

Kathleen Norris: The Quotidian Mysteries:

Laundry, Liturgy + "women's work."

dead, new life emerged, including this essay that you are reading. 1998. Paulist Press

I generally dislike the careless use of birthing imagery applied to the process of writing. The distinction that is made in the Nicene Creed is a useful one: God is a begetter, not a maker, and poets are makers, not begetters. *Maker* is what the word *poet* means at its Greek root, and I am all too acutely aware that what I make, the poems and the personae that fill them, are not creatures in the fullest sense, having life and breath. But I do detect in the quotidian, meaning daily or ordinary, rhythms of writing a stage that might be described as *parturient*, or in labor, about to produce or come forth with an idea or discovery. And it always seems that just when daily life seems most unbearable, stretching out before me like a prison sentence, when I seem most dead inside, reduced to mindlessness, bitter tears or both, that what is inmost breaks forth, and I realize that what had seemed "dead time" was actually a period of gestation.

It is a quotidian mystery that dailiness can lead to such despair and yet also be at the core of our salvation. We express this every time we utter the Lord's Prayer. As Simone Weil so eloquently stated it in her essay, "Concerning the Our Father," the "bread of this world" is all that nourishes and energizes us,

not only food but the love of friends and family, "money, ambition, consideration...power...everything that puts into us the capacity for action." She reminds us that we need to keep praying for this food, acknowledging our needs as daily, because in the act of asking, the prayer awakens in us the trust that God will provide. But, like the manna that God provided to Israel in the desert, this "bread" cannot be stored. "We cannot bind our will today for tomorrow," Weil writes; "we cannot make a pact with [Christ] that tomorrow he will be within us, even in spite of ourselves." Each day brings with it not only the necessity of eating but the renewal of our love of and in God. This may sound like a simple thing, but it is not easy to maintain faith, hope or love in the everyday. I wonder if this is because human pride, and particularly a preoccupation with intellectual, artistic or spiritual matters, can provide a convenient way to ignore our ordinary, daily, bodily needs.

As a human being, Jesus Christ was as subject to the daily as any of us. And I see both the miracle of manna and incarnation of Jesus Christ as scandals. They suggest that God is intimately concerned with our very bodies and their needs, and I doubt that this is really what we want to hear. Our bodies fail us, they grow old, flabby and feeble, and eventually they lead us to the cross. How tempting it is to disdain what God has created, and to retreat into a comfortable gnosticism. The members of

the Heaven's Gate cult regarded their bodies as obstacles to perfection, mere "containers" to be discarded on their way to what they called "a level beyond human." The Christian perspective could not be more different; it views the human body as our God-given means to salvation, for beyond the cross God has effected resurrection.

We want life to have meaning, we want fulfillment, healing and even ecstasy, but the human paradox is that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we wish we were. We must look for blessings to come from unlikely, everyday places—out of Galilee, as it were—and not in spectacular events, such as the coming of a comet. Although artists and poets have not been notoriously reverent in the twentieth century—Dylan Thomas, as he lay on his deathbed, is rumored to have said to the nun caring for him, "God bless you, Sister, may all your sons be archbishops"—the aesthetic sensibility is attuned to the sacramental possibility in all things. The best poetic images, while they resonate with possibilities for transformation, are resolutely concrete, specific, incarnational. Concepts such as *wonder*, or even *holiness*, are not talked about so much as presented for the reader's contemplation.

The Roman Catholic poet Anne Porter, for example, evokes the mystery of the incarnation, and the entire journey of Holy Week—the sweat and tears of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday,

and the deep peace of Easter morning—in this look at an Easter lily,

Whose whiteness
is past belief

Its blossoms
The shape of trumpets
are mute as swans

But deep and strong as sweat
Is their feral perfume.

The American Buddhist Margaret Gibson begins her poem "Making Salad" by speaking of an ordinary task:

I rub the dark hollow of the bowl
with garlic, near to the fire enough
so that fire reflects on the wood,
a reverie that holds emptiness
in high regard.

The poet notices the hearth-fire reflected in the window above her sink and, opening the window, catches a glimpse of the Pleiades. Taking in the brisk autumn air, she writes:

I watch the leaves swirl
and part, gathering fresh light
from Gemini, ten millennia away, fresh
from Sirius—holding each burning leaf,

each jewel within whatever light
a speck of conscious mind can make,
unshadowed by reflection or design,

impartial. Out the tap, from a source
three hundred feet down, so close
I feel the shudder in the earth, water
spills over my hands, over the scallions
still bound in a bunch from the store.
I had thought to make salad, each element
cut to precision, tossed at random
in the turning bowl. Now I lay the knife
aside. I consider the scallions. I consider
the invisible field. Emptiness is bound
to bloom—the whole earth, a single flower.

