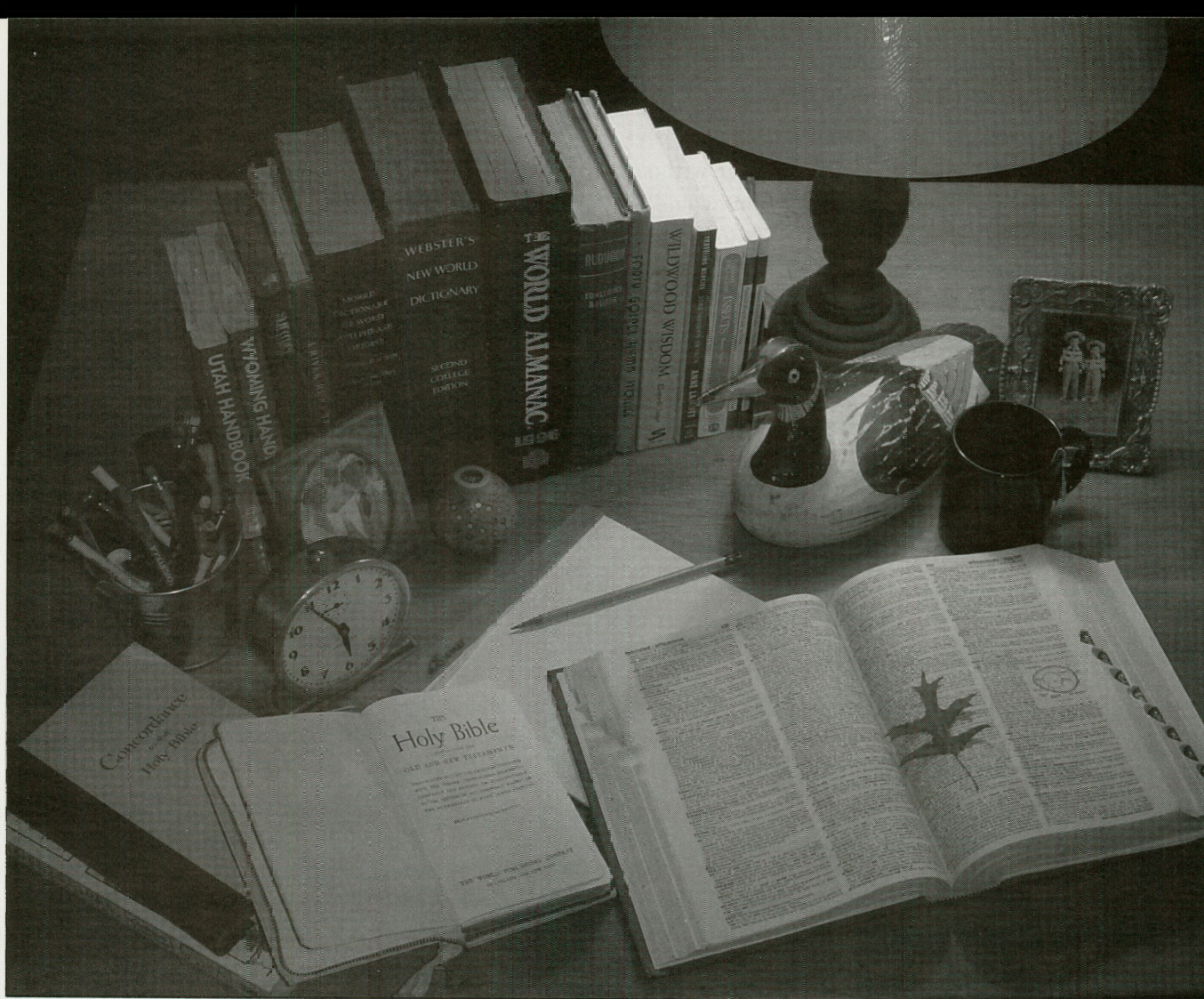


# Prayer, Piety, Passion, and Prose: One Writer's Quest for the Sacred

By Kim Barnes

I sit in my study, my icons arranged around me: a tepid cup of decaffeinated tea; three dictionaries of varying efficacy; a thesaurus, which has just allowed me to find the word *efficacy*; a mug of pens and pencils; family photographs; stacks of rough drafts; shelves of books by authors I hold most sacred—Shakespeare, Maclean, Plath, Dickey, Wrigley, Hugo, Lamott, Doty, Blew; books that might inform me—*Idaho Place Names*, *Roadside History of Idaho*, *Roadside Geology of Idaho*, worn copies of Peterson and Audubon and Craighead to guide me through the animal, vegetable, and mineral states. Hemingway commands two of the highest shelves: books by him, about him, their covers like a gallery of Hemingway lore: here, he lies naked upon his bed, reading a strategically placed edition of *The New York Times*, here, infused with Parisian ennui, he broods beneath his black beret; and, on the cover of the September 1, 1952, issue of *Life*, sleeved in plastic and hanging on my wall, he looks into the camera's lens with eyes that are animal-dark.





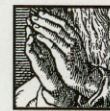
Sometimes, when the words won't come, I swivel my chair and let those eyes settle on me until something breaks. Who, I wonder, am I grieving for as I turn back to the page? Hemingway, whose face on that cover of *Life* corresponds to the release of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the book that many consider the zenith of his career? My awareness of how that zenith will fall to nadir, the drinking and pain, electroshock and suicide? Or am I grieving for myself, adrift as I am on a white ocean, trying to find meaning in this ritual act of writing, trying to forge a narrative that, like Santiago's fish, will prove to me if to no one else that my calling is true and my luck still strong?

And here, across from my shrine to Hemingway, the King James Bible given to me on my twelfth birthday, a biblical concordance, a book of hymns. Some days, I am surprised to find myself deeply immersed in the plight of Job, or Moses, or David, caught up in ancient stories that I remember from my childhood but have come to understand in a new light, for all the stories, the old and the new, are the same: they detail the individual quest for meaning, identity, and salvation in its various, and often surprising, forms.

Who am I, and why? These are the questions that

define the speakers in poetry, the characters in fiction—the questions that writers of personal nonfiction must ask of themselves. As a child growing up in a patriarchal household informed by the dictates of fundamentalist religion, I understood that there was only one absolute answer: I was a child of God, and my sole purpose was to serve and glorify him.

