

Accidental Evangelist: Book Tour Blues

"You don't believe that!?" the media coach said, hovering between incredulity and denial in the classic manner of New Yorkers. I blinked and sat back; along the wall to my left, four images of me on television monitors sat back too, looking bewildered and weary.

What had I said to set her off? She had proposed one more rehearsal of the interview on which she had been drilling me for two days straight. I had replied, "Okay, one more time. But it's a good thing life is eternal. I expect to spend the first half of heaven recovering from all this book-promotion stuff." I had not meant to offend her.

She came around the enormous camera to confront me squarely, hands on her hips.

"You don't believe that," she repeated, more firmly this time. "You are too smart to believe stuff like that. A Ph.D.! You can't believe that, that 'eternal life' stuff." She threw questions at me like baseballs, fast and up the middle.

No, I didn't mean reputation. Not living in the memory of those who knew us. Not offspring nor accomplishments. Eternal life. Yes, eternal life. Death is a doorway, not a conclusion. Yes I do believe. Literally.

I wish I could claim that I met her amazement with some articulate, persuasive statement of faith. But I didn't. I was too tired to care if she thought I was a pious dimwit. When her barrage of questions ended, I just sat there, weary and unembarrassed, looking her in the eye and waiting for her to sit down and pretend one more time to interview me about my new book.

Then suddenly I caught a fleeting glimpse of something else in her eyes. She is an old woman, I realized, fiery and sharp but obviously frail. For decades she has coached media stars and even a U.S. President: dozens of pictures lined a hallway floor to ceiling, one familiar face after another. Her contract with my publisher was small potatoes in comparison to that. This lovely, gracious lady would never have been put off by my smiling complaint that she demands a lot of those she coaches.

Perhaps--perhaps--I was not in her eyes a fool but rather the bearer of unbearable good tidings. There were tears in her eyes, I realized. Tears. God save me, I thought, what am I doing in the middle of all this? I leaned back into a warm, glowing silence that reached out to steady me.

"You do believe it," she said at last, quietly, evenly.

"*We believe it*," I corrected her. "Christians believe this. And yes, I do believe it." I looked at her squarely, as if I were saying nothing more profound than *the door is unlocked*. She blinked a couple of times, shook her head just slightly, reached for a tissue, and returned to her side of the camera--once again the tough professional.

"One more time," she said firmly, flipping some switch. "With us today is Catherine Wallace, author of a new book . . ."

I ignored the camera just for a moment, offering to take her to dinner that evening. She accepted my invitation.

And for the first time I understood why we call it "the good news."

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In two years of book-promotions touring since then, I have repeatedly found myself the bewildered bearer of glad tiding into all sorts of strange places. It didn't help, of course, that the Lewinsky scandal first broke just days before the release of my book *For Fidelity*, which advocated and explicated marital fidelity. My first tour, in February and March of 1998, swept me off into the middle of all that. I came home feeling scorched and haunted, feeling accused somehow by the hunger and the grief I had encountered. It was as if I had spent my life hoarding or hiding what decent and mature people were starving to hear: we are indeed capable of kindness, integrity, and commitment. Here too is good news for which many people yearn.

I have begun to suspect that the Roman Catholicism of my upbringing has proved central to the kind of responses my work has elicited. This has been a stunning recognition, because I left the church thirty years ago. Although I have spent the last ten years quietly meandering from one Protestant congregation to another, I have never established a clear denominational identity. Nonetheless, it seems inescapably true to me now that Catholic intellectual tradition funds the ability to name and to elicit the God-shaped hole in ordinary human experience: "high" sacramental theology and liturgy powerfully support the poetic capacity to recognize the real presences of God within ordinary daily life.

These resources of the Catholic tradition come into play in my book--I suspect--because I tell so many stories. Whenever the basic logical structure of my argument might have demanded that I tangle with complicated philosophic problems of the relationship between mind and body, I told a story instead. A funny story, if I had one. (We Irish are known for such strategies.) I was fully aware of the complexities I was avoiding, and so I made sure my stories were both precise and evocative enough to elicit the reader's assent to my major claims.

I evoked a lot more than I bargained for: I found myself staring into the God-shaped hole in others' lives. And I discovered that this hole is always ringed with fire. So I'd like to tell a few of my book tour tales to illustrate the simple things that any of us might do to share the good news.

1. **Encourage hope.** I started to take a wrong turn in the maze of office hallways, so the interviewer grabbed my shoulder. Then she put her arm through mine and pulled me close, grasping my forearm with an athletic grip.

"I can't let you go," she said suddenly, speaking hardly above a whisper. "He and I, we've been together for ten years now, which is longer than anybody I know--but y'know these things never last. It seems okay, we seem okay, but I've never known a relationship to last. But you know

something I don't. What is it that you know? How is it possible?" She stopped. She turned to face me, our faces close in the crowded hall. "You have something," she continued. "I don't even know what it is. How can I let you go?" She still had her arm around on the inside of mine, with that grip of my forearm. At the end of the hall, out beyond the security guards, my escort had spotted us. He was waving, pointing at his watch.

