

Tongues of Fire

*“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.
And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.
And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:1-4)*

From a distance, it appeared as if a halo of feathers was floating above the heads of the women sitting in the shade of the huge oak tree. As I got closer, I realized that it was indeed a halo of feathers, not descending from above but floating up from the chickens being plucked by the good women of St. Mary Magdalene’s parish. These women, all soft and thick with fat, de-feathered the hundreds of chickens donated by the area farmers for the parish gumbo which would take place on the next day, Saturday. The women would pluck and the men, those known for their gumbos, would do the cooking. They would make huge vats of roux and throw in piles of chopped onions, celery, green peppers, garlic, parsley followed by water and the chicken, all of which would become an aromatic stew the color of the bayou which ran through our town.

Riding my bike nearer to the circle of women, I began to decipher what at first I thought was the clucking of the chickens, a puzzlement to me since I knew they had been killed earlier. The clucking was actually the flow of talk—mostly gossip and family stories--emanating from these women. As usual the conversation was a patois of Cajun French and English, a wonderfully rich mixture of the two languages with an odd assortment of African and Native American words thrown in:

“Mais, I don’t know, but I poot in da new zink and it runs fine.”

“Sha, I told my fils to get down yesterday to tast my boudin mais he had to make groceries and couldn’t.”

“I know, chirens today have no time for famille.”

There seemed to be a rhythm to the plucking and clucking, almost as if orchestrated by some invisible conductor. Even at 13, I knew who that conductor was: Father Fusilier, our parish priest, whose rough and weathered skin convinced us that he was not one to sit behind a desk in the rectory. No, Father Fusilier was out in the fields with his flock, encouraging them to build a new Catholic elementary and high school, to renovate their church, and to think about how they can put their ideals and religious convictions into actions.

Today, the members of his flock were preparing for the annual parish gumbo whose profits were targeted for a new Catholic high school. People would be arriving around 11:00 the next morning with empty pots and metal containers to be filled with the wonderfully rich gumbo, rice, potato salad and French bread. The gumbo sales would continue until 2:00 when clean-up would begin so that everyone could go home and rest up for the dance that would start at 8:00 in the parish hall. While no liquor would be served by the good people of the parish, everyone knew that most would have had a few beers before coming to the party and certainly there would be drinking afterwards. But the exuberant dancing to Cajun music would obscure anyone’s drunken misstep. It was time to party for the good of the parish.

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As is often the case when I fly back to my childhood home in Louisiana, the click of my seat belt automatically provokes such early memories of my growing up in a small Cajun town. Returning home intermittently over the past thirty-five years has always filled me with a mixture of anxiety and excitement. It's true that Cajuns eat and drink to excess and always have a pot of strong, deep-roasted coffee ready for company. So, I look forward to the sense of perpetual party brewing while I'm home. But I also know that there is a more caustic cultural attribute among Cajuns. There is an insularity about them that divides Cajuns from non-Cajuns. So entrenched is this division that even marrying into a Cajun family does not make you one. You will be welcomed; but somewhere within the social exchanges, your non-Cajun background will be used to identify you. It may be caused by the lack of a Cajun accent, your not liking some traditional food, or it just may be your physical appearance that betrays you as someone who comes from the outside.

While I'm Cajun by birth, I'm an outsider by sentiment. My bent has always been to open up the cultural circles that I constantly found myself within and to let the outsider in. I could not understand why accepting an invitation to a dance by a non-Catholic, or greeting with a kiss and hug the black woman who cleaned our house, cooked our meals, and washed our clothes, or being eager to see the world by attending a college that was in another state caused such emotional turmoil among my family and friends. I was in the world of the Cajuns but certainly not of it. I would choose reading books over duck hunting any day; I loved going to musicals, art exhibits, stimulating lectures about somewhat esoteric topics in the nearby college city. Yet, I was always the first one on the dance floor when the music started up. And to this day, I have a fondness

for the darker, the mysterious in life which is also part of the Cajun milieu. My memories of Mardi Gras are not the wildly exuberant, colorful parades of gorgeously decked out floats and silk clothed riders tossing out strings of yellow, purple, and green necklaces and gold doubloons. No, mine are of hooded horse riders going from house to house collecting food for a communal feed later that day. Their presence filled me and my young friends with fear as the riders galloped into yards shouting with beer breath and demanding the home owner's contribution. They often carried whips which they swung around their heads to heighten their onslaught.

