

Session 6: Faith, Preservation, and Immortality



Preparation: Read Chapter 11

Opening: Toni Morrison, on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, 7 December 1993:

“The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was... [caused by] the weight of many languages...that one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. [But] whose heaven [would this have been]... and what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature if no one could understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they [understood], the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life.”

Tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul... . Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names.”

Discussion:

A. Faith

1. Sometimes profound loss diminishes faith, and sometimes it strengthens it. Were you surprised by the matriarch Abby's dispute with William's belief that it was better to have children die than never to have them at all?
2. Would you have expected Dodie and Earl reactions to Eliot's death to have been what they were? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with Ned's assessment that "agnostics were just Unitarians 'one further stage along?'" Has your spiritual path moved you closer or farther away from agnosticism?
4. Do UU's have a problem reconciling their commitment to "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning" with the fact that their searches may lead them to something less than a liberal religious belief?

B. Preservation

1. In "Not So Fast," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22-23, 2009, W4, John Freeman writes:

"We will die, that much is certain; and everyone we have ever loved and cared about will die, too, sometimes -- heartbreakingly -- before us....The simulated busyness of email addiction numbs the pain of this awareness, but it can never totally submerge it. Given that our days are limited, our hours precious, we have to decide what we want to do, what we want to say, what and who we care about, and how and we want to allocate our time to these things... .

Our society does not often tell us this. ...Emailing at this frantic rate ...is encroaching on parts of our lives that should be separate or sacred, altering our minds and our ability to know our world, encouraging a further distancing from our bodies and our natures and our communities. Of course email is good for

many things...but we need to use it far more sparingly, with far less dependency... This is not a sustainable way to live. This lifestyle...causes unhappiness. How many of our most joyful memories have been created in front of a screen? We need to protect the finite well of our attention if we care about our relationships.

For the Eliot women, “the personal writings whose voices connected the past and present were privileged corridors to the most understandable form of eternity, an all-encompassing unity of experience” (p.241). Do you agree with John Freeman that these corridors and our present and future relationships are in peril because of our epidemic addiction to email and other technology?

2. Is it realistic to think that enough of us will return to paper and pens to enable the next generations to feel Dodie Wilbur’s “all-encompassing unity of experience?” If not, how will we 21st century women (and men) preserve and pass on the ponderings, sorrows, frustrations, and hopes than make us human?

3. Tucker’s acknowledgments speak of her “primal debt to [her] book’s female subjects, “women who learned to make noise and break rules and then saved the damning evidence,” inspiring their survivors to preserve and make their papers available “once the culture was ready to listen to women and take them seriously.” Do you think today’s culture is ready to take women seriously? Why or why not?

Closing: Susan B. Anthony to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1898:

“Strong, courageous, capable young women will take our place and complete our work....And we, dear old friend, shall move on to the next sphere of existence---higher and larger, we cannot fail to believe, and one where women will not be placed in an inferior position but will be welcomed on a plane of perfect intellectual and spiritual equality.”

Suggestions for Further Reading

Marie-Hélène Gold, "A Century of Women Photographers at the Schlesinger Library," *A Sampling of Innocent Documents* (Cambridge, MA.: Radcliffe College, 1999), 13-30.

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1989). A classic study of scripting the female life.

Lois Lowry, Acceptance Speech for the Newberry Award for *The Giver*, June 1994 (available online). On inclusion and the redemptive powers of memory.

Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Random House, 2009). An excellent book on history and the challenges of studying it.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001).

Cynthia Grant Tucker, "Legacy," *Prophetic Sisterhood*, 224-234.