

A HEROINE CALLED RUTH

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The story begins badly. A family living in Bethlehem is struck by famine. They travel to the nearby country of Moab, where things take a new turn for the worse. Elimelech dies, leaving behind his wife, Naomi, and two sons. Then more tragedy: the two sons also die, but not before they marry local women, Ruth and Orpah.

So there, in patriarchal society where women were dependent on men for their security and survival, three women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are left alone. It is right there, out of the fields of death and despair that a new story arises. Death, darkness, loss can go before a new life cycle. Death preceding new life is essential to Christianity. In the creation story, it says that darkness hovered over the face of the deep, and then the light shone. The dark can be a beginning. It is then that the senses are alert. The poet Roethke says, 'In the dark time, the ear begins to see',¹ but in this story, 'In the dark time the ear begins to hear.' The text says the women hear a faraway call, they hear of food being provided back in Bethlehem.

As a new story arises out of the ashes of the old, it is the women who take centre stage. Now it is Moab they are leaving. The prophet Jeremiah says 'Moab has been at ease since youth, like wine left on its dregs, not poured from one vessel to another.'² This presents an image of settling down, stagnation, where the soul is locked into an outworn memory of the past. The good word may be spoken and heard, but has become strangely devoid of Spirit. There is

¹ 1. 'In a Dark Time', *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*.

² Jeremiah 48.

an absence of freshness, vitality, life-blood. Moab is a wasteland, an existence of what Jean Houston calls 'toxic habituations and serial monotonies'.

Now, the day has dawned, the time has come, for the urge to move out toward what is calling. A lot of modern therapy is concerned with fixing the past, but what is it that calls you? What is it that is coming towards you? The women follow the call and they set out along the road, but they do not get too far before Naomi stops and says to her daughters-in-law, 'Go back, go back to the house of your mother where it is safe.' 'But we want to go with you and to your people,' they reply. And so the women weep together. 'Go back,' says Naomi, 'Are there any more sons in my womb who could become your husbands? I can offer no security, this situation is hopeless, please go back.'

Naomi is acting as a guardian of the way. The following of the impulse to life means going out into the unknown where there are dangers and no promise of security. Have Ruth and Orpah got what it takes? Have they considered the cost? Jesus said, 'Which of you intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost?'³

Approaching the threshold, Ruth and Orpah can either move forward into the adventure or return to where it is safe. Orpah, faced with warning and resistance, in tears, turns around and goes back. She has a strong feeling to escape the prison of the past, but she does not want to take on the cost. Ruth cannot go back; she clings to Naomi. She is brought right down, down, into herself to where she knows exactly what she wants. She touches into that same centre that is calling her. As Rilke says,

My eyes have already touched the sunny hill,
Going far ahead of the road I have begun,

³ Luke 14.

So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp.
It has its inner light and changes us, even from a
distance,
...into something else...⁴

Ruth is grasped by what she cannot grasp. The light that she can see in the distance is igniting inside her, and as she embraces Naomi, the eruptive powers of the heart burst open. She declares:

Entreat me not to leave you, or to return from following after you, for where you go I shall go; where you lodge, I shall lodge; your God shall be my God, and your people shall be mine; where you die, so shall I, and there I will be buried.

Jesus said, 'When the eye is single the body is full of light.'⁵ Ruth is leaving her old stone gods for the Hebrew God-king, Jehovah, whose name means, 'He who calls us to become.' She has chosen the path of 'I will become.' But Orpah returns to the stone gods of Moab. These could represent fixed, lifeless forms of divinity or concretised ideas of divinity; for example, the reduction of what the theologian Karl Rahner calls 'the radical and pure uncontrollability of God' into dogma.⁶ We mirror the god we worship. If we worship a stone god, we begin to stagnate and petrify. As will Orpah: for she has chosen the path of 'I will not become.' The apostle Paul says, 'When I was a child, I thought like a child, I acted like a child. Now I have put away childish things.'⁷

Ruth knows she cannot go back. She says, 'May I be dealt with ever so severely, if anything but death separates me

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, 'A Walk', in *Selected Poems*, trans. Robert Bly, HarperCollins.

⁵ Luke 11.

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, New York: Darton Longman & Todd, p.10.

⁷ 1 Cor. 13.

from you.’ To retreat now, once having heard the call, would be a living death. What we refuse positively, will be experienced negatively. Jesus said, ‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don’t bring forth what is within you, what you don’t bring forth will destroy you.’⁸

Naomi can see Ruth is determined to keep going, and the two women continue down the road to Bethlehem, from where Ruth goes out into the fields to look for food. And as it happens, as soon as she launches into the path of her desire and steps out into the unknown, a passage opens up for her. Of all the fields outside Bethlehem, she finds herself in the field of a wealthy, strong man named Boaz. When Boaz arrives, on what is a scene of bountiful harvest, he greets his reapers invoking transcendent powers. ‘May the Jehovah be with you.’ Ruth has now entered a landscape of vivifying potential – a field of magnified power. It is her desire that has carried her there.

Coming into the field of Boaz, Ruth begins collecting grain – the left over bits from the reapers. Passion must find its form, its groundedness, in hard work. Is there any harder work than soul work? Then Boaz, seeing her, comes over and says to her,

You are welcome here, stay here where it’s safe. I’ve told the men not to touch you. And you see those jars of water over there, if you are thirsty, go get yourself a drink.

Ruth is granted a safe place – a place to be. This is the paradox. By leaving the security of the old life, a safe place is found. Jesus said, ‘Whoever saves his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it.’⁹ But to understand this, we have to try it out.

⁸ Cited by Joseph Campbell in interview with Bill Moyes and M. Toms.

⁹ Matt. 16.

