Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 8 | Issue 2 Article 5

12-1-2004

The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage, by Paul Elie

Amanda Angaiak

Recommended Citation
Angaiak, A. (2004). The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage, by Paul Elie. *Journal of Catholic Education, 8* (2). http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0802082013

BOOK REVIEWS

THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR OWN: AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE

PAUL ELIE
FARRAR, STRAUS, AND GIROUX, 2003
$15.00, 560 pages

Reviewed by Amanda B. Angaiak

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, author Paul Elie sets out to bring readers on a pilgrimage with four of the most influential Catholic writers of the 20th century: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy. Theirs is a pilgrimage in which reading, writing, and faith converge: a pilgrimage taken as both lover of literature, and author of literature; as a seeker of God, and witness to the joys and struggles of lived faith. Elie's novel successfully articulates the intricacies of these writers' lives as pilgrims on an individual level, and as pilgrims in the greater society of post-war America. Even more impressive, however, is Elie's ability to construct a fluid conversation between the literary encounters and lived experiences of these influential Catholic writers.

The first chapter, "Experience," describes the life experiences of Day, Merton, O'Connor, and Percy who began their journey as pilgrims. For Day, the San Francisco quake of 1906 foreshadowed her pilgrimage with suffering. In an experience of real and startling physical devastation, the 8-year-old Day was witness to people helping one another. "A whole life is prefigured in that episode," says Elie. "In a moment of history – front page news – Dorothy Day felt the fear of God and witnessed elemental, biblical charity, the remedy for human loneliness" (p. 4). Ten years later it would be the literature of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky that would awaken in her the need to seek the sufferer's experience.

Experiencing the death of his mother and a journey with his father to St. Antonin, France would lead Thomas Merton on the path of a mystic, seeking out a life in imitation of Christ and the saints, and yet still "never want[ing] to be anyone but Thomas Merton, French-born son of a landscape painter" (p. 21). In answer to the question, "Who am I, and who am I meant to be?" (p. 21), Merton would seek the devout and ideal life found in the works of Joyce, Huxley, and Gilson.

Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, Vol. 8, No. 2, December 2004, 250-267

Walker Percy, an orphan of a "self-fashioned great family of the South" (p. 10) was heir to a dismal family legacy, with a suicide in almost every generation – including his father and grandfather. Adopted by William Alexander Percy when he was 16, Walker Percy found in his uncle, a man distinctive from his lineage; a man whose life he would unknowingly seek to imitate in order to "uphold the family history, and to defy it, at once to emulate it, and diagnose it - to find a way of being a Percy that was distinctly his" (p. 12).

Considered exceptional as part of the religious minority in Georgia, Flannery O'Connor's Catholic upbringing was one which fed her fervor for Catholic religious belief and spirit. Gifted so much by her conviction in the Spirit, O'Connor would come "to seem to others as a kind of freak" (p. 14) even as a young child. In what one might now call true Flannery O'Connor fashion, an experience with a chicken and a newsreel camera man would begin O'Connor's pilgrimage with what she called the "mystery of the unexpected" (p. 13) and forever attract her to the "grotesque and the freakish" (p. 14) in the ordinary person's faith experience.

For the duration of the book, Elie skillfully navigates the reader within the complexity of each writer's life. Amid each thoughtfully titled chapter, the lives of Day, Merton, Percy, and O'Connor unfold as individuals in different places, at different times (Day is a whole generation ahead of Merton and Percy; O'Connor is younger still) yet Elie capably defines their communion as pilgrims through their shared reading of literature and experience of faith and conversion. Elie is able to draw the reader into the most human experiences of each writer. The reader finds Day and Merton, "side by side in their pilgrimage, their stories echo[ing] each other...sinning their way to God, following the downward path to salvation" (p. 32).

