

## [Readings] | Darling, by Richard Rodriguez

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*By Richard Rodriguez, from the title essay in Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography, to be published in October by Viking. Rodriguez's article "Final Edition" appeared in the November 2009 issue of Harper's Magazine.*

A middle-aged woman in a brown wool suit tapped my shoulder after mass. She knew my name. She said she had read an interview I gave to an online magazine on the gay-marriage controversy in California. At that time, a Catholic archbishop had colluded with officials from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a campaign to protect the sacred institution of marriage from any enlarging of its definition (including civil marriage, which the Catholic Church does not recognize as sacramentally valid). Campaign checks to be made payable to the Knights of Columbus.

The Knights of Columbus is a fraternal lay organization sanctioned by the Catholic Church. The Knights are an admirable bunch of guys — I believe "guys" is the right word — who spend many hours performing works of charity. On festival days, the Knights get themselves up with capes and swords and plumed hats like a comic-opera militia.

The woman in the brown suit did not say she agreed with my comments in the article; she did not say she disagreed. She said, "I am a Dominican nun; some days I cannot remember why."

I will stay in the Church as long as you do, I said.

Chummy though my reply was, it represented my abrogation of responsibility to both the Church and the nun.

A gay man easily sees himself as expendable in the eyes of the Church hierarchy because that is how he imagines the Church hierarchy sees him. The Church cannot afford to expel women. Women are obviously central to the large procreative scheme of the Church. Women have sustained the Church for centuries by their faith and their birthrates. Following the sexual scandals involving priests and children, women may or may not consent to present a new generation of babies for baptism. Somewhere in its canny old mind, the Church knows this. Every bishop has a mother.

It is because the Church needs women that I depend on women to protect the Church from its impulse to cleanse itself of me.

I shook hands with the Dominican nun and we parted.

But even as I type these words, the Vatican has initiated a campaign against American nuns who (according to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) promote "radical feminist themes" and who remain silent regarding their Excellencies' positions on women's reproductive rights and homosexuality. A nun's silence is interpreted as dissent in this instance.

The Church — I say the Church but I mean the male church — is rather shy in the presence of women, even as the God of Scripture is rather shy of women. God will make a bond of friendship with a hairy patriarch. God interferes with Sarah through her husband. God courts Mary by an angel.

And yet the God of intention entered history through a woman's body (reversing the eye of the needle). The Church, as she exists, is a feminine act, intuition, and pronoun: the Christian Church is the sentimental branch of human theology. (I mean that as praise.) The Church watches the progress of Jesus with the same sense of his heartbreaking failure as did the mother who bore him. In John's account of the wedding at Cana, Mary might be played with maximum flibbertigibbetry by Maggie Smith. Jesus struggles to extricate his legs from the banquet table in the courtyard; his companions can't help sniggering a bit. The first showing of Jesus' power over Nature, the

changing of water into wine, makes no clear theological sense. But as the first Comic Mystery, the scene makes perfect domestic sense. Jesus is instructed by his mother.

The women who educated me — Catholic nuns belonging to the Irish order of the Sisters of Mercy — looked very much like Afghan village women. They wore veils, long skirts, long sleeves, laced black shoes — Balenciagas all.

Of the many orders of Catholic nuns founded in nineteenth-century Europe, the majority were not cloistered orders but missionary orders — nursing and teaching orders. Often the founders came from upper-middle-class families, but most of the women who swelled the ranks had left peat-fumed, sour-stomached, skinny-cat childhoods behind. They became the least sequestered women imaginable.

It was in the nineteenth century, too, that secular women in Europe and North America formed suffrage movements, following in the footsteps of missionary nuns and Protestant missionary women. Curiously, it was the burkalike habits nuns wore — proclaiming their vows of celibacy — that lent them protection in the roustabout world, also a bit of a romantic air.

When seven Irish Sisters of Mercy (the oldest twenty-five) disembarked in San Francisco in December 1854, they found a city filled with dispirited young men and women who had followed the legend of gold. The Sisters of Mercy spent their first night in California huddled together in St. Patrick's Church on Mission Street; they had no other accommodation. In the morning, and for months afterward, the sisters searched among the wharves and alleys of San Francisco, ministering to men, women, and children they found.

The *Christian Advocate*, an anti-Catholic newspaper, published calumny about the nuns; the paper declared them to be women of ill repute and opined that they should move on — nobody wanted them in San Francisco.

In 1855 the Sisters of Mercy nursed San Franciscans through a cholera outbreak. In 1868 the nuns cared for victims of a smallpox epidemic. In 1906, after the great earthquake and fire, the Sisters of Mercy evacuated hundreds of the sick and the elderly to Oakland across the bay. Officials in the nineteenth century invited all religious orders to ride San Francisco's buses and cable cars free of charge because of the city's gratitude to the Sisters of Mercy.

As they had done in Ireland, the Sisters of Mercy opened orphanages, schools, and hospitals in California and throughout the United States. By the time our American mothers caught up with the nuns in the 1960s — with the possibility of women living fulfilling lives independent of family or marriage — the nuns had discarded their black robes in favor of sober pedestrian attire. Vocation has nothing to do with dress-up.

Veiled women were seldom thereafter seen on the streets of America or in European cities, not until the influx of immigrant Muslim women from North Africa and the Middle East in the 1980s.

A shadow of scandal now attaches in Ireland to the Sisters of Mercy. An Irish government report released in 2009 documents decades of cruelty perpetrated particularly on children of the working class in orphanages and homes for unwed mothers run by the Sisters of Mercy. One cannot doubt or excuse the record. The record stands.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas — the women I revere — are fewer and older. The great years of the order seem to have passed, but the Sisters continue their ministry to the elderly, to immigrants, to the poor. The Sisters are preparing for a future the rest of us have not yet fully comprehended — a world of increasing poverty and misery — even as they prepare for their absence from the close of the twenty-first century.

Nuns will not entirely disappear from San Francisco as long as we may occasionally glimpse a black mustache beneath a fluttering veil. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are an order of drag nuns whose vocation is dress-up.

Like the Sisters of Mercy in early California, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence took up their mission in bad repute. Unlike the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of P.I. have done everything in their power to maintain a bad repute.

They have their detractors. I was one. I wrote against them because I saw them as mocking heroic lives. Thirty years ago I had lunch with Jack Fertig, a.k.a. Sister Boom Boom, in a taqueria on Mission Street. He arrived wearing jeans and a T-shirt. On the wall at the rear of the restaurant was a crucifix — not, I assumed, ironic. The nun in mufti approached the crucifix and fell to his knees. He blessed himself; he bowed his head. Whether this was done for my benefit I don't know. There was no follow-up, no smirk, no sheepishness, no further demonstration of piety. I did not question him about it; I was astonished. But, as I say, I wasn't taken in.

Before he died, Jack Fertig converted to Islam.

A few years ago, I stood on a street corner in the Castro; I watched as two or three Sisters of P.I. collected money in a coffee can for one of their charities. Their regalia looked haphazard on that day — jeans and tennis shoes beneath their skirts, like altar boys. I couldn't help but admire how the louche nuns encouraged and cajoled the young men and women who approached. The Sisters' catechism involved sexual precaution and drug safety, with plenty of trash repartee so as not to spook their lambs: "Do you have a boyfriend, honey? Are you getting enough to eat? Where do you sleep? Are you compliant with your meds?"

I experienced something like a conversion: Those men are ministering on a street corner to homeless teenagers, and they are pretty good at it. No sooner had I applied the word "good" than I knew it was the right word. Those men are good.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence do what nuns have always done: they heal; they protect; they campaign for social justice; they perform works of charity. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence have an additional mission: they scandalize.

For example, on Easter Sundays, the Sisters host the Hunky Jesus Contest in Dolores Park. The Sisters and their congregation seem to be interested only in satirizing the trappings of S&M already available in Roman Catholic iconography. (One cannot mock a crucifixion; crucifixion is itself mockery.)

I do not believe the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are enemies of the Church; I believe they are a renegade church of true vocation. They are scourges; they are jesters. Their enemy is hypocrisy. In a way, they are as dependent on the Church as I am. They are as dependent on the nun in a brown wool suit as I am. Without the Church, without the nun, they would make no sense at all.

He" is the default setting in scripture — Jewish, Christian, Islamic. The perception, the preference, the scriptural signifier, the awe of the desert religions, is of a male God. Father. Abba. Lord. Jesus refers to God always as Father, though he insists that God is spirit. Yahweh is unnameable but for the name He (as I was going to write) gives Himself: *I Am*. There is no "He" in *I Am*. The theologian John L. McKenzie proposes that a more accurate translation of the holy name might be: *He brings into being*. Bringing into being was a potency that the prophets, the evangelists, the compilers of scripture, conceived anthropomorphically as male.

In the desert cultures of the Middle East, religious communities regard homosexual acts as abominations — unnatural, illegal, unclean. But homosexual behavior does not preclude marriage or fatherhood. The notion of a homosexual identity is a comic impossibility. What alone confers an appropriate sexual identity on the male is fatherhood.

