

Peter Hartwig

For the reader who is not familiar, I spent this summer co-teaching a class at the Albemarle Charlottesville Regional Jail titled "Spiritual Autobiography." I had taken the class as a dual enrollment student at UVA when I was in high school and after a few short conversations with the professor, Dr. Heather Warren, I got the idea to teach it in a prison setting. Nathan Walton, a doctoral candidate in the religious studies department, became my comrade in the year-long fight to get our curriculum accepted at an institution. We finally settled in at the ACRJ where we taught the class as part of the Summer Academy in the education program there. Here, I would like to offer three short and not entirely related reflections on my experience teaching the class.

I. The Lord Said to Peter a reflection on the beginning

I think I went into jail because God told me to.

The Hebrew Bible recounts the event of God's voice in the most definite terms, speaking about God's speaking as though it were the most concrete, audible, transcribable of all realities. To the Cosmos: *God said 'let there be light' and there was light.* (Gen 1.3) To Moses: *The Lord said 'when you go back to Egypt...'* (Ex 4.21) To Samuel: *The Lord came and stood, calling as the other times, 'Samuel, Samuel!'* (1 Sam 3.10) The Scriptures announce the divine voice direct, jussive if not imperative.

But I'm always worried by how quickly the story can lose God's arresting directness. As the narrative goes on, so often the word rots, warps, curves the original line between God, man and comprehension. What about the Word to Abraham, where God seems to have forgotten how the other son? *'He said, Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...'* Or the Word to Eve, that changes when she tries to remember? God commands mankind, *'but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'* (Gen 2.16) But she repeats it slightly off, *"You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it."* (Gen 3.3) Is *that* what hearing the voice of God is like? The Lord speaks but, trying to remember, in writing them down, we conjugate the words.

Don't you think we would be most serious about this, if anything? About God talking to us? How could we, why would we run the risk of falling into a place of uncertainty? This should be the easiest of all questions to answer: the serpent's question *Did God actually say* (Gen 3.1)? Apparently, that is not such an easy question to answer and, often, requires a story.

For the Project on Lived Theology's intern blog, I wrote a post called "Here's How We Got Started" that chronicled—in overly grandiose terms—the humble beginnings and turbulent formation of my summer internship. In the post I wrote,

"I've taught the class for a long time. Actually, taught it at a church first," Dr. Warren said, and then the fateful words: "But I've always wanted to teach it in a prison." I really cannot tell you why I was immediately so taken with the idea. I have never been involved with prison ministry and my only real interest in law enforcement is my own personal safety. But as soon as Dr. Warren made the suggestion "I've always wanted to teach it in a prison" I felt a switch flip. I want to do that.

That, by and large, has been my method for telling the story of our Starbucks-fueled project: Dr. Warren had an idea that excited me. But now that the money is spent and the final projects are graded, I'd like to make something more of the first moment, the beginning, *Bereshit*: I think God told me to go to jail.

I do not feel like I need to rewrite the account I offered before, the one quoted above. Whether God spoke or not does not really change the way I would retell the event: *I felt a switch flip. I want to do that.* The immediate decision, the singularity of focus, the absolute assurance that we would end up teaching in the jail—whether attributed to the divine voice or not, they all remain true to the story as best I can remember. There is nothing—no quality or causality or result—of the switching-on that can offer a scientific certainty here, (even the fact that our project worked out). It is, yes, entirely possible that I've simply accomplished the apotheosis of my own voice. Except that, when I read the Hebrew Bible and the commands of Christ in the New Testament I find an alternate telling of the story in "Here's How We Got Started."

Absent of the *Vox Dei* the story sounds like this. My professor had a wonderful idea, so wonderful, in fact, it opened up in me a passion that before had been unconscious, unseen and latent: teaching the incarcerated. It was all her idea really, but I found it fruitfully captivating. And, now that it's all said and done, credit should go where credit is due: to Dr. Warren, to Nathan Walton, to the Project on Lived Theology, and the Albemarle Charlottesville Regional Jail.