My penchant for this dark, ominous strain comes not just from such events but also I suspect from my Catholic upbringing which was full of the pre-Vatican II liturgy. As a fervent altar boy who served at parish masses from 6th grade until senior year in high school, I can still recall the sacristy, cold and silent, where we altar boys would put on our surplice and cassock and the presiding priest would garb himself for the 6:15 a.m. daily mass. Our white surplices were starched and ironed, our cassocks—either red or black--immaculately cleaned, and our shoes always shined. Every item for the service was stored in its proper place among the dark wooden cabinets and cupboards that lined the walls. There was a chiming clock whose tick reverberated throughout the sacristy and whose chimes sounded like a sledge hammer counting out the minutes to some foreboding event.

As an altar boy, one of my roles was to accompany the presiding priest as he distributed communion wafers (remember, this is pre-Vatican II); I had to hold the shiny gold paten under the chin of the communicants in case the host missed their tongues, a scandalous accident which did happen from time to time. My memories are mostly of

these tongues, often coated with the colors of medicines these elderly had to consume. Some of these tongues were almost too short to poke out of their mouths; others had jagged edges; and still others were serpentine in shape—an arresting juxtaposition of evil and goodness.

So stringent were the rules for conducting oneself properly as an altar boy that even when I was stung by a bee during a Sunday mass, I withstood the pain until after the service was over out of fear of being reprimanded for unseemly behavior on the altar. To this day, I remember my silent tears as I knelt next to the presiding priest who always conducted himself with not just a moral rigidity but a physical one as well.

As I reflect on my days as an altar boy, I think I was filled more often with fear than any other emotion. In fact, I recall waking up during the night and being suddenly frozen by what seemed like a ghostly appearance slowly flowing toward me; gradually I would come to recognize my starched surplice hanging on the open door directly across from my bed. That shadowy encounter which happened often in my younger years came to be part of my Catholicism. Darkness was woven into my life in real ways. For example, I was regularly called out of school to assist at a funeral. Leaving the classroom—most often at mid-morning—I would be transported over to the church to perform the functions of an altar boy for what was then called a Black Mass; this would mean wearing my black cassock with the white surplice, making certain I had black trousers and shoes on, and preparing the censer for incensing the coffin. Of course, the solemnity and sadness of this particular service reinforced the darkness of this gathering which always conflicted with the lighthearted, somewhat raucous classroom I had just left.

Returning home as an adult tends to duplicate that same shocking experience of moving between the dark and the light. This particular trip is especially hard for me since I'm returning to see my brother-in-law for probably the last time. He is dying from lung cancer; the doctors say he has a few months, maybe only weeks to live. I'm going to be with him during my spring break but also to be there for my sister. She needs some relief from constant caring for her husband. I also want her to know that I'm still family, even if I live far away in Minnesota.

As the plane gets closer and closer to its destination, I can feel my body shrink back to its preadolescent size, to a time when I felt like a crawfish out of water—to give the idiom a Cajun twist. My soul resists the return because what I have become disappears and what is left once I'm among family and friends is the bare remains of someone who has little to say about life as it is lived in my hometown. Yet, on this visit I realize something else, something that makes me profoundly grateful for my Cajun roots. These roots are the source of my love for the image, for understanding character, for filling out the details of a story, and for language, especially the rich nuances of the metaphorical. While I know that some of this penchant comes from my Cajun heritage, some of it—especially the sense of drama and a narrative richness—comes from my early Catholicism. This is why I am drawn to writers like Flannery O' Connor, William Faulkner, Joyce Carol Oates, whose fictions are invested with the sublime and the demonic, with the sinister lurking right beneath the surfaces of the little dramas in our lives.

I gradually realize all this as I sit with my brother-in-law, waiting for his daily visitors to arrive. First, comes my sister's high school friend who brings communion.

