LITERATURE, IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND NARRATIVE EXPERIENCES

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AS A TEACHER OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, I am always looking for help in coming up with contemplative, thoughtful and interactive lesson plans for my students. When I found the poem entitled 'Lesson Plan' in Billy Collins's latest collection of poetry, *Water, Water*, I read it, eager to find images and language that could help me introduce a topic in spirituality. In the poem, the narrator speaks of what can only be called the most remote preparation for how he will discuss a poem he wrote 'over 30 years ago'. That preparation involved watching a cat drinking from a swimming pool and snipping off 'a few dead twigs / from a miniature orange tree'.[1] This was not exactly the help I was looking for. But for the narrator, it was; in watching a cat and tending his garden, he found his lesson plan.

We know the feeling hinted at in the beginning of Collins's poem: we too, like the narrator, search for language and images to talk about our experiences and our inner lives. In the context of spirituality, this search for the word returns us to the origins of Christianity. We can think of the disciples asking Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples' (Luke 11:1); Jesus offered them the simple, direct and concrete prayer to the Father. Similarly, we can think of the desert mothers and fathers, women and men who were sought out for a word that could help seekers find their way.

We can also consider Joseph Veale, an Irish Jesuit and one of the great interpreters of the Ignatian charism in the twentieth century; he too was a man caught up in the search for a new word about spirituality. In one of his finest essays, 'Manifold Gifts', Veale referred to a commonplace in spirituality: the inadequacy of language to talk about God, God's nearness and our hunger for God. 'Our terminology is strange', he said,

[1] Billy Collins, 'Lesson Plan', in *Water, Water* (New York: Random House, 2024), 36.

and 'our language clumsy'.[2] He was right then and he is right now: to talk about consolation, devotion and discernment of spirits—topics that I like to explore with my students—can often feel strange and esoteric.

Veale continued this line of thought in his essay and concluded:

> We need a new word, one we have not yet discovered. It would encompass not only the prayer that opens the spirit to God and leads towards union with Him but, besides, all those other things which open the spirit to the action of God.[3]

For, as clear as he is about finding that new word, he never sketched out what that word or language might consist of; but he did give us a way forward. In the same essay, he offered:

> There are more languages than one, more images than those of one school of thinking, that can be used to attempt to describe the incomprehensible mystery of God's way of giving himself to this person or to that.[4]

I would like to offer you here more languages than one, more images than those offered by the Ignatian school of thinking about spirituality: I want to share narrative experiences with you. In my estimation, the turn to poetry and narrative is one of the ways that Pope Francis has invited us to respond to our times. Speaking to poets, artists and film-makers, he declared: 'we need the genius of new language, powerful stories and images'. Epochal change calls us, in Francis's words, 'to save our imagination from everything that domesticates it'.[5] In short, I aim to move you as I have been moved, so that you can, like Collins at the end of his poem, 'go from there'.

Pondering and Discerning Everything

In his search for a word with which to begin his class on poetry, the narrator of 'Lesson Plan' implicitly reminds us that teaching itself is a creative act. A lesson plan is like a poem: it needs time to emerge. It depends upon study, conversation with colleagues, planning—hours of hidden labour. Sometimes, too, all that silent work does not yield any

[2] Joseph Veale, 'Manifold Gifts', in *Manifold Gifts* (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 21–32, at 24.
[3] Veale, 'Manifold Gifts', 30.
[4] Veale, 'Manifold Gifts', 31.
[5] Pope Francis, audience with participants in the conference organized by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 27 May 2023.

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ideas that are usable. What often seems so promising sometimes does not make it on to a page or into a classroom discussion.

These hidden hours that go into teaching, or any creative process, are a part of Collins's poem. I believe that hidden hours—or years—constitute the foundation from which Joe Veale did such fascinating work in spirituality. Unlike me and many others of my generation in the Society of Jesus, he did not get a degree from a university in Spain that specialises in the area of Ignatian spirituality. Rather, he entered the field after having been a teacher of English and religion for approximately twenty years.