'If your're thirsty, go and get a drink,' says Boaz. In this new field of being, there is no shortage of refreshment. Ruth is seized with gratitude at this host-pitality. A host is there for the soul, in its passage towards completion. Boaz continues, obviously drawn to her. 'I've heard how you've left your mother and father and home to come to a place you did not know before.'

This is the necessary separating from the values of home and family, so one can clearly establish, what one believes, stands for, will give oneself to. When Ruth entered Bethlehem, it was for the very first time. The text says she 'returned' from the fields of Moab. Perhaps we have to leave home to come home. The Koran is hopeful; it says we are all returning.

We have been following the story looking over the shoulder of Ruth. I want to pause to briefly look over the shoulder of Boaz, who welcomes Ruth. This story was set in the days of the Judges. These were days of tremendous social upheaval and chaos. In the 19th Chapter of Judges is a story that stands in grave contrast to this welcoming image we have here in the story of Ruth. A woman is given over to a gang of thugs and savagely raped and abused throughout the night and left for dead.

In a culture where the letter of the law is valued over poetry; where rational thought is valued over feeling and intuition; where the heroic ego is valued over the ability to simply be; where need for proof is valued over imagination and wonder; where economic and material progress is valued over art, creativity and the nurture of life: need we be surprised that mother earth and her people are groaning?

A sacred marriage is to occur at the end of the story, where the chorus of townspeople hold the masculine and feminine in equal esteem. The way back to the whole is for us to

welcome and respect the foreign stranger who appears in the field of our souls.

Now looking over Ruth's shoulder again. She is in the midst of the hard soul work of collecting grain, discriminating out, separating what is useful for nourishment. She works right to the end of the season.

The story is moving to its climax. The counsel from the wise woman Naomi is to go out into the night to the sleeping Boaz. 'Wash and perfume yourself, put on your best clothes,' says Naomi, 'Make yourself look beautiful – stand in the fullness of all that you are and go out into the night to where Boaz is sleeping among the piles of grain, uncover him and lie down at his feet.' In Psalm 45 it says, 'The king shall greatly desire thy beauty', or 'The king shall be enthralled by your beauty.' Do not diminish who you are, Naomi is saying, accentuate it. It is by owning all that we are that helps bring us through to completion – our light as well as our dark.

Ruth is on her way once again, this time out into the night. St John of the Cross describes this same movement in his poem 'Dark Night', as his own soul opens to the Other:

In the night that was dark,
fired by love's urgent longings
(made fiery by the furies of love
fevered by loves anxieties)
ah, the sheer grace!
I left without being noticed,
My house being now all stilled.

Secure and in the dark,
On the secret staircase, stealth,
ah, the sheer grace!
And darkness protected me,
My house being now all stilled.

In the delicious night,
(There in the lucky dark)
In secret, where no one saw me
Nor did I see one thing,
I had no light or guide
But the fire that burned inside my chest.

That fire showed me
the way more clearly than the blaze of noon
To where waiting for me
was the one I knew so well....

In my chest full of flowers,
Flowering wholly and only for him,
There He remained sleeping;
I cared for Him there,
And the fan of the high cedars cooled Him.¹⁰

The poem, as does our story, goes on to consummation. But for the moment, Ruth comes to the sleeping Boaz, uncovers him and lies at his feet. 'The awful daring of a moment's surrender,' says T. S. Eliot.¹¹ This scene represents for us, not woman surrendering to man, but rather inner surrender. She is holding in tension the polarities of owning her glory and greatness, while being in an attitude of humility, surrender. In the middle of the night, Boaz wakes, startled. 'Who are you?' 'I am Ruth', she replies, 'Cover me with your blanket as a sign you'll marry me.' 'Ah Ruth' he says. 'I know you, you are a woman of great worth...'. This is the inner recognition of true worth, which for us, can be so elusive when sought on the outside.

The time is drawing well nigh for desire to be met with fullness of response. If we can get onto the path of true

¹⁰ Composite translation from various sources.

¹¹ 'What the Thunder Said', *The Waste Land*, V.

desire, we will then discover what we long for, longs for us, what we yearn for, yearns for us. The next morning Boaz goes into town, and with vigour and detachment contends for and secures the right to marry Ruth.

Julian of Norwich said,

This I am, this I am
I am what you love
I am what you enjoy
I am what you serve
I am what you long for
I am what you desire.
I am all that you intend.¹²

Out of this sacred union, a new quality of life is brought out into the world: a child is born in Bethlehem. This child, Obed, whose name means ‘to serve’, prefigures the Christ who will be born in the same place many centuries later.

If we can take the story of Ruth as an allegory of the soul’s passage towards completion, the conclusion hints, not just to the Christ of history, but also at the possibility of bringing forth Christ in our own lives. Giving birth to a new way of a being, bringing a new consciousness into the world. Eckhart said, ‘What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God, fourteen hundred years ago and I not also give birth to the Son of God in my times and culture?’ Or as Angelus Silesius said, ‘Of what use, O Gabriel, is your message to Marie, unless you give the same message to me?’

Because the story begins and ends in Bethlehem, and ends with a birth, there is a cycle in play. This story does not just belong to history, it moves in a continuous cycle, it is a constant, it is happening all the time, calling for our

¹² Brendan Doyle. *Meditations with Julian of Norwich*. Santa Fe. Bear & Co.

participation. The heroine, Ruth, calls us to exercise deep listening; to answer life's call; to leave behind a wasteland existence; to cultivate the heart; to follow the path of true desire; to honour the instinctual drive of the body; to travel into new frontiers of the soul; to open to the inner beloved, and bring change into the world. She calls us to go with her, as Yeats says:

And someone called me by my name;
She had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old from wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.¹³

¹³ William Butler Yeats, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'. *The Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran.