

*Moments In a Sacred Journey**

Frederick Buechner
Pawlet, Vermont

About ten years ago I contracted to give a set of lectures at Harvard. It was a lectureship that in the past had almost always been held by theologians, and I felt so outclassed and overawed in their midst that I decided that it would be folly to try in any sense to compete with them, especially since I did not then, any more than I do now, consider that I was, properly speaking, a theologian myself. I wanted to talk about the same kinds of things that they had talked about, but I wanted to talk about them in terms I felt at home with and in a language that I thought I could handle. The way I worked it out, for better or worse, was this.

All theology, like all fiction, I decided, is at its heart autobiography, and what a theologian is doing essentially is examining as honestly as he can the rough and tumble of his own life with all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and expressing in logical, abstract thought the truths about human life and about God that he believes he has found implicit there. Then, since neither logic nor abstract thought have ever been my particular specialties, I determined to omit both of them pretty much altogether and simply to try to describe my life as evocatively and candidly as I could in the hope that such glimmers of theological truth as I believed I had glimpsed in it would shine through my description more or less on their own. It seemed to me then and seems to me still that if God speaks to us at all in this world, if God speaks anywhere, then it is into our lives that he speaks. Someone we love dies, say. Some unforeseen act of kindness or cruelty touches the heart or makes the blood run cold. We fail a friend, or a friend fails us, and we are appalled at the capacity we all of us share for estranging the very people in our lives we need the most. Or maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all — just one day following another, helter-skelter, in the manner of days. We sleep and dream. We wake. We work. We remember and forget. We have fun and are depressed. And into the thick of it, or out of the thick of it, at moments of even the most humdrum of our days, God speaks. . . .

That was ten years ago. By now my children have mostly grown up and mostly gone. I am not by a long shot entirely grown up myself, but I am ten years' worth of days older than I was then, and lots of things have happened to me, and I have had lots of time to listen to them happening. Also, since I passed the age of fifty, I have taken to looking back on my life as a whole more. I have looked through old letters and dug out old photographs. I have gone through twenty years' worth of old home movies. I have thought about the

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people I have known and the things that have happened that have for better or worse left the deepest mark on me. Like sitting there on the couch listening to the sounds of roosters, swallows, hammers, ticking clock, I have tried to make something out of the hidden alphabet of the years I have lived, to catch, beneath all the random sounds those years have made, a strain at least of their unique music. My interest in the past is not, I think, primarily nostalgic. Like everybody else, I rejoice in much of it and marvel at those moments when, less by effort than by grace, it comes to life again with extraordinary power and immediacy — vanished faces and voices, the feeling of what it was like to fall in love for the first time, of running as a child through the firefly dusk of summer, the fresh linen and cinnamon and servant-swept fragrance of my grandmother's house in Pennsylvania, the taste of snow, the stubbly touch of my father's goodnight. But even if it were possible to return to those days, I would never choose to. What quickens my pulse now is the stretch ahead rather than the one behind, and it is mainly for some clue to where I am going that I search through where I have been, for some hint as to who I am becoming or failing to become that I delve into what used to be, I listen back to a time when nothing was much farther from my thoughts than God for an echo of the gutturals and sybillants and vowellessness by which I believe that even then God was addressing me out of my life as he addresses us all. And it is because I believe that, that I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived or will ever live as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys. . . .

On a Saturday in late fall, my brother and I woke up around sunrise. I was ten and he not quite eight, and once we were awake, there was no going back to sleep again because immediately all the excitement of the day that was about to be burst in upon us like the sun itself, and we could not conceivably have closed our eyes on it. Our mother and father were going to take us to a football game, and although we were not particularly interested in the game, we were desperately interested in being taken. Grandma Buechner had come down from the city to go with us and was asleep in another room. Our parents presumably were also asleep, and so were the black couple who worked for us, downstairs in a room off the kitchen. It was much too early to get up, so just as on Christmas morning when you wake up too early to start opening the presents, we amused ourselves as best we could till the rest of the house got moving and it came time to start opening the present of this new and most promising day. We had a roulette wheel, of all things — black and glittery with a chromium spindle at the hub which it took only the slightest twirl to set spinning and the little ball skittering clickety-click around the rim until the wheel slowed down enough for it to settle into one of the niches and ride out the rest of the spin in silence.

We had a green felt cloth with the numbers and colors marked on it and a box of red, white, and blue pokerchips; and all of this we had spread out on the foot of one of our beds, playing with it, when something happened that at a moment neither of us more than half noticed because it was such an ordinary thing in a way, set next to all the extraordinary things that we had reason to believe were going to happen as soon as the day got going. What happened was

that our bedroom door opened a little, and somebody looked in on us. It was our father. Later on, we could not remember anything more about it than that, even when we finally got around to pooling our memories of it, which was not until many years later.

If he said anything to us, or if we said anything to him, we neither of us have ever been able to remember it. He could have been either dressed or still in his pajamas for all we noticed. There was apparently nothing about his appearance or about what he said or did that made us look twice at him. There was nothing to suggest that he opened the door for any reason other than just to check on us as he passed by on his way to the bathroom or wherever else we might have thought he was going that early on a Saturday morning, if either of us had bothered to think about it at all. I have no idea how long he stood there looking at us. A few seconds? A few minutes? Did he smile, make a face, wave his hand? I have no idea. All I know is that after a while, he disappeared, closing the door behind him, and we went on playing with our wheel as I assume we had kept on playing with it right along because there was nothing our father had said or done or seemed to want that made us stop. Clickety clickety click. Now this number, now that. On one spin we could be rich as Croesus. On the next we could lose our shirts.

How long it was from the moment he closed that door to the moment we opened it, I no longer have any way of knowing, but the interlude can stand in a way for my whole childhood up till then and for everybody else's too, I suppose: childhood as a waiting for you do not know just what and living, as you live in dreams, with little or no sense of sequence or consequence or measurable time. And that moment was also the last of my childhood because when I opened the door again, measurable time was, among other things, what I opened it on. The click of the latch as I turned the knob was the first tick of the clock that measures everything into before and after, and at that exact moment my once-below-a-time ended and my once-upon-a-time began. From that moment to this I have ridden on time's back as a man rides a horse, knowing fully that the day will come when my ride will end and my time will end and all that I am and all that I have will end with them. Up till then the house had been still. Then, muffled by the closed door, there was a shout from downstairs. It was the husband of the black couple. His voice was fruity and hollow with something I had never heard in it before. I opened the door.

All over the house doors opened, upstairs and down. My grandmother loomed fierce and terrified in the hallway, her nightgown billowing around her white and stiff as a sail, her hair down her back. There was a blue haze in the air, faintly bitter and stifling. In what I remember still as a kind of crazy parody of excitement, I grabbed hold of the dowel post at the top of the stairs and swung myself around it. "Something terrible has happened!" my grandmother said. She told us to go back to our room. We went back. We looked out the window.

Down below was the gravel drive, the garage with its doors flung wide open and the same blue haze thick inside it and drifting out into the crisp autumn day. I had the sense that my brother and I were looking down from a height many times greater than just the height of the second story of our house. In

grey slacks and a maroon sweater, our father was lying in the driveway on his back. By now my mother and grandmother were with him, both in their nightgowns still, barefoot, their hair uncombed. Each had taken one of his legs and was working it up and down like the handle of a pump, but whatever this was supposed to accomplish, it accomplished nothing as far as we could see. A few neighbors had gathered at the upper end of the drive, and my brother and I were there with them, neither knowing how we got there nor daring to go any farther.

Nobody spoke. A car careened up and braked sharp with a spray of gravel. A doctor got out. He was wearing a fedora and glasses. He ran down the driveway with his bag in his hand. He knelt. I remember the black man who had woken us sitting somewhere with his head in his hands. I remember the dachshund we had wagging his tail. After a time the doctor came back up the drive, his tread noisy on the gravel. The question the neighbors asked him they asked without words, and without a word the doctor answered them. He barely shook his head. It was not for several days that a note was found. It was written in pencil on the last page of *Gone with the Wind*, which had been published that year, 1936, and it was addressed to my mother. "I adore and love you," it said, "and am no good . . . Give Freddy my watch. Give Jamie my pearl pin. I give you all my love."

God speaks to us through our lives, we often too easily say. *Something* speaks anyway, spells out some sort of godly or godforsaken meaning to us through the alphabet of our years, but often it takes many years and many further spellings out before we start to glimpse, or think we do, a little of what that meaning is. Even then we glimpse it only dimly, like the first trace of dawn on the rim of night, and even then it is a meaning that we cannot fix and be sure of once and for all because it is always incarnate meaning and thus as alive and changing as we are ourselves alive and changing.

A child takes life as it comes because he has no other way of taking it. The world had come to an end that Saturday morning, but each time we had moved to another place, I had seen a world come to an end, and there had always been another world to replace it. When somebody you love dies, Mark Twain said, it is like when your house burns down; it isn't for years that you realize the full extent of your loss. For me it was longer than for most, if indeed I have realized it fully even yet, and in the meanwhile the loss came to get buried so deep in me that after a time I scarcely ever took it out to look at it at all, let alone to speak of it. If ever anybody asked me how my father died, I would say heart trouble. That seemed at least a version of the truth. He had had a heart. It had been troubled. I remembered how his laughter toward the end had rung like a cracked bell. I remembered how when he opened the bedroom door, he had not said goodbye to us in any way that we understood. I remembered what he had written on the last page of the book he had been reading.

And then by grace or by luck or by some cool, child's skill for withdrawing from anything too sharp or puzzling to deal with, I stopped remembering so almost completely to remember at all that when, a year or so later, I came upon my brother crying one day all by himself in his room, I was stopped dead in my tracks. Why was he crying? When I prodded him into telling me that he

was crying about something that he would not name but said only had happened a long time ago, I finally knew what he meant, and I can recapture still my astonishment that, for him, a wound was still open that for me, or so I thought, had long since closed. And in addition to the astonishment, there was also a shadow of guilt. It was guilt not only that I had no tears like his to cry with but that if, no less than he, I had also lost more than I yet knew, I had also, although admittedly at an exorbitant price, made a sort of giddy, tragic, but quite measurable little gain. While my father lived, I was the heir apparent, the crown prince. Now I was not only king, but king in a place that, except for his death, I would probably never have known except in dreams. What I mean is that the place we moved to soon after he died — and it was there that my brother cried, in a house the color of smoked salmon overhanging a harbor of turquoise and ultramarine — was the Land of Oz.

No place I have ever been to since — not matter how remote, no matter how strange and lovely — can match the loveliness of the Bermuda islands as they still existed when I first saw them. There were no cars there in those days, none of the sounds or smells of combustion engines of any kind which have become so much a part of the world we live in than it is hardly possible any more to imagine either the world or our lives without them. The world was quieter and statelier without them, the distances greener and greater. There were only horses and carriages there then — Victorias mostly with their hooded, perambulator tops that could be put up if it rained, and slim English bicycles with bells and baskets, and a narrow-gauge Toonerville Trolley of a railway with wicker armchairs for seats that rattled through pawpaws and banana palms, over high trestles that swayed in the wind across inlets and coves from one end of the fishhook-shaped island to the other no faster, it seemed, than a boy could run. There were fields of lilies, hedges of oleander and hibiscus, passion flowers, moonflowers, and always the small, bent cedars that grew everywhere and whose fragrance enchanted the air you breathed together with the fragrance of horses, the sea, the faint sweetness of kerosene that Bermudians burned in those days when the evenings turned cool.

The houses were sky-blue and rose, lemon yellow and lavender and pastel green, all with their blinding white roofs stepped to catch the rain because rain was all the water there was in Bermuda. You drank rain. You bathed in rain. You watched rain move in slow, sad curtains across the harbor where our house was, heard the soft hiss of its moving advance. It would come up out of nowhere and stop as suddenly, the porous coral roads drying in minutes — the chalky, damp small of their drying. There were pale pink coral beaches turning to amber in the shallows, then shading off into Gulf Stream greens and purples and deep-sea blue. There were angel fish off our terrace, goggle-eyed squirrel fish, and sergeant-majors striped bumblebee yellow and black. There was a small, battered ferry called *The Dragon* that chugged you across to Hamilton for sixpence with its stern almost awash under a load of bikes. There were the great *Monarch* and the great *Queen* which on alternate weeks slipped silent as ghosts through the narrows at daybreak, then foghorned, breathy and hoarse, as they started to dock. There was an eccentric with a golden brown beard and hair that grew down to his shoulders who used to hang around the custom

sheds with a faraway look in his eyes and was always there by the gangplank when the Furness ships came in, watching the passengers as they got off one by one. Some said that he was looking for a woman who had deserted him, or a lost friend, a lost child, but he himself never told, or even told his hame, so Jesus was what people called him because of his long hair and beard, I suppose, or the way he searched all the faces that passed him by. And there were the long-tailed Bermuda gulls.

