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Contours of the daily and domestic

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Feb. 12, 2010

Julian of Norwich is depicted in a niche beside the main door of the cathedral in Norwich, England. (Sally Scott-Robinson)

My life has been largely spent at home, caring for my family. It is a small world, but a rich and complex one, for all its short distances from stove to bed and bathtub to couch. Perhaps that is why I am drawn to these writers -- they are women -- who observe the contours and appreciate the significance of the daily and the domestic.

Anne Tyler?s characters rarely leave Baltimore, or even the houses where they were raised. In Tyler?s novels, the houses, like the city itself, become characters in the narrative. Those who do leave home remain bound by the ties, both glorious and grim, of place and blood and story. When elderly Daniel Peck begins to travel, in Tyler?s *Searching for Caleb*, it is not because there is any site outside Baltimore worth exploring. He?s looking for his brother, Caleb, who disappeared from their Roland Park home one day in 1912 leaving ?no trace except for a bedroom full of hollow, ringing musical instruments and a roll-top desk with an empty whiskey bottle in the bottom drawer.?

Peck and his granddaughter, Justine, track down leads from alumni magazines and obituary pages, looking for someone who might know where Caleb went. Here is Grandfather Peck and Justine on an Amtrak train to Manhattan, after she, in response to his complaint of a dry throat, has gone to get him a soda.

> ?Root beer, Grandfather!? she sang out. If he didn?t hear her, the rest of the car did.
>
> She put a cup in his hand, and he took a sip. ?Ah, yes,? he said. He liked herby things, root beer and horehound drops and sassafras tea. But when she tore open the cellophane bag and presented him a Cheez Doodle -- a fat orange worm that left crystals on his fingertips -- he frowned at it from beneath a tangle of white eyebrows. He had once been a judge. He still gave the impression of judging everything that came his way. ?What is this,? he said, but that was a verdict, not a question.

Divining a character through his response to a Cheez Doodle is surely a domestic way of knowing, but no less insightful for its homeliness.

If a Cheez Doodle is the ?fat worm? of foods, the rectum is the lowliest of organs. That said, no mother is allowed to ignore either one. In Julian of Norwich?s *The Showings*, she reflects upon God?s goodness in providing for the wonders -- elegant, really, when one considers Julian?s phrase, ?a well-made purse? -- of digestion and elimination. Julian is the theologian of this little hymned, but necessary, work.

> A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is open and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says, that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for love of the soul which he created in his own likeness. For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.

I recall our then-toddler Andrew, whose favorite posture at Mass was on his back in the pew, his eyes fixed on the high ceiling of the church. If I knelt or bowed close enough, he would whisper to me, ?What?s God doing now??

?What?s God doing now?? That is both the question and the revelation of my days.

For it is domesticity that has taught me, in William Blake?s familiar phrase, ?to see eternity in a grain of sand.? It is the question asked -- if not necessarily answered, or happily so -- by writers whose books I open again and again. It is the question poet Mary Oliver asks daily. ?What?s God doing now??

It?s discouraging to find Oliver?s work reprinted on Web sites featuring gauzy photos of waterfalls and meandering rivers. Still, I turn to Oliver because of the way she chronicles her house and her neighbors and what she can see and taste and smell just outside her door. She knows something women seem to learn more easily than men, knows the way one person is born with perfect pitch while another can?t get close to a note. She knows she is not the creator of worlds, but the disciple, and the lover, of the creation and its Creator. She writes in *The Leaf and the Cloud*:

> I am a woman sixty years old
> and of no special courage.
> Everyday -- a little conversation
> with God, or his envoy
> The tall pine, or the grass-swim-
> ming cricket.
> Everyday -- I study the differ-
> ence between water and
> stone.
> Everyday -- I stare at the world;
> I push the grass aside

And stare at the world.

I think that is what my life at home has taught me, and, thanks to Oliver, I have the words for it. My life has taught me to study the difference between water and stone.

I keep a copy of Oliver?s poem, ?Messenger,? taped to my computer. It is a hymn:

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the
hummingbird --
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there
the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the
speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat
torn?
Am I no longer young, and still
not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still
and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and
the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since
all ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a
mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give
shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the
sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over,
how it is
that we live forever.

If any writer bids us stand still and be astonished, it is Joan Didion. Never mind that it is less the astonishment of watching the ?sleepy dug-up clam? than the astonishment of watching a 20-car pileup. Indeed, if any fan posted a picture of a meandering river or a waterfall alongside Didion?s prose, readers would surely spy in the water the drifting corpses thrown from the falls.

Didion looks -- hard -- at the world and allows us to look with her. In her adamantine collection of essays, *The White Album*, Didion recalls an Easter Sunday when she made ?a large and elaborate lunch for a number of people, many of whom were still around on Monday.? She tells us her dinner prep consisted of ?taking a 25-mg. Compazine.? She doesn?t even say Compazine *tablet*, or tell her reader just what a Compazine is, or is not. This is daily life in which the pharmaceutical element is assumed.

Didion writes with the eye of the woman in Luke?s Gospel, who, having lost one of her 10 coins, lights a lamp and sweeps the house, ?searching carefully until she finds it.? Her eye for the domestic may be unsparing and unsettling, but it is always true. She sums up the ?60s, what she calls ?the mood of those years,? by taking us first, not to the headlines, but to a house.

> It will perhaps suggest the mood of those years if I tell you that during them I could not visit my mother-in-law without averting my eyes from a framed verse, a ?house blessing,? which hung in a hallway of her house in West Hartford, Conn.
>
> *God bless the corners of this*
> *house,*
> *And be the lintel blest ...*
> *And bless each door that opens*
> *wide, to stranger as to kin.*
>
> This verse had on me the effect of a physical chill, so insistently did it seem the kind of ?ironic? detail the reporters would seize upon, the morning after the bodies were found. In my neighborhood in California we did not bless the door that opened wide to stranger as to kin. Paul and Tommy Scott Ferguson were the strangers at Ramon Novarro?s door, up on Laurel canyon. Charles Manson was the stranger at Rosemary and Leno LaBianca?s door, over in Los Feliz. Daily life can be holy, but never sweet, sacred but never sentimental.

And then there are the slightly saccharine books that still satisfy, because they made a way for writers like Didion. My first memory of wanting to read a book so much that I resented mealtime and bedtimes and playtimes, anything that kept me from the story, dates from the winter of 1961. I was 9 the Christmas my mother gave me her set of four volumes by Louisa May Alcott: *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Eight Cousins* and *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. She had gotten the books from her own mother on Christmas in 1929. I began with Little Women, and wound up memorizing the entire chapter recounting Beth?s death.

How satisfying to lie on my bed, my head propped on a pillow, the tears flowing, while I read, ?As Beth had

hoped, the ?tide went out easily?; and in the dark hour before the dawn, on the bosom where she had drawn her first breath, she quietly drew her last, with no farewell, but one loving look, one loving sigh.?

I?m not sure how one sighs ?lovingly,? nor can I guess what cosmic disturbances cause a tide to go out uneasily, but I do know the debt I owe Alcott, whose books on my shelf still prompt a loving look their way. She made me a reader.

I read the Alcott collection countless times, and, at some point, I stopped wanting to be meek Beth or dutiful Meg or beautiful Amy and started wanting to be literary Jo. She begins by writing for papers like *The Weekly Volcano*, the sort of publication she describes as having ?a pleasing illustration composed of a lunatic, a corpse, a villain, and a viper.? Once she decides that she cannot keep churning out the trash, she takes a turn writing for children.

> The only person who offered enough to make it worth her while to try juvenile literature was a gentleman who felt it his mission to convert all the world to his particular belief. But as much as she liked to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all naughty boys as being eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school, nor all the good infants, who did go, as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life with psalms and sermons on their lisping tongues.

It is not until Jo puts aside contrivances of every sort -- from lunatics to lisping tongues -- and begins writing about daily life with her sisters, that she begins to find both satisfaction and success in her work.

> Jo never knew how it happened, but something got into that story that went straight to the hearts of those who read it; for, when her family had laughed and cried over it, her father sent it, much against her will, to one of the popular magazines, and, to her utter surprise, it was not only paid for, but others requested.

And that?s as good a description of the mystery of writing as any. I?m not sure how it happens, but something true gets a story and so, into us, the readers.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum, most recently coauthor with Jana Bennett of Free to Stay, Free to Leave: Fruits of the Spirit and Church Choice, is a regular contributor to Celebration and GIA Quarterly. Her work has appeared in Commonweal, First Things and Notre Dame Magazine.]

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