

REFRAMING BAPTISM



The Original Moment of Trust

As a six-year-old, I was baptized one early Sunday morning in June in a New Hampshire lake. My father, as the minister, guided me as we waded into the frigid waters. Holding me in his arms, he slowly lowered me under the waters, repeating the ancient words,

*I baptize thee in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

For a moment, I panicked, as the waters swirled over me, my father still holding me firmly in his arms. Then I was lifted clear of the waves, and burst into tears. My mother stood on the shore watching as the sun rose. She was singing “Sunrise Tomorrow.”

Hand in hand with my father, we walked back to shore, where he spoke the ritual words that were his signature at baptisms,

*Lord, it has been done as Thou hast commanded,
and yet there is room.*

What doth hinder thee from being baptized?

If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest.

I do not know what to name my experience. I wanted to be where my mother and father were, and this seemed to be where Jesus was. All I had to do was ask, and the door had opened and I had been enfolded in loving arms. My tears tell me it was a movement on my part that deeply mattered, but I could not have said why.

The Betrayal of Trust

The experience of my baptism lingered and asserted itself one day in therapy as an adult in my forties. My therapist had been trained in bioenergetics, a form of therapy which relies on healing through exercises designed to restimulate chronic tensions held in the body, in the jaw, the shoulders, or as in my case, the back. I was guided to lie down on my back on a specially constructed stool—a posture that expands the constricted muscles of the chest and back. As I went backward, inexplicably a wail of terror arose from the depths of my being. Later, sitting quietly with the therapist to talk about my experience, he suggested that the supine position I had assumed was identical to that of my baptism.

Memories of that cool June morning at the lake so long ago flashed before me: the waves lapping on the shore, the sunlight slanting through the pines and glinting on the lake, my father's reassuring touch as he cradled me in his arms and lowered me under the surface of the chilly water.

Later that afternoon at home, I lay down spread eagle on my bed in the fading light of day, gazing meditatively out the window, and reflected on my feelings and experience of the morning at therapy and of that other morning in my childhood. As I mused, an image came of Abraham offering Isaac on the altar, so similar in physical gesture to my baptism. The tears were flowing fast now. The tension and horror of that offering were palpable. I had to ask the searing question, "Had my parents likewise 'offered me up' on the altar of their faith?"



"Abraham was a fool!" I thought. How could he have thought this was God's demand? And what about Isaac, who questioned, but who also appeared so docile? "Isaac was a fool!" was my despairing conclusion.

I was helped a few years later by coming upon an essay by James Hillman on "Betrayal." He suggests that "trust and betrayal. . . contain each other. You cannot have trust without the possibility of betrayal. Trust has within it the seed of betrayal."¹ He uses a Jewish story to illustrate. A father places his little boy on the stairs, saying, "Jump, and I'll catch you," and does so twice. But the third time, he lets his son fall, saying, "That will teach you never to trust a Jew, even your own father." Hillman counters our instinctive horror at the story, making a strong point of the spiritual and psychological necessity of betrayal of primal trust in order for a person to become fully conscious. He argues his point on the basis of the centrality of the theme of betrayal in the Christian story, culminating in the betrayal of Jesus, viewed by some as abandonment by God in Jesus' death on the cross, and by others as Jesus' death being a paradoxical declaration of God's love for us—what theologians call the mystery of the cross.

I was struggling with the issue of my own broken, primal trust—in the simple faith of my childhood, baptized in my father's arms, and in this God of Abraham who appeared to make a cruel demand. I did not know how to resolve my questions. I knew in my heart that I had been turned toward God all my life. But I was puzzled about this God who would first make a lavish promise of generativity to the father of a nation, and then turn around and ask that father to destroy the long-awaited heir.

Hillman points out that "the broken trust is at the same time a breakthrough onto another level of consciousness." He goes on to illustrate the necessity of a father, and by extension, our Heavenly Father as well, to let his children move from a primal unconscious kind of trust to one that is deliberate and volitional. I was slow to arrive at that breakthrough.