I do not know for certain the materials that he taught, but certainly it was literature, stories and the Gospels. He may not have been catechizing in his class, but it is likely that the rigour with which he instructed his students gave ample testimony to the Ignatian *magis* that motivated him. But a lot of teaching is much less glamorous than the occasional riveting conversation about a novel or a poem. Grading papers, planning lessons and working with difficult students formed the early history from which he creatively interpreted the Ignatian charism. All of this makes me wonder: what did he learn in those years of teaching that made him such an astute reader of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*? And who were the students who helped him realise that God speaks to each of us in a personal way?

I ask these questions because I too was a high-school teacher, and though I taught in inner-city Chicago, for less time than Joe Veale did in Dublin, I know what teaching is like. It means grading hundreds of essays, disciplining students, adapting lessons to a range of learning abilities—and celebrating students' successes. When I look back at that

time, some memories immediately come to me: Cristina González giving me a hug before class and then stepping back and saying: *Eww, Mr Staab, you're all bones*. I recall too Gracie Pérez who, upon sitting next to the most rambunctious boy in the class, said to me: *Don't worry Mr Staab, I will help you control Juan*. I will also never forget Kevin Maldonado, who upon hearing me reinforce the importance of doing his homework, would say to me: *I got you Mr Staab, don't worry*. To which I would respond: *I do not care if you got me, I just want you to do your homework*. Response: *I got you Mr Staab*.

For those of us who have been teachers, these are the kinds of moments that we carry with us. These students—spontaneous, surprising and maddening—shape our hearts and minds. I mention my stories as a way to consider imaginatively those that shaped Joe Veale's heart and mind. Somehow his stories allowed him to understand Ignatius of Loyola's encounter with God in a new way. Narrative does this: it opens us to the future. It opens us to something new and hopeful, and to that in which the past echoes in the present.[6]

I also imaginatively recreate this part of his life because the spirituality that he studied so well included a spiritual exercise of this kind. In Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, one of the more fascinating exercises is that of contemplating the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth. Jesus, the man who advanced in wisdom and age before and with other women and men, becomes real for the retreatant. Jesus too was a child, an adolescent, learning to walk with humility, attention and love on the streets of Nazareth as he would those elsewhere in Galilee. The hidden life of Jesus is never hidden. It is a part of the story. Similarly, the hidden life of Joe Veale—the essays he graded, the students who frustrated, amazed and loved him—is not hidden but silently present in all of his writing and work in spirituality.

There is a Nazareth-like quality to the poetry of Billy Collins, and that simplicity and accessibility is on full display in 'Lesson Plan'. So how did the narrator come up with his plan for teaching his old poem? He was quiet, he listened and, perhaps most importantly, he paid attention to what he was doing. He watched a cat drink from a pool; he plucked off the dead growth of a miniature tree so that miniature oranges could grow. In his search for his lesson plan, he discovered that

[6] Following Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration*, translated by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), 15.

what he was doing revealed what he needed to know to talk about poetry. When he says at the end that he will start off describing these things and 'go from there', he seems to suggest that he will tell the story of life unfolding around him and let that life take him to wherever it will.

By calling his collection *Water, Water*, a clear reference to Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Collins tips his hand and reveals that he will be writing about poetry and the poetry-writing process. 'Lesson Plan', like many poems in this collection, draws our attention to poetry itself and to Collins's view that the small, quotidian and insignificant occurrences of life around us are what comprise it. For example, in his poem 'BC/AD', the narrator recounts a humorous class discussion about 'the two realms of Christian time', before Christ and the year of our Lord. Considering the first, students chuckle at the fact that historical figures were going backwards in time. Though the narrator tries to reason with his students, they are clearly having fun imagining men and women going backwards and then starting to go forwards at Christmas. Bemused, the narrator looks out the window and spots 'orange and yellow trees … a few ordinary birds'. And he concludes: 'this was, after all, an introduction to poetry'.[7] Similarly, there is a poem entitled 'Emily Dickinson in Space', in which an astronaut in a space station recites one of Emily Dickinson's poems. And the narrator marvels at, 'her little poem still circling the globe / at seventeen thousand miles an hour, / hands down the fastest poem in history'.[8]

Watching a cat drink from a pool, contemplating a few ordinary birds outside a classroom window and looking up to imagine a poem racing around the earth—these are not especially profound images that take us to some deep existential terrain. For some they may not appear to be the most felicitous images for poetry. Nor are they images that can be turned into pronouncements for a talk about spirituality in a time of epochal change. And that is exactly their appeal.

