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DID YOU SEE THAT?

Annie Dillard, an American author who wrote *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, *The Writing Life*, and her newest novel, which she claims to have spent ten years writing, *The Maytrees*, loves to describe the world in intimate detail, and uses a word that I particularly love. The word is luminescence.

If you look it up in the dictionary, Webster's has this to say: *luminescence*. n. *an emission of light that is not ascribable directly to incandescence and therefore occurs at low temperatures and that is produced by physiological processes (as in the firefly), by chemical action, by friction, or by electrical action.*

When the novelist uses this word in one of her books, she is always referring to a kind of light that comes from within, as when something seems to glow, or becomes inexplicably radiant. It is not reflected light, but self-generated light, and the effect of the viewer is momentary astonishment, as in seeing the holiness in something for the very first time.

The Greek word used to describe the experience of the disciples up on the mountain in what the church calls the Transfiguration, is *metamorphosis*, which we know to be a change that occurs from within, as when a caterpillar inside a cocoon becomes, by one of nature's loveliest and most astonishing transformations, a butterfly.

Remember that science lesson in school, when a time-lapse movie showed the butterfly emerging from the cocoon and flying away. It starts out as a lowly caterpillar, and ends up with wings and in the imagination of every child there is this message: "I may be a caterpillar now, but one day I will grow wings, crawl out of my cocoon and fly away." We do not have to stay as we are. We can "metamorphize." Whereupon the teacher says, sorry, it's not a verb.

One of the great debates among biblical scholars concerns whether or not the transfiguration actually happened, whether it is an historical account with real eye-witnesses, or the creation of the writer of Mark's gospel, later repeated and adapted by Matthew and Luke. As always, the argument assumed that either something happened or it didn't, so either a story is true or its

false. We don't apply this standard to poets or storytellers of course, but that's because we forget the wisdom of the native-American shaman who began one of his creation stories by saying, "Now I not sure if this is what really happened, but I know it's true."

I feel exactly that way about the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. I have reason to doubt that it happened exactly this way, but I have no doubt that the story is true. Why? Because the New Testament is not the work of journalists or historians. It's the work of poets. It is an argument that Jesus is the messiah, presented through the most relevant narrative forms in a story-telling culture.

Yesterday something remarkable happened to me that I simply must tell you about. A month ago I was invited to spend two hours at a church discussing my book, "Saving Jesus from the Church" — which is, by itself, not unusual. What is unusual, however, is where this conversation took place. For the first time in my 25 years of ministry in Oklahoma City, I was invited to speak in a black Baptist church, the 5th street Missionary Baptist church to be exact. The invitation came from their pastor, Byron Coleman, whom I had never met. He is an avid reader of books on progressive Christianity, and his Sunday School class had just finished Philip Gulley's "If the Church were Christian," and he is a big fan of Bishop John Shelby Spong — and he grew up believing that Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the most important figures in 20th century Christianity.

I must confess, when the invitation came I wondered if there might be some mistake. Or, if I might be walking into an ambush. It was a dark thought, not one I'm proud of, but what if the plan was to get this white liberal over here and well out of his element and pray for him to see the light, ask him why on earth he wrote a book with a cover that shows duct tape over the mouth of Jesus!

And they prayed for me alright, but not for me to become a Baptist. They prayed that I might continue to speak and write the truth that was on my heart and in my book, and that it might be a blessing to the church of the future, and with rippling Amens and "Thank you Jesus" they escorted me into a hall where a crowd was waiting and whose mood was anything but confrontational. I talked about all the things I talked about in Boulder, Colorado — but two blocks east of Lincoln in Oklahoma City — about how far off track the church has gotten as an empire wedded to the Empire and confusing faith with creeds and doctrines instead of with a radical way of being in the world, and they just kept saying, "Amen!"

I even mentioned to this entirely black audience that today is Transfiguration Sunday. They all knew that of course, because they actually read their Bible's, and then I said, here is a good example of how we ask the wrong questions. The transfiguration is exhibit A of what Bible scholars called *typology*. You use the archetypal stories of your audience, in this case the Jews, to make the case you are trying to make — namely, Jesus is your man.

How do we know this? Well, didn't Moses go up on a mountain once? And wasn't his face transfigured? And didn't he come down the mountain with something important, like the Ten Commandments? Well let me tell you, our man Jesus went up on a mountain too, and don't you

know his face was transfigured, and he comes down the mountain too, only not with tablets, but with power to heal the first child he sees, a boy who is possessed by a demon.

“That’s right!” rippled through the crowd. Moses is the great law-giver but now he stands on a new mountain, and by his presence he pays homage to the greater law giver, Jesus. “Amen!” said the people. And who was Elijah? He was Israel’s great prophet, now standing on a new mountain, and by his presence he pays homage to the greater prophet, Jesus. “Amen!” said the people. And if you read just past our text this morning, you’ll hear one of the disciples explain exactly why this appearance by Elijah needed to happen. Read on a couple of verses and the disciples say, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”

You see, it was widely believed in that day that Elijah’s return would signal the coming of the messiah, and since Elijah had not returned, Jesus could not be the messiah. And so the writer of the story has Jesus say that Elijah has indeed already come, but nobody recognized him. And then the disciples realized that he was talking about John the Baptist. Well that takes care of that little problem. And again, the people listening to me said, “Amen!”