Her accent (slight northern twang) makes it clear she's not Cajun; unlike me, however, she has learned how to live here. What impresses me the most is the ritual that she enacts: after saying simple opening prayers, she takes out a small locket which contains a host and gives it to my brother-in-law, who struggles to open his mouth and even to say amen. I am near tears witnessing this austere drama of tragedy, hope, and reconciliation. What I perceive in retrospect is how commonplace religious symbols were in my early years and just how much the symbolic in general reached into my home. The crucifix, the rosary, sacred candles, pictures of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane—could be found in practically every room, even the bathroom—the most sacrosanct of spaces for an adolescent boy full of sexual juices.

My brother-in-law and I have visitors whom I have to oversee since trying to talk tires him out and could induce even more pressure on his lungs. The first is his younger sister and her daughter who is a year younger than I and who has just learned that her breast cancer has returned; this means another operation but the prognosis is dire. In fact, I learned a month after my return that she died a few weeks after her operation. Initially my brother-in-law's sister and daughter inquire about his health, and I update them with information I gleaned from my sister and from taking him to the doctor a few times earlier in the week. Then, the real purpose of the visit begins as sister, brother, and niece chat about family, mutual friends, and scandalous events around town. As usual familial connections occupy much of their talk; it is important to Cajuns to establish who is related to whom, even distantly. I wonder if this is a remnant of a time when incest was commonplace or if it is simply a way to continually mark the territory, to circle the zone within which stories are told and understood. Again I sense that this contextualizing is

what I learned over years as an English major and now professor. Entering a story, I need to know the territory, who is connected to whom, in what ways, and then what motivates the characters. My college major in reality had reinforced what I had learned from a community of storytellers.

This last literary aspect is what occupies most of my brother-in-law's conversation with his sister and niece; they speculate for nearly an hour about why a family member continues to drink and sleep around, why neighbors bought a new RV when they owe enormous amounts of money all over town, and why so and so has stopped attending daily mass. There are judgments made, solutions offered, future speculations rendered; in other words, what I hear as I listen to their conversation is the very essence of interpretation. The rhetorical question, "Can you believe, sha?" recurs throughout their exchanges. While it is a commonplace transition for many such conversations among Cajuns, I also hear it now as the very question I ask my students with a slight variation when I am teaching them how to initiate a literary analysis: "Why do you believe this story? These characters? This theme?"

I think about the process I ask my students to use when working with a piece of literature. I tell them that I would like their reactions to move from impression to analysis/synthesis, to evaluation and in this order. If they neglect the middle process and go from impression ("I don't like this story") to evaluation ("Therefore, it's not a good work of literature"), their interpretation lacks substance, conviction, and evidence. These conversations between my brother-in-law and his visitors—later a close friend from work stops by and then my cousin and a neighbor—enact over and over again this progression; sometimes more time is devoted to one stage than another, but I sense that I had absorbed

the rudimentary literary technique of interpretation when as a youngster I sat through long hours of visits with family, neighbors, friends, and even as I accompanied my mother to her beautician (as they are called down South).

What is even more challenging to my students, however, is to entertain the unpleasantries in the stories I often assign. The most frequent student criticism I get to assigned novels and short stories is why can't you have us read stories with happy endings? Part of the reason I must now admit is that the stories which matter to me must encompass not just the glorious resurrections of our lives but also the agonies of the Good Fridays as well. Otherwise, we fail to see the world in its rich complexities.

By the end of my stay with my sister and her husband, I am ready to return home to my partner—again an essential part of my life that lies outside my Cajun community which allows for all sorts of sexual variations as long as they are among heterosexuals. I board my plane for my return flight, quickly find my seat, and eventually buckle up once all the passengers are seated. As I do, I begin to mentally disengage from my Cajun past but know that within me still resides the young altar boy biking through the dimly lit early morning streets that lead to a world which is a shadow of another and where my faith will teach me to interpret the fictions of this life. Even though I no longer am a practicing Catholic and, in fact, consider myself a Unitarian and, therefore, have little to do with the elaborate ritual traditions of Catholicism, I still find myself longing for the high religious dramas with which I grew up. To paraphrase Faulkner, the past I suppose is never really the past. In fact, for me and for those who are willing to listen closely enough, the tongues of our past keep revealing to us the stories of our lives. They inevitably attempt to answer the question: "*Can you believe, sha?*"