These are images that turn us *outward* to see the life that is all around us. Using Joe Veale's words that I quoted earlier, these images constitute 'all those other things which open the spirit to the action of God'. The grammar of a new language in spirituality at a time of epochal change might be taking shape in the life that we are actually living. Collins's collection points in simple and playful ways to a language of

[7] Billy Collins, 'BC/AD', in *Water, Water*, 24–26.
[8] Collins, *Water, Water,* 39–41.

depth, wonder and surprise that appears everywhere and in everything.[9] What you see, what you notice, what happens in front of you, might be a language for you, and you can go from there.[10]

The way for you and I to come up with a spirituality that is truly in the Spirit—I mean a spirituality of love, a love that, following St Paul, is not rude, does not seek its own interests, but 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'—is to give importance to who we are and what we do.[11] True to his Ignatian roots, Veale believed in 'an enlivening practice of the examination of consciousness' as a way to renew our lives by seeing and noticing what we are living.[12] The point of the Ignatian Examen is to notice the images and language that come to us from the world around us, and to go from there. Where else could we go from?

We could go from many other places, and one of those is our interiority, cut off from the lives that we live, 'bleared, smeared with toil' as they are.[13] Distrustful of institutions, even ecclesial institutions and organizations, we turn to our interior, to what we feel, and we seek to get to a steady, stable inner place. Yet, the way we turn to our interior is worth discerning. In his astute reading of Ignatius' spiritual vision, Joe Veale caught his awareness of deception in the spiritual life. As a close reader of Ignatius, Veale knew that spiritual images and languages can deceive. Put more colloquially, there can be a lot of fake news in our interior lives, and we would never notice it.

The way we turn to our interior is worth discerning

We can think we are growing, deepening, finding our way, only to discover that we were led by another spirit, one not associated with Jesus of Nazareth. Probably familiar with his own self-deception, Veale pointed out the central place of the meditation on the Two Standards in the *Spiritual Exercises*. In that meditation, one considers the standard of Christ and the standard of the evil one. As Veale rightly points out,

[9] On this point compare Saint Teresa of Ávila: 'I believe that in each little thing created by God there is more than what is understood, even if it is a little ant' (*The Interior Castle*, 4.2.2, in *St Teresa of Ávila: The Complete Works*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. edn [Washington, DC: ICS, 1987]).

[10] See also Patrick Goujon: 'The things that happen to me, if only I can pay them attention, have much to teach me' ('The Spiritual Exercises and Conversion', *The Way*, 61/3 [July 2022], 71–79, here 73).

[11] 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7.

[12] Veale, 'Renewing Jesuit Life in the Spirit', in *Manifold Gifts*, 190–199, here 194.

[13] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 139.

'there is no question here, of course, of choosing between them'.[14] The question runs deeper: the retreatant is asked to consider who Jesus is and, fundamentally, *how* he goes about his mission. The fruit of that meditation often consists in a retreatant's clarity about deception in his or her spiritual life. Also, this meditation reconnects the retreatant with what he or she saw in the meditation on Jesus' hidden life in Nazareth. He is the one that goes about his life in humility, openness and love. He makes a pretentious claim to be the Son of God, but he does so unpretentiously. The meditation on the Two Standards unmasks illusions, deceptions and the fantasies that our ego expertly nurtures.

I mention this meditation because it alerts us to the fact that not every language, from inside or outside, is helpful to us. Languages and images have to be discerned, pondered and considered over time. Yet a reliable indicator of good images and language is that they turn us out into the world and move us towards others. Such a move towards others is never easy, and here the narrative project—if it could be called that—of the Korean writer Han Kang offers us provocative images and languages about our relationship to others, to others near and far.

Something Breaks So That Something New Can Emerge

For Han Kang, a female writer from the global south who was, at the age of 53, one of the youngest recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature, to 'go from there' is a fraught, terrible, and beautiful venture. Stated in biblical terms: if in the book of Deuteronomy God calls his beloved people to choose between two paths, one that is life and one that is death, Han Kang's fiction makes us painfully, but poignantly, aware that we choose both. The possibilities for life and for death are always in front of us, and for her it is naïve to think that we only traverse one of them.