Even if we do not make such glorious poems
out of our ordinary experiences, arranging Easter
lilies or making salad, we are free to contemplate
both emptiness and fullness, absence and pres-
ence in the everyday circumstances of our lives.
No less a saint than Thérèse of Lisieux admitted
in her *Story of a Soul* that Christ was most abun-
dantly present to her not “during my hours of
prayer...but rather in the midst of my *daily occu-
pations*” (emphasis mine). We can become aware
of and limit our participation in activities that do
not foster the freedom of thought that poetry and
religious devotion require; I cannot watch televi-
sion, for example, and write a poem. I might be

inspired by something I hear or see on television,
particularly in news interviews, but this is rare.
The ordinary activities I find most compatible
with contemplation are walking, baking bread
and doing laundry.

My everyday experience of walking confirms
the poet Donald Hall's theory that poetic meter
originates in the bodily rhythm of arms and legs
in motion. Walking certainly loosens up more
than my leg muscles. The simple, repetitive move-
ments also free my mind to brainstorm. I find
bread baking to be a hands-on experience of
transformation, and during the quiet times when
dough is rising, I often sit and write, aiming for
transformations of my own. As for laundry, I
might characterize it as approaching the moral
realm; there are days when it seems a miracle to
be able to make dirty things clean. I once wrote
an article on laundry, specifically the joys of hang-
ing clothes on the line to dry, and sent it to the
New York Times Magazine. I had thought I might
get a warning about backsliding as a feminist, but
was pleasantly surprised to hear from an editor
that my essay had inspired everyone in the office
to talk about their own laundry rituals, usually
inherited from a mother or grandmother, but in
one case from a father who had taught his chil-
dren laundry as a military discipline; the son, now
in his fifties, had admitted that he still starched
and ironed his shirts the British Army way.

Laundry is universal—we all must do it, or figure out a way to get it done—and as I learned when writing my essay, it is also surprisingly particular. The editors decided to print my essay because they thought it might stir up in their readers the same sort of discussion that they had had in their office. I must have received a hundred letters, many with poignant childhood memories of hanging clothes out-of-doors, or of happily running through clotheslines full of fragrant, billowing sheets. My two favorite responses to the article came from an Israeli woman who told me that during the Gulf War, the government had warned people not to hang clothes out-of-doors, as a gas attack would pollute them. The mother of an infant, she had defied the warnings and hung her baby's clothes out-of-doors as a visible sign of hope. Another woman, an apparently stressed-out commuter with small children, wrote to say that to enjoy laundry at all I must have way too much time on my hands.

The often heard lament, "I have so little time," gives the lie to the delusion that the daily is of little significance. Everyone has exactly the same amount of time, the same twenty-four hours in which many a weary voice has uttered the gospel truth: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Mt 6:34, KJV). But most of us, most of the time, take for granted what is closest to us and is most universal. The daily round of sunrise and sunset,

for example, that marks the coming and passing of each day, is no longer a symbol of human hopes, or of God's majesty, but a grind, something we must grit our teeth to endure. Our busy schedules, and even urban architecture, which all too often deprives us of a sense of the sky, has diminished our capacity to marvel with the psalmist in the passage of time as an expression of God's love for us and for all creation:

It was God who made the great lights,
whose love endures forever;
the sun to rule in the day,
whose love endures forever;
the moon and stars in the night,
whose love endures forever. (Ps 136: 7–9, GR)

When I think of the way that so many Americans live—so many long commutes on so many sterile highways, to jobs that all too often seem equally sterile—I stand in awe. To tell you the truth, I don't know how my sister does it. She is a divorced woman, a single mother, who supports two children. Every morning, she must get up, help her children prepare for school, prepare herself for work, drive the family across the Koolau Mountains of Oahu into Honolulu, and go to her job as an office manager—officially the "administrator"—of a high-powered law firm. The very thought of it would make me want to turn over and go back to

sleep. Another day. Another dollar. And life is what happens to you when you are busy doing something else.

How does my sister manage, I wonder, let alone live her life with grace and wit and humor, and an occasional fiery blast of justified anger. (The managing partner of the law firm once reported to her that he had relished dismissing a self-important young attorney who had complained that my sister did not treat him with proper deference, by saying, "We did not hire her for her retiring personality.") Somehow, she keeps body and soul—and a law firm—together, and she provides a home and a measure of security for her children. Compared to many single mothers, she is fortunate. But the key to her life is not to be found in her job, the money, or the steady car and mortgage payments. It is instead the priestly charism of transformation. I have already presented an image of a priest as housewife; now I will play with its mirror image. As my sister has matured, accepting and growing into her responsibilities as a single mother, she has grown adept at recognizing and savoring the holy in the mundane circumstances of daily life. Finding spiritual refreshment in unlikely places, she can offer nourishment to her children.

