Short Stories and the Christian Imagination

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Spohn wrote about the impact of the literary arts on our moral imaginations by discussing three key elements of moral experience: first, moral perception; second, empathic identification, that is, the role that empathy plays in our ability to identify with characters in stories; and third, moral discernment. In this essay we will examine these categories more precisely to see how this sort of moral and spiritual formation takes place.

William C. Spohn, a highly regarded Catholic moral theologian at Santa Clara University for many years, wrote often about the moral imagination. His death in 2005 cut short further contributions on this important topic. The center of Spohn’s theological endeavors over the years, displayed in his 1999 volume Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics, was to secure, in a contemporary way, the centrality of Jesus Christ in the Christian moral life. Followers of Christ, he thought, should be clear and articulate about what Jesus calls them to be and to do. As he explained, Jesus Christ is the “concrete universal” of the Christian life; followers of Jesus must use their “moral imaginations” to discern how make their lives “rhyme” with Christ in faithful and creative ways. Prompted by the conclusion of Luke’s Good Samaritan story, Christians are called to “go and do likewise.” That does not mean go and do exactly the same; nor does it mean go and do whatever you want. The word “likewise” is a call to use our imaginations to “spot the rhyme.”
to discern appropriate analogies between the life of Jesus and our own (Spohn 1999, 4).

As might be expected, Spohn wrote a great deal about how we read and interpret the New Testament. This is the foundation of our access to the stories by and about Jesus.

At the same time, Spohn did not think that the New Testament, however privileged, was the only source of wisdom for disciples. In an essay published in the year of his death, Spohn suggested that the arts—especially literary arts—can be a valuable source of wisdom that can nourish our moral imaginations (Spohn 2005). To be sure, even the best novels, poems, or short stories do not have the same privileged status as the Scriptures; they are not the inspired word of God mediating God's grace and wisdom. Nevertheless, works of art can be instruments of God's grace and direction, however subtly or indirectly.

When Spohn wrote about the impact of the literary arts on our moral imaginations, he did so by discussing three key elements of moral experience: first, moral perception; second, empathic identification, that is, the role that empathy plays in our ability to identify with characters in stories; and third, moral discernment (Spohn 2005, 16–27). Spohn invoked the same categories when he wrote about the influence of scriptural stories on our moral imagination (Spohn 1999). Luke’s Good Samaritan story, for instance, can shape the way we perceive the moral world, it can engage our empathic imaginations, and it can (and should) impact the way we engage in moral discernment. In this essay we will examine these categories more precisely to see how this sort of moral and spiritual formation takes place. We will look at perception, empathic identification, and discernment in reference both to the scriptures and three wonderful short stories.

**Perception**

Two important mentors for Spohn were H. Richard Niebuhr (Niebuhr, 63–65) and James Gustafson (Gustafson, 33–40). He drew from them the conviction that the moral life is a matter of discerning fitting responses in the relationships and situations in which we find ourselves. As we try to answer the questions “What shall we do?” or “How shall we respond?” we must first answer the questions, “What is going on here?” and “How and by whom are we being acted upon?” In other words, we must see well; we must perceive the moral situation as thoroughly as possible in order to respond in fitting or appropriate ways.

But we do not always see so well. Inattentiveness—often in the form of preoccupation with other interests—can prevent us from seeing that we are even in the midst of a moral situation. Lack of moral experience can prevent us from recognizing what is truly important and what is not. Self-absorption, envy, and indifference to others are some of the things that can impede good moral discernment. “Corrective
Through the power of the Spirit at work in our lives, our seemingly small resources are often more than enough to respond in justice and in love to our needy neighbors. This is the corrective vision the New Testament can provide.