Yet, the remarkable aspect of her fiction is that she draws us close to both life and death, compassion and violence, and does so with empathy and feeling. In her own words, her fiction presents us with situations in which we face the 'question about human violence and the possibility or impossibility of refusing it'.[15] This is a remarkable achievement, and I believe it opens for us the possibility of a new language and new

[14] Veale, 'Manifold Gifts', 28.

[15] Han Kang, interviewed by Linda Wertheimer, 'Don't Be Fooled, "The Vegetarian" Serves Up Appetites for Fright', *NPR* (13 February 2016) at https://www.npr.org/2016/02/13/466648890/dont-be-fooled-the-vegetarian-serves-up-appetites-for-fright, accessed 18 November 2025.

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Han Kang

images in which to consider a spirituality comprising compassion and human fragility as well as the polarities and contradictions of our own lives.

The themes of violence and love, cruelty and compassion are exemplified in what may be her most important work to date, *Human Acts*, a fictional retelling of the 1980 Gwangju student uprising, when the military opened fire on student protesters and young children in the South Korean city of Gwangju. Through various narrative voices, finally using her own in an epilogue, Han Kang takes on a topic that was taboo in Korean society, and she does so with tenderness and honesty, describing the violence that was carried out and the ripples of suffering that expanded in its wake. From an Ignatian perspective, this book feels like the best kind of contemplation: all of our senses and our heart are engaged as we are placed in various periods of time with diverse characters who have been morally, spiritually and emotionally ruined by the violence.

In the epilogue, titled 'The Writer, 2013', Han Kang tells us that she was born in 1970 in Gwangju and, at the age of three, moved with her family to Seoul. When she was ten, she noticed that her father, returning from a trip to Gwangju, had brought with him a 'photo chapbook', a book that was 'printed in secret and sold unofficially' because it documented with graphic photographs the violence the military had carried out against civilians. As a young child, she sensed the secrecy and taboo around the book. She noticed that it was a book her father shelved by hiding the spine from view. When 'the grown-ups were all sitting in the kitchen' she climbed the bookcase to find it, and in seeing the photographs, she tells us: 'some tender thing deep inside me broke. Something that, until then I hadn't even realized was there.'[16]

[16] Han Kang, *Human Acts*, translated by Deborah Smith (New York: Hogarth, 2016), 201–202.

This too is what happens to us as we read *Human Acts*: something inside us breaks. That something—our heart, our faith in the innate goodness of humanity, or our naïveté that we are somehow not affected by the suffering of others—is ruptured, chapter after chapter. And maybe that is the point: for a new language to emerge, perhaps a former one has to break. At one point we accompany a young woman who was brutalised by the military. Many years after the violence, the woman wrestles with the request to share her experience of imprisonment with a PhD student who is gathering research on the events in Gwangju. She finally decides that she 'will not bear witness' to the violence she experienced; for her it is impossible. She asks, 'Is it possible to bear witness to the fact that I ended up despising my own body, the very physical stuff of my self? … that I willfully ran away … to somewhere colder, somewhere safer. Purely to stay alive.'[17] In another chapter, told from the point of view of a mother who lost her child in the massacre, we see a woman in her old age caressing the school ID photograph of her son. When no one is around, she takes the photograph out, unfolds the creases in it, and whispers the name of her boy, Dong-ho.[18] The loss is like her breath, so close night and day, something she can never escape.

Like the chapbook that Han Kang pulled from her father's bookshelf when she was child, this novel, *Human Acts*, connects us viscerally with one of the more painful episodes of modern Korean history, and the work easily transcends the boundaries of what has been called the Hermit Kingdom; it shatters any sense a reader might have had of the events' foreignness or distance. In the two examples I have given, Han Kang not only presents the language of suffering and the impossibility of overcoming it, but also delineates the way that suffering radiates out and creates more suffering. She says as much in her epilogue: the after-effects of those who have been tortured are '"similar to those experienced by victims of radioactive poisoning" …. Cells turn cancerous, life attacks itself.'[19] We see this in our world: 'the radioactive spread is ongoing'; in my context, for example, one Trump presidency was not enough. We wanted more. The novel does not resolve this violence, rather it presents it under the frighteningly benign title *Human Acts*. The point seems to be: any language about our lives has to consider violence—our violence.

