

“Raymond Carver and Alcoholics Anonymous:
The Narrative Under the ‘Surface of Things’ ”

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Abstract

Resumen

When Raymond Carver met Richard Ford in 1978, Carver had already crossed over into what he spoke of as the second of “two lives.” June 2, 1977 marked Carver’s “line of demarcation,” the day he entered into a new life without alcohol (Gentry and Stull 89). In these days of instability, Ford remembers that Carver “had inched his way out of shadows and into light, and he was as thankful, and as determined to stay in the light – my light, your light, the world’s light – as any convert to a feasible religion” (73). Ford’s memory suggests that Carver was a convert, a changed man on a pilgrimage to recovery. However, while critics may recognize that “something” happened to Raymond Carver’s fiction, few are willing to associate Carver’s literary transformation with a spiritual conversion. This interpretive reluctance causes Carver’s vision of transcendence to be handled with suspicion, as spiritual imagery and confessional language is typically dismissed as an alcoholic’s restored hope in humanity rather than a possible encounter with “the other.”¹ In contrast to the postmodern way of suspicion, Dennis Taylor advocates for an authentic engagement with spirituality in literature. Taylor goes as far as suggesting that some texts in the western canon actually demand a religious interpretation; when this possibility is squelched, “what is left over is a nagging spiritual question” (125). Concurring with Taylor, I suggest that a truly judicious approach to Raymond Carver’s life and work will create the necessary theoretical space for a spiritual reading.

Perhaps the most significant article concerning Carver's spirituality is William Stull's, "Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver." In this essay Stull contrasts the darkness of Carver's earlier work with the optimism illustrated in *Cathedral*. Stull's close reading of "The Bath" and "A Small, Good Thing" suggests that the ominous uncertainty of "The Bath" is revised from chaos "into an understated allegory of spiritual rebirth" (12) which culminates as a "symbol of the Resurrection" (13). Although Stull cites deliberate allusions between the Bible and Carver's story, Carver makes no claims of biblical literacy, making it problematic to suggest he was using Christian imagery as deliberately as Stull suggests.² For this reason, both Randolph Paul Runyon and Mark A.R. Facknitz reject Stull's interpretation. They, in turn, assert that the ending of "A Small, Good Thing" is not designed to elicit a sense of Christian communion, but is a self-generated *human* communion that is genuine, but also godless (Runyon 149, Facknitz 295-96). Although these observations make a valid rebuttal, their overwhelming rejection of structured Christianity also negates the spiritual awakening that is certainly evident in Carver's post-recovery work. To dismiss the possibility of a spiritual encounter on the grounds that it does not correlate with Christianity is yet another representative misreading of Carver's work. In short, Carver's spirituality is far more ambiguous than critics tend to realize, as Carver simultaneously refuses to be interpreted as a Christian or a secular humanist.

As an alternative approach to this critical tension, Hamilton E. Cochrane contends that Carver's predilection toward spirituality arises from his association with Alcoholics Anonymous. Cochrane asserts that examining Carver's redemption "in light of the A.A. experience is illuminating and more accurate than locating his new sensibility in some other, say, Christian perspective" (81). Although Cochrane's observations are convincing and insightful, it is worth noting that Carver actually denies the influence of Alcoholics Anonymous on more than one occasion; however, this rejection should be interpreted with care.³ For even if Carver did not reproduce the actual narratives of A.A. meetings in his work, an examination of key stages in the

A.A. program suggests that the structural patterns of Alcoholics Anonymous, invites, and may even explain, the spiritual dimension in Carver's later work.

In 1977, Carver was living in San Francisco, where he visited St. James Episcopal Church and went to "at least one and sometimes two [A.A.] meetings a day for the first month" (Gentry and Stull 39). Apart from Carver's early drying out period, it is difficult to assess the degree of participation he maintained with Alcoholics Anonymous; nevertheless, it is evident that the memory of A.A. remained with Carver his entire life.⁴ With this in mind, the objective of this article is to offer an illustrative study that compares various stages of Alcoholics Anonymous with the characteristics and patterns interpreted in Carver's post-recovery writings. In doing so, it is evident that on a surface level, Carver's rehabilitation brought sense and order to a chaotic personal narrative. Yet, beneath a text of what Carver describes as "the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (*Fires* 26), Carver's own life and work parallels the patterns of Alcoholics Anonymous, suggesting that this recovery program contributed significantly to Carver's spiritual and literary transformation.

