, the work of the Spirit that is definitive in all true spirituality.

What I mean to insist upon is that spiritual writing — *Spirit*-sourced writing — requires spiritual reading, a reading that honors words as holy, words as a basic means of forming an intricate web of relationships between God and the human, between all things

visible and invisible.

There is only one way of reading that is congruent with our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives and create truth and beauty and goodness, writing that requires a reader who, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, “does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood.”³ This is the kind of reading named by our ancestors as *lectio divina*, often translated “spiritual reading,” reading that enters our souls as food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and becomes holiness and love and wisdom.

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In 1916 a young Swiss pastor, Karl Barth, gave an address in the neighboring village of Leutwil where his friend Eduard Thurneysen was pastor. Barth was thirty years old, had been a pastor in Safenwil for five years, and was just beginning to discover the Bible. A few miles away the rest of Europe was on fire with war, a war epidemic with lies and carnage that marked what one writer at the time (Karl Kraus) called the “irreparable termination of what was humane in Western civilization.”⁴ Each succeeding decade of the century supplied more details — political, cultural, and spiritual evidence of the world inexorably becoming what T. S. Eliot had laid out in prescient poetry as “The Waste Land.”

At the time that the killing and lying were in full spate, just across the German and French borders in neutral Switzerland this young pastor had discovered the Bible as if for the first time, discovered it as a book absolutely unique, unprecedented. The soul and body of Europe, and eventually the world, was being violated. On every continent millions were hanging on news from “the front” and on speeches from the world’s leaders as reported by the journalists. Meanwhile Barth, in his small out-of-the-way village, was writing what he had discovered, the extraordinary truth-releasing, God-witnessing, culture-challenging realities in this book, the Bible. After a few years he published what he had discovered in his commentary, *Epistle to the Romans*. It was the first in a procession of books that in the years to come would convince many Christians that the Bible was giving a truer, more accurate account of what was going on in their seemingly unraveling world than what their politicians and journalists were telling them. At the same time Barth determined to recover the capacity of Christians to *read* the book receptively in its original, transformative character. Barth brought the Bible out of the academic mothballs in which it had been stored for so long for so many. He demonstrated how presently alive it is, and how different it is from books that can be “handled” — dissected and analyzed and then used for whatever we want them for. He showed, clearly and persuasively, that this “different” kind of writing (revelatory and intimate instead

of informational and impersonal) must be met by a different kind of reading (receptive and leisurely instead of standoffish and efficient). He also kept calling attention to writers who had absorbed and continued to write in the biblical style, involving us as readers in life-transforming responses. Dostoevsky, for instance, as the Russian reproduced in his novels the radical Genesis reversals of human assessments, shaping his characters under the rubric of the divine “nevertheless” and not as the divine “therefore.”

Later Barth published his Leutwil address under the title “The Strange New World within the Bible.”⁵ At a time and in a culture in which the Bible had been embalmed and buried by a couple of generations of undertaker-scholars, he passionately and relentlessly insisted that “the child is not dead but sleeping,” took her by the hand, and said, “Arise.” For the next fifty years, Barth demonstrated the incredible vigor and energy radiating from the sentences and stories of this book and showed us how to read them.

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Barth insists that we do not read this book and the subsequent writings that are shaped by it in order to find out how to get God into our lives, get him to participate in our lives. No. We open this book and find that page after page it takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws us into *its* reality, pulls us into participation with God on *his* terms.

He provided an illustration that became famous. I am using the germ of his anecdote but furnishing it, with a little help from Walker Percy,⁶ with my own details. Imagine a group of men and women in a huge warehouse. They were born in this warehouse, grew up in it, and have everything there for their needs and comfort. There are no exits to the building but there are windows. But the windows are thick with dust, are never cleaned, and so no one bothers to look out. Why would they? The warehouse is everything they know, has everything they need. But then one day one of the children drags a stepstool under one of the windows, scrapes off the grime, and looks out. He sees people walking on the streets; he calls to his friends to come and look. They crowd around the window — they never knew a world existed outside their warehouse. And then they notice a person out in the street looking up and pointing; soon several people are gathered, looking up and talking excitedly. The children look up but there is nothing to see but the roof of their warehouse. They finally get tired of watching these people out on the street acting crazily, pointing up at nothing and getting excited about it. What's the point of stopping for no reason at all, pointing at nothing at all, and talking up a storm about the nothing?

But what those people in the street were looking at was an airplane (or geese in flight, or a gigantic pile of cumulus clouds). The people in the street look up and see the heavens and everything in the heavens. The warehouse people have no heavens above them, just a

roof.

What would happen, though, if one day one of those kids cut a door out of the warehouse, coaxed his friends out, and discovered the immense sky above them and the grand horizons beyond them? That is what happens, writes Barth, when we open the Bible — we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us. Life in the warehouse never prepared us for anything like this.

Typically, adults in the warehouse scoff at the tales the children bring back. After all, they are completely in control of the warehouse world in ways they could never be outside. And they want to keep it that way.

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St. Paul was the little kid who first scraped the grime off the window for Barth, cut out a door, and coaxed him outdoors into the large, “strange” world to which the biblical writers give witness. Under this school of writers, beginning with St. Paul but soon including the entire Holy Spirit faculty, Barth became a Christian *reader*, reading words in order to be formed by the Word. Only then did he become a Christian *writer*.

Barth's account of what had happened to him was later published in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Novelist John Updike said that that book “gave me a philosophy to live and labor by, and in that way changed my life.” On receiving the Champion medal in 1997, Updike credited the Christian faith revealed in

Barth's rediscovered Bible for telling him, as a writer, "that truth is holy, and truth-telling a noble and useful profession; that the reality around us is created and worth celebrating; that men and women are radically imperfect and radically valuable."⁷

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The first metaphors for writing and reading that caught my fancy were from Kafka: "If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? ... A book must be like an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us."⁸ By this time I was vocationally involved as a pastor and professor in getting people involved in the right reading of Scripture. I was dismayed that their reading of the Bible didn't seem to be any different from the way they read the sports page, or the comic strips, or the want ads. I wanted to wake people up and turn them inside out. I wanted them to see the Bible as a fisticuff book, an ice-axe book. In retrospect I realize that my strategy was mostly carried out by raising my voice. I hardly noticed the violence in the metaphors; I wanted to *make a difference*. And then I was caught up short by Wendell Berry's question: "Did you finish killing / everybody who was against peace?"⁹ I realized that the violence implicit in the metaphors wasn't exactly suited to what I had in mind as I was trying to guide Christian readers to receive the words of Holy Scripture as food for their souls. Maybe force-feeding isn't the best way to convey the distinctive

quality inherent in Bible reading, in spiritual reading.

And then I noticed that the most striking biblical metaphor for reading was St. John eating a book:

I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. (Rev. 10:9-10)

Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him had also eaten books — a good diet, it would seem, for anyone who cares about reading words rightly.

For attention-getting, this is as good as Kafka any day, but as metaphor it is far better. St. John, this endlessly fascinating early-church apostle and pastor and writer, walks up to the angel and says, "Give me the book." The angel hands it over, "Here it is; eat it, eat the book." And John does. He eats the book — not *just* reads it — he got it into his nerve endings, his reflexes, his imagination. The book he ate was Holy Scripture. Assimilated into his worship and prayer, his imagining and writing, the book he ate was metabolized into the book he wrote, the first great poem in the Christian tradition and the concluding book of the Bible, the Revelation.

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The Oxford don Austin Farrer, in his Bampton Lectures, referred to "the forbidding discipline of spir-

itual reading”¹⁰ that ordinary people have characteristically brought to this text that forms their souls. Forbidding because it requires that we read with our entire life, not just employing the synapses in our brain. Forbidding because of the endless dodges we devise in avoiding the risk of faith in God. Forbidding because of our restless inventiveness in using whatever knowledge of “spirituality” we acquire to set ourselves up as gods. Forbidding because when we have learned to read and comprehend the words on the page, we find that we have hardly begun. Forbidding because it requires all of us, our muscles and ligaments, our eyes and ears, our obedience and adoration, our imaginations and our prayers. Our ancestors set this “forbidding discipline” (their phrase for it was *lectio divina*)¹¹ as the core curriculum in this most demanding of all schools, the School of the Holy Spirit, established by Jesus when he told his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-15; also 14:16; 15:26; 16:7-8). All writing that comes out of this School anticipates this kind of reading: participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.

Words spoken or written to us under the metaphor of eating, words to be freely taken in, tasted, chewed, savored, swallowed, and digested, have a very different effect on us from those that come at us from the

outside, whether in the form of propaganda or information. Propaganda works another person’s will upon us, attempting to manipulate us to an action or a belief. Insofar as we are moved by it, we become less, the puppet of a puppeteer writer/speaker. There is no dignity, no soul, in a puppet. And information reduces words to the condition of commodities that we can use however we will. Words are removed from their originating context in the moral universe and from personal relationships so that they can be used as tools or weapons. Such commodification of language reduces both those who speak it and those who listen to it also to commodities.

Reading is an immense gift, but only if the words are assimilated, taken into the soul — eaten, chewed, gnawed, received in unhurried delight. Words of men and women long dead, or separated by miles and/or years, come off the page and enter our lives freshly and precisely, conveying truth and beauty and goodness, words that God’s Spirit has used and uses to breathe life into our souls. Our access to reality deepens into past centuries, spreads across continents. But this reading also carries with it subtle dangers. Passionate words of men and women spoken in ecstasy can end up flattened on the page and dissected with an impersonal eye. Wild words wrung out of excruciating suffering can be skinned and stuffed, mounted and labeled as museum specimens. The danger in all reading is that words be twisted into propaganda or reduced to information, mere tools and data. We si-

lence the living voice and reduce words to what we can use for convenience and profit.

One psalmist mocked his contemporaries for reducing the living God who spoke and listened to them into a gold or silver thing-god that they could use:

Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:8)

It's an apt warning for us still as we deal daily with the incredible explosion of information technology and propagandizing techniques. These words need rescuing.

[1.](#) A. Negoita, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), vol. 3, p. 321.

[2.](#) Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Selected Letters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927), p. 229.

[3.](#) Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), p. 201.

[4.](#) Quoted in George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 269.

[5.](#) In Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978 [first published in 1928]), pp. 28-50.

[6.](#) See Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 119-49.

[7.](#) John Updike, *More Matter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 843, 851.

[8.](#) Quoted by George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 67.

[9.](#) Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems 1957-1982* (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), p. 121.

[10.](#) Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948), p. 36.

[11.](#) The details involved in this “forbidding” will be elaborated in Section II, *Lectio Divina*.