[17] Kang, *Human Acts*, 170–171.
[18] Kang, *Human Acts*, 193.
[19] Kang, *Human Acts*, 203.

Many of these same themes are picked up in Kang's novel *Greek Lessons*. This story, translated and published in English in 2023, is about a woman, who remains unnamed throughout the story, learning a new language: ancient Greek. At the same time that she is learning Greek, she is losing her ability to speak at all. In what seems to be characteristic of Han Kang's style, it is unclear why she is losing her voice. Nevertheless, plausible reasons abound: she has recently divorced her husband and has lost custody of her eight-year-old boy. Moreover, we learn that her mother wanted to abort her, and her proximity to not being born was continually brought to her attention by others. She heard, as if it were a refrain, '*you came within an inch of not being born*'. As an adult woman, she recalls that sentence and considers her life as akin to 'a fragile bubble had coalesced ever so briefly in the nick of time'.[20] Maybe language slipped away from her because, as she says, she did not feel she had the right to exist.

All of these seem like reasons why the protagonist would refuse or lose her ability to speak. Nevertheless, what is unambiguous is her refusal to let others interpret her silence. After she tells her earliest dreams to her therapist, the therapist rolls out boilerplate therapeutic language: 'I understand. You must have felt that it was impossible to withstand everything on your own.' She finds this hackneyed language intolerable, and is terrified by his claim to understand her. Her response is silence; then she picks up a pen and piece of paper and writes: '*No. It isn't that simple.*'[21]

The novel *Greek Lessons* makes us feel the drama of '*No. It isn't that simple.*' And this is difficult for us, since we want to know why and how. Especially in the area of spirituality, we are searching for language and images to understand our times and live them well. Han Kang helps us to search for a language that is not simple. Such a language might be one that comes from an interior, felt knowledge of suffering, violence and resilience. It might also be one where no words are adequate.

One of the reasons that the central character gives for refusing to speak involves her refusal to be reconciled. She thinks to herself: '*Could not be reconciled. The things not to be reconciled with were everywhere.*' And she enumerates a brief list:

[20] Han Kang, *Greek Lessons*, translated by Deborah Smith and Emily Yae Won (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2023), 38.
[21] Kang, *Greek Lessons*, 40.

> *… in the body of a homeless person, found dead on a park bench … in the dull eyes of people riding the subway late at night … in human bodies, so easily crushed … in the exchange of foolish, clipped jokes that are meant to make us forget all.*[22]

Like one of the Old Testament prophets, the character reveals why she is silent, and it is deafening to our ears and hearts. This defiant and lucid posture feels like it coming from Han Kang herself, the writer who refused to hold a press conference for her reception of the Nobel Prize. It appears that she could not reconcile an award ceremony with a world of suffering. In her and her character's silence, what is she telling us? What new language is she offering us?

That question makes me think of a poetic essay that Dan Berrigan wrote about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. According to Berrigan, Bonhoeffer had 'churchy' reasons to come to the United States, but he was not clear about the motives that underlay his decision to return to Germany a month later. Berrigan picked up on this and wrote:

> He returned for no reason. Existence. Fidelity. The Spirit. Destiny. Folly. Whatever it is that draw men and women out of the common rut of rationality and at the same time hides from them every vindication, proof, the lying clarity of the conscious mind.[23]

This helps. The language that Han Kang is offering us is spirit, fidelity, refusal, compassion and existence. And she connects all of these human experiences; they go together.[24] The advantage of such a language is that it points us to a God who is God, not 'the score keeper, band-aid, bonbon, celestial oracle'.[25]

Joe Veale was not far from the sensibility of Han Kang. As Kang grappled with a national trauma in the massacre at Gwangju, Veale did the same with the trauma of sexual abuse committed by members of the Roman Catholic Church. In his essay titled 'Meditating on Abuse', Veale, in prose that boiled up from deep within his soul, confronted the enormous grief, anger and dislocation that these cases of abuse were