Step Three: "Cathedral" and the Possibility of 'Something.'

"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 34)

Raymond Carver's spirituality is not systematic or easily definable – it is not bound by orthodox creed or specific doctrine. In a similar way, Alcoholics Anonymous is described as "a spiritual rather than religious organization" (Wilcox 64). The only confessional requirement is that the new member must be willing to recognize that alcoholism has bent his or her mind "into such an obsession for destructive drinking that only an act of Providence can remove it" (Wilcox 21). The second step recognizes that this healing force of Providence is not antagonistic, but desires wholeness and restoration—which leads to the third, and perhaps, most critical step. Through an

act of faith, the alcoholic must cross a threshold, turning his or her life over to the gracious care of the higher power as they “understand Him,” content to receive renewal based on the limited revelation he or she has received. Reading a story such as “Cathedral” in this context, suggests that the ambiguous “higher power” of Alcoholics Anonymous surfaces in the form of an ineffable “something” that is mysteriously revealed to the narrator of “Cathedral.”⁵

When one probes below the surface of “Cathedral,” characteristics of Carver’s “God as he understood Him” become clearer. A blind man, an old friend of the narrator’s wife, comes to visit, dismantling the narrator’s stereotypical assumptions concerning blindness. The narrator, “hemmed in by insecurity and prejudice, buffered by drink and pot and by the sad fact, as his wife says, that he has no ‘friends,’ [the narrator] is badly out of touch with his world, his wife, and himself” (Nesset 66). However, the narrator, who believes he has genuine knowledge, actually becomes dependent upon the blind man, a character whose paradoxical vision reaches far deeper than the narrator can ever imagine.

As the evening conversation fades, the two men are watching a late program, “something about the church and the Middle Ages” (“Cathedral” 222). The blind man leans toward the screen with his ear cocked, hearing what he fails to see. Together, they listen to a droning Englishman describe cathedrals and their symbolic ability to reach for transcendence. The narrator suddenly becomes aware of a communication gap. In a series of rapid questions, he asks the blind man: “Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you know the difference between that and a Baptist church, say?” (223-224). Although the blind man knows something of cathedrals, he has no idea what one actually looks like. Yet, as the narrator stares at the various cathedrals, he realizes that words will not capture the image. He gropes for language, but stops as he “wasn’t getting through to him” (225). In frustration, the narrator simply states that “in those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be closer to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone’s life.

You could tell this from their cathedral” (225). While the narrator’s attempt at description is genuine, language fails penetrate what the image communicates.

The blind man then responds with an explicit question that provokes a confession:

‘Hey, listen. I hope you don’t mind me asking you. Can I ask you something? Let me ask you a simple question, yes or no. I’m just curious and there’s no offense. You’re my host. But let me ask if you are in any way religious? You don’t mind me asking?’

I shook my head. He couldn’t see that, though. A wink is the same as a nod to a blind man. ‘I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard. You know what I’m saying?’

‘Sure, I do,’ he said.

‘Right,’ I said. (225)

Through these unpredictable shifts in conversational rhythm, it is probable that the looming and breaking of silence is not an indicator of what is often generalized as Carveresque reticence, but the origins of genuine conversation prodded by the “higher power.” As Martin Buber suggests, authentic dialogue reflects a pattern of broken silences, perhaps dictated by a spiritual presence:

It is not necessary for all who are joined in a genuine dialogue to actually speak; those who keep silent can on occasion be especially important. . . . No one, of course, can know in advance what it is that he has to say; genuine dialogue cannot be arranged beforehand. It has indeed its basic order in itself from the beginning, but nothing can be determined, the course is of the spirit, and some discover what they have to say only when they catch the call of the spirit. (87)

Mirroring Buber’s assertion, the silence encroaches upon the two men again, until the narrator is moved to speak. Apologizing for his inability to communicate, it is, perhaps, the spirit of language that moves the narrator to clarify his confession further: “The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean

anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are.' It was then that the blind man cleared his throat" (226).

