



Sermon

*Give me a fish and I will eat for today; teach me to fish, and
I will eat for a lifetime.*

That sounds vaguely Biblical, but it's the proverb used as the epigram for ex-priest Richard Bolles' thirty-five year best seller on job hunting, *What Color is Your Parachute?* Is the message, then, about fishing, eating, or living? Or perhaps all three?

Good Morning, on a frosty Sunday.

Those questions seem to me fitting with central themes from two great works I want to explore with you: *Moby-Dick* and the Book of Jonah, whaling stories for our time.

Let me start with Melville's novel, arguably the most interesting ever written by an American, termed by no less a critic than D. H. Lawrence, "a great book, a very great book, the greatest book of the sea ever written. It moves awe in the soul."

The story is purportedly told by "Ishmael," an engaging narrator, who as we meet him, says that when he gets depressed, badmouthing people and circumstances around him like a true *isolato*, he goes to sea. As the book opens, this New York City native travels to New Bedford, Massachusetts looking for a whaler on which to sail, when he meets and is befriended by Queequeg, a huge South Seas islander, a tattooed cannibal and harpooner who had been a prince in his native Pacific society.

The ship on which they sign together is the *Pequod*, commanded by one Captain Ahab, a fearsomely crazed man obsessed with gaining revenge on the white sperm whale, Moby Dick, which some months earlier had torn off Ahab's leg after capsizing the small boat from which Ahab had led the chase.

At the story's riveting climax (revered critic F. O. Matthiessen termed it "the finest piece of dramatic writing in American literature." He may be right – though I've always been partial to the scene of Melanie having her baby while Atlanta burns, in *Gone With the Wind*), Ahab, standing at the prow of a harpooner's boat, fires his lance at Moby Dick, striking home, but as the great white whale dives, Ahab becomes entangled in the attached line and is instantly pulled to his death.

Now as if returning his attention to finish this scene of carnage, Moby Dick breaches, turns, bears down and staves the *Pequod*, striking it broadside, sinking and killing all aboard but Ishmael, miraculously saved by Queequeg's air tight coffin, which the harpooner had commissioned of the ship's carpenter in a premonition of the catastrophe, and which now floats to the surface as a life buoy.

When Melville began his professional writing career, it was a time of great material optimism in America. Western migration was in full swing, fueled both by the discovery of gold in California outside Sacramento in 1848, and by ongoing industrialization such as work on a vastly improved transportation network permitting freer movement of goods and people. One of its major components ran almost by our backyards: the Cumberland Trail, begun in Maryland, came through the early Illinois capital of Vandalia where young Abraham Lincoln served in the legislature and where his desk is still on display in the old Statehouse, on into St. Louis on the way to the Rocky Mountains – today, I'm describing, of course, Interstate 70, paved in many spots directly over the original Cumberland Trail.

As new American commercial vistas opened, important developments were taking place at sea. Americans are "destined by nature to be great maritime people," wrote one distinguished foreign visitor in the early 1830s; "born to rule the seas as the Romans were to conquer the world." The visitor was the young French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1835 would publish his account of travels here and predictions about our national future (which have proven true with jaw dropping accuracy) in Part I of his *Democracy in America*.

Our material progress, however, was not matched by either cultural accomplishment or artistic recognition. With wholly characteristic arrogance, the British critic Sydney Smith wrote in 1820, "In all the four corners of the globe, who today reads an American book?" and at the time, Smith was right. Herman Melville helped to change that fact, but it was a notably slow process.

To begin with, he wasn't part of the prevalent mid-19th Century capitalistic tradition of expansionist American optimism. The reasons are complex, deeply embedded in the fabrics of his life and art. Melville's first two novels, based on his adventures as a sailor encountering cannibal natives in the South Pacific, were instant best sellers. If Oprah had been on the air in 1847-48, Melville would surely have been her guest, and *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, his first publication, might have been her Book Club choice.

But almost as quickly as he had become famous, Melville lost his popular audience by refusing to turn out requested sequels to his early work. His major writing was done by 1857, when he was thirty-eight. From soon after the Civil War, for almost twenty years, he worked as a customs clerk in New York City, quite forgotten. In 1876, as part of the World's Fair Centennial celebrations in Philadelphia, all America's important writers were invited to attend. Not Melville. As it apparently didn't occur to the planners that he was still alive, no invitation was prepared. He lived on to 1891, to age seventy-two – by 19th Century standards, almost a double lifetime. At his death, a New York newspaper obituary noted the passing of that “once famous novelist, Herbert Melville.”