[22] Kang, *Greek Lessons*, 130.
[23] Daniel Berrigan, 'The Passion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *America is Hard to Find: Notes from the Underground and Letters from Danbury Prison* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 39–49, here 46.
[24] Han Kang commented that her novel *We Do Not Part*,was about 'connecting dead memories and the living present, thereby not allowing anything to die off'. Quoted in Victoria Kim, 'Mining South Korea's Nightmares, and Her Own', *New York Times* (23 January 2025).
[25] Berrigan, 'Passion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', 44.

and are causing. He was looking for a language of grief and compunction, as he was in his writing on spirituality. What does it mean, he asks, to ask for forgiveness?

Veale answered this question by positing two conditions that ought to be present before forgiveness is sought. First, he counsels that we acknowledge that 'we are all capable of what the abusers have done'. Secondly, he declared: 'we have to face how we feel'.[26] Regarding the first point, for Veale the *sine qua non* for a way forward is to recognise that we too could have done or could still do what the abusers have done. Like Han Kang's fiction, Veale draws us close to the pathology of the abusers—perhaps too close. Yet, this is the work of his essay: the creation of an awareness that these acts are human acts; they are possibilities for us. Further on in his essay, he wonders about the collusion between seminary formation and men and women who ended up committing sexual abuse, and he asks: 'Perhaps they need our compassion for what we did to them?' Should the reader dodge this question, Veale relentlessly pursues us, making us ask: 'How have I contributed to the abusive behaviour, and to the twisted thinking that favoured sexual abuse?'[27]

In terms of his second point, Veale—who must have been a masterful spiritual director—pushes our attention to our feelings. One way to avoid what Berrigan called 'the lying clarity of the conscious mind' is to notice and attend to what we feel, because with our feelings, it is difficult to deceive ourselves.[28] Near the end of the essay, he returns to this theme: 'until I have dealt with my feelings … and until we share those feelings openly, we cannot move towards an authentic collective repentance'.[29]

Facing how we feel is what a great spiritual director asks of us. It is also, I believe, what Han Kang's fiction does: it places us with characters and situations that make us feel parts of ourselves that we did not know existed. We name these feelings, especially the complex, ambiguous and dark ones, so that they too might not be forgotten in our language about our life with God. Facing, naming and describing emotions that are both light and dark, transparent and opaque is what we might call a narrative praxis, and a narrative praxis, according to the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, creates new bonds among events and a new

[26] Veale, 'Meditating on Abuse', in *Manifold Gifts*, 220–231, here 222.
[27] Veale, 'Meditating on Abuse', 228, 229.
[28] Berrigan, 'Passion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', 46.
[29] Veale, 'Meditating on Abuse', 229.

configuration of relationships.[30] New bonds and a new configuration of relationship: this is a way to live this time of epochal change.

To Try to Give Voice to the New Language

The topic of learning new languages has been more than an academic or spiritual pursuit for me. I have spent a lot of time in my life learning Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. And I have found that in order to learn a language you have to listen, but you also have to open your mouth, speak and risk making mistakes. Simply put, there comes a time when you have to try to say something.

The time has come for me to attempt to formulate and share my own narrative. I take my cue from Billy Collins who encourages us to experience our lives and to *go from there* with the words and images that come. I am also encouraged by the narrative work of Han Kang. Though it may seem that my description of her novels suggests a certain apophatic tendency in her approach to others and our interior lives, I believe that she points to the beauty and the necessity of formulating our narrative experiences with a language that includes complex, dark and ambiguous feelings. There is nothing to be afraid of in noticing the full range of our emotions, even the scarier ones.