Two young men fussing over a baby girl in a stroller. You were not charmed. You said no straight man would make that kind of fuss.

No straight woman, either, Darling.

The new gay stereotype is domestic, child rearing — homosexuals willing to marry at a time when the heterosexual inclination is to dispense with marriage.

Divorce rates in the United States and Europe suggest that women are not happy with the relationships they have with men, and vice versa. And whatever that unhappiness is, I really don't think gay people are the cause. On the other hand, whatever is wrong with heterosexual marriage does have some implication for homosexuals.

The majority of American women are living without spouses. My optimism regarding that tabulation is that a majority of boys in America will grow up assuming that women are strong. My worry is that as so many men absent themselves from the lives of the children they father, boys and girls will grow up without a sense of the tenderness of men.

The prospect of a generation of American children being raised by women in homes without fathers is challenging for religious institutions whose central conception of deity is father, whose central conception of church is family, whose only conception of family is heterosexual. A woman who can do without a husband can do without any patriarchal authority. The oblique remedy some religious institutions propose for the breakdown of heterosexual relationships is a legal objection to homosexual marriages by defining marriage as between one man and one woman.

I believe there is a valid analogy to be drawn between the legal persecution of homosexuality and the legal persecution of miscegenation — both “crimes against nature.” But more comparable to the gay-rights movement is the nineteenth-century feminist movement.

Suffragettes withstood condemnation from every institution of their lives, condemnation that employed the adjectives of unnatural aspiration, adjectives such as “thwarted,” “hysterical,” “strident,” “shrill.” Still, it was the brave suffragette (and not the tragic peacock Oscar Wilde) who rescued my sexuality.

In the twentieth century, gays emerging from the closet were beneficiaries of the desire of women to define themselves outside the familial structure. The feminist movement became inclusive not only of wives, mothers, and unmarried women but also of lesbians and thus, by extension, of nonfamilial sisterhood, of homosexual men, of the transgendered, of the eight-legged anagram LGBT.

Using the homeliest of metaphors — coming out of the kitchen; coming out of the closet — heterosexual women and homosexual women and men announced, just by being themselves without apology, the necessity of a reordered civil society. We are — heterosexual women and homosexuals are — for however long I don't know, dispensed (by constitutional laws, state laws) from having to fit into the heterosexual roles and heterosexual social patterns that have been upheld for so long by reference to the “natural law.” Natural law, as cited against sodomy, against abortion, against birth control, against miscegenation, is neither exactly the “natural moral law,” which is a philosophical construct (the understanding placed in us by God at the creation), nor exactly the law of Nature — that is, how Nature works. Rather, it is a value placed on behavior by someone or some agency, most often with reference to some divinely inspired statutory text, that denounces or declares illegal or punishable any deviation from what the authority or the text declares to be natural human behavior. Boys will be boys, and girls like glitter.

I know there are some homosexuals who see the gay couples in line for marriage licenses, or filling out forms for adoption, or posing for wedding announcements in the *New York Times*, as antithetical to an ancient culture of refusal that made the best of a short story — of youth and chance and public toilets and then the long half-life of irony and discretion.

There certainly are homosexuals of my generation who never dared hope for a novel of marriage but only one of renunciation. E. M. Forster imagined a marriage novel, but then stipulated it not be published during his lifetime. The Church regards homosexual marriage as a travesty that will promote the undoing of marriage. But I propose that the single mother is a greater threat to the patriarchal determination of what constitutes a natural order.

I am thinking of David Grossman, the Israeli novelist who, in a profile in *The New Yorker*, said: “If God came to Sarah and told her, ‘Give me your son, your only one, your beloved, Isaac,’ she will tell him, ‘Give me a break,’ not to

say 'Fuck off.' ”

I am thinking of the Mormon mother who told me on Temple Square in Salt Lake City: “The Church teaches us that family is everything. And then the Church tells me that I should abandon my homosexual son. I will not do it!”

It is clear to me that civic attitudes toward homosexuality and gay marriage are changing. In countries we loosely describe as Western, opinion polls and secular courts are deciding in favor of the legalization of gay marriage. Nevertheless, the desert religions will stand opposed to homosexuality, to homosexual acts, unless the desert religions turn to regard the authority of women. And that will not happen until the desert religions reevaluate the meaning of women. And that will not happen until the desert religions see that “bringing into being” is not a power we should call male only. And that will not happen until the desert religions see the woman as father, the father as woman, indistinguishable in authority and creative potence.

My place in the Church depends on you, Darling.