I thought maybe I was in a parallel universe. Then I said to myself, “Self, take this further.” So I said out loud, “All we do is argue in the church over whether this is exactly what happened, and how it happened, or if the disciples had had a cell phone would they have recorded it and posted it on YouTube, and that’s not the point. The point is that the gospel writers are preaching to their audience, and they would have gotten the point as surely as if someone today were to ask us to imagine Jesus as the halftime show at the Super Bowl. Or as a guest on The View, or, miracle of miracles, to cast out the demons from Charlie Sheen! We would get it because we live here and now, and we would have to adapt our message to the audience. And the people listening to me in that black Baptist church said, “That’s right!”

Well, that’s a fine how do you do. Black Baptists reading Philip Gulley and led by a pastor who admires Harry Emerson Fosdick? When I first arrived at the church, I was escorted to the pastor’s office (in the black church, as you know, the pastor is something approaching royalty; people scurry around and get you things, ask you if you’re OK, ask if they can carry your stuff from the car, back to the car, to the car, very nice I must admit but Shawn would say, “not what Robin needs”) — and in that office, with several Deacons in attendance, and the pastor’s sons coming in and out (they were about the age of Ian and Alec Moore, asking to have the movie hooked up so they had something to do while the preachers went at it), the pastor said, “We did have one person who objected to your visit. A woman who used to read your columns in the Gazette, said, “You’re not going to have Meyers over here are you?” And the pastor said “yes” we are. Is he not our brother?”

Transfiguration. A rather ponderous sounding word for a moment when everything you thought you knew is rearranged, when something shifts, when something ordinary suddenly seemed extraordinary, as if lit from within. I saw that in the crowd yesterday. I went up on *their* mountain and it was *their* faces that I saw transfigured, and I have come down off the mountain still blinking and seeing spots.

Oh, to be sure, the real world returned quickly. Our kitchen faucet is leaking. I tried to fix it, and the bolts were rusted underneath and I couldn't get the fasteners to come loose and I broke them and I muttered polite obscenities under the sink where nobody could hear me. But I had already been to the mountain top, so what's a leaky faucet compared to that?

While some people argue over the details of the transfiguration, I am newly impressed by how important prayer must have been to Jesus, and to his disciples — how it sustained them. I was lifted by the prayers of the people of the Fifth Street Missionary Baptist church yesterday, and was newly reminded of the power of prayer.

I think it is strange that we lampoon Muslims for praying five times a day. What do you think would happen if Christians spent 40 minutes a day praying, and if they stopped what they were doing at prescribed times and prayed in order to have traffic with the divine?

I love that in this story, the disciples have trouble staying awake. We all have trouble staying awake, and I'm not talking about falling asleep, but about being fully alive, unafraid, able to speak our truth with dignity and courage. This is a story that the church has told for centuries to make certain that we don't miss the moments of transfiguration that happen every day — when something which had always appeared rather dingy suddenly shines like the sun — “dazzling white.”

There must have been times when the disciples looked at Jesus and he seemed to be on fire. Almost as if they could see through his skin, the way you can see through the skin of your fingers when you cup your hand around a flashlight and some of the light leaks around the edges. It makes your fingers look like they are on fire.

Light is the Bible's most powerful symbol for God, darkness for God's absence. Jesus must have appeared illuminated to his disciples, and then over the centuries countless artists tried to portray Jesus as divine by painting a golden ring of light around his head. As if he were the sun; indeed as if he outshone the sun-god Mithra, whom Constantine, that cagey coalition builder, helped to fuse together into the empire's new religion, so that to this day we worship on Sun-Day.

Later, when the manuscripts of the middle ages were copied and bound, the pages themselves would be artistically modified with gold letters. We called them “illuminated manuscripts.” The message is exactly the same. These are not ordinary words. They are the word of God. See how they shine.

To this day, when you go to a children's Christmas pageant, someone will put a flashlight under the head of doll that is the baby Jesus – so that it will seem to glow, even in the crib. I mean, let's make sure we have fresh batteries, because after all, this is Jesus.

When the two disciples take that walk to Emmaus after the crucifixion, shuffling dejected and defeated by the empire, the stranger that appears to them on the road, whom they do not recognize at first, is transfigured into a vision of the risen Christ. And how do they describe it?

As their hearts burning within them.

Peter's reaction to all this is so like Peter: let's build three booths to mark the very spot when the Transfiguration occurred — people can visit, tell the story to their children, and the moment will never be forgotten. This always makes me think of those historical markers along the highways that tell of some famous battle or make a trail where the pioneers made their way west. Some people actually read those, while the kids in the backseat pretend to be interested.

How often, I wonder, did the disciples look at Jesus and see the face of God? How often did they turn to each other and say, "Did you see that?"

Silence is probably the best response to such a moment. Shawn would be silent. I would probably try to say something clever. Like the first time I saw the Grand Canyon. I stood on the north rim, staring into that bluish gash of pre-history, that cosmic crack in the earth and felt like a flea buzzing around the edge of eternity – see how I go for the words? Some people point their little box cameras out across the expanse and take a snapshot. Something to take home, a little photographic booth and say, "There it is, I was there."