But Spohn would have us note that corrective vision is channeled not only through the Scriptures, but through the arts, especially the narrative arts. I propose here that short stories can be graced instruments of such corrective vision. Flannery O’Connor’s classic story “Revelation” is an example (O’Connor, 247–267). It is important for me to insert myself into the text here and describe my own first reading of this powerful story. From the first sentence forward Flannery O’Connor describes Mrs. Turpin, an imposing woman who had established her presence in a doctor’s waiting room in a small Southern town. I didn’t like Mrs. Turpin. Perhaps I was intimidated by her, uneasy with her dominating presence. She seemed to “preside” over the group of people assembled there. And she had a name, a “slot,” for everyone, all neatly stereotyped according to her clean, comfortable categories. As I read I identified more of what I didn’t like about her, more of my discomfort with her cozy, arrogant, and racist worldview. The way
she described the others in the waiting room shocked my politically-much-more-correct sensitivities. There was “the stylish lady,” “the ugly girl,” “the white-trash woman,” “the fat girl,” and of course several “niggers.” The more her righteousness oozed out of her mouth the more repulsed I was. I hated it when she thanked God she wasn’t “white trash.” And as she described how grateful she was that God didn’t make her “like them,” I found myself grateful that God hadn’t made me like her! And that, of course, was the moment of “revelation,” the moment I knew I had been “hooked.” This story is not simply about the racism and righteousness of Mrs. Turpin, I realized, it is also about the arrogance and “better-than-thou-ism” of many of us. Maybe this story is about how such “-isms”—so crude and obvious in others—find their way so insidiously inside some of us. I didn’t like getting “hooked,” but I am better for that grace. It helped me see myself more clearly. That is the point; that is what a good story can do.

**Empathic Identification**

What I mean by “empathic identification” can be best explained by recalling the moving story of the woman caught in adultery in John’s Gospel (8:1-11). It is hard to imagine a more horrible situation than that of this woman caught “in the very act” (v. 4) of adultery. She is dragged before the jeering crowd eager to ridicule her before they stone her to death; the leaders are delighted to be able to use her as a mere object to see how Jesus might respond. My own imagination inclines me to think that the woman might wish for the stoning to begin. “Let’s get this over with; there is no moving forward from here; please, let the stoning begin.” My own capacity for empathy has obviously been engaged by this story. The capacity to empathize allows us to feel for the woman in the story, to identify with her, and to imagine ourselves one day in some similar situation. But even more, this great story also allows us to empathize with Jesus himself, to feel some of what he might have felt, and to imagine analogous situations in which we might be presented with the opportunity either to condemn someone or to offer a way for that person to “move on.” Stories like this engage our empathic imaginations as we try to discern how we might “rhyme with Christ.” This Gospel narrative invites us to discern how we might “go and do likewise” in response to those who have done something that might warrant condemnation. How can we stand for our convictions, as Jesus did, even as we look for ways to offer forgiveness and second chances to those around us? To have our empathy and our imaginations engaged by this Gospel story is to be moved by the grace of God calling us to integrity and compassion.

Some contemporary short stories can do something similar. Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” comes to mind (Olsen, 163–171). The following passage from the story is the place to begin:
She was a beautiful baby. She blew shining bubbles of sound. She loved motion, loved light, loved color and music and textures. She would lie on the floor in her blue overalls patting the surface so hard in ecstasy her hands and feet would blur. She was a miracle to me, but when she was eight months old I had to leave her daytimes with the woman downstairs to whom she was no miracle at all, for I worked or looked for work and for Emily’s father, who “could no longer endure” (he wrote in his good-bye note) “sharing want with us.”

I was nineteen. It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression. I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet. (Olsen, 164)

In a moving way, Olsen’s story displays the frailty of human freedom as we are sometimes forced to make decisions that we know are less than optimum, but seem like the best we can do in confining, limiting situations. Tillie Olsen invites us into the soul of an unnamed woman who stands and irons as she reflects on the limited choices she faced regarding the raising of her daughter Emily. That she has had a deep, abiding love for her daughter is not at all the question. Rather, as the above passage illustrates, her struggle has been with her far-from-ideal choices about how she could spend time with Emily, how she could provide for her, how she could show her love. The feelings of the woman who irons are not anguished feelings of guilt, but more ambiguous and softer feelings of regret. She can imagine what might have been, but she has not lived in an imaginary world. She faced and dealt with reality as it pressed hard against her and did what she was able to do. There is no remorse over that, but regret.