She once told me, for example, that the daily commute has become invaluable to her as family time, a free-for-all in which she and the kids exchange stories, bad jokes and silly songs. It has

become a time to take measure of her children, to learn how their day has gone (or allow them to articulate their anxious anticipation concerning how it might go) and above all, to reflect on their growing up. The children are in the process of becoming, being formed as human beings, and everything they do or say has the potential to inform their mother's decisions about how best to foster their growth, even a ferocious squabble over who gets to sit in the front seat, the "loser" sulking all the way home. No matter how dreary the weather, inside or outside the car, there are daily blessings to be found. She and the kids can count the new waterfalls that spring up on the cliffs through which they pass after a heavy rain. And, on the homeward trip, they have the astonishing view of the Pacific Ocean unfolding before them as they emerge from a tunnel in the mountains. It is a view that attracts tourists from all over the world. But the grip of acedia on the human spirit is such that even the great beauty of this land and seascape can be rendered impotent and invisible. It is common for people stationed in Hawaii with the military or large corporations to experience what is termed "rock fever," a condition marked by a nagging contempt for the place. They hate the ocean because it reminds them that they are stuck on an island in the middle of "nowhere," and they dismiss paradise as "the rock."

I am sure that my sister and her children often fail to notice the natural beauty that is laid before them, in splendid greens and blues. But sometimes just the sight of the sea can quell an argument, calming the atmosphere in the car. It can also stir things up, breaking through the family's insularity and the daily monotony of the commute. Being a parent is also daily, though hardly monotonous, and my sister has learned the spiritual discipline of so many parents, to help her children learn to build a family around the little events that make up the course of a day. A geographically distant but doting aunt, I am a grateful recipient of it all. I can easily picture my nine-year-old nephew offering a friend a "tour" of their house, starting not with his bedroom but with the bathroom, where he points to the toilet and says, "that's where I put all my troubles."

Like many children, my niece and nephew are budding theologians. When my nephew was eight, he chastised his mother for not intervening when a petty dispute escalated into hysteria. He said to his mother, "*You're* the grown-up—it's your responsibility. If you don't settle this, all hell will break loose!" Later, when he tried to smooth things over by asking his mom to play a game with him before bedtime, she rebuffed him. He threw his hands up into the air, and said, "Great! Now we'll go to bed angry with each other, and when we get up in the morning, we'll still be mad, and it

will never end!" She agreed to play the game. When I informed my nephew that what he had said was in the Bible, and that both Jesus and St. Paul would have given his mother similar advice, he responded with what for him is ultimate praise, a heartfelt, "Cool!"

Not long ago my eleven-year old niece reported to her mother that God speaks to her in her dreams. When my sister asked her how long this had been going on, she replied that it had begun when she was five. Among the more reassuring things that God has told her is that a little swearing is not the end of the world. God informed her that everyone is given a million opportunities to swear in a lifetime; it's only at a million and one that you are in danger of going to hell. To my niece, like any child, a million seems too many to count; she is reassured to think that even God can't possibly be bothered to keep track of the small stuff, the little "damns" uttered during a day. (Although she did tell God that she was worried about her little brother because she had heard him swear when he was only eight years old, and she thought if he kept it up he would use up his million chances in a hurry.)

The Bible is full of evidence that God's attention is indeed fixed on the little things. But this is not because God is a Great Cosmic Cop, eager to catch us in minor transgressions, but simply because God loves us—loves us so much that the divine

presence is revealed even in the meaningless workings of daily life. It is in the ordinary, the here-and-now, that God asks us to recognize that the creation is indeed refreshed like dew-laden grass that is "renewed in the morning" (Ps 90:5), or to put it in more personal and also theological terms, "our inner nature is being renewed every day" (2 Cor 4:16). Seen in this light, what strikes many modern readers as the ludicrous attention to detail in the book of Leviticus, involving God in the minutiae of daily life—all the cooking and cleaning of a people's domestic life—might be revisioned as the very love of God. A God who cares so much as to desire to be present to us in everything we do.