When, at the age of eighteen, I chose to abandon my faith, the rituals of prayer, meditation, fasting, and ministering to the needs of others—the Christian traditions that had defined my life—were lost as well, replaced by an overwhelming sense of confusion and lack of direction. If I were not the good girl, the dutiful daughter, then who was I? Always, I had been taught that there were only two either/or choices and that having rejected one, I was doomed to embrace the other. No longer the “good” girl, I must, then, be the “bad.” No longer willing to serve the God my parents and the church had defined for me, I must, then, serve





Satan. So imbedded were these dichotomies in my psyche that I believed that even to attempt prayer without an attendant willingness to resubmit my soul would be sacrilege. Unable to adhere to the tenets of my faith, I could no longer claim its comforts.

Years of guilt and near-despair followed. My rituals: smoking Virginia Slim menthols, drinking Boone's farm Tickled Pink cut with 7-Up, spending hours applying makeup and curling my hair before hitting the disco, where I could dance whether the Spirit moved me or not. And one other ritual: reading. Books from the library, books from the Goodwill, books from the shelves of friends who shared my literary interests. Although literary may be a misnomer: Danielle Steele, Sidney Sheldon, Richard Bach. But also Dickens and Poe, Ellison and Roth. Long after the bars had closed and my roommates had fallen into slumber, I would lie in my bed, reading until dawn. Only then, with the book in my hands, did I feel the chaos ebb, feel the sure direction—the movement we call narrative.

I have often heard the writer Bill Kittredge say that story is how we make sense of our lives, "What we are is stories," he writes in "The Politics of Storytelling." "We do things because of what we call character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark, and rework our stories... reinventing reasons for our lives... We are like detectives, each of us trying to make sense and define what we take to be the right life." Kittredge goes on to quote

## What happens when the stories we tell ourselves are ones that we believe our family and community cannot accept...?

Peter Brooks, who says that story helps us to "overcome the loss of the 'sacred masterplot' that organizes and explains the world."

What neither Kittredge nor Brooks speaks to is what happens when, in the individual's quest for meaning through story, she finds herself building a narrative in direct opposition to the narrative that is her inheritance. What happens when the stories we tell ourselves are ones that we believe our family and community cannot accept, when we break the codes of conduct, the codes of silence and submission, when we risk being

cast out and stripped of membership in the tribe?