Behind her question "dare I trust?" lurk two very dangerous corollaries: am I capable of trust? and Am I worthy of trust? Behind the narcissism of our day, behind the expressive individualism and the consumerist self-absorption, there can be found a terrible despair about the nature of the human and a profound sense of isolation from one another. Simple-minded optimism is easily deconstructed by the cynical, the wounded, and the wise--but hope is made of stronger stuff. Hope holds on in the face of pain and fear. Hope knows that life arises unexpectedly where we thought nothing would ever grow again. It is tempting to echo the cheap cynicism that masquerades as sophistication, when what the starving need from us is the courage to hope. When I argued--as I do at length in *For Fidelity*--that we have an absolute sexual and psychological need for commitment, what I stumbled across unawares is how desperate people are for a word of hope.

Another interview raised the issue again. As tapes rewind, as a multitude of settings were reset, he told me that he was divorced and she was divorced and both of them had teenagers. He was afraid their relationship was setting a very bad example; he was even more afraid of failing again. He thought he understood the mistakes of his first marriage. But how could he be sure? Would they--could they?--succeed in blending such an array of adolescents into a single new family? I had no answers, nor was he expecting answers of me. Hope has no answers, no explanations, no proofs. Hope is not knowledge but resolve to act as if hope has solid foundation in some ultimate albeit elusive truth.

His story ended, his tape rewind, he sat on his high-backed stool and I on mine, eyes meeting, knees almost touching. The cramped studio felt like some cross between an airplane cockpit and a confessional with good lighting. But I am neither a priest nor a pilot: as I had with the prior interview, I felt that I just didn't have whatever he was looking for.

That's it, I realized. That's it. He was looking in my eyes for some glint of cynicism, I realized, some shadow that hinted *this guy is a fool*. So I took a steady breath and let him keep looking.

"Blessings on you both," I said, without looking away.

"Yup," he replied. "Thanks. We need it." But it was another four or five seconds before he turned to open the studio door behind him.

2. Acknowledge suffering. Some radio hosts--not many--have technicians to manage all the machinery. Elsewhere in this same day an interviewer waited until the technician finished up and departed, leaving us alone in the studio. She watched the door close, turned back to me for just an instant, and buried her face her hands, her breathing ragged. I stopped breathing altogether.

"If only we could tell them," she said after a minute. "If only we could tell them how used we felt, how terrible the pain, how nothing is worth that kind of pain. I would do anything to spare them that, anything."

We had spent almost the whole hour talking about my arguments about why casual sex is both self-destructive and exploitative, and about how we can explain and defend such ideas to our teenage children. She had skillfully probed my arguments about competing Western ideals of sexual morality. We had talked about theories of embodiment, and we had talked about theories of moral development in children. We had talked about Freud and Augustine. We had talked about anything but the painful real experiences that sometimes haunt parents trying to talk to their kids about sex.

But now that the reels were stopped, now that the microphones were off, she set aside her intellectual poise to agree with my stand on an issue that we had never discussed: sometimes what's morally wrong can also be devastatingly painful, even many years later. If only the interview had begun there! But the individualist pretensions of self-sufficiency and self-reliance generate something like shame around our experience of how badly we can be hurt or how vulnerable we are to one another both sexually and in other ways. She was only the most passionate of many who understood my vision of moral norms as a gentle and compassionate regard for their own suffering.

My media escort was waiting impatiently right outside the studio door. And now there was no time for lunch.

"Did you bring granola bars?" he asked me as we hurried out to the car. "New York told you to carry food, didn't they?"

Our next stop was a television interview, interrupted repeatedly by commercials, that focused primarily upon how I could account for Clinton's popularity in the polls, and how I would respond to the commentators who insisted that no one takes marriage vows seriously these days. Staying focused during commercial breaks is, of course, no small challenge for neophytes who--unlike the TV host--have no teleprompter. We have to ad-lib.

This interviewer made things worse by spending every commercial break grieving terribly, grieving repeatedly, that anyone could dare to dismiss infidelity as insignificant. Then at some signal from someone, his face would snap back into the bland plastic polish of television faces. Instantly he was distant, cool, skeptical, "objective." We would resume the talking-heads routine, two voices among thousands chattering about Clinton in those months. It was the intellectual equivalent of whiplash.

When our segment finally ended, he thanked me passionately for speaking out, for being a voice desperately needed--although it seemed to me I had not said very much, at least not on the air. I was far too confused at that point to be certain about what exactly I *had* said. A fellow emerged from behind the lights and the cameras to escort me safely over the tangle of cables. Around the edge of the set, out of sight of everyone else, he folded me into an unexpected embrace. Eye to eye with the flapped pocket of his flannel shirt, I felt him rest his chin on the top of my head and

murmur "thank you, thank you, thank you, you're wonderful, thank you" into my hair. We stood there briefly, his breath warm on my scalp. Then he let go of me and turned away so abruptly I never saw his face.

As I watched him return to the set, I was stunned all over again by how deeply grateful and reassured people felt that I was willing plainly and directly to articulate our ordinary human vulnerability to one another. I never said "look here, we are all living members of the Mystical Body of the risen Christ!!" Very few people can de-code statements like that. But I was overwhelmed to see what a liberating, humanizing truth we have in that doctrine: we are spectacularly, profoundly interconnected. Radical individualism is a shabby, lonely, inhumane pretense. All things considered, it is not difficult to find the commonplace, secular, everyday language in which to say we do indeed matter to one another--especially if you keep in mind (and in heart) that our significance to one another arises from our significance to God.

3. **Admire courage.** "Yeah, I'm faithful," the journalist mused. We were sitting in a bookstore cafe. "But who has time for an affair? Three kids, a house in the suburbs, this job, a long commute: I'm supposed to have energy for a lover too?" Was she merely a "chump," she wondered? Was everyone else leading more gloriously free and sensual lives than she was? Was she truly faithful or merely middle-aged? She looked at me as if I were supposed to say something. But I had been carted from one interview to another for twelve hours straight, without a break, and I had nothing left in me to say. I stared instead at the dinner I was far too tired to eat.

"Do you think you're a chump?" I asked her, looking up. It was the wrong question, or maybe the right question: she launched herself into a tirade about what she called "the everyday heroic." She had always suspected she was a fool, she admitted, but my book made her feel like a hero just for trying every single damn day to be reliable and mature and kind. What if we stopped feeling oppressed and victimized and exploited, she proposed, and we admitted that compassion is heroic? What if we let our kids see that we believe honesty is heroic? I had never heard anyone define faith as plain raw courage quite so straightforwardly as this journalist did. Faith--in God, in one another--demands a raw courage so profound that we rightly call it "heroic."

Nonetheless she needed me to agree that she was a hero not a chump. We need one another. People are starving for faith in themselves and in one another, faith that we are not innately depraved, that we are not inevitably sleazy self-seeking egotists. I heard about her first marriage, her second marriage, and the complexity of living with his kids, her kids, and their kids. She knew what it takes to be happy, to be grounded and satisfied and proud of ourselves, and to raise children who know who they are. But she was morally lonely. She felt morally besieged by the culture around her. My heart was breaking, and I felt I had so little to offer.

"You are not a chump," I said, "and neither am I. This is what life is about." The media escort interrupted me at that point, saying that people were waiting in the back of the store, where I was supposed to lecture. I stood up to shake hands, but she pulled me into a hug.

"Bless you, bless you" she said. I traipsed obediently after my handler.

4. **Tell the truth.** Last week I was lecturing on *For Fidelity* at a university in Florida. The head librarian asked me to describe my new book, [*Dance Lessons: Moving to the Rhythm of a Crazy God*](#).^{*} It tells the story of how my struggles with career--family conflicts gradually unraveled my intellectual agnosticism, returning me to faith even if not to church membership. The librarian asked what had convinced me to believe in God.

I didn't like his tone. I replied evenly--almost flippantly--that I'm quite adept at deconstructing ideas and concepts, but no amount of postmodernism can make a person disappear. His jaw dropped, and the students tensed attentively, hunching their shoulders just slightly. I was glad--and not for the first time--to be Jesuit educated.

"Do you mean to say," he said, "that you were persuaded by the immediate presence of God?" His incredulity was palpable, his question poised sarcastically at the very edge of rudeness. I surveyed the faces in a room grown suddenly very silent. I would not have phrased it quite like that, but . . .

"Yep," I said. "Other questions?" There were none.

In the hall outside the lecture room, the librarian shook my right hand and clapped me on the shoulder with his left, beaming with impish delight.

"Good job!" he exclaimed. "Good job!"

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The good news. We call it "the good news." Two years ago I had no idea how painful it can be to meet the hungry, to listen to the afflicted, to encounter the downhearted, and in general to bear good tidings into broadcast studios and bookstores. But we are never alone. God is with us--Emmanuel--and once in a while we come across one another.

For Fidelity came out in paperback in February of 1999, just as *Dance Lessons* was released hardbound. At that point, I started going to daily Mass. It has been wonderful. It hardly seems possible for me to imagine myself a Roman Catholic at this point. So many painful issues remain: contraception, for instance, or the status of women. The silencing of scholars.

But grace is peculiar stuff, and the Spirit has a wicked sense of humor. Above all I have found it great solace to pray among those who are convinced that God is among us still, intimate, immediate, and meddling in our lives.

^{*}Re-issued in 2000 as [*Motherhood in the Balance: Children, Career, Me, and God*](#).