It is this God who speaks to us through the psalmist as he wakes from sleep, amazed, to declare, "I will bless you, Lord, you give me counsel, and even at night direct my heart" (Ps 16:7, GR). It is this God who speaks to us through the prophets, reminding us that by meeting the daily needs of the poor and vulnerable, characterized in the scriptures as the widows and orphans, we prepare the way of the Lord and make our own hearts ready for the day of salvation. When it comes to the nitty-gritty, what ties these threads of biblical narrative together into a revelation of God's love is that God has commanded us to refrain from grumbling about the dailiness of life. Instead we are meant to accept it gratefully, as a reality that humbles us even as it gives us cause for praise. The

rhythm of sunrise and sunset marks a passage of time that makes each day rich with the possibility of salvation, a concept that is beautifully summed up in an ancient saying from the monastic tradition: "Abba Poeman said concerning Abba Pior that every day he made a new beginning."

According to Genesis, this is no more than God has asked of himself. Creation itself was a daily process—each day God spoke more and more into being, and then, it seems, let it all sit until the next day. Our bodies, and our lives, still reflect these basic rhythms of creation, which are also captured in the church's tradition of daily prayer, also known as the liturgy of the hours or the divine office. Lauds (or morning prayer) reminds us of our need to renew, to remember and recommit to this process of creation in our inmost selves. Those of you who are not "morning people" know how difficult this can be—and those of us who are subject to depression know that just getting up in the morning can be the greatest challenge of the day. The evening offices of vespers and compline, by comparison, are a surrendering of contention, a willingness to let the day go, and let God bring on the quiet, brooding darkness in which dreams might wrestle with and even nourish the soul. Each night, like the farmer of the gospel parable, we are asked to admit to the limitations of our conscious understanding, and enter into the realm of God: "The kingdom of

God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how" (Mk 4:26-27).

Such worship, it seems to me, is *primary* theology, the fertile ground out of which our poems and stories, our theories and ideas—and even, to use a dauntingly sober word that I seldom employ except in jest, our hermeneutics—can grow. Remembering to praise God every morning, noon and evening establishes a primal rhythm, as primal as creation, and I know from experience how refreshing this can be in the life of a childless freelance writer whose days might otherwise have little rhythm or sacred routine. I insert the word *sacred* because I wrote my book *The Cloister Walk* in part to celebrate the grace that fell upon me when I was able to practice the daily liturgy—not only attending the eucharist but the complete liturgy of the hours—with a monastic community over many months. To my surprise, the monotonous, repetitive activity did not place a damper on my writing, but the opposite: the prose and poetry began to flow, in a near-constant stream. The wonder for me was that this was not at all a matter of wild, unfettered inspiration so much as a dialogue with the liturgy of the hours. It all depended on a steady, daily routine that by the standards of the busy world looked boring, repetitive, meaningless.

But when I am at home, without the scaffolding of daily communal prayer to sustain me, it is hard for me to sustain routine. I find the liturgy an especially hard discipline, one that I mostly fail at observing. I can easily identify with a comment made by Peter Jordan in a *Commonweal* article on Dorothy Day: "Lacking the formal monastic regimen, Day had to steal the early morning hours for her spiritual exercises. She did this almost daily, year in and year out." And I love the simple, unsanctimonious and humble thing that Day herself said about her practice: "My strength...returns to me with my cup of coffee and the reading of the psalms." Workaholism is the opposite of humility, and to an unhumble literary workaholic such as myself, morning devotions can feel useless, not nearly as important as getting about my business early in the day. I know from bitter experience that when I allow busy little doings to fill the precious time of early morning, when contemplation might flourish, I open the doors to the demon of acedia. Noon becomes a blur—no time, no time—the wolfing down of a sandwich as I listen to the morning's phone messages and plan the afternoon's errands. When evening comes, I am so exhausted that vespers has become impossible. It is as if I have taken the world's weight on my shoulders and am too greedy, and too foolish, to surrender it to God.

Having discarded contemplation, I render it, and the worship that is its fruit, meaningless, futile,

without issue. And this dry sterility is the stuff of acedia. Like John Bunyan's pilgrim, having been captured by Giant Despair, I languish in the dungeon of Doubting Castle and need to be reminded that the key that would set me free is already in my possession. Worship has often proved to be that key; although on the surface it seems useless, it is also necessary, a means of reconnecting with other people when acedia or dejection has isolated me. Worship grounds me again in the real world of God's creation, dislodging me from whatever world I have imagined for myself. I have come to believe that when we despair of praise, when the wonder of creation and our place in it are lost to us, it's often because we've lost sight of our true role as creatures—we have tried to do too much, pretending to be in such control of things that we are indispensable. It's a hedge against mortality and, if you're like me, you take a kind of comfort in being busy. The danger is that we will come to feel too useful, so full of purpose and the necessity of fulfilling obligations that we lose sight of God's play with creation, and with ourselves.

