

**JOHN UPDIKE: Lessons of Faith
From A Writer's Spiritual Journey
by John McTavish**

When John Updike died in January, 2009, at the age of 76, he was widely hailed as a colossal figure in American letters — one of the finest writers in the English language. What many do not know, however, is that he was also an ardent Christian, a practising Protestant. His journey of faith, I suggest, holds vital lessons for us.

Updike's spiritual journey began in a small town in Pennsylvania where he was enrolled in the Lutheran Sunday school of his mother's heritage. His experience in Sunday School, admittedly, wasn't altogether successful. He tells us, for example, that he rarely received the perfect attendance pin, though his attendance seemed to him and his parents as good as anybody's. Instead, he was given a pencil stamped KINDT'S FUNERAL HOME.

Once, knowing that a lot of racy social activity was going on under its aegis, young John tried to join the Luther League, but had the misfortune to arrive on the night of their Halloween party and was refused admittance because he was not wearing a costume. And then, an even worse rebuff: he was struck by a car one Sunday on the way to Sunday School. "I had the collection nickel in my hand, and held on to it even as I was being dragged fifteen feet on the car's bumper. For this heroic churchmanship I received no palpable credit; the Lutheran Church seemed positively to dislike me."

Yet Updike never left the church. He changed denominations occasionally, as he changed places of residence. In Pennsylvania he was a Lutheran. In Ipswich, Massachusetts, a Congregationalist, and he ended up as an Episcopalian in nearby Beverly Farms. But churchgoing itself remained constant throughout his life.

This often amazed Updike's readers. It sometimes amazed even Updike himself. He once wrote:

How did the patently vapid and drearily businesslike teachings to which I was lightly exposed succeed in branding me with a Cross? And a brand so specifically Lutheran, so distinctly Nordic; an obdurate insistence that at the core of the core there is a right-angled clash to which, of all verbal combinations we can invent, the Apostles' Creed offers the most adequate correspondence and response.

(*Assorted Prose*, p.181.)

It seems clear that those early childhood experiences in Sunday School had a lot to do with the formation of Updike's faith. "Let the little children come to me," said Jesus. "Do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Isn't this how the seed of faith so often gets planted in our lives? But of course we can't stay in Sunday School forever. The complications of life soon enough press upon us, and our Sunday School faith is usually jolted, if not demolished, during our teens. At one time Updike dramatized the adolescent crisis in a short story called "Pigeon Feathers".

In the story a 14-year-old boy, David Kern, dips into one of his mother's college textbooks, and is ambushed by the writer's description of Jesus as an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo in a minor colony of the Roman Empire who survived his own crucifixion and presumably died a few weeks later, the freakish event giving rise to a new religion. Bang go all of David's simple, trusting Sunday School convictions! The fear of death suddenly enters his consciousness and that evening, while sitting in an outhouse, he is visited by an exact vision of death:

A long hole in the ground, no wider than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede. You try to reach them but your arms are pinned. Shovels pour dirt into your face. There you will be forever, in an upright position, blind and silent, and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel. As strata of rock shift, your fingers elongate, and your teeth are extended sideways in a great underground grimace indistinguishable from a strip of chalk. And the earth tumbles on, and the sun expires, and unaltering darkness reigns where once there were stars.

(*The Early Stories 1953-1975*, p. 17.)

David now goes in search of a hint, a nod, something that can rebuild his fortress against death. He finds it at last while examining the feathers of some recently slain pigeons.

Into the fragrant open earth he dropped one broadly banded in slate shades of blue, and on top of it another, mottled all over in rhythms of lilac and gray. The next was almost wholly white, but for a salmon glaze at its throat. As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever. (Ibid, p. 33.)

This, of course, is the old argument from design, often debunked in our time. And yet it remains intuitive. How can a world so marvellous, so minutely worked out, be the result of an accident? The intricate patterns of the dead birds, in any event, assure David that a universe that is so beautiful, that made so many beautiful things as this one, will not allow him to wink out like a candle in a dark room.

With Updike a major crisis of faith took place in his late 20s. He was living in Ipswich at the time: healthy, successful, happily married. And suddenly none of it mattered. He remembers playing touch-football with friends and fellow husbands, and recalls in particular “waiting on a raw rainy fall day for the opposing touch-football team to kick off, and there would come sailing through the air instead the sullen realization that in a few decades we would all be dead.”

He also recalls another event. “I remember squatting in our cellar making my daughter a dollhouse, under the close sky of the cobwebby ceiling, and the hammer going numb in my hand as I saw not only my life but hers, so recently begun, as a futile misadventure, a leap out of the dark and back.” Updike got through

this full-scale spiritual upheaval, he tells us, only by his reading of the theology of Karl Barth. It was a profoundly Christ-centred theology that proved helpful, and not one of the popular brands with their superficial appeal to the fanatical right or sceptical left. No, it was Barth, along with the 19th century Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, who gave Updike a kind of solace and renewed his faith. “They convinced me that this was the human condition and that we could leap our way out of it. And once you take this highly intellectually unhealthy leap into faith, the world becomes accessible again.”

Strengthened by his Christian convictions, he went on to write over 60 books: daring, provocative novels such as *Couples*, *Rabbit, Run*, and *The Witches of Eastwick*; beautiful short story collections like *Pigeon Feathers*, *The Afterlife*, and *My Father’s Tears*; several volumes of playful poetry and thoughtful prose; and scores of elegant and insightful book reviews for one of the most prestigious of all magazines, *The New Yorker*. It was a remarkably productive life in which the author remained a Christian believer.

He also, interestingly, never read as much theology again as he did in his 20s. “My life,” Updike once said, “is mostly lived.” And he didn’t apologize for living. “God is the God of the living,” he said, “though his priests and executors, to keep order and to force the world into a convenient mould always want to make Him the God of the dead, the God who chastises life and forbids and says No.”

What Karl Barth and other theologians gave John Updike, when he needed it most, was a sturdy intellectual defence for the Yes of life that Christianity proposes. But if Updike didn’t read much theology again, he did continue going to church, and found that he needed to do so. “When I haven’t been to church in a couple of Sundays,” he once told an interviewer, “I begin to hunger for it and need to be there. It’s not just the words, the sacraments. It’s the company of other people, who show up and pledge themselves to an invisible entity.”

On another occasion he said: “Somehow it struck me quite early that the church, whatever its faults, was speaking to the real

issues, and that without the church I didn't feel anybody would speak to the real issues — that is, the issues of being human, being alive. I've remained loyal to the church. Spires you see in a small town or a city do bring hope, and hope brings energy. It's certainly brought me energy."

Shortly after Updike had weathered the major spiritual crisis in his life, he wrote an Easter poem in which he maintained that the resurrection was an event in time and space and not simply a poetic way of saying that the spirit of Jesus lives on. I'm sure Updike would stand with other Christians in making an important distinction between resurrection and a simple resuscitation. Still, he insists that something concrete took place.

Seven Stanzas at Easter

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit,
the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the
eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then regathered
out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
making of the events a parable, a sign painted in the faded
credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