But there is another language, an older language, a scriptural voice that tells the story equally well: In the month of February, in the 2013th year of our Lord, Dr. Warren said to me, "oh that I would see my class taught in the prison." And the voice of the Lord spoke unto Peter, called Peter, and said, "Go. In the prison, visit me. Be strong and courageous." So Peter did.

Maybe one of these actually does tell the story better. Maybe one of them is truer to the mysterious depths of the human mind and the unsearchable machinations of God's world. I will not be the first to decide. Nor will I be the first to pick up an authority that is not given to me. Let me be biblically clear. I think I went into the jail because God told me to.

II. Failure to Participate

A reflection on the final assignment

They barely wrote a damn thing. When I took the class at UVA, we had to write a ton: weekly two page responses, a seven-page midterm and a twenty-page final. It was required. But at the end of summer academy, we could find barely more than five full pages in their journals marked *Written Assignments*.

As a student in Dr. Warren's American Religious Autobiography, I loved writing those papers—and not just because I was writing about myself. The weekly responses were my first attempt at ordering my life, farming a coherent chronology out of a field of memories. And, in all academic honesty, my final paper was little more than all those reflections put together into a longer narrative. But I had never been asked before to write autobiographically and I do not think I had never *thought* autobiographically either.

Thinking autobiographically may be a term that I just thought up. I'm not entirely sure what I mean by thinking autobiographically except for thinking in such a way that the fruits of thought culminate in an autobiography. It is a method of thinking determined by a task: to offer an account of one's life until this point. I've have begun to think that the criteria or features of autobiography—accuracy, coherency, honesty—grow out of the demands created by the form of storytelling less so than the high criterion of truth. We want our readers to be engaged, edified, and maybe enlightened. So we go about *telling a story*, it just happens to be about us—a story that we cut from the larger story of our life.

All autobiographies are incomplete. I know from sharing my testimony. For one reason or another you leave something out. You either forget your sins, or you remember them too well, and so when the microphone lands in your hands you edit them out. But testimony, by editing or adding, is about making a coherent story with a point out of true events. It's a way of telling the event-chain of life so that Christ is the final word. We order the retelling of our memories to direct attention, affection, and trust towards God. And we start, usually, in the beginning: *bereshit*.

That's where it all begins—in the beginning. It is the first word of the whole Bible. *Bereshit Bara Elohim*. In the beginning God created. Some people have translated *Bereshit* as 'in the eternal past.' Others, Bonhoeffer for instance, have emphasized the grandeur of the sense of cosmogony here: it is the point before which nothing. That is, usually, where autobiographies begin: the point before which there is nothing we can remember, which is usually the hardest point to remember. Our mind stretches back to that earliest memory, rewritten and reinterpreted so many times in our retelling, that we cannot be entirely certain how to true to the facts we can actually remain. However, we can be entirely certain of the meaning of that moment for us.

The word *Bara* in Hebrew classically translated 'to create' had, for the authors of the Hebrew Bible, a slightly nuanced meaning. For Greeks and Latins, the words for 'create' *epoiesan* and *creavit* mean 'to bring something into being.' Ex Nihilo, there was nothing and then there was something. But for the Hebrews *Bara* means something much closer to 'bring into order.' As John H. Walton has called it, a functional Ontology. He writes in his short commentary *The Lost World of Genesis One*, "people in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered universe.*" (pg.24)

So God, in the Hebrew Bible, does not create the world in nothing. He orders a world that is 'formless and void,' *tohu-vabohu* in Hebrew. The image we have is of the breath of God brooding over a chaotic cosmological cauldron. And from it, God begins to make something. He creates something. That something can be made at all from the swelling, ruleless waters of creation is itself a miracle. In writing, we do something very similar.