In Carver's typical "sparse style that tells nothing, but shows everything" (Cochrane 79), eavesdropping readers must interpret meaning through the limited lens of Carver's compressed language. The blind man "cleared his throat" -- Was it just timing? Or was the blind man offended by the narrator's indifference towards the "other"? Whatever the case, a throat clearing shifts the control of the narrative, as, in this moment, the power of knowledge shifts. The blind man begins directing the narrator to gather up some heavy paper and a pen. After they clear a space to draw, the blind man closes his hand over the narrator's and politely orders, "Go ahead, bub, draw . . . Draw. You'll see. I'll follow along with you. It'll be okay. Just begin now like I'm telling you. You'll see. Draw" (227). These directions speak a prophetic irony. Twice the blind man repeats, "you'll see," in the context of you'll *see how things work*. However, the expansive conclusion of the story reveals that the narrator, who does not believe in "it" or "anything" that inhabits cathedrals (226), actually *sees* "something" (229).

As instructed, the narrator draws. He begins timidly, blindly drawing a box that "could have been the house [he] lived in" (227); yet after some encouragement, he remembers: "I couldn't stop" (227). Even when the program goes off the air, the two men continue. In a rapid series of sequential commands, the blind man offers instruction and encouragement to his pupil: "Put some people in there now. What's a cathedral without people? . . . Close your eyes now" (227-228). Without questioning, the narrator continues to draw. And with eyes closed, he recalls the unique moment that transported him to an encounter with "something":

So we kept on with it. His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now.

Then [the blind man said] 'I think that's it. I think you got it,' he said 'Take a look. What do you think?'

But I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer.

I thought it was *something* I ought to do.

'Well?' he said. 'Are you looking?'

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

'It's really *something*,' I said. (229, emphasis mine)

Through his participation in volitional blindness, the narrator is able to see "something" beyond what his personal limitations formerly allowed. In the presence of "something," he remains prayerfully silent, with eyes closed, as though it was *something* he ought to do. Although the final lines are formed by abstract, seemingly elusive language, the narrator's own memory eliminates the possibility of a mundane experience. As if transported by the spires he drew, he specifically remembers the sensation of transcending his own boundaries, as he "didn't feel like [he] was in anything." He remains silent for he lacks the adequate language or ability to communicate.

Traditionally, critics have attributed this moment to an interpersonal connectivity between the narrator and the blind man. An alternative reading proposes that Carver's repetition of "something" is a significant, yet ambiguous, expression that testifies to a confrontation with the ineffable 'higher power' that Carver could not adequately define. Paul Doherty's insightful commentary on the rhetorical structure of the final lines proves to be informative for such a reading:

'It's really something.' Those words are the honest best the [narrator] can make of his new experience. In its vague generality, the sentence simultaneously conveys both the inadequacy of language to describe the experience which the [narrator] is having, and the validity of that experience. "*It*," the experience of moving beyond language, is "*real*" it is "*some thing*." (340)

Doherty's observations unearth the potential meaning beneath the surface of Carver's text, as this phrase may function as an internal allusion to an earlier moment in the story. Previously, when

questioned about his religious convictions, the narrator replied that he didn't believe in "*it*. In *anything*" (225). In contrast to this nothingness, after seeing the makeshift cathedral through volitional blindness, the narrator recants, testifying that "*It is really something*" (229 *emph. mine*). What was formerly nothing, is now perceived as "some thing" tangible.

It is also worth noting that although the narrator fails to physically see anything, he encounters something through the building and interaction with a spiritual icon. Like a medieval icon inviting reflection, the narrator's "boxed house" cathedral is rough cut, perhaps even ugly, suggesting that the physical form may actually function as a vehicle used to invite the spiritual experience. In his essay "The Blind Man of Siloe," Jean-Luc Marion distinguishes between polished images that invite a religious voyeurism, and icons, which actually pull the viewer into the symbol via their banality or even ugliness. A highly stylized image, therefore, has the potential to lead to one-sided spiritual blindness, while an icon creates mutual sight, allowing the viewer "to see" and "be seen" by the transcendent. Although the narrator's cathedral lacks aesthetic merit, its blunt features may be capable of pulling the creator-observer to a point where he can "see" and "be seen" by the significant "something."

As a further note on this topic, external testimony suggests that "Cathedral" bears further qualities to an icon, as the final lines of the story have generated moments of spiritual transference for readers. For example, Tobias Wolff remembers reading the story for the first time. At the illuminating conclusion, he recalls metaphorically entering the text, seemingly "levitating" beyond the confines of his own boundaries (Halpert 153). Largely because of this effect, Edward Duffy ventures to call "Cathedral" a story of "unambiguous salvation As if by attending to [the text], a reader with ears to hear and eyes to see could be lifted up towards the heavens" (331).