He remained a largely ignored figure until the 1920s, when the great Melville revival began. To say it has flourished since would be a little like calling Niagara a waterfall. So much scholarship on the subject has been produced that American critic Harry Levin once suggested that writing about Herman Melville has replaced whaling as New England's leading industry.

Melville had little of the aloof, detached perspective of his friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne. He searched and seemed unable to discover a philosophical or religious synthesis in which he could believe – a not altogether surprising result, considering his inherited background. His mother's family were the Gansevoorts of Albany, NY; she was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church, a strict observer of Calvinist doctrine, with its beliefs in Innate Depravity, Predestination, and Original Sin which so alienated the young William Ellery Channing, whose rebellious words we heard in the Reading for our January 4 service.

His father, Allan, was a Boston Melvill, committed Unitarians all, whose optimistic religious beliefs centered on reason rather than fear, and trust in a benevolent God who, as Allan once wrote to his family while on a business trip, “reconciles partial evil with universal good.” Well. What dinner conversations this family must have had. ...

Out of this rich spiritual mix, and as commentator Richard Chase puts it, Melville became “a kind of alien wanderer in a world of imagination, seeking a truth that should be at once a truth of reason and a truth of art.” Melville came to believe that we live in an insolubly dualistic world, forever caught between eternal and self contained opposites: good and evil, heaven and hell, God and Satan, head and heart, spirit and matter.

It was a perspective which helped fuel Melville's natural tendencies toward skepticism and doubt. But instead of being crushed by that conclusion, resourceful person that he was, Melville at mid-career renegotiated the terms of his art, determined to portray the denial of those easy affirmations by which most of us live. “The test of a first rate intelligence,” wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, “is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still function.”

He decided nothing less than to expose the uncertainties, the contradictions, the unanswerable riddles of life which most of us prefer to ignore. As famed psychologist and Melville scholar Henry Murray writes, Melville began to write not “to soothe, but to kindle, to make people leap from their seats . . . and fight for their lives.”

Melville's search and struggle to do so is a thrilling story, nowhere more evident than in *Moby-Dick*. Melville grew, in other words, from an entertainer into an artist, who realized that his work was destined not to console or sustain, but to *disturb*, and by dramatizing that most unwelcome truth of the human condition, our common vulnerability.

And so we arrive at the story of Jonah, referred to by Melville several times in *Moby-Dick* as a kind of cultural reference point. We often associate his name with someone who brings bad luck, but that's because we don't remember – or don't probe more deeply – the kind of parable which Jesus was so fond of citing. Too often, all we remember of Jonah is that he throws himself into the sea, is swallowed whole by a whale, then regurgitated three days later, remarkably enough, with all body parts intact. But there is considerably more here for the asking.

In the beginning, Jonah is told by divine message to go Ninevah to preach word of the one and only God to the pagans, to ask them to forsake their idolatry and be saved. But Jonah balks. He refuses because he doesn't

want them to be saved; he wants them *destroyed*. As a loyal nationalist, he looks upon Ninevah as his country's deadliest enemy.

But the Book of Jonah is a repudiation of this narrow mindset, as columnist Sydney J. Harris has suggested. It is instead a powerful denial of the cultist tendencies of those Israelites who believed that God's grace was limited to the children of Abraham – children of Isaac, of course. Ninevah is spared in spite of Jonah, as a lesson for him and us in divine compassion, regardless of any denominational belief, ethnic identification, or line of descent.

The whole purpose of this miracle-myth, as Harris reads it, is to show that God extends His mercy and grace even to the enemies of Israel; that He is not a god of a tribe or cult but of the whole universe. And this is the point that Jonah finds so hard to accept, believing as he does that the Lord should be on the side only of his own people.

This is the core ecumenical meaning of the story, which really has not a hill of beans' worth to do with Jonah bringing bad luck, or whether a man might live inside a whale belly yet escape in one piece. It is a highly prophetic, mystical narrative, because it moves the God of ancient Israel upward from a nationalistic deity to a universal one, in the direct line of all the great Old Testament prophets. It is a message, then, not of vengeance or of disobedience, but of *light*.

When I teach *Moby-Dick*, I want to highlight Melville's rejection of many mid 19th Century American perspectives, turning away as he does from any single minded view of reality in favor of one more forked, ambiguous, and inclusive. Two chapters of the novel memorably illustrate the point. In the first, Ishmael is assigned as Lookout from the ship's masthead, a tiny four square foot open area one hundred fifty feet above the deck. Looking out at the transcendent beauty of the view, of the calm sky and sea, he almost forgets how small and fragile is his perch. One false step, one overly enthusiastic admiration of the scenery, he realizes, and he plunges fifteen stories to his death.