Paradoxically, this is what makes Han Kang's fiction hopeful. 'Unlike positive thinking', writes Byung-Chul Han, 'hope does not turn away from the negative aspects of life. It remains mindful of them.'[31] Moreover, Joe Veale also encourages us not to remain silent about God. In his essay 'The Silence', Veale, again chafing at the inadequacy of our spiritual language, bemoans that 'our words about God are second-hand, third-hand, reach-me-down, ready-made'.[32] But not for that reason does he advocate silence. Rather, understanding the Ignatian charism as a spirituality committed to language, he posited: 'what the Ignatian tradition challenges us to do really is embarrassing. You have to talk about God.' The point is, as he puts it, 'to speak simply about God'.[33]

I have to confess that I would be more comfortable turning to another piece of literature or to more methodological heuristics for

[30] Han, Crisis of Narration, 33.
[31] Byung-Chul Han, *The Spirit of Hope*, translated by Daniel Steuer (Hoboken: Polity, 2024), 7.
[32] Joseph Veale, 'The Silence', in *Manifold Gifts*, 232–241, here 233.
[33] Veale, 'Silence', 239. In even stronger language, Thomas Merton writes: 'Who can dare to be the kind of fool that gets up and talks about him' (*Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, volume 6 of *The Journals of Thomas Merton* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997], 315).

finding images and language for spirituality than sharing a narrative experience. In spirituality circles, this is often what we do; we describe in erudite ways all manner of things, yet history, rhetorical criticism and methodological concerns can distract us from talking about God in the first person. For this reason, it seems to me that one of the more challenging insights from Joe Veale is also one of his simplest: to speak simply about God. This is what I will do in a story that is (embarrassingly) simple. It is a story about getting my hair cut in Garberville, California.

Garberville, a small village in Humboldt County with a population of 1,815 citizens, is located about 200 miles north of San Francisco. I spent a week in that part of northern California visiting redwood trees. As far as I am aware, Humboldt County is home to some of the oldest, if not *the* oldest redwood trees on the planet. They are, in the true sense of the word, awesome. During a week in October, our school's fall break, I hiked through various redwood groves; I spent the days straining my neck looking up, running my hands across their surprisingly soft bark, and crouching into the base of those that were hollowed out by fires centuries ago. For as tall as they grow upwards, their root system is small in proportion to their height. They are giant, majestic and, pardon the anthropomorphism, humble.

This context is not ancillary to the afternoon when I walked into a barber's in Garberville on my last day in the town. I was third in the queue, waiting behind two young boys. I love listening to the conversation in barber-shops, and this one was moving. The young mothers of the two boys talked about one of their friends who was killed in a war. They commented on this young man, how fun and full of life he was, and how he lost his life in a war that made no sense to them. Though they did not refer to the place of the man's service, they did, however, comment on how the government provided a cheque for $100,000 to the mother on the loss of her son. Finally, after a wait of some thirty minutes, the barber, a woman, announced it was my turn. As I made my way to her chair, she commented: 'You are so polite, you must not be from here'. I had only said, I think, 'thank you' once or twice, but that was enough to suggest to her that I was not from Garberville.

As I sat in her chair, she waved to me in the mirror, and said, 'Hi, my name is Debbie'. I waved back and said, 'Hi Debbie, I'm Chris'. Debbie is a 56-year-old woman, a native of Garberville. She talked incessantly and occasionally she asked me about my life. For once, I was not in a hurry; I was not perturbed by her questions, nor was I put off by her stories; I felt

present and interested. Stated differently, narrative needs listeners; it requires leisure and a state of relaxation, and I was a relaxed listener.[34] I remember asking her about the economy in Garberville, to which she responded: 'Well, it used to be marijuana, but now that pot is legal all across California, we have no income from the former illegal sale of it'. That helped me understand the place, because I had never seen so many people smoking marijuana, especially elderly men and women, as I did on the streets of Garberville.


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She asked me about my work, and I told her that I was a teacher of Christian spirituality at a university in San Francisco. Debbie was enthused: 'I like religion; in fact, I'm Jewish'. Intrigued, I asked if her family was Jewish or if she attended a temple. The answer was 'no'. She summed up her Jewish faith in these words: 'My mom liked to read the Old Testament, and I do too'. Immediately the thought came to me: *Debbie, reading the Old Testament does not make you Jewish*, but then I thought, *let her go. Let her be*.