Critics may continue to restrict Carver's stretch towards transcendence by confining "Cathedral" to a testament of human hope. However, Carver's "second life" rejects such interpretations, as he "bears witness" (Gentry and Stull 226) to a miraculous encounter with

“something” that changed his own voice, making it, as he liked to say, “more generous.”⁶ While Carver did acknowledge a renewed sense of self-esteem through his recovery from alcoholism, he also suspected the influence of “something” else that he was unable to name. When asked about his “more generous” writing, Carver could only state that “I’m more sure of my voice, more sure of *something* I don’t have a sense of fooling around, of being tentative When I go to my desk now and pick up a pen, I really know what I have to do. It’s a totally different feeling” (Gentry and Stull 103).

Carver’s confessional language and experience invites the possibility of religious affiliation. However, while Carver may not couch his spirituality in an orthodox system of faith, it is not overstatement to suggest that this unnamed “something” in Carver’s life and work illustrates a spiritual reality. For despite Carver’s denial of religious affiliation, he is also forced to qualify his statement in the same sentence. In the same sentence, Carver states that although he is not religious he must believe in “miracles and the possibility of resurrection” (Gentry and Stull 46). These seemingly contradictory statements become possible when contextualized within the Alcoholics Anonymous program. “The Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous testifies of a reality reminiscent of Carver’s own miraculous resurrection, proclaiming that “the age of miracles is still with us. Our own recovery proves that!” (153).

While Carver was not an explicitly religious writer, his personal narrative recognizes the unnamable ‘higher power’ that invaded his life with grace. As Carver’s personal narrative references the “higher power,” his later fiction functions as a testament to the gracious power that saved him. In opposition to such an interpretation, Facknitz recognizes grace in Carver’s fiction, yet attributes it to nothing beyond the restoration of human compassion. Facknitz states:

Grace, Carver says, is bestowed upon us by other mortals, and it comes suddenly, arising in circumstances as mundane as a visit to the barber shop. . . . [It is] Not Grace in the Christian sense at all, it is what grace becomes in a godless world – a

deep and creative connection between humans that reveals to Carver's alienated and diminished creatures that there can be contact in a world they supposed was empty of sense or love . . . in the cathedrals we draw together, we create large spaces for the spirit. (295-96)

Considering Carver's acknowledgement of the 'higher power,' Facknitz's strictly humanist interpretation illustrates what now stands as a normative misreading of Carver's work. While Facknitz correctly asserts that grace in Carver's work is not traditionally "Christian," his interpretation fails to consider the possibility of the "other," or what both Carver and his narrator call "something." Despite Facknitz's polished speculation, it seems plausible that even in the midst of a "godless world," Carver had given himself over to the 'higher power,' a force that desired his restoration and recovery. As Carver's wife, Tess Gallagher, affirms: Raymond "never heaped credit upon himself for having overcome illness. He knew it was a matter of grace, having put his trust in what A.A. identifies as 'a higher power,' and having been given the will to turn all temptations to drink aside" (208-209). Healing was offered to Carver as a gift. In response to this encounter, it seems logical that Carver's later fiction should communicate the same possibility of hope to others.

Step Nine: Redeeming the Past Through Re-Vision

"Made direct amends to [people we have hurt] wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 83)

In a 1983 review of *Cathedral*, Anatole Boyard perceptively recognizes that "like a missionary, Mr. Carver seems to be gradually reclaiming or redeeming his characters" (27). It is evident that after Carver's initial rehabilitation from alcoholism, he felt an increasing burden to revisit the past, holding himself responsible to reconcile division and broken relationships. Through

his almost obsessive gift for textual revision, Carver was able to revisit his characters, offering hope for recovery to those he left stranded in the text.⁷

This redemptive quality is particularly evident in Carver's revision of "The Bath" into "A Small, Good Thing." While recent critical work has focused primarily on comparing the two texts, the majority of criticism fails to question why Carver actually chose to revisit "The Bath" in the first place. Although it is no secret that Carver liked to, as he states, "mess around with [his] stories," the act of revising was far more than shifting commas. Instead, Carver used the revision process to "gradually" get "into what the story is *about*," implying that texts intrinsically bear an organic meaning to be revealed (*No Heroics, Please* 108-109). When questioned about revising and the rationale for transforming "The Bath" into "A Small, Good Thing" Carver states:

In my own mind I consider them to be really two entirely different stories, not just different versions of the same story; it's hard to even look on them as coming from the same source. I went back to that one, as well as several others, because I felt there was unfinished business that needed attending to. The story hadn't been told originally; it had been messed around with, condensed and compressed in "The Bath" to highlight the qualities of menace that I wanted to emphasize so in the midst of writing these other stories for *Cathedral* I went back to "The Bath" and tried to see what aspects of it needed to be enhanced, redrawn, reimagined. (Gentry and Stull 102)

It is, perhaps, helpful to read this passage in conjunction with Paul Ricoeur's theory of the new horizon. Ricoeur suggests that interpretive reading is "concerned with the permanent spirit of language. By the spirit of language we intend not just some decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but *the capacity of language to open up new worlds*. Poetry and myth are not just nostalgia for some forgotten world. They constitute a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an

opening on to other *possible* worlds which transcend the established limits of our *actual* world” (489-90).

Applying Ricoeur’s theory to Carver’s life and fiction suggests that when Carver’s own narrative of self-destructive alcoholism intersected with the healing offered through the ‘higher power,’ a new horizon opened to him. As the spirit of language led Carver to the possibility of this new world, Carver, like the narrator of “Cathedral,” was transported beyond his own limitations into a new life and vision of hope. In this context, the process of revision actually becomes a “re-visioning” of a new reality, as characters and content are transformed into the possibility of recovery. Therefore, despite the same characters and general plot progression, Carver could honestly say that “The Bath” was not related to “A Small, Good Thing.” For the latter version proclaims a new reality, a possibility that was formerly unknown in Carver’s own scope of experience.

Alcoholics Anonymous states that seeking reconciliation “is the beginning of the end of isolation from our fellows and from God” (*Twelve Steps* 82). This is particularly profound when one considers that characters in “The Bath” illustrate complete isolation, whereas, in “A Small, Good Thing” broken lines of communication are reconnected.⁸ Carver not only reconciles the characters of “A Small, Good Thing,” he also leads the disconnected parties into a meal reminiscent of the Eucharist, which leads Ewing Campbell to suspect that at this moment “a conversion follows” (55). In the midst of what should be anger and fractured communication, Carver joins these disconnected people through confession, sunlight, and the breaking of bread.

A similar illustration of recovery surfaces through the posthumous publication of “Kindling” in *Call if You Need Me*. The story, one of five previously uncollected stories, was found in Carver’s writing desk in Port Angeles, Washington. “Kindling” becomes increasingly significant when contextualized within the larger Carver corpus, as the main character, Myers, is a figure who reappears throughout numerous collections. In “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” published in 1976,

Myers is temporarily liberated from writer's block at the expense of a family's tragic circumstances. Year's later he reappears in "The Compartment." On a train trip to visit his son in Strasbourg, the struggling writer is edgy, for he has not seen his son in eight years. When the train stops in Strasbourg, Myers realizes that a watch he bought for his son has been stolen. In this moment, Myers suspects the whole reunion is wrong; he wanders around the station, hiding from his son. In confusion, he boards the wrong train, literally becoming a lost and misguided foreigner. Completely disconnected, Myers is satisfied leaving his possessions and his son behind.

In *Call Me if You Need Me*, Myers makes a final appearance in "Kindling." Nearly twenty years after Carver's death, it is evident that the author-creator went back to reimagine Myers in light of a new horizon. Carver starts "Kindling" by stating, "It was the middle of August and Myers was between lives. The only thing different about this time from the other times was that this time he was sober" (7). The Myers met in "Kindling" is shaky, but a man improved for the better. Although still terse and insular, he is a humble man, open to some degree of conversation and relationship. In contrast to the concluding disconnection of previous endings, readers finish "Kindling" knowing that Myers is on a path to recovery and stability.

Step Eleven: Wordless Prayer and Talking Symbols

"Sought through Prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."
(Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 96)

Alcoholics Anonymous frequently mentions that in group meetings and personal life "there are no required prayers. Although most feel that some form of prayer or meditation is necessary to maintain sobriety, specific prayers are only suggestions" (Wilcox 73). Throughout recovery, Raymond Carver increasingly incorporated a method of meditative prayer in his life, illustrating that he took Step Eleven of the Twelve Steps to Recovery seriously. Carver's own handling of

words made his meditation practices compressed, even wordless, as natural symbols rather than words, became the vehicle for communicating with the ineffable “something.”