I have used this story in a classroom setting—in a college for women—for many years. Discussion with the students invariably includes some strong and harsh voices suggesting that the mother in this story is kidding herself; she made poor and perhaps selfish choices in regard to her daughter’s care. “Why didn’t she do this?” “Why couldn’t she have done that?” “How thoroughly did she really love Emily?” But invariably there are also other voices, voices of young women, some of them single mothers, who see something else, who indeed see themselves in the story. For them, Tillie Olsen has engaged their empathy and their ability to identify with the young mother who was forced to make choices that might not have been optimum, but which were the best she could do in the situation at hand. Sometimes, these voices suggest, we can only do our best, even if some theoretically better choice can be imagined. Once that line of thought is introduced into the conversation, it nearly always happens that more students begin to “spot the rhyme” between the woman in the story and their own personal lives. For many (not for all), the result is most often a gentler, kinder sort of conclusion: perhaps human freedom is not an “all or nothing” reality; perhaps our choices are often limited in nature,
forcing us to choose something that is less than ideal but the best that can be done here and now; perhaps wisdom and compassion call us to be gracious toward others even as we hope for grace and understanding from others. A story that can lead to such a conclusion, to growth in compassion and understanding, is a kind of sacred story, a holy instrument of grace.

**Discernment**

What do I mean by discernment, moral or spiritual discernment? Two convictions from Spohn’s work help frame an answer to that question. First, Christians are called to see Jesus Christ as the “concrete universal” of the Christian life; second, we are called to use our imaginations to recognize ways we can “go and do likewise” or, as Spohn sometimes put it, to “spot the rhyme” between our lives and the life of Jesus (Spohn 1994, 47). Thus, discernment (both moral and spiritual discernment, given the unity of the Christian life) is the task of recognizing how we might be faithful to the life, teachings and deeds of Jesus and, simultaneously, creative as we attempt to “go and do likewise” in the relationships and situations in which we find ourselves. Obviously, the New Testament is the central source book for Christians engaged in such discernment. But it is not the only guide; the argument here is that many short stories can be vehicles of grace that can help us “spot the rhyme” between our lives and the life of Jesus.

Let us consider one of Jesus’ most troubling New Testament parables and then a contemporary short story that might help us find a way for the parable to rhyme with our own lives. The parable is Matthew’s account of the “Workers in the Vineyard” (20:1-16) and the short story is “Deputy Sid’s Gift” by Louisiana writer Tim Gautreaux.

The parable is not likely the favorite of many of us, especially in an economy and culture so steeped in the notion of merit, that is, that we get what we have earned not only economically but perhaps beyond (or at least we should). Matthew’s parable poses a stiff challenge to that notion. Workers are invited into a landowner’s vineyard to work for an agreed-upon wage. Fair enough. The trouble (our trouble) is that workers are invited at several different times of the day—some working all day long, others only a few hours. Many of us join the chorus of protest expressed by those hired early in the morning: “These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the heat of the day” (v. 12). The response, undoubtedly unsatisfactory to the day-long workers, is simply this: “Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?” (v. 15).

Our trouble with the parable, I suggest, has to do with where we tend to find ourselves in the story; we tend to empathize with the day-long workers and to identify with their indignation, their sense of being wronged because they received the same wage as those hired late in the day.
What if we could imagine ourselves elsewhere in the parable? What if we were able to identify instead with the landowner, with the one who simply feels a call to be generous, to extend to those hired late in the day a wage that has much more the character of “grace” than merit? Enter Tim Gautreaux’s story “Deputy Sid’s Gift”; it sheds some light on why and how one might act with such grace.