Is it not a good joke that when God gave us work to do as punishment for our disobedience in Eden, it was work that can never be finished, but only repeated, day in and day out, season upon

season, year after year? I see here not only God's keen sense of humor, but also a creative and zesty love. It is precisely these thankless, boring, repetitive tasks that are hardest for the workaholic or utilitarian mind to appreciate, and God knows that being rendered temporarily mindless as we toil is what allows us to approach the temple of holy leisure. When confronting a sinkful of dirty dishes—something I do regularly, as my husband is the cook in our house and I am the dishwasher—I admit that I generally lose sight of the fact that God is inviting me to play. But I recall that as a college student I sometimes worked as a teacher's aide in a kindergarten and was interested to note that one of the most popular play areas for both boys and girls was a sink in a corner of the room. After painting, the children washed their brushes there, but at other times, for the sheer joy of it—the tickle of water on the skin and God knows what else—a few children at a time would be allowed what the teacher termed “water play.” The children delighted in filling, emptying and refilling plastic bowls, cups and glasses, watching bubbles form as they pressed objects deeper into the sink or tried to get others to stay afloat.

It is difficult for adults to be so at play with daily tasks in the world. What we do of necessity can drag us down, and all too often the repetitive and familiar become not occasions for renewal, but dry, stale, lifeless activity. When washing dishes, I am no

better than anyone else at converting the drudgery of the work into something better by means of playful abandon. The contemplative in me recognizes the sacred potential in the mundane task, even as the terminally busy go-getter resents the necessity of repetition. But, as Søren Kierkegaard reminds us, "Repetition is reality, and it is the seriousness of life...repetition is the daily bread which satisfies with benediction." Repetition is both as ordinary and necessary as bread, and the very stuff of ecstasy. When reading a story such as *Peter Rabbit* to a small child, who among us has not heard that child summon the authority to say, "Read it again"? I once observed a girl of about four years of age find a penny on the floor of a post office. "Look, Momma, a penny," she said. Her mother, busy with the clerk at the window, mumbled an acknowledgment. I was surprised to see the girl put the penny back on the floor, in a different location. "Look, Momma," she said again, "I found another one!" She kept it up until she had found five pennies, and each one of them new.

The wisdom of that child is difficult for grown-ups to retain. At the very least, we are expected to keep such foolish little games to ourselves. Mystics and poets do get to play, but although much lip service is paid to both traditions in our culture, it is largely condescension. No parent really wants his or her child to grow up and become a poet; no one in a religious house really wants to live next door to

a mystic. The task, and the joy, of writing for me is that I can play with the metaphors that God has placed in the world and present them to others in a way they will accept. My goal is to allow readers their own experience of whatever discovery I have made, so that it feels new to them, but also familiar, in that it is of a piece with their own experience. It is a form of serious play.

And it was in the play of writing a poem that I first became aware that the demands of laundry might have something to do with God's command that we worship, that we sing praise on a regular basis. Both laundry and worship are repetitive activities with a potential for tedium, and I hate to admit it, but laundry often seems like the more useful of the tasks. But both are the work that God has given us to do. The poem, which is printed below, is an attempt to convey one of the mysteries of house-keeping, the odd state I found myself in one day as I sought to make order out of the habitual chaos and clutter of my home. It had been a busy day, and I felt like a clown in a three-ring circus, taming the lion of my business correspondence, putting out the fake fires that seemed to spring up with each phone call and doing laundry that seemed endless, as in how many dirty clothes can fit inside the magic box of the washing machine.

Suddenly, I found myself at the foot of my basement stairs, and realized that I had little idea of what I was doing there and no memory of having

descended the steps. My hands held clues, in the form of an item or two of dirty clothing, several books, an old dust pan and whisk broom, a box of crayons, and some thoroughly incongruous kitchenware—a coffee mug and a plastic pitcher with several matching tumblers. Operating in housewife mode, my brain had conceived of a place, the “right place,” for all of these items in that basement, and I was about to set them there, in a finely tuned sequence of events that I had now forgotten. The experience struck me as comical. But I also recalled that when my husband had spent several weeks in a psychiatric ward, a woman there, an abused wife, had spoken of such an event as the precipitating cause of her hospitalization. She had been cleaning house in a frenzy so as to avoid the next beating, an attempt she knew to be futile. Then, all at once, she stopped, and stood frozen in her basement for well over an hour. She was in such dread of falling, of literally disappearing into nothingness within her house, that she had to crawl up the stairs and phone a neighbor who could telephone for medical assistance.