When Carver received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Hartford, he offered an address that was later titled: “Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa.” Written in 1988, it stands as the last piece of published prose that Carver completed. He opens his address by quoting Saint Teresa, who states, “Words lead to deeds. . . . They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness” (*No Heroics, Please* 223). After commenting on the beautiful truth of the phrase, Carver repeats the phrase, noting that the words may seem foreign to an age that no longer thinks of words bearing meaning. Particularly moved by “soul” and “tenderness,” Carver confesses that “There is something more than a little mysterious, not to say – forgive me – even mystical about these particular words and the way Saint Teresa used them, with full weight and belief” (223). Carver then moves toward a profound closing passage, a benediction that echoes the Apostle Paul’s charge to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12, NRSV). He states:

Long after what I’ve said has passed from your minds, whether it be weeks or months, and all that remains is the sensation of having attended a large public occasion. . . . try then, as you work out your individual destinies, to remember that words, the right and true words, can have the power of deeds. Remember too, that little-used word that has just about dropped out of public and private usage: tenderness. It can’t hurt. And that other word: soul – call it spirit if you want, if it makes it any easier to claim the territory. Don’t forget that either. Pay attention to the spirit of your words, your deeds. That’s preparation enough. No more words.
(225)

Those who knew Carver well comment on his almost sacred handling of words. Jay McInerney, a former student under Carver, remembers that as an instructor, Carver mumbled when

he spoke. McInerney recalls, “if it once seemed merely a physical tic, akin to cracking knuckles or the drumming of a foot, I now think it was a function of deep humility and respect for the language bordering on awe, a reflection of his sense that words should be handled, very, very gingerly. As if it might almost be impossible to say what you wanted to say. As if it might be dangerous, even” (15-16). In a similar way, Geoffery Wolff remembers, “that Ray believed in the power of language so profoundly, it was so sacred to him, that he understood, as few people understand, that words are loaded pistols. Sometimes to say something, to name it, is to enact it. So there were certain words he would not say” (Halpert 184-85). It is this reverence for language, the suspicion of its mystical and incarnational power, which causes Carver’s spirituality to depend upon symbol rather than the spoken word.

Natural symbols lead Carver, as well as his fictional characters, towards an immanent engagement with transcendence, as these forms contain the potential to communicate what language fails to describe. Tess Gallagher remembers that for Raymond rivers “were places of recognition and healing” (84) that opened renewal and optimism. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* actually uses the healing image of water when it states that “the persistent use of meditation and prayer . . . did open the channel so that where there had been a trickle, there now was a river which led to sure power and safe guidance from God as we were increasingly better able to understand Him” (109).

In “Where Water Comes Together With Other Water,” Carver affirms the healing message of Alcoholics Anonymous, as he meditates on the glory of this water that gathers from springs, creeks, and rivers to join the fullness of the sea. He writes: “The places where water comes together / with other water. Those places stand out in my mind like holy places.” For Carver, it is worth noting that the river itself is not holy, it is “like” a holy place. As Paul Tillich suggests, “holy things are not holy in themselves, but they point beyond themselves to the source of all holiness, that which is of ultimate concern” (*Dynamics of Faith* 48). As the poem concludes, Carver’s focal point moves upstream, as he longs to reach the “source” of everything that provides his fullness.

The river, functioning as a signifier to an upstream source, draws in Carver's affection through its natural and expansive presence: "It pleases me, loving rivers. / Loving them all the way back / to their source. / Loving everything that increases me."

"Where Water Comes Together with Other Water" is set at Morse Creek, a place Carver visited with Tess Gallagher. Late in his struggle with cancer, Gallagher recalls that before a trip to Alaska "Ray wanted to go to Morse Creek once more" (84). After a slow and deliberate journey, they gazed at the fullness of water entering the sea and experienced a moment of spiritual and personal connectivity. In a moment that metaphorically communicated an experience of new life, Gallagher remembers:

Without saying anything, we began to walk towards the mouth where this freshwater river joins the Strait of Juan de Fuca. . . . [Raymond] was travelling on his remaining right lung, but carrying himself well in the effort, as if this were the best way to do it, the way we had always done it. When we made it to the river mouth, there was an intake of joy for us both, to have crossed that ground. It was one of those actions that is so right it makes you able in another dimension, to go all the way back to the start of your life. We savored it, the river's freshwater outrush into salt water, that quiet standing up to life together, for as long as it was going to last. (84)