When we write our autobiographies, or, at least, when we think autobiographically we do not fabricate stories. We do not bring stories out of nothing. No. We know very well material afforded us: ourselves! We are both the beginning and end of our autobiographical reflection. When we turn our minds back into the eternal past, to the beginning which we did not give ourselves, to the point before which there is nothing to say of us—when we turn back there, we find our spirits hovering over a mess of fourteen, twenty, fifty years' memories. The task is to order them—chronologically and existentially. We must tell these memories in such a way that a coherent story is created, so that a coherent Self is created. How an autobiography is told changes the autobiographer.

It was not until I took Heather Warren's class that I thought of myself as particularly religious. It was not until I wrote a two-page paper in response to the question "What is your earliest religious memory" that I began to understand what it meant for me to grow up in a religious home. It was not until she asked me to write about "Religious place" that I began to understand my complicated relationship with the church. It was not until she

asked me to write about “Your biggest religious influence” that I realized caring and unwarranted mentors had been guiding me my whole life. I emerged from her seminar, as a junior in high school, with a totally new understanding of myself. I wanted to give that to the inmates, the opportunity to form a new version of themselves.

So we gave them the same assignments: weekly two page responses to prompts and a five-or-so page final autobiography. We wanted to assign them to the practice, the task of creating their story. After all, who could benefit more than the incarcerated from this discipline? They have plenty of time and, I was sure, plenty of the chaotic memory-mess that needed brooding-over.

Not a single one finished the five pages.

When we collected the journals we had given them, Nathan and I found some interesting material. Mr. Mars had written a number of poems to his lover along with several drawings which were actually really good. Mr. Tiresias had written a statement of faith instead of an autobiography, “I believe in God. My life come from God He is my Life. God is Life.” Mr. Sophocles had actually written a few of the weekly responses. But no one actually wrote the final assignment.

This is an uncomfortable fact to share. Sometimes I hear myself passing it off, “They’re in JAIL for Godsake! What else were they doing?! Writing a history of the English speaking peoples?!” But, here, I would like to own up to the fact that, in the final assessment, my vision of the class has been fundamentally challenged, though I am not entirely sure how.

Something about the fact that the students wrote almost nothing makes me aware that I had miscalculated what was going on here. The fact that from the entire summer, we gleaned about ten pages of handwritten material puts a rock in my stomach. It’s not just the fact that I now wonder whether anything was accomplished, whether any of them are now able to tell the story of a different self. It’s that I miscalculated *them*. I thought they would write more. Even hearing their stories in class, did I fail to see them all summer long?

Get Out of My House

A reflection after the fact

Around town, it is hard to recognize the students from the jail. We had been warned, during training, that the jail’s short-term nature lends itself to unforeseen and unarranged interactions with inmates who had finished their term. But that is no real preparation for the moment when a face, phantom-familiar disrupts the spaces from which it was once securely apart.

It was not more than two weeks after summer academy ended that I saw him outside of ACRJ. College campuses have a magical sort of pregnancy, the ability to suddenly spring people into your path, almost out of nowhere. People you have not seen in forever. They walk out of a library, or step from behind a building, or stand suddenly motionless in the middle of the to-from-class hurry—your high school math teacher or your ex-girlfriend or an inmate.

I left my air-conditioned breakfast in Newcomb hall and walked into the humid August morning. Standing between Monroe and Newcomb, a pair of spectacles glanced up from under a UVA cap, about forty feet ahead in my path. He looked wildly familiar, this guy with the glasses and the scruff and the flaming orange cap. He stuffed one thumb under the shoulder strap of his backpack and gestured to me clearly, now about fifteen feet away, with a cigarette in the crevasse of his index and middle fingers. “I recognize you.” His voice was so familiar—a soft, gravely southern twang. It was a voice for factual statements: “I recognize you.”

“I recognize you too.” I said and arced my eyebrows along the tortoise shell bar of my sunglasses. “From where?”

“The jail.”

For a moment there, I felt like my summer had been meaningless. How could I not remember him?