When you are at the bedside of someone who is terminally ill, words will fail you completely, I don't care how chatty you are. But your presence can be absolutely luminous to the person who looks up at you. Think of those moments when you felt the presence of something extraordinary in your own life – the birth of a child, faces at a wedding ceremony, evening light on a lake in the company of friends? And you wanted to say, "Did you see that?" Like a shooting star flashing across the sky and you wondered if you were the only one who saw it. "Did you see that?"

It is not a myth that pregnant women "glow," or that the face of a loved one is "on fire." I can look into the eyes of my granddaughter (whose name is Iris), and see at that very spot where the lines of her pupils come together, converging at a spot known as, oh, the iris, and it almost looks as if I could fall into it (into Iris' iris) and emerge on the other side of the universe.

In the summertime, in Oklahoma, the setting sun can turn glass skyscrapers which are not otherwise all that inspiring, into flaming obelisks. And you want to say, "Did you see that?"

I have leaned over the bed as my children slept and seen their eyelids twitching as they dream. I have looked into the eyes of my Labradors and wondered what they were thinking. There are burning bushes all around us.

Truman Capote's wrote a short story called *A Christmas Memory*, and it's the story of a seven year old boy named Buddy, and his relationship with an eccentric and elderly cousin, whose annual ritual of baking fruitcakes is based on Capote's own memories of childhood in rural Alabama in the 1930's.

It's a portrait of an odd but enduring friendship between innocent souls, one old and one young, and the special time they shared together around the holidays. There is over half a

century's difference in their ages, but they are connected somehow by the love of doing simple things, and having no expectations of the other, except to enjoy life.

Here is how Capote describes her “. . .shorn white hair. . .she is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable, not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid.” “Oh my,” she exclaims one day in late November, her breath smoking the windowpane, “it's fruitcake weather.”

Capote remembers the ritual of the two of them going to shop for all the necessary ingredients to bake thirty cakes. Some things they buy from the store with their meager resources, but they gather the pecans from under a pecan tree, “a heaping buggy load of windfall pecans” that make their backs sore from gathering them.

Capote remembers that the old woman has never seen a movie. She would give him a dime on a Saturday sometimes so he could go, but she has never gone herself, and tells Buddy that she would prefer that he tell her about it, “That way I can imagine it more. Besides [she continues], a person my age shouldn't squander her eyes. When the Lord comes, let me see Him clear.”

In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: “eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry. None of those things. But here's a few she has done: killed with a hoe the biggest rattlesnake ever seen in this county (sixteen rattles), dipped snuff (secretly), tamed hummingbirds (just try it) till they balance on her finger, told ghost stories (we both believe in ghosts) so tingling they chill you in July, talked to herself, taken walks in the rain. . .known the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian cure, including a magical wart-remover.”

They put a little whiskey in the fruitcakes, which is scandalous of course. Buddy comforts her, and tells her she is not old, but fun. They cut a Christmas tree together and decorate it. She knows he wants a bike, but she can't afford to get him one, so like every year she makes Buddy a kite, a homemade kite, because they are champion kite flyers who “study the wind like sailors.”

Buddy has also made her a kite, and on Christmas day, after everyone else has gotten their proper gifts, Buddy and his friend take their kites, his is blue and scattered with gold and green ‘Good conduct stars’ that has his name painted on them, and they fly them together in a moment that produces an epiphany as glorious as the one we just read about on top of that mountain.

Here is what the old woman says, as they run through the grass, and feel their kites “twitching at the string like sky fish as they swim into the wind. . .”

“My, how foolish I am!” my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. “You know what I've always thought?” she asks in a tone of discovery and not smiling at me but a point beyond. “I've always thought a body would have to

be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are (her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass) and their little do] Queenie pawing earth over her bone just what they've always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes."

I could leave the world with today in my eyes. . .that's the best definition of luminescence I ever heard — much better than Webster's. I know what I'm talking about. Yesterday I was a guest at the Fifth Street Missionary Baptist Church, and the people there were luminescent. When I got in my car to drive home, there was nobody to say it to, so I said it to myself . . . "Did you see that?"

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, March 6, 2011

Lord of Life, we hope against hope that there is a new day ahead, and if we may be so bold, I think I can feel it, I think I see the edges of it now, just like the sun breaking over the horizon. A new day, and it will be better.

I see a nation sobered by its own excesses, and left to wonder, what have we become? I see a crowded planet, groaning under its vast inequities, and ready to hear the words of life again: why don't we share?

I see young people waking, as if from a long nap of indifference to the certain knowledge that if they don't help to make the future, the future will be made without them, and someone else may turn out the lights.

I see the possibility of peace, even though I know how often that hope has been in vain. In fact, in the distance I hear a peace train, oh peace train take this country, come take us home again. I think we may have come to the end of our selfish rope. I think we may be on the verge of being born-again not to the certainty of heaven, but the necessity of justice.

What else can we do, if this is true, but fall silent. . .