The Willing Victim

I lived with my doubts and faith, holding their paradox in suspension for many years. I had not yet resolved a basic question about the meaning of my own baptismal experience as a child and why that image of Abraham offering his son was so disturbing.

A dozen years after our marriage, we joined the Episcopal Church in Boston. Here I was introduced to the rite of baptism in a new and powerful way. Much was made here of this moment when one takes on the "baptismal covenant." I was especially moved as the priest placed the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized with oil, saying:

*"You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism
and marked as Christ's own for ever."*

My evangelical Protestant tradition had paid scant attention to Passiontide over the years, so the care our church gave to the celebration of the week before Easter was refreshing and fraught with meaning. On Maundy Thursday, we sang an ancient chant-like hymn unfamiliar to me, which focused my attention on the words. One phrase stood out, describing Jesus as a "willing victim," a juxtaposition which startled me. It was not simply Isaac who had stretched out his arms to the will of his father. Jesus, who was no fool, had been a willing victim, and simultaneously our priest. The image of Jesus moving through the precise time we were celebrating—the Last Supper, the agony in Gethsemane, the trial, and death on the cross—was freighted with significance.

I glimpsed a new possibility of redeeming my early experience by taking it on consciously. A willing victim might be a contradiction in terms, but it was a condition Jesus had taken on for me and for the world, and I was flooded with gratitude. I was set free to receive that experience of long ago as an initiation into grace. The act had been primitive and simple at the time. Now I affirmed it consciously.

What's more, the intervening years since my baptism at age six had not been a wasteland. I was not returning to my childhood faith; I had never left it. The primal experience could stand for what it was—a mystery which I expect God to be able to unveil some day. The intervening years had their rich resonances of meaning too, the struggle to find my Self, so that I could surrender it consciously, not mechanically or in response to communal pressures. Some inner resistance melted and in its place, comprehending love overflowed, while we sang the hymn.

I could only comprehend the Abraham story through the lens of the Jesus story. Whereas I had seen surrender as arbitrary and difficult in my past, now it came bubbling up freely out of gratitude in the face of the mystery of God become human in Jesus, who in turn laid down his life willingly. To identify with such a one in surrender is to be no fool.

But it was sitting in the church sanctuary one June morning, singing the fourth verse of a hymn, *Alleluia, Sing to Jesus*, that a few lines at the end stopped me:

*Thou within the veil hast entered,
Robed in flesh, our great High Priest:
Thou on earth both Priest and Victim
In the eucharistic feast.*

It was the words "Priest and Victim" which startled me into awareness. In my musings on the story of Abraham offering Isaac, I had been seeing Isaac—and by extension myself—as a victim, the suffering son surrendering to his father. But the hymn was now suggesting that Jesus, the divine Son, was *both* priest and victim. A line from another hymn called Jesus a *willing victim* who went to his death on the cross.

In the summer of 1936, I only knew the simplicity of the action I had taken. I was not yet aware of the mythic significance of my death, burial, and resurrection in the waters of that lake. Life is like that—the simplicity conceals and contains the treasure that unfolds over time.

A Chosen Baptism

There was another baptism in my life. It was the day before my wedding. Don had made it clear when we first met that God was a priority in his life. I never questioned what that meant, yet it surprised me the day he told me he wanted to be baptized. But it made me glad.

It took place on Chicago's West Side in an African American church that had a baptistry. The setting sun streamed through the stained glass windows and created a halo around Don's red gold hair, illuminating his exalted face with fresh joy and tears. The minister gently lowered Don's body into the waters to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

I was moved to tears, and the memory of it still lingers.

I also remember a wave of envy that my husband, as a conscious person and a Jew, had made a clear adult choice to be marked in this way. I followed him that day into the waters—something I have kept in silence ever since because I cannot explain or defend it. It was an impulse that in some ways I regret, as unnecessary. So I have lived in silence ever since so as not to take away the freshness of both my early experience, nor Don's meaningful mature choice.