My dislocation, though a fleeting sort of madness, was far less drastic. But it made me ponder the nature of housecleaning, and that became the title of the poem. Rather than quote a few lines, I will print it in its entirety. I employ as an epigram a line from Nor Hall’s book, *The Moon and the Vir-*

gin: “The dreamer descends through the basement to see what was valuable in her inheritance.”

HOUSECLEANING

Kneeling in the dust, I recall
the church in Enna, Sicily,
where Ceres and Proserpine reigned
until a Pope kicked them out
in the mid-nineteenth century.

This is my Hades, where I find
what the house has eaten.

*And Jessica was left with only
the raw, sheer, endless terror
of being alone in the world.*

“We are alone, Jessica,” I say aloud;
the whole box of romances must go.

I keep the photograph of a young girl
reading cross-legged
under cottonwoods,
her belly still flat, not yet a fruit
split open, the child shining
in its membrane
like a pomegranate seed.

She ended both their lives,
and no mother’s rage or weeping
could bring them back.
I leave her with the book of fairy tales:

still safe, held fast,
in Sleeping Beauty's bramble forest.

I could use some sleep.
What I do must be done
each day, in every season,
like liturgy. I pray
to Mary Magdalene, who kept seven
demons,
one for each day of the week.
How practical; how womanly.

My barren black cat rubs against my legs.
I think of the barren women
exhorted by the Good Book
to break into song:
we should sing, dear cat,
for the children who will come in our old age.
The cat doesn't laugh,
but I do. She rolls in dust
as I finish sweeping.

I empty the washer
and gather what I need for the return:
the basket of wet clothes
and bag of clothes-pins,
a worn spring jacket in need of mending.
Then I head upstairs, singing an old hymn.

I forget now where I picked up the detail about
the Sicilian church, a small tidbit in the venerable

history of the Christian church's encounter with ancient folk religion and myth. The lines from the cover of a romance novel come from a book I noticed as I was shelving it in a library where I once worked. A substantial portion of my family story is in the poem; condensed into a few lines is a fictionalized version of my Aunt Mary's suicide. She was an aunt on my father's side of the family, a woman who haunted me for years, ever since I learned when I was ten or eleven years old that she had killed herself in the year when I was born. Pregnant out of wedlock, she had been institutionalized for a mental illness that only seemed to worsen when the baby was born. There is evidence that Mary was schizophrenic, but I have long considered her suicide to be in part the result of both pre- and postpartum depression.

Another element in the poem concerns the move my husband and I made to my maternal grandmother's house in 1974. It was a house that she and my grandfather Totten had built in the early 1920s and lived in for over fifty years, but it always seemed more her house than his. My grandfather's true realm was his medical office on Main Street, but he also had the dark north bedroom of the house, where he took a nap every day after lunch—forbidden territory. From my child's perspective, the house seemed my grandmother's domain, where she made three square meals a day, every day, in the summers when we

would visit. Where she worked laundry through a wringer washer in the basement and hung the wet clothes on a line in the backyard. I still use the Maytag washer that she purchased in the late 1960s. And I still hang clothes on the line—for the exercise, for the pleasing ozone aroma of clothes dried in sunlight, and sometimes, in winter, as a means of combating cabin fever.

During the unspeakably brutal winter of 1996–1997, with nearly thirty inches of snow on the ground by Thanksgiving, I had had enough by the time the spring blizzards came—another three feet of snow and high winds on the eighth of April—that I set out one morning, ablaze with the warmth of an angry determination, to shovel a path to the clothesline in order to hang something colorful there. As I began to handle the wet clothes, my hands quickly reddened, stung with cold, but it seemed worth doing nonetheless, simply to break the hold of winter on my spirit—and to disrupt the monotony of the white moonscape that our backyard had become. And even though the clothes freeze-dried stiffly and had to be thawed in the house, they had the sky-scent of summer on them. And it helped.

The poem, like housekeeping itself, is an attempt to bring order out of chaos. In the poem, by pulling many disparate things together, I tried to replicate the actual work of cleaning, sorting through the leftovers, the odd pieces of a life, in order to make a

whole. I sense that striving for wholeness is, increasingly, a countercultural goal, as fragmented people make for better consumers, buying more bits and pieces—two or more cars, two homes and all that fills them—and outfitting one's body for a wide variety of identities: business person, homebody, amateur athlete, traveler, theater or sports fan. Things exercise a certain tyranny over us. Whenever I am checking bags at an airport, I recall St. Teresa of Avila's wonderful prayer of praise, "Thank God for the things that I do not own." Things are truly baggage, our impedimenta, which must be maintained with work that is menial, steady and recurring. But, like liturgy, the work of cleaning draws much of its meaning and value from repetition, from the fact that it is never completed, but only set aside until the next day. Both liturgy and what is euphemistically termed "domestic" work also have an intense relation with the present moment, a kind of faith in the present that fosters hope and makes life seem possible in the day-to-day.