Writer Rose Hawthorne Lathrop and Catholic comrade Peter Maurin would help Day focus her life as a lived imitator of Christ in Depression-era New York city. Merton, in an effort to lose himself in a redemptive world of literature, would forge a relationship with the works of Blake, Maritain, Hopkins, and Joyce that would help him articulate a true communion with the divine and encourage his baptism in the Catholic Church and monasticism. At almost the same time, Walker Percy would enter medical school in Manhattan in the hopes of finding himself. After contracting tuberculosis, he would "find company of writers and thinkers of the past" (p. 137) immersing himself during his quarantine in the works of Dostoevsky, Sartre, Mann, and Kierkegaard. The insights and company of these writers would challenge Percy's philosophy of faith and steer him to Catholicism. O'Connor, significantly younger than her counterparts and already a Catholic, would not experience a conversion of faith, but would ache for change due to her father's real and painful battle with lupus, and her real and earnest convictions

to be a writer outside the confines of her Southern hometown and family.

Throughout the book, Elie acquaints the reader with the synchronicity of these individuals' lives. No chapter demonstrates this synchronicity better than "The School of the Holy Ghost" which focuses on the connective process of writing. In 1948, Merton's first work, *The Seven Storey Mountain* would be published by Columbia University friend Robert Giroux. Day, in New York, would read an excerpt of Merton's work in the Catholic publication *Commonweal* and would be impressed both as a writer and as a Catholic.

The Seven Storey Mountain would later become a staple reading of her counterparts at *The Catholic Worker*. By this time, O'Connor, at 23, had completed her first novel, *Wise Blood*, and would be fighting for its publication. Directed by a friend to go to Robert Giroux at Harcourt Brace, O'Connor would be impressed with him. She would ask Giroux in their first meeting about an author he had recently published, Thomas Merton. Giroux would give O'Connor a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Percy, during this time, would contact publisher Caroline Gordon, a long time friend of Day's, and request her to read a copy of his first novel, *The Charterhouse*. Gordon would simultaneously have in her hand a copy of *Wise Blood* and would write to a friend that, "Walker's novel and Flannery's novel are IT. They are both so damned good" (p. 198).

If there is one weakness in Elie's first novel, it ironically stems from a thoroughness in showing the connection of these four writers. Elie details so well the similarities of these writers' pilgrimage, their synchronicity as Catholic writers, and their communion with one another on their journey, that when O'Connor and Merton die three quarters of the way through the book, so too does some of the story's energy. As readers mourn the untimely loss of O'Connor and Merton, Day and Percy seem almost an afterthought, and little interest is left for details about the crusades of Daniel and Peter Berrigan, the movement for Day's canonization, or the summative tales of Percy's personal life. Readers are too busy wishing each of these writers had more time to work with one another and further develop the bonds so well articulated by Elie's research. By the time readers finish Elie's epilogue entitled "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," however, any aforementioned weakness is quickly forgotten as readers recount the lives of Day, Merton, O'Connor, and Percy in order to find a connection and synchronicity with, and through, the lives of individuals around them.

Elie's first novel has given a powerful account of four extraordinary American Catholic writers. By detailing both the writers' experiences of the ordinary and the profoundly meaningful, Elie challenges readers to make their own ordinary experiences in life extraordinary.

The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage success-

fully reminds readers to be vigilant in finding connections in their humanity, to dig deep in order to find commonalities and to do the research and reflection necessary to find what truly connects us with one another as humans and as a pilgrim Church.

Amanda B. Angaiak is the principal of Immaculate Conception Grade School in Fairbanks, Alaska.

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN SCHOOLS

THOMAS J. SERGIOVANNI
JOSSEY-BASS, 1994
$25.00, 256 pages

Reviewed by Sean Lynch

By combining research, case studies, and original ideas, Thomas Sergiovanni attempts to address the major obstacle to providing quality education in schools today: a loss of a sense of community. Building on previous books about effective school leadership, Sergiovanni offers the reader ideas about the root causes of this loss of school community and ways in which individuals concerned with this issue might reverse this trend. Written for parents, teachers, superintendents, scholars in educational administration, organizational theorists, and others interested in building community, the author expounds on why reversing the loss of community is not only in our best interest for children, but why such community development is essential for us, as human beings.

The opening chapters of the book lay out the origins of community loss today, how the loss is manifested in our schools, and why its re-establishment is so critical. Sergiovanni sees the breakdown in school community in its relation to the dissolution of community in society at large. In our past, the socialization of young people was shared by the family, the neighborhood, and the school. Today, societal changes have contributed to the partial failure of each of these institutions to provide social support for children, leading them to look internally or to dysfunctional substitutes to address this