Intent on communicating this message of hope, it is evident that Carver did not confine the healing symbol of rivers to his own life, but used the image to guide his characters as well. Although "Kindling" is published as an unedited story, lacking the compression of a fully revised piece, this is, perhaps, advantageous for this illustration. Throughout "Kindling" Carver provides numerous allusions to a nearby river; the mystical power of The Little Quilcene River communicates something to an emptied Myers, a dried out man who desires restoration. It is a powerful river that "rushes down through the valley, shoots under the highway bridge, rushes another hundred yards over sand and sharp rocks, and pours into the ocean" (*Call Me if You Need*

Me 13). Although the river is fast and purposeful, its central function comes through its mystical ability to speak to Myers, the main character.

Myers comes into town and rents a room from a couple named Sol and Bonnie. As the couple shows Myers the prepared room, he hears the water for the first time. Carver writes, “Was it his imagination, or did he hear a stream or a river?” (9). Myers, known for being terse, simply states: “I hear water.” Sol tells him of the Little Quilcene River, but Myers offers no response. However, when the couple leaves, Myers returns to the voice of water. “He opened the window all the way and heard the sound of the river as it raced through the valley on its way to the ocean” (10). Myers shifts the furniture in his room and moves his desk in front of the open window, then stares at a blank page and writes: “Emptiness is the beginning of all things.” Cursing his own foolishness, he turns out the light and stands in darkness – listening to the river’s purposeful movement.

Myers’ healing begins when he finds a purpose. A flatbed truck dumps two cords of wood in the yard and he offers to cut the wood. Sol teaches Myers how to use a saw and how to split the kindling. After a day’s work, Myers returns to his desk and is able to write: “I have sawdust in my shirtsleeves tonight . . . It’s a sweet smell” (18). He stays awake into the night, thinking about the wood, what he accomplished. Again, the voice of water leads Myers out of bed and his eyes are drawn up the river. “When he raised the window the sweet, cool air poured in, and farther off he could hear the river coursing down the valley” (18). It is possible that this passage contains spiritual significance for Meyers, as Carver combines the voice of the water with the presence of wind, the traditional symbol of spirit. In this moment Myers is circled by a natural symbol of something beyond himself. As the cool air pours “in” and permeates his being, Myers moves further towards recovery.

After finishing the wood, Myers decides to leave. However, he hesitates before leaving and opens the window again. In the darkness of night Myers looks to the pile of sawdust and listens to

the river for a while. Concluding his stay, Myers returns to his table and writes the final passage on this stage of his recovery: “The country I’m in is very exotic. It reminds me of someplace I’ve read about but never traveled to before now. Outside my window I can hear a river . . .” After finishing his entry Myers decides to stay one more night. And before crawling into bed Carver writes that Myers “left the window open . . . it was okay like that” (20).

“Something” happened to Myers that bears the marks of an encounter with transcendence. In his final entry, Myers alludes to a common pattern in conversion narratives. He finds himself in an Edenic, or “exotic” country. Like T.S. Eliot who writes that the end of our searching “Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time,” Myers also experiences a similar pattern of revelation (*Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding,” 242-43). He has read about this place, this river, but not fully known it until now. For this reason, Myers stays another night, not because he is tired or defeated, but because this place feels like the home he has intuitively known and longed for his entire life.

Step Twelve: “Bearing Witness” and Concluding Thoughts

“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 106)

The testimonial component of Alcoholics Anonymous requires that the recovered convert carry the message of redemptive hope to others. Reflecting on Carver’s generous spirit, Jay McInerney remembers that Carver participated in this call, as he often “accompanied friends in need to their first A.A. meetings (19). Recent scholarship is only beginning to realize that Raymond Carver proves to be a model convert, one who was able to “bear witness” to the possibility of recovery (Gentry and Stull, 226).

Although Carver doubted that his writing would ever actually change anybody for the better, Jim Harbaugh, a Jesuit and Twelve Steps retreat leader, recognizes the possibility of using Carver's work in the Twelve-Step program.⁹ Harbaugh envisions using Carver's fiction and poetry to communicate hope to the client who is resistant to the religious or philosophical language present in twelve-step literature. Particularly optimistic towards the use of "A Small, Good Thing," Harbaugh suggests that "The 'spiritual' qualities found in ['A Small, Good Thing'] might be a good way to describe spirituality without defining it in a way that puts off either religious or non-religious people . . . [the story's spiritual qualities] are very consonant with the qualities of the recovering person described in 12 Step literature" (39). Although Carver doubted the possibility of positive influence, his stories may actually continue to sustain the message of hope that changed his life.