Our conversation continued down this personal path when she shared her experience of the pandemic. Debbie recounted for me, with numbers, the debt she incurred during the lockdown and the subsequent months, and I can assure you that she will never get out from under that debt. Worse than the economic misfortune was the emotional suffering she endured; Debbie spent eleven months alone. Surprised by such a length of time, I asked her: 'You spent eleven months all by yourself?' With tears in her eyes, she said, 'Yes, eleven months, alone'. She tried hurriedly to brush back her tears, but she couldn't. I sat in silence and she resumed my haircut.

[34] Han, *Crisis of Narration*, 5, 48. Also, from Pico Iyer: 'Leisure is where things happen to you' (*Aflame* [London: Penguin, 2025], 81).

And then she asked: 'Are you a priest?' I could only smile inside and think: *Wow, this woman is sharper than she lets on; she does not miss anything*. When I told her that I am a Catholic priest, she immediately took flight again, describing how she liked looking at the Catholic church near her house. Shortly thereafter she finished cutting my hair, and she was proud of the way it turned out. She assured me: 'it is short and it will be easy for you to take care of'. She was right, it was short and it was easy to take care of. I paid her, thanked her and once again, politely, said goodbye.

It occurs to me that when I recount this story, you may be wondering: what's the point? Where's the new image or language about God? The fact that I cannot answer those questions makes me think that it reveals something about the narrative experiences that you and I live. Information gives, well, information. Stories bring us to a conclusion that we can like and maybe learn from. Narrative, however, resists explanation.[35] Even more importantly, it lingers. And this lingered with me and I knew its import or revelation would come in time. And so I hung around it, talked about it, and revisited it in my heart and mind. On one level, Debbie helped me see that Donald Trump was going to win the US presidential election. It is not that she declared her support for Trump, but it was clear to me that Kamala Harris's message of 'let's be joyful' was not going to reach a segment of the population buried financially and bruised emotionally by the pandemic.

Sitting in the barber-shop in Garberville and talking with her was more, however, than a sociological window into my country. It was more than a sharing of information and more than the kind of storytelling that we see on social media and respond to with a 'like' or an emoji. Debbie was both a straightforward and a complex narrator, smiling and crying, transparent but distant. She was open but at the same opaque. For my part, I was patient, letting the moment emerge. And, importantly, by revisiting it, I was able to prolong it, savour it, and let the revelation in it emerge in its own time. It could grow in me because I gave it time.

I am giving it time now to emerge again now. This encounter presses upon me in such a way that it makes me believe that Debbie and I, in the barber-shop, were, in our very lives, a language. We were and are the narrative expression of God's life, and the grammar of that language is the stuff of our lives, all of it: divorce, priesthood, loneliness, debt, tears and kindness. Debbie was pure in her expression, and I

[35] Han, *Crisis of Narration*, 3.

was too. She was herself, with no adornments, or, better yet, she is middle-aged woman with all of the cultural adornments that accompany a woman trying to survive in the rural USA after the pandemic.

To say that she was transparent would be true, but she was also playing the role of a beautician—creating a pleasant environment for her client. And I was taking the role of the polite customer from out of town, reluctant to admit to being a priest, not wanting to play the part of her confessor, but being the Jesuit on vacation who does not want anyone to know who he is. In other words, I am suggesting that we did not inhabit in that barber-shop some special plane of existence, rather we were our complicated, ambiguous and beautiful selves where everything in our lives belonged and we connected. And we did not just experience something *about* God. We experienced that we were the expression of God's life. Earlier I quoted Joe Veale, who encouraged his readers to look for 'all those other things which open the spirit to the action of God'.[36] The search is simpler; it is not for a thing or an object outside you. You and I are the expression of the language that comes from God who loves us and who comes to us in and through our burned or hollowed-out centres, as well as in the majesty of the warmth, softness and large-heartedness that we can show another human being.

You and I are the expression of the language that comes from God

Inhabited as I have been by my encounter with Debbie, when I think back on it now I see Debbie's wave to me in the mirror as akin to that visit by three men to Abraham in Genesis. He knew they were special visitors and, in his welcome of them, his life changed. The promise that was always out in front of him, so close, but never realised, changed. It was not a thing to happen, it was his being. His life was the sign of God's promise to the people. And he went from there. I hope you can too.

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[36] Veale, 'Manifold Gifts', 30.