

LEARNING AND LIVING

Recently I went to see the movie, "The Odyssey". It fascinated me. Back in high school we read much of Homer's Odyssey in the original Greek and studied the grammar and vocabulary. I can still recite by heart the opening lines of the Odyssey in Greek. So I was prepared and psyched. Since seeing the movie I have read many reviews and criticisms. Not faithful to history say some. Not faithful to Homer say others. Too contemporary in meaning say a few. I have continued to read about it and I went back to see it a second time. I followed it much better this time and knew who was who. I have gone to Barnes and Nobles where they had a display table on the Odyssey with six different translations. I checked the translation of the first lines in each to see with what words they chose. All had a different translation to describe Odysseus whom I remember as being "resourceful". Other words such as "crafty" were all an interpretation.

I am happy to see such interest in a 3000 year old classic and hear people arguing what it means for us today. Children love stories and don't know whether they tell true facts or not. And many adults are the same. But others, especially in our scientific age, are taken UP with literal meanings of everything.

What I am getting at is my fond belief in picture, metaphor, poem, image, story to balance fact, prose, literalisms. Many people can't read the Bible without wanting to know what every word and scene means. They don't realize that literal meanings are not only the only way to comprehend reality. Jewish Rabbis have articulated a way to interpret parts of the Bible as stories through what they call Midrash. In the early church the Alexandrian School of writers preached metaphor and image in the Bible contrary to the Antiochene school which tried to adhere to a literal meaning. But do you think God really created the world in six days? Did the sun really stand still for Joshua? Did Jesus really preach hatred for one's parents and the need to cut off a hand or take out an eye if they are part of sinful acts? It wasn't until the nineteenth century when some fundamentals Christians preached that the words of the Bible were all literally true? Muslims believe that an angel dictated the Koran to Mohammed. But Christians believe the Word of God (just like Christ himself) is both human and divine. The lesson is that the whole Bible must be taken seriously but not literally.

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Our minds have to embrace both scientia and sapientia as Thomas Merton taught. Scientia, which means knowledge/science, is factual knowledge. It is important but not the only way humans know. Sapientia, which means wisdom, comes from other sources that we must learn. The experience of humanity with learning from feelings and trials of mistakes and life's adventures also teaches us. I think it is important to read fiction as well as science. I have just finished reading "Land" by Maggie O'Farrell who also wrote "Hamnet". The novel is full of Celtic learning. It is the story of a family of four children and how they grow. But the real protagonist is the land itself. We learn from experience, ours and others. As we grow older, we see the truth of some aspects of life that we previously ignored and did not find in our text books. Wisdom is a deeply human way to know life, ourselves, and the world. Poetry, likewise, is a way to find deeper meaning in life. I try to read a poem each day and usually recite it out loud to feel it as well as think it.

Music is a source of learning. It includes songs but also goes beyond words that touches and teaches our heart. The Art we find in museums teaches us how some humans saw and portrayed reality, and saw what we miss. Our body teaches us. Sweat and hard work tell us what life is about. Rituals express sensually what we cannot put into words. Silence teaches us as our body and spirit resonate with the entire cosmos, with all of humanity, with history, with the divine. We need to be still and cease the frenetic activity of body and mind to know what is within us.

Nature teaches us. We just have to behold a tree, a plant, an animal to learn about life and its mysteries. I have always loved walking in the outdoors. Birds sing, people laugh, the land is alive. How sad to see people busy on their phones as they walk in a park or other places where life is so abundant.

All of this is a both/and attitude to life, and not an either/or. Yes, we need science but we need wisdom. Yes, we need people and love and laughter, but we also need silence and solitude.

To return to "The Odyssey". I know some aspects of it could have been better or more developed. But it was a wonderful movie, a good story, interesting people and a good take on life's journey. It makes me want to go back to read The Odyssey again, in English and not in Greek! There is so much to learn. Reading is a

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great gift whereby we enter the lives and adventures of others. It is a break from life from one point of view, but also a taste of life (at least in good movies). I appreciate computers, i-pads, and other devices that give me much information but I want more life-giving reality from other sources as well. How about you?

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.