Grandma Buechner was against our going and with reason. It was the same kind of extravagance that had so weighed down my father, she said. It was a frivolous place to go at a grave time. It was no place to raise boys. It was escape. "You should stay and face reality," she wrote my mother, and old Herman Scharmann, puffing a cigar on Millionaire's Row at Sheepshead Bay, would have nodded agreement if he had not been some fifteen years dead by then and, like his cigar, gone long since to ash. Reality was like the bad weather that you did not put things off because of, or seek refuge from in the Land of Oz. Reality was what the old woman in the joke peered out at through her fingers even though she knew the sight of it might strike her blind.

And my grandmother was right, of course — right in a hundred ways and wrong in as many others. She was right that reality can be harsh and that you shut your eyes to it only at your peril because if you do not face up to the enemy in all his dark power, then the enemy will come up from behind some dark day and destroy you while you are facing the other way. Maybe, if we had stayed home as she did, and wept for my father there, we might have become the stronger for it as certainly she became stronger herself because in her chair by the window she stared her doom straight in the eye until somehow she finally managed to stare it down altogether to emerge doom-proof at last with even her mirth intact like the soft, lyric passage that *Götterdämmerung* ends with after all the orchestral *strum and drang* of Valhalla in flames. Who knows what we might have become? But she was also wrong. *Le bon Dieu*, she would say with that faint little smile, half ironic, half wistful, and if her smile never quite dismissed *le bon Dieu* himself, what I think it did dismiss was anything like the serious possibility that through flaws and fissures in the bedrock harshness of things, there wells up from time to time, out of a deeper substratum of reality still, a kind of crazy, holy grace.

"You should stay and face reality," she wrote, and in terms of what was humanly best, this was perhaps the soundest advice she could have given us: that we should stay and, through sheer Scharmann endurance, will, courage, put our lives back together by becoming as strong as she was herself. But when it comes to putting broken lives back together — when it comes, in religious terms, to the saving of souls — the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do — to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst — is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on

your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own. Surely that is why, in Jesus' sad joke, the rich man has as hard a time getting into Paradise as that camel through the needle's eye because with his credit card in his pocket, the rich man is so effective at getting for himself everything he needs that he does not see that what he needs more than anything else in the world can be had only as a gift. He does not see that the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from *le bon Dieu* himself, a helping hand. . . .

My grandmother might have been right about our going to Bermuda. It could have been a terrible mistake. Instead maybe it was the best thing we ever did. My father's death could have closed doors in me once and for all against the possibility of ever giving entrance to such love and thereby to such pain again. Instead, it opened up some door in me to the pain of others — not that I did much about the others, God knows, or have ever done much about them since because I am too lily-livered for that, too weak of faith, too self-absorbed and sequeamish — but such pain as I had known in my own life opened up if not my hands to help much, at least my eyes to begin seeing anyway that there is pain in every life, even the apparently luckiest, that buried griefs and hurtful memories are part of us all. And there was so much else to see too — the priest in his black gaiters, the pull and hum of the Good Friday kites, the girl sitting beside me on the wall at Salt Kettle — and there is so much to see always, things too big to take in all at once, things so small as hardly to be noticed. And though they may well come by accident, these moments of our seeing, I choose to believe that it is by no means by accident when they open our hearts as well as our eyes.

A crazy, holy grace I have called it. Crazy because whoever could have predicted it? Who can ever foresee the crazy how and when and where of a grace that wells up out of the lostness and pain of the world and of our own inner worlds? And holy because these moments of grace come ultimately from farther away than Oz and deeper down than doom, holy because they heal and hallow. "For all thy blessings, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, we give thee thanks," runs an old prayer, and it is for the all but unknown ones and the more than half forgotten ones that we do well to look back over the journeys of our lives because it is their presence that makes the life of each of us a sacred journey.