BEING REAL, PART TWO

SPIRITUAL TOOLS FOR AUTHENTIC LIVING

A Series of Excerpts for Further Study and Reflection

BEING REAL ABOUT LIFE

At the Trinity Institute conference on Benedictine Spirituality in April 2003, Kathleen Norris introduced the concept of Holy Realism, arguing that it is the hallmark of any authentic spiritual life. In the following excerpts Being Real About Life is discussed in three categories: 1) Holy realism, 2) Being real about darkness and struggle, and 3) Being real about evil.

Holy Realism

Kathleen Norris

The popular wisdom is that the words "[holiness]" and "realism" don't go together. Holy people, like poets, are dreamy and sentimental. Never get places on time. … Holy people are not of this world. [They are not real about life]. Their mind is always on higher things, including perhaps the old pie in the sky.
--Kathleen Norris, Trinity Institute Benedictine Spirituality Conference, 2003, 8.

My goal today is to overturn [these] false notions of holiness, for I believe that it surfaces in human beings precisely when we are being most realistic, most grounded, most down to earth. Holiness is never fussy or sentimental. Neither is a good poem; it's ultimate realism. My evidence for this belief is that holiness endures, persistent as a weed through the depredations of all the ages, throughout all the terrors that we human beings can inflict on each other and have inflicted over our history on this earth. Holiness prevails, and poetry. Religion and poetry are among the most ancient of human activities, predating even agriculture. And battered as they are today by secular indifference or co-optation … by legalism, fundamentalism, or terrorism, by right-thinking ideologies, [or] tyrants; religion and poetry are with us still, still witnessing to hope at the dawn of the 21st century. Both holiness and poetry [may seem] anachronistic, … [but they are] peculiar forces with a life of their own in the face

of the dog-eat-dog world we know too well, and as necessary as breath, giving us the hope that evil does not have the last word.
--Kathleen Norris 10-12.

Holy realism pricks the balloon of our tendency to think of ourselves as "good people." You know, you often hear people say that. "I'm a good person." It's usually a preface to ostracizing someone they consider "bad." "I'm a good person. I don't cheat on my wife." "I'm a good person. I don't attack the President." "I'm a good person, I *do* attack the President." "I'm a good person, I don't engage in homosexual acts." "I'm a good person, I don't engage in homophobia." The litany of self-righteousness in our culture convinces me that for all of our psychological sophistication and all of our therapies, we remain remarkably unreflective about ourselves and our capacity for evil.

Benedictine [monks] are asked constantly to remember that we, each of us, are capable of unspeakable horrors, acts of mental and physical cruelty. Reading the Psalms every day, they can't escape that realization, the Psalms with all their talk of enemies and betrayal and violence. The Psalms reflect us as we are, not nearly as good as we imagine ourselves to be. One of St. Benedict's great insights was that monks also need to pray the "Lord's Prayer" several times a day to remove, as he put it, "the thorns of contention that spring up in community life," and also to remind us of our own weaknesses. We really do need to ask over and over to be delivered from temptation and trial, lest our anger or pride or greed take hold and we behave in a selfish and inhumane way. And of course, when we do that, we ask for forgiveness, and forgiveness is the thread running through that prayer.

I suspect that the comfortable lies that we tell ourselves about holiness, that it's not realistic, [that] it's not tough enough for the real world, this allows us to easily dismiss faith and its challenges and discomforts. If we can disparage religion as folly, then we don't have to look at our own weakness, our own capacity for evil.
--Kathleen Norris 9-10.

[Another] point about holy realism is that it is grounded in the present, in the real world, and especially not in our heads. We have in our society so many temptations to live in our heads. We're constantly invited to live our lives through the carefully packaged lives of celebrities, even people who are famous only for performing some infamously stupid or vulgar act. We might imagine ourselves in the glossy magazine ads. Our lives would be centered on a purse or

a pair of sandals. We see a dress in a store window lit as if it were an object of devotion in a church. Holy realism rejects these false images of the world and human life, and it reminds us of who we really are. Holiness is humbling, and that's a point St. Benedict makes quite forcefully, devoting an entire chapter of the *Rule* to the subject of humility.
--Kathleen Norris 14-16.

I believe that we need poets … and we need religion to keep bringing us to our senses. I recently read a fine book by Garrett Keiser entitled *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin*, in which he suggests that the recent phenomenon of road rage in America is a good example of anger that results from our living in our heads, from our exaggerated subjectivity. Like many forms of quick trigger anger, road rage is ultimately, as Keiser says, "a loss of reality. Both the perceived offense and the response to it are completely out of proportion." It's ultimate narcissism, just one example in our culture where we could all use a good dose of humility and to sort of adopt what I think of as the ultimate Benedictine attitude, to say, "Well, who am I? I'm a mere mortal, like the person who just cut me off in traffic."
--Kathleen Norris 16.

Holy realism asserts that life does matter, how we live it matters. It's not willing to accept … that the endless daily drudgery is all there is to life. Holy realism takes a stand for awe and wonder and beauty even in the midst of ordinary daily activities. That is asceticism to me, I think. In a prose piece, [poet] Kate Daniels … writes of a burgeoning poem that she was forced to set aside, in a typical day of teaching, and couldn't get back to [that] night because her children and her husband were coming home and had to be fed. "Like me," she wrote, "they are tired and over stimulated. The events of the day are clamoring inside them. The good events want to be shouted out, the bad see the inside or are precipitously acted out in ferocious sibling wars. We have all come home to each other to be healed and hailed, to be soothed as a victim, chastised if a perpetrator, and morally realigned. But we are so tired and we lash out in irritation, frustration, anger." That sounds very familiar to me. In the midst of chaos in her kitchen, the children doing homework are littering the floor with paper scraps, the dog overturning the garbage pail, Kate Daniels takes a stand. "Try as I may, and I do, I have a hard time browning the ground turkey I'm planning to mix with canned spaghetti sauce for the glory of God. I try to find the poetry that exists even here. I know that God is here but in the chaos and the noise, I can't seem to find Him."

Now this is a woman who can find God in the midst of changing a diaper, so we know she's morally realigned and very strong. But now in that kitchen she feels bereft of any consolation. And I connect with that very much. I don't have children, but I have been a caregiver for my husband for about three or four years. And so I really do understand that you sense that God is there but you really can't find God. … But even the fact that Kate Daniels or I am aware of the absence of God is a form of holy realism. We can have faith and hope that there is something better than the ordinary pains and frustrations of life. Holy realism is grounded defiantly in the daily chores of life. I treasure the remark of one woman who told me that she came to a retreat I was leading because the word "laundry" was in the advertisement. I had based my retreat title on my book, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work*. That made me so happy that she said that. I felt, well, of course, "laundry" is in the title.

I'm going to [give] you a little meditation on the daily. When my niece Christina was a toddler, her mother worked as a stockbroker and financial planner. My brother, Christina's father, would drive her to day care in the morning and her mother would pick her up after work. And every day she brought Christina an orange, peeled so that the child could eat it on the way home. One day Christina was busying herself by playing Mommy's office on the front porch … of our house in Honolulu. And I asked her what her mother did at work. Without hesitation and with a conviction that I relish to this day, she looked up at me and said, "She makes oranges."

And that is what God does, I think, making oranges and wind and the ocean and green leaves and everything else that constitutes our earthly home. As we come to know this God who gives us so much, a God of limitless compassion, we can find great mercy even in the midst of lamentation. And … that marvelous phrase that 'the world is new every morning,' that comes in the middle of a lamentation. It comes after great lament, in fact.
--Kathleen Norris 23-26.

Our culture, of course, is overloaded with data. It's wanting in meaning. It tempts us to indifference and unhealthy detachment. We don't really want to pursue even our evil thoughts or our good thoughts to find out where they could lead. We get shortchanged. The ancient monks spoke of the temptation of … indifference, not caring, as being tempted to look outside of one's cell to see if the other monks were up to anything. Our modern day equivalent may be turning on CNN. But the temptation is the same. And the result is also the same, not caring, indifference. The holy realist is aware of this and knows all too well that

temptation to indifference, but he or she resists, asserting that life does have meaning, life is worth caring about, and how we live it matters.
--Kathleen Norris 33.

Being Real About Darkness And Struggle

Holy realism knows that life is worth living in any season. It counters that silly T-shirt I sometimes see: "Life is a bitch and then you die." Holy realism knows that life is both gift and struggle, and then we die, each one of us. And we can't begin to imagine the good things that God has in store for us then.

Benedictine [monastics] … really live immersed in the Psalms and Scripture so that death and even **darkness** come to be, if not acceptable, … at least seen in light of faith.
--Kathleen Norris 22-23.

Comment from the Trinity Institute Conference Audience - Fred Burnham
I want to tell you about an experience that I had just before this session because everything you said about holy realism has just come alive for me. During the break, twenty-two of us, who were here with the Archbishop of Canterbury on September 11, had lunch with him. We sat in a circle talking to each other about our experiences that horrible day. The amazing thing is that all the people in the room talked as if they had just heard your lecture. One after another they talked about how the event spawned in them all the basic characteristics of holy realism. They spoke of new found humility, of being open to the Other, of living with a profound sense of their mortality, of finding praise in the midst of despair, and coming to have a whole new, more realistic understanding of who we really are. There is a sense in which the experience of 9/11 moved these people into holy realism. I want to ask you if you think it's necessary to go through that kind of **darkness** in order to discover what holy realism is all about?

Response from Kathleen Norris
Well, I think in a sense it is. But I think life will hand it to you in some form or another because that's how life is. There's loss and grief all around us as well as joy. So I think we don't have to look for it. It's going to hit us. And how we respond to it … we can look out for number one, become very defensive and bitter, or we can go in another direction towards holy realism. I think we have a problem with grace because if grace always came as wonderful, affirmative

things, we would take it for granted. When it comes as grief and loss and despair, we really have to come to terms with it. We have to try to find the beauty, find the grace, often in very difficult circumstances.

Question from the Audience - Fred Burnham
Was there any sort of event in your life of that kind of despair and **darkness** that changed your spiritual formation?

Response from Kathleen Norris
I think so. Part of it was back in the early Eighties when I began writing *Dakota*, the farm crisis, which has sort of become perennial. But then it was a real shock because [there] had been this big boom in the Seventies. And all of a sudden in the Eighties people were losing their farms, people were committing suicide. And I was living in the midst of this. It wasn't my own suffering, exactly. We were losing money. But it was just looking at the institutions of this little town and the whole state of South Dakota going crazy. So that was one. And I guess for myself personally would be my husband's health. [He has cancer] and for … 15 years, he's cheated death about 15 times. He's really an amazing survivor, but his increasing frailty has made me really look at my own life and our marriage and everything in a different way.
--Kathleen Norris 38-40.

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Most of us arrive at a sense of self … only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free "travel packages" sold by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage--"a transformative journey to a scared center" full of hardship, **darkness** and peril.

In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidental but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost--challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for the true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is here and now--in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep in our hearts.

But before we come to that center, full of light, we must travel in the dark. **Darkness** is not the whole of the story--every pilgrimage has passages of loveliness and joy--but it is the part of the story left untold. When we escape the **darkness** and stumble into light, it is tempting to tell others that our hope never flagged, to deny those long nights that we spent cowering in fear.

The experience of **darkness** has been essential to my coming into selfhood, and telling the truth about that fact helps me stay in the light. But I want to tell the truth as well: many young people today journey in the dark, as the young always have, and we elders do them a disservice when we withhold the shadowy parts of our lives. When I was young, there were few elders who were willing to talk about the **darkness;** most of them pretended that success was all that they had known. As the **darkness** began to descend on me in my early twenties, I thought that I had developed a unique and terminal case of failure. I did not realize that I had merely embarked on a journey toward joining the human race.
--Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 17-19.

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Darkness is the winter of the soul, the time when it seems nothing is growing. But winter, we know, is the fallow time of year. Winter is the time when the earth renews itself. And so it is with struggle. Unbeknownst to us, struggle is the call and the signal that we are about to renew ourselves. Whether we want to or not. …

… Struggle is what forces us to attend to the greater things in life, to begin again when life is at its barest for us, to take the seeds of the past and give them new growth. …
--Joan Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003) 38-40.

The process of struggle is the process of the internal redefinition of the self. … When our expectations run aground of our reality, we begin to rethink the meaning and shape of our lives. We begin to rethink not just our past decisions but our very selves. It is a slow but determining deconstruction of the self so that the real person can be reborn in us, beyond the expectations of others, even beyond our own previously unassailable assumptions. … Struggle is always an invitation to a new life that, the longer it is resisted, the longer we fail to become who we are really meant to be. --Joan Chittister 92.

Being Real About Evil

Holy realism … [also] witnesses to [the existence of] evil. And … it can witness convincingly to evil precisely because it understands that enemies are real. That's anathema in America these days because we all want to be friends. At the extreme, this attitude can be summed up in a sign that I saw at a recent peace rally: "Saddam Loves You." Well, the evidence is that Saddam loves no one but himself, and even that is a dysfunctional relationship. Contrast that silly thing, "Saddam Loves You," with a passage from *Life Together*, which is a little book that Dietrich Bonhoffer wrote about the Christian community in an underground seminary in Nazi Germany. He writes, "Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. And at the end, all his disciples deserted him. On the cross, he was utterly alone surrounded by mockers. So the Christian too belongs within the thick of foes." He [also] quotes some Luther: "The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies, and who will not suffer this does not want to be of the kingdom of Christ. He wants to be among friends." Well, it's tricky, isn't it, to think of enemies. And of course, we all have to begin by saying the worst enemy is within. But I think we do also have important witness, both in the Scriptures and in poetry, to evil, to what enemies do. …

… What is a Christian to do when we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, commanded to love our enemies? There are situations in which making nice does no good and begins to do harm. As Garrett Keiser insists, anger, righteous anger in the Biblical sense, not selfish, self-aggrandizing anger, can break through denial and lead to the prayer of forgiveness that makes anger no longer necessary, [even] perhaps the concept of an enemy. But the question nags, how can I pray for my enemy? We need to be, first of all, suspicious of our own motives and keep a close watch on ourselves. "But if I truly love my neighbor as myself," Keiser insists, "I am not looking for victory but a radical change of heart. It is love that impels me to pray for my enemy while fully intending to do everything in my power to oppose him. I intend to prevent his abuse," he writes, "from destroying us both."

Now probably the most valuable tool that Benedictines employ … in their spiritual warfare is the daily reading of the Psalms. They don't allow us to escape the hard questions of good and evil in human life. As C.S. Lewis writes, "When we're in the ancient world of the Psalms, we're also in the world we know, with lies, betrayals, violence, and even massacres." I think the first thing I

did, when I caught my breath after watching the Towers fall at about five in the morning Hawaii time, is … read Psalm 79 about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and no one was left on the streets to bury the dead. Prayer is warfare to the last breath, with ourselves, with the evil within and without. The tyrant *du jour* may seem to have all the power, but the Psalms teach us that justice matters more and it endures. We hear over and over that malice recoils on the one who acts out of malice. Not denying our evil thoughts but embracing them is something that I have heard Benedictines speak of, seeing where they want to go, resisting and maybe getting to the flip side. A lustful thought, for example, someone with whom a liaison would be inappropriate, can be flipped over and become selfless hospitality or generosity. And it works that way with all of those lovely seven temptations, or eight.
--Kathleen Norris 29-33.

Question from the Audience
In college … I found my way to Mount Savior Monastery in Elmira, New York, where I lived for a summer with the monks, and first experienced the rhythms of daily liturgical worship. I was struck by the fact that you came back several times in your talk to the point that, for monks, the Psalms is at the center of their daily life. For me, it was amazing at four forty-five in the morning to be … singing about dashing babies' heads against the rock, to … a very nice tune. And then singing "Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." As a young man, being raised in a fundamentalist tradition, I was taught that these things had God's imprimatur on them, that basically yes, we would be blessed if we took the babies and smashed them against the rock if we were justified in doing so. But as a person who was, I hoped, growing in compassion, I found singing about [such] violence very deeply disturbing. [So] I wondered what a person who is a holy realist would say about that violence. Is there a definition of violence in holy realism that … helps us understand it?

Response from Kathleen Norris
Okay, I think the realism comes in acknowledging it and saying this is part of who we are, this is part of human history. In every monastery I've ever encountered … this is one of the key issues that gets argued about and changed. There are some communities [where] there are, maybe, two Psalms that aren't even read. Other communities, they read the whole Psalter. Other times, people print the really nasty stuff in teeny, teeny letters. So it's like, "We don't really mean this and we're not going to recite this out loud in public, but it's there and you can read it." There are [many] different ways of dealing with it. And I think it's a healthy thing for the Christian community and for Benedictines in

particular that it keeps coming up for discussion. It's never going to go away because it's one of those questions that doesn't have an answer.

I've just been dealing with some very, very difficult people who have been acting maliciously, deceitfully, in really horrible ways. And boy, reading the cursing Psalms is just a great relief. It's not that I'm directing all of this at them. It's just saying, "Oh, this feels good to say this, thank you, thank you, thank you." Because evil and violence and maliciousness are real. And I think that's the value that's in the Psalms. Our holy book doesn't censor out who we are. It reflects it back to us, and then it's up to us to decide, "Well, no, I think it's better not to dash any babies against rocks." And I think the rest of the Bible and certainly the Gospels attest to that. So I think you just have to balance it out. But it is a very difficult thing. The Psalms are very difficult for modern people to read for that reason.
--Kathleen Norris 42-45.