As a young woman, I began to tell myself a story of loss and isolation, I had alienated my family, my faith, my community. I was, I believed, alone. What I did not understand was how the road I was on had its own recognizable narrative, its archetypal structure: the quest.

Mainstream American culture in general is not tolerant of the quest. It takes time and lacks defined direction. It refuses to adhere to the dichotomies and emphasizes instead the individual's ability to forge for him or herself a particular story of meaning. The quest is not a quest for absolute meaning but a journey toward a narrative that can somehow contain and arrange the puzzle pieces of our lives. The quest gives birth to personal icons, to the newly sacred; it is dependent upon the eye and ear and soul of the quester, each event, each being and object encountered open to fresh and singular interpretation—and herein lies the problem: the conflict that arises when what you make of the images—the memories and experiences—that compose your narrative does not correspond to the story line superimposed by surrounding voices.

Because of this potential for discrepancy, because we collectively fear loss of order, such journeys seldom find a place of honor in a culture given to absolutism. The individual quest for meaning threatens the staid stories we are expected to revere, the laws we are made to obey—the laws themselves, the codes of conduct and silence, an intrinsic part of the "masterplot." To consider alternative possibilities to the story you have been given—to contemplate for instance, that the mythology of strength and survival your family has so carefully composed is actually a story of abuse and

repression, or to suggest that a religious community has failed in its mission to love and uphold, or sometimes to simply tell the literal truth of your own experience, to say, "This is what happened"—can be interpreted as sacrilege. You are questioning the masterplot, and even before the question or assertion has taken hold, you feel yourself risking judgment, emotional and sometimes physical banishment, and self-destruction, because that is what it is called: not destruction of the self from the outside, but suicide.

This is a metaphor, of course, for loss of narrative.



We say we have lost our way, that we are without direction, that we don't know which way is right. We can't turn the page of our own lives and find out what happens next. So it was that my time of indecision, my search for meaning, seemed less like a quest than a sure-fire road to catastrophe. Because that's what I'd been told it would be, the plot I recognized, the narrative I had been given. Out of the frying pan into the fire. Headed to hell in a handbasket. And for years, those prophecies held true. Because they were self-fulfilling. Because I had never been taught and could not imagine another way.

*redefining to demythologizing and deconstructing.* The stories we have told ourselves, though flawed, can never truly be destroyed, nor should they be. Narrative is a continuum, an infinite text—if we are lucky.

But even if we can recognize the importance of both redefining and maintaining elements of the “masterplot” in theory, where does this leave us at the level of daily living, where the icons seem less stable, the rituals less informative, the traditions obtuse? As a writer of personal nonfiction, I actively engage in destabilizing the stories that have made up my life, and

## I believe in what I am doing, and my family, schooled in conviction, recognizes that belief.

Only recently have I allowed myself to contemplate that the destruction of the “old” self may have been a necessary precursor to the creation of the “new,” though it seems quite obvious now. It has taken me even longer to let go of the old dichotomies, the absolutism that informed my life, to realize that I *can* allow ritual and tradition some place in my daily existence, and that those rituals and traditions are made up of both the old and the new, to accept that I *can* embrace a spirituality that would not be accepted by the congregation of my youth, to believe that there is a way to honor my family *and* stay true to my art.

None of these things is easy, and why should it be? In breaking down the old structures, demythologizing our personal, familial, religious, and social histories, deconstructing the cultural values that have sustained so many generations, we take enormous risks. It is not something to be undertaken blithely, and we must at all times be aware that nothing exists in a void, that for every icon we bring down, another will come in to take its place. We must consider carefully what the new icons, the new myths, should be. We must honor the quest of the individual and the community to define themselves, but we must also honor the journey that has brought us to this point.

Let us never believe that the rituals and traditions of previous generations hold no merit, that there is nothing in them we can learn from, for to do so would be an incredible act of hubris. History at every level, individual to world, is riven with failure, but as Edison said, “Failure is the opportunity to start over with more knowledge.” This is why I much prefer the term

in doing so, I risk what C. K. Williams calls “narrative dysfunction”—losing any sense of the meaning of my own existence. But, as Kittredge notes, if we “stick to [the wrong] story too long, we are likely to find ourselves in a great wreck.” But without story, he adds, you will see a society without much idea of how to proceed.” Because this is also what stories do: they tell us how to act. Kittredge believes that in order to create a better world, we must first create a better narrative, that our actions will then follow.