He had sat. every week, two or three seats to my left on the long end of the folding plastic table. He was our house cynic, never trusting the motives of any of the autobiographers. His opinion on Chuck Colson, author of *Born Again*: “I think he’s a celebrity. You know, the whole Nixon government got cracked.” He was one of two students who had lived through the Nixon administration. “And Colson thinks he’s got to become all pious and good. So people see it. He’s...what’s it? That Chinese saying? Save face! He’s saving face! You know, like keeping up a good look. The Chinese say it.” I think he also once offered an etymologically questionable account of the word *spiel*. Either way, he pontificated nearly weekly about arrogance and etymology, with his chair leaned back against the wall and his right knuckles rubbing the Christmas white scruff he kept on his chin.

Around grounds though he looked...profoundly un-jail-like: clean-shaven with a baseball cap and a cigarette and an orange Gatorade. He was actually outside of the jail. I had never really considered this. At the very least, I had spent so much time trying to learn the histories of the students—life before and during jail—that I had not really considered their future beyond the gates. But the realization that he was out came as a start from which I attempted to gracefully recover.

“Oh my god, you were in the class. Hi...”

His name. I could not remember his name. It wasn't there. I had his face, his seat in the class, but I could only see a blank nametag.

“What was your name?” I figured I should just take the plunge. I am not entirely certain though why I used the past tense. *Was your name* as though he had been dead to me.

“Persephone.”

“Right, right.”

“So you were from here?” Meaning UVA.

“Yeh.” I chuckled.

“Why didn't that come out in the class?”

“That we went to UVA?”

“Yeh.”

“When you're oriented,” I've blamed a lot on my orientation, “they advise you not to share personal information. Where you go to school, your relatives, your hometown. That sort of thing.”

“That was always weird to me, though, that that never came out.” The way he said it saddened me, as though beneath the question was another. *Why wouldn't you tell us who you were? Why wouldn't they let you tell us? Who are we that we can't know you?* I wished then that we—both the inmates and I—had been in such a position that sharing my life bore a different kind of risk.

I recovered a moment of silent walking “so, where are you staying?”

“The salvation army has a situation where they put of ex-cons. I've been there for a while. Since I got out.” As he said it, we reached the cross walk over McCormick road between Brown College and Clark library. Two hundred yards up from that crosswalk, my colleagues and residents in Roussler residential dorm, where I am an RA, were beginning their mornings, as well. *I can't lead him there, I thought. I don't want him to know where I live. I don't want to put my residents in a situation.*

“Well, I'm headed this way,” I said it without asking where he was going. “I've got to head to class.” Not true. “It's good to see you though Persephone.”

“Yeh, yeh, you too.”

He crossed the street toward Clark and disappeared from my periphery. I walked briskly down McCormick as though I knew he was not headed the same way. But when I glanced over my shoulder, coolly and in no specific direction, I saw him walking right in step on the other side of the street. So I took the long way home. I dodged off behind the leadership school, through the Batten courtyard, and popped out onto my street from

behind the Chem building. For those who do not know UVA geography, that means I walked entirely parallel to McCormick Road without ever actually walking on McCormick Road.

So when my winding path spit me back out onto the main drag, by the Housing and Residence Life office, I saw that he had not veered from his direct path. I did not want him to see me go home. So I ducked into the HRL office and spoke with my supervisor there.

“Remember the whole jail thing this summer? I taught in a jail.”

“Ya.” I am not sure if she was lying.

“One of the students from the jail is here.”

“Like, in the office?”

“No, just on grounds. I ran into him outside of Newcomb and then he followed me...or, we just kind of walked the same way. So I didn’t go to Roussler because I didn’t want him to see where I live you know? But we walked the same way and he’s standing right across McCormick.”

“Are you like worried? Do you want me to do anything?”

“No, no, no. I just don’t want him to know where I live. Or to put my residents in a weird spot so I just thought I’d let you know in case something happened. Cause I literally just saw him.”

“What does he look like?”

That time I did remember.