In the second, Ishmael nearly wrecks the *Pequod*, after having described in close detail the kiln, with its associations of hell fire, in which whale blubber is boiled to extract its precious oil. Ishmael dozes off at the helm, at the ship's wheel, only to be startled awake by the sense "of something fatally wrong." In the moment before he regains his bearings, realizing he has turned in his sleep to face the ship's stern rather than its bow, the *Pequod* seems "not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern." It is an experience which prompts the following brief sermon, one of the story's strongest judgments of Ahab:

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!

Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for a time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness.

Alone among members of the crew, Ishmael sustains a perspective sufficiently large and flexible to grasp the limitations of both views. External reality rarely admits to either unblemished beauty or purifying fire. To survive, one needs to recognize and seize middle ground, to understand the limitations of both extremes. To covet either transcendental purity or blind rage is to invite madness and death. Ishmael survives the wreck of the *Pequod*, "escaped alone to tell thee," as he puts it on the novel's last page, because like Job, he has been tested and found worthy. He survives because he deserves to.

In the same vein, I like asking students about the book's famed first sentence, perhaps the most famous opening line in all American literature. I ask if we may paraphrase it accurately as "My name is Ishmael." A surprising number often agree, as if I had just asked, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?" But I insist that the narrator is not directly identifying himself. Ishmael is *not* his name, but he tells us we may call him that. To a generation of readers brought up with close Bible study, the *Genesis* account of the teenage outcast condemned by God to live apart with his mother from the only society he has known, "a wild man" whose "hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him" would seem both familiar and appropriate to the misanthropy with which the narrator begins his story.

Our Ishmael, though, whatever his real name, grows beyond such a stance, accepts as a chaste bedmate and brother a tattooed cannibal, and from him learns all the redeeming Judeo-Christian virtues of friendship,



community, forgiveness, acceptance, love. Alone at sea, where "the tranquil beauty and brilliance" of the ocean's skin but conceals "the tiger heart" that beats beneath it, such lessons prove a life line.

Each year, many of us receive solicitations from a unique New York City based charity, The Abraham Fund, which my wife and I are pleased to support, dedicated as it is both to underwriting programs to promote Arab and Jewish mutual understanding and educational collaboration, and to honor the Old Testament patriarch who fathers both Ishmael and Isaac. At the signing of the historic 1998 West Bank agreement mediated by President Clinton between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, Jordan's King Hussein delivered the following poignant eulogy to the effort:

There has been enough destruction, enough death, enough waste. And it's time that together we occupy a place beyond ourselves, our peoples, that is worthy of them and of their sons and daughters, the descendants of the children of Abraham.

There is in Jewish folklore the tradition of *tikkun olam*, roughly translatable as the urge "to heal the world." To the extent American author Bernard Malamud was right to suggest "all of us are Jews, but few of us know it," to be a Jew today is to know (in commentator Leonard Fein's words) fundamentally that this world is not working the way it was intended. Rather, it is badly broken, and we are all implicated in its repair.

While I am not here to say that *Moby-Dick* is a profoundly Jewish book, I will say that when we vicariously experience the world of the *Pequod*, a microcosmic society carefully populated by members of almost every imaginable ethnic and religious affiliation, and obviously intended by Melville to represent all humanity – with the glaring omission, of course, of the half of it who are women – we see that world is broken, streaked as it is by vengeance, greed, selfishness, spiritual weakness, and interpersonal neglect.

When Ishmael turns away from this world view, when he successfully resists Ahab's magnetic but neurotic illusions of self dependence, he is illustrating Melville's rejection of what he came to see as the ruinous individualism of optimistic, expansionist, mid 19th Century America. By reconciling the contrary beliefs he encounters, Ishmael is one of our first Anti-Heroes, one of the first modern figures to express a fuller, more balanced vision by which to order one's life. Is it too much to suggest it became a goal of his author to do the same?

Jonah, Ishmael, Melville. Three fishing stories of a sort, but about fish, food, or quality of life?

Educator Patricia Cross has paraphrased Richard Bolles in referencing the ongoing debate over the relative value of vocational or pre-professional study versus that of the traditional liberal arts.

Teach students subject matter, and you give them perishable information; teach them how to learn, and you give them knowledge and independence for the rest of their lives.

The message is that learning to learn transcends age and location. If it's never too late to learn, neither is it to draw upon the core Judeo-Christian values learned by Jonah and Ishmael, of compassion, altruism, justice, and trust.

May the fish each of us seek provide not only today's food, but a lifetime's nourishment for thought. And may such presence inform each of our lives with the peace which brings – and passes – understanding.

Amen.