The role of ritual and tradition cannot be undervalued here. They keep us grounded in the familiar even as the world around us spins away. They are our constants, our Pole Stars, our touchstones. And this is why, even in the face of my own revolution, in the midst of a culture attempting to re-imagine itself, I hold to the old ways that aided the survival of my ancestors: I pray; I treasure sacred things; I gather my family at the table and share food. And something else, something new: I write story.

Nothing is more ritualized in my life than this act of writing. I don't mean that I engage in superstitious actions to woo the creative impulse, though many writers do, insisting on the same pen, the paper pointing north, the mothy cardigan draping their shoulders. What I mean is that writing has become something sacred to me, something to be honored and attended. It is a daily quest.

As a girl in the Pentecostal Church, I spent hours on my knees, hands raised to heaven, questing not for salvation, for that had been granted, but for the Spirit





to possess me, for the gift of glossolalia, speaking in tongues. I have to tell you that writing is not much different. It feels like a calling to me, something that I am simply meant to do; it hits me with a novice's modest pleasure; it requires of me submission; it brings me to my knees. And when whatever it is that happens, when the Muse makes her visit, when the Creative Impulse takes hold, it feels like nothing so much as that infusion of passion I felt at the altar.

And why should I think there would be a difference? I believe in this act of writing with a familiar conviction, and I cannot help but be grateful for having learned the elements of faith early on, for being able to recognize and adhere to the rituals of the quest: devotion, desire, humility, belief—all embodied in the mundane tasks of waiting, watching, listening for hours, days, perhaps a lifetime.

People often ask me how it is I have the courage to write so honestly about my life, how it is I can make the decision to risk alienating my family, how I find the strength to break the codes of silence, to challenge the old laws of conduct. There are any number of ways to answer these questions, none of them absolute, but what I do know is this: I believe in what I am doing, and my family, schooled in conviction, recognizes that

belief. They see me give my life over to hours upon hours at the computer; they know that sometimes those hours produce nothing more than a thin sentence on the page. They sense my fervor and my frustration. More than anything, they understand that I am on a quest, a quest that I have undertaken with great seriousness, a quest they have chosen to honor.

What advice I can offer to those of you attempting to claim authorship of your own stories is this: do it for the right reasons. Don't do it for the money. Don't do it for simple purgation or out of anger, bitterness, or a need for revenge. If you do, how can you expect to gain any blessing? Speak to your family of your passion, your desire, and use those words. Make them believe in what you are doing as much as you do. And another thing: remember to honor your family with the gift of good writing. By this I mean treat them in your writing as you would your most cherished fictional characters. Allow them complexity; understand and accept that they are flawed and sometimes blind. Make them sympathetic. Describe their actions objectively; let the audience be their judge. Remember that they, too, are searching for meaning. Ask yourself, "Who are they, and why?"

When I look to those photographs of Hemingway, I am not looking for creative stimulation or patriarchal direction from Papa: what I am looking for, what I am seeing, is some reminder of my quest for what he called the "True Geo"—some essential element of human existence, some word or image that will cut to the bone. I am seeing the turmoil, the inner conflict, the bifurcated self, the chaos of Hemingway's inability to craft for himself a narrative he could believe in.

No one defined his life and the lives of his characters by ritual more than did Hemingway; the subtleties of camp-side coffee-making; the clean, well-lighted cafe; finally, the obsessive daily counting of written words. Ritual alone is never enough, and perhaps this is what I'm asking Hemingway to remind me of. In my quest for self-definition and a new narrative of meaning, I have found ways to honor my elders; I have found a place of comfort within family, within community. As a writer, I have come to understand that what is most sacred is my relationship to the story on the page. And I have come to accept, once again, that what my faith requires of me is nothing more than my life.

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Kim Barnes's work includes two memoirs—*In the Wilderness*, a 1997 Pulitzer Prize finalist, and *Hungry for the World*. This presentation was first made at Walla Walla College.

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