The central character in Gautreaux’s story is a man who is not so easy to like, yet someone who, in the end, surprises us and himself with his own inner goodness. The story is presented in the context of Simoneaux—he is called only by this last name and only once—going to his parish priest to tell him about how he responded to a disturbing thing that happened to him. It is a kind of confession. Simoneaux’s thirty-year-old ’62 Chevy pickup truck had been stolen. It was “a rusty spare I kept parked out by the road just to haul off trash. It was ratty and I was ashamed to drive it unless I was going to the dump” (Gautreaux, 195). Even so, it galls him that someone stole it and he wants it back. He first calls Claude from the city jail and then Sid, the county sheriff, for help. Neither one exactly jumps into action, but at their own pace they do go off to search for the truck. It shows up on the property of a very poor Black family. One of the old-before-his-time men of the area, Fernest, in the depths of his alcoholism, has been living in it. Simoneaux wants Fernest arrested and he wants his truck back. “You want me to put him in jail?” asks Deputy Sid. “Hell yeah, I told him” (Gautreaux, 199). He stole the truck; he should go to jail—that is what he deserves. Later Simoneaux says to himself, “I wasn’t going to help no black drunk truck thief that couldn’t be helped” (Gautreaux, 205).

But as the story moves along, that is precisely what Simoneaux is eventually moved to do—that is, to do something genuinely good and compassionate, motivated not by what Fernest might deserve, but rather by a new insight about the kind of person Simoneaux himself wants to be. Simoneaux has been working at a local nursing home for some time, often feeding the residents, many of them unable to speak and seemingly unable to understand his words to them. They seemed to be fitting candidates for his compassion. Why not Fernest? He didn’t merit it. Simoneaux didn’t see Fernest as deserving of his or anyone else’s compassion. He should do something to turn his life around! But after a series of tragedies for Fernest—his mother’s home burning to the ground and not long afterwards his mother’s death—Simoneaux begins to see Fernest differently, as someone who has nowhere to turn and seemingly no way out of his pitiable life. Perhaps Fernest is not so different from the residents at the nursing home who receive his care; after all, many of them neither speak nor understand his words to them. So how

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does Simoneaux know what sort of life they had lived? Why does he presume they deserve his compassion? Perhaps compassion has nothing to do with “merit” anyway. Simoneaux begins to feel a call to do something good, something “grace-ful” for Fernest not because he is being paid for it, as he is at the nursing home, but simply because Fernest is a fellow human being. So toward the end of the story, when Fernest has nowhere else to turn, Simoneaux decides that he wants to give the truck to Fernest, but he wants no credit for the gift. So he tells Fernest that Deputy Sid had bought his truck and was planning to give it to him, to Fernest, “so that he could stay in it sometime” (Gautreaux, 207). Simoneaux wants this to be known as Deputy Sid’s gift, not his own, simply because he wants to be compassionate; and he wants nothing in return. The beneficiary of this is not only Fernest (the gift, in fact, does not radically change his life). But more deeply, it is Simoneaux himself who benefits from knowing that in this small act he has done something good and important for himself.

Like the landowner in the parable whose generosity blurs the lines of merit and who reaps his own internal benefit of his “grace-ful” deeds of generosity, Simoneaux has learned that merit may have its place in life, but it ought not drive everything we do. Gautreaux’s story and the “grace-ful” action of Simoneaux help us gain an insight into Matthew’s parable. If we can identify with Simoneaux in Gautreaux’s tale, perhaps we can see the parable from the perspective of the owner of the vineyard. Sometimes questions of merit or “deserving it” do not get us very far. We are at our best, we are most like the landowner, indeed most God-like, when we are able to respond to those around us who are in need “just because,” just because they are fellow human beings. We reap the deepest internal benefits from such actions. In ways analogous to the parables and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, a short story that can help lead us to a greater sense of connection with and compassion for our fellow human beings is not just a good story, but a vehicle of grace.

References


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