My poem is in some sense "about" the mythic Proserpine (or Persephone), and I had great fun employing the elements of her story, the pomegranate seed that Hades induces her to eat so that she will have to keep returning to him, spending part of each year underground. Her story is, of course, the story of winter and spring, of the dying down of vegetation and its eventual rebirth. In an earlier poem, entitled "Persephone," I depicted

her as a kind of pawn between the forces of death and life. Speaking of her own condition, she says:

...I learned to eat
what was put before me,
and became a wife.

My mother raged, my husband
capitulated. When the deal was struck
no one thought I'd be torn in two.

Now I have my pied-à-terre,
and the inner darkness.
Now spring is a blind green wall.

Spring can seem to me like "a blind green wall," an implacable force stirring things into life that has grown comfortably dormant. It is one of the perversities of my interior makeup that I so often become depressed just as winter makes its turn into spring, and the longed-for moment arrives; the weather turns pleasant, and one can walk out of doors without bundling up. But unbundling means exposure, a kind of vulnerability, and I seldom feel ready for it when that first balmy day arrives. Instead, I resist the good news of spring, lurking inside my house as if it is still winter. My spirit suffers, my garden languishes, and my perennial flowers and herbs must struggle on their own with encroaching weeds. This bleak mood always passes, but in the meantime I

am like the person spoken of in Sirach 27:30: "Anger and wrath...are abominations, yet the sinner holds on to them." Choosing interior darkness, I draw the house around me like a shroud and protect my despair.

I am always distressed to find how fearfully I confront the glorious prospect of spring and summer, their tantalizing invitation to the out-of-doors and ease of movement. In my sour mood I become like the Israelites in the desert who rage against the God who has freed them. Their servitude in Egypt, as oppressive as it was, had also offered a kind of security. But the people grow terrified by the prospect of freedom, the unknown way that lies before them, and their bitterness is profound. They say to Moses, as Pharaoh's army closes in on them, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?...it would be better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Ex 14:11). Three times they raise up this lament: at the Red Sea, in the desert when they are hungry and can find no food and when they and their livestock are exhausted with thirst at their camp at Rephidim. Each time Moses pleads with God, and each time God answers with a miracle. The parting of the sea, the gift of manna, the water from the rock. After he has drawn water, at God's command, from the rock at

Horeb, Moses names the springs after Hebrew verbs meaning "to test" and "to find fault." Marking the lack of steadfastness that seems to be an integral part of the human psyche, Moses immortalizes Israel's doubt, "[calling] the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'" (Ex 17:7).

When I was a child, these stories of Israel in the desert were my favorite in the Bible. Of course I always sided with God, wondering how in the world these foolish people could fail to trust time and time again, after all that God had done for them. Now that I am older, I know all too well and can easily see myself among the doubters and complainers. Even when I was young, however, I had some appreciation of the repetitions as a narrative device. They allowed me a form of play in which I could respond to each story by raising my own lament: *not again!* Are they going to test God yet again? And every spring, as I contend with depression, I must ask this question of myself: again? When will you ever learn? even though the answer seems to be never. Just as Adam and Eve left Eden in order to take on work that is never finished but must be repeated, so there are spiritual matters that I must contend with over and over again, whenever I am confronted with the genuinely new, even the expected newness of spring.

Winter has become a comfortable place to wallow in gloom, my Egypt, the devil I know; but I must cast it off in order to welcome the burgeoning green life out-of-doors. And often it is the necessity of doing laundry that provides the way. No matter how lethargic I am feeling—and an overwhelming listlessness is a sure sign of acedia—I find it morally reprehensible to use an automatic clothes dryer when I could hang clothes out-of-doors to dry. So I literally emerge from my basement carrying a clothes basket and I leave the cave of winter behind. Once I am out-of-doors, of course, I must take stock of the garden to see what needs to be done there. Even if it takes me a few more days to muster the energy to do the work, I have put the greening garden within my range of vision and within my psyche. I am always glad to see the columbines return; most of them were planted by my grandmother many years ago. Even if all of this fails to cheer me, at the very least, by the end of the day my husband and I have clean, fragrant clothes, towels and sheets.