Entering Alcoholics Anonymous simply requires that substance abusers confess "they do not own the truth to categorically state that there is no God. . . .[however], as members recover, they are no longer in a position to argue whether or not [God] exists," for denial negates their own miraculous transformation (Wilcox 80). Without compartmentalizing Carver's spirituality into a theological frame of analysis, it is worth considering that Carver's transformation may place him in the threshold of what Karl Rahner alludes to as anonymous Christianity. Rahner states:

There is such a thing as anonymous Christianity. There are men who merely think they are not Christians, but who are in the grace of God. And hence there is an anonymous humanism inspired by grace, which thinks that it is no more than human. . . . When we affirm as a doctrine of faith that human morality even in the natural sphere needs the grace of God to be steadfast in its great task, we recognize . . . that such humanism, wherever it displays its true visage and wherever it exists, even outside professed Christianity, is a gift of the grace of God and a tribute to the redemption, even though as yet it knows nothing of this. (366)

Rahner's insights remain both controversial and thought provoking, as his observations could possibly unify the humanist versus religious debate that continues to haunt Carver's work. Approaching Carver's work in Rahner's perspective assumes that critics would be willing to reinterpret the origins of humanism as well as the potential extent of immanent grace. Through this process of revision, Carver's work could no longer be divided by polemic arguments that demanded he fit into a categorical mold of either humanism or orthodoxy.

In the midst of Carver's spiritual ambiguity, perhaps only two things are completely vivid. "Something" happened to Raymond Carver that transformed both his life and writing. Second, the structural patterns of at least some of the Twelve Steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous recovery program prove to be a far larger influence on Carver's life and work than critics have previously recognized. For those seeking clearer answers concerning Carver's religious conviction, the answers are far less certain. We are ultimately left with spiritual possibility rather than confessional certainty, as Carver alone may claim knowledge of these answers. In the last interview before Carver's death, the coughing writer was confident in his faith when he stated: "It will be okay. I have faith. I'm calm. I feel I'm in a state of grace" (Gentry and Stull 249). When we push for spiritual certainties beyond what Carver has offered, we are reminded of his echoing phrase: "No more words." Silence must answer what our words cannot.

Notes

¹For example, even Kirk Nessel's recent monograph *The Stories of Raymond Carver: A Critical Study* (1995) fails to mention the spiritual dimension of Carver's later work.

²Concerning biblical literacy, Carver remembers that "we had the Bible in our house but the family did not read [it]" (Gentry and Stull 121).

³Carver states: "I can't honestly say I've ever consciously or otherwise patterned any of my stories on things I've heard at the meetings" (Gentry and Stull 48, 40). However, if Carver was a genuine participant in the Alcoholics Anonymous program it is also possible that he simply honored the A.A. pledge of anonymity, which promotes humility and group solidarity rather than personal recognition (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* 189-192).

⁴For example, even as late as 1986, Carver makes reference to A.A. in a letter to his friend Henry Carlile (Adelman 133). And at the conclusion of Carver's funeral the Lord's Prayer was offered, "as they do at the end of A.A. meetings, in respect and gratitude for [Carver's] sobriety" (Halpert 183).

⁵Steve Mirarchi compiled a variorum edition of “Cathedral” that compares the 1981 *Atlantic Monthly* version with the 1983 Knopf edition. Although these revisions are not addressed in this essay, Mirarchi makes the assertion that “Carver’s specific revisions ultimately bring about a new discourse on religion” (299).

⁶Steve Mirarchi states that although critics offer a wide range of speculations concerning Carver’s later work, “none can offer an explanation of Carver’s change of heart, his much-quoted ‘opening up’” (299).

⁷*Soul Barnacles*, Gallagher remembers that “[Carver] carried some burdens of guilt about ‘what had happened.’ And he worked out his redemption and consequently some of ours in his art” (59).

⁸For a comparative discussion see Shute, 3-4; Stull, 9.

⁹Carver recognized the “spiritual nourishment” of reading, yet he speculated that his writing would always be received as a form of consumer based entertainment (Gentry and Stull 51).

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