

LOOKING FOR GRACE

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Democracy, says Dewey, is a deeply held desire for common human flourishing. It is a *personal* conviction, centered in conscious awareness, that commits us to working out the means of both our individual and collective salvation—the two cannot be separated—from within the horizon of the present.¹

The present moment has shaken my own existence. The murder of George Floyd puts a lump in my throat and a pit in my stomach. I wonder how I could have lived my life without really *seeing* the frightening police brutality, the shameful rates of prison incarceration, and the unspeakable levels of Black pain and suffering.

Existential Searching

Dewey asks for a way of life that steadies, enlarges, and enriches experience.² At this moment, in search of this controlling factor, I have turned for help to one of my favorite novels: *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson.³

The novel is written as a series of letters from an aging father to his young son. The year is 1956.⁴ The father, John Ames, is a third-generation Congregational minister in the small town of Gilead, Iowa. He knows that he is approaching the end of his life. He knows that he will not be there as his son matures. Throughout the book, the Reverend Ames confronts his own mortality in light of his profound faith, his deep love of the world, and his expansive gratitude for wife and child.

John Ames is a generous soul. He is apt to wake up early so that he can prayerfully experience the sunrise within the sanctuary of

¹ See John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” In *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

² Dewey, “Creative Democracy.”

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

⁴ Four years after the death of Dewey.

his church. He loves to listen to baseball on the radio, and imagines the afterlife in light of the embodiment of youth. "I imagine a kind of ecstatic pirouette, a little bit like going up for a line drive when you're so young that your body almost doesn't know about effort."⁵

For the Reverend Ames, the world is experienced as gift, and religion is lived out as the continued and mutual exchange of blessing. His religious life is based on experience rather than dogma. It is wide and encompassing:

I was walking up to church. There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all of the attention you can give it.⁶

Into this world, Robinson weaves observations about the twin pandemics that we are again, currently, confronting (infectious disease and racism):

⁵ Robinson, *Gilead*, 142. I have taken the liberty of omitting certain words or sentences in direct quotations without the use of ellipsis. This is done for aesthetic purposes.

⁶ Robinson, *Gilead*, 28.

Ames remembers what it was like to live through the Spanish flu.

People don't talk much now about the Spanish influenza, but that was a terrible thing, and it struck just at the time of the Great War, just when we were getting involved in it. People came to church wearing masks, if they came at all. They'd sit as far from each other as they could. It was a strange sickness—I saw it over at Fort Riley. Those boys were drowning in their own blood. They couldn't speak for the blood in their throats, in their mouths. So many of them died so fast there was no place to put them.⁷

Somehow, the Reverend Ames is convinced, the flu had to be interpreted as a sign—as a call to repentance. “There was talk that the Germans had caused it with some sort of secret weapon, and I think people wanted to believe that, because it saved them from reflecting on what other meaning it might have.”⁸

And racial injustice—the other half of the twin pandemics. It is the driving force underpinning the psychological drama of the entire novel. For the Reverend Ames is deeply rooted in the Iowa that was once called by President Grant “the shining star of radicalism.”⁹

The towns along the southwestern border were founded by White abolitionists working to ensure that Kansas would enter the Union as a free state. Ames' grandfather was one of these abolitionists, a towering figure who felt personally called by God to overthrow slavery, and by any means necessary.

My father's lips were white. He said, “Well, Reverend, I know

⁷ Robinson, *Gilead*, 41-42.

⁸ Robinson, *Gilead*, 41-42.

⁹ Robinson, *Gilead*, 220.

you placed great hope in that war. My hopes are in peace, and I am not disappointed. Because peace is its own reward, Peace is its own justification.”

My grandfather said, “And that’s just what kills my heart, Reverend. That the Lord never came to you.”

My father stood up from his chair. He said, “I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing. And I was, and I am, as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision.”

My grandfather said, “So-called vision. The Lord, standing there beside me, had one hundred times the reality for me that you have standing there now!”

And that was when a chasm truly opened. Not long afterward my grandfather was gone. He left a note.

No good has come, no evil is ended.

That is your peace.

Without vision the people perish.¹⁰

Riding with John Brown, Ames’ grandfather saw his pastoral duties as consisting of the recruitment of his White congregants into the struggle for racial justice. After the Civil War, he sought to keep the flame of Black freedom alive—for the increasingly deaf ears of those in

¹⁰ Robinson, *Gilead*, 84-85.

Gilead.

Reverend Ames grew up, then, among these competing forces. He witnessed the strain between his father and grandfather. He saw the way in which the racial violence that plagues the United States also insinuates itself into White communities, dividing friends and family, father and son.

A Desire to See the Other

Despite this family history, Reverend Ames is, at the time the book is set, uninterested in questions of racial justice. Curiously uninterested. Almost willingly, obdurately uninterested. As I re-read the novel, a good part of the drama revolved around the degree to which the Reverend Ames would seek out interactions that would open up his life to the rising tide of racial protest that was, already, in 1956, evident.¹¹

From where would these interactions come? Compellingly, Robinson gives them to us through the remaining central character of the novel—the Reverend’s very namesake, John Ames (Jack) Boughton.

Reverend Ames’ life-long best friend is the town’s current Presbyterian minister, Robert Boughton. For the many years that Reverend Ames lived without a family of his own, Reverend Boughton lived a life surrounded by his many adoring and successful children. Out of love for his friend—and perhaps some amount of pity—Reverend Boughton had the Reverend Ames baptize his young son, and only during the rite itself informing the Reverend Ames that the child would be his namesake:

¹¹ This is, of course, two years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case that was centered in Topeka, Kansas, less than 150 miles from where the Reverend lives.

We'd talked it over. The child's name was to be Theodore Dwight Weld. I thought that was an excellent name. But then when I asked Boughton, "By what name do you wish this child to be called?" He said, "John Ames." I was so surprised that he said the name again, with the tears running down his face.

It simply was not at all like Boughton to put me in a position like that. It was so un-Presbyterian, in the first place. I could hear weeping in the pews. It took me a while to forgive him for that.

As it was, my heart froze in me and I thought, This is *not* my child—which I truly had never thought of any child before. I don't know exactly what covetise is, but in my experience it is not so much desiring someone else's virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it.¹²

Jack is the prodigal son. The black sheep. The best-loved son who continually and predictably breaks his father's heart. He steals. Sometimes from Reverend Ames, sometimes from others. "His transgressions were sly and lonely, and this became truer as he grew up."¹³

Eventually, however, Jack goes too far. For reasons that are never fully explained, as a young adult, he becomes involved with a young teenage girl. The girl becomes pregnant. She has the baby. Jack leaves town. The girl's family will accept no help from the Boughtons. The baby lives in complete poverty and dies of a preventable accident. "The little girl lived about three years. She was turning into a spry, wiry little thing. But she cut her foot somehow and died of the

¹² Robinson, *Gilead*, 188.

¹³ Robinson, *Gilead*, 182.

infection. The stone says Baby, three years (her mother had never really settled on a name)."¹⁴

Given the scandal, Jack leaves Gilead, and does not return--until the moment in which the novel is set. The return of Jack Boughton to Gilead, therefore, is a central moment in the novel. It is an event that comes to dominate the thoughts of Reverend Ames. For Jack comes often to visit the Reverend, seeking both advice and forgiveness. The Reverend Ames, for his part, becomes convinced that Jack is scheming to steal his wife and child. "My impulse is strong to warn you against Jack Boughton. Your mother and you."¹⁵

A more likely truth is that Jack Boughton seeks not just forgiveness, but to know whether forgiveness is even possible in a world such as ours. For himself. For the nation. Jack has spent the better part of his adult life in Saint Louis. He has a wife and child of his own. But because Jack is White, and his wife is Black, their marriage is unrecognized by the state. It is unrecognized by his wife's family. And it is unknown to anyone in Gilead.

As Jack is finally able to find a way to tell the Reverend Ames what ails him, we see, in the novel's closing pages, that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. The Reverend is finally able to see something about Jack that he was not able to see before. And through Jack, the Reverend sees something more: that God calls us to reconciliation at the same time as God calls us to act for racial justice.

It 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. But the Lord is more

¹⁴ Robinson, *Gilead*, 159.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Gilead*, 125.

constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. 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 should have the courage to see it?¹⁶

Dewey and the Other

Dewey's view of the world is one based on transaction. The living creature interacting with the environment results in experience. Experience can and should be shared. The more widely and equitably it is shared, the more democratic the society, and the more richly textured are the individual existences therein. Societies and the individuals that comprise them become more responsive, more informed, and more committed to those around them.

But we must *want* to know the other. We must *want* to overcome isolation, segregation, and ignorance. There are great forces, both internally and externally, that drive people apart.

If Marilynne Robinson is right, then it is the Jack Boughtons of our lives who must be confronted. Those whom we can't understand. Those who we are convinced are persecuting us. Those who bring out our own most paranoid fears:

This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? Each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor makes us artists of our own behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as

¹⁶ Robinson, *Gilead*, 243.

aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense.¹⁷

For White folks, this means that our work probably needs to begin closer to home.

We can and must allow our hearts to break for Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. But, given that I hold out hope for both grace and salvation, I must therefore commit to finding and hearing out my own Jack Boughtons as well.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Gilead*, 124.

References

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