Although I did not realize it until many years after I wrote "Housecleaning," the poem is a manifesto against acedia. In her terrifying autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* Sylvia Plath has her protagonist, Esther, explain why she has not washed her hair for three weeks: "The reason I hadn't washed my clothes or my hair was because it seemed so silly....It seemed so silly to wash one

day when I would have to wash again the next. It made me tired just to think of it. I wanted to do everything at once and for all and be through with it." Here, as clear as the tolling of a bell, is the awful death wish of our ancient foe, *acedia*, a perfect expression of the deep-seated, ironic contempt for the self that has become all too fashionable in our day. Esther's lack of concern for her body is not the healthy, ascetic humility of a desert amma but the dread of a young woman who is rapidly becoming psychotic.

Our culture's ideal self, especially the accomplished, professional self, rises above necessity, the humble, everyday, ordinary tasks that are best left to unskilled labor. The comfortable lies we tell ourselves regarding these "little things"—that they don't matter, and that daily personal and household chores are of no significance to us spiritually—are exposed as falsehoods when we consider that reluctance to care for the body is one of the first symptoms of extreme melancholia. Shampooing the hair, washing the body, brushing the teeth, drinking enough water, taking a daily vitamin, going for a walk, as simple as they seem, are acts of self-respect. They enhance one's ability to take pleasure in oneself and in the world. At its Greek root the word *acedia* means "lack of care," and indifference to one's welfare can escalate to overt acts of self-destruction and even suicide. Care is not passive—the word derives from an

Indo-European word meaning "to cry out," as in a lament. Care asserts that as difficult and painful as life can be, it is worth something to be in the present, alive, doing one's daily bit. It addresses and acts on the daily needs that *acedia* would have us suppress and deny.

Caring is one response to the grief of the human condition, a condition described so poignantly in Psalm 90: "Our span is seventy years,/or eighty for those who are strong./And most of these are emptiness and pain./They pass swiftly and we are gone" (Ps 90:10, GR). But lack of care is another response, and it takes many forms, from suicidal depression to a madcap superficiality, to the practiced pretending-to-indifference at which adolescents excel. When I read Esther's confident words, which seem intended to mask her well-reasoned insanity (what a psychiatrist might identify as a "well-defended neurosis"), I recall my brash and bratty fourteen-year-old self responding to my mother's suggestion that I make my bed in the morning before leaving for school. "Why?" I asked, in a mocking tone. "Why? I'll just have to undo it again at night." My mother had no answer that would have satisfied me then, and I complied with her request in as perfunctory a manner as possible. It was nothing, just a small expression of ordinary sloth. I was slow to recognize that combating sloth, being willing to care for oneself and others on a daily basis, is no small part of what constitutes basic

human sanity, a faith in the everyday. Not until I was in my thirties did I discover Benedict's Rule for monasteries, in which he characterizes sloth as disobedience.

I have long been intrigued by the questions Jesus asks his disciples in the gospel of Mark—"Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 9:29), and "What is it you want me to do for you?" (10:36). By extension, as we too are Christ's disciples, he is directing these questions to us as well. For me, the latter usually occasions a despairing sigh—"Lord, there is so much that I would ask of you"—but then I recall the passage in the letter to the Hebrews in which we are reminded that Christ has already done everything for us. It speaks of the Christ who "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Heb 10:12). And yet the church teaches, and our experience of faith confirms, that Christ continues to be with us and to pray for us. The paradox may be unraveled, I think, if we remember that when human beings try to "do everything at once and for all and be through with it," we court acedia, self-destruction and death. Such power is reserved for God, who alone can turn what is "already done" into something that is ongoing and ever present. It is a quotidian mystery.

Modern psychology does not always know what to make of mystery, but it is in agreement with the

psychology of the ancient desert monastics in recognizing that depression is often the flip side of anger. What we perceive as dejection over the futility of life is sometimes greed, which the monastic tradition perceives as rooted in a fear of being vulnerable in a future old age, so that one hoards possessions in the present. But most often our depression is unexpressed anger, and it manifests itself as the sloth of disobedience, a refusal to keep up the daily practices that would keep us in good relationship to God and to each other. For when people allow anger to build up inside, they begin to perform daily tasks resentfully, focusing on others as the source of their troubles. Instead of looking inward to find the true reason for their sadness—with me, it is usually a fear of losing an illusory control—they direct it outward, barreling through the world, impatient and even brutal with those they encounter, especially those who are closest to them. I recognize all of these stages in myself and I know that there are some days when unspecific anger makes me of little use to anyone. The popular faith in "talking it out" is counterproductive; if I bristle with irritability, especially if my anger seems out of proportion to any cause, depression is my real enemy. And talking about it is the last thing I need to do. It either leads me to rant, or it allows self-pity to surface, sending the poison deeper within.

When, in the early 1980s, I discovered in the sayings of the desert abbas and ammas a name for