

THE CRESSET

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Vocation through Limitation Flannery O'Connor's Life of Faith

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*"To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation,
but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality."*

Flannery O'Connor

The Calling: A Georgia Catholic Writer

Even those with only a passing familiarity with Flannery O'Connor know that for her to say that she is a Catholic writer from Georgia is to say more than just biographical facts. It speaks to her core. She was born in Savannah, educated in Milledgeville, and as a young woman she was on her way up. She became a highly trained writer, attending Iowa's Master of Fine Arts program, which was a leading program for young fiction writers in the 1940s and 1950s. She spent some time at the writer's colony in Yaddo and was living with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut when she was diagnosed with lupus in 1950. This diagnosis led her to return to the South to live with her mother on Andalusia, her dairy farm in Milledgeville. But do not be misled into thinking that her illness is what forced her to call herself a "local" writer. Whether she became ill or not, she would have firmly believed that to be a writer, you had to write from somewhere, not from nowhere.

The fact that the "somewhere" for her was Georgia made O'Connor the writer we know today. She was convinced that a writer should only write what he or she knows about, and what she knew about was backwoods fundamentalist prophets, people whose faith ran so deep in them that it was in their blood. What she knew was life on a southern dairy farm and the par-

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ticular types of pride that can come when people born there go north to get an education and come back, full of judgment and contempt for “the folk.” In some ways she got this kind of outsider education, too, but rather than contempt for what she saw around her, she had a sense of humor and irony about the disjunction. This sense of humor is laced throughout everything she has written, from the stories themselves to her occasional prose, and especially her letters. I always think of O’Connor as having a gently ironic relationship with her mother, Regina, who, like most of the people she lived in and among, had really very little idea what the literary life was like. I love the exchange between herself and her mother that she told the Fitzgeralds about in a 1953 letter:

My mamma and I have interesting literary discussions like the following which took place over some Modern Library books that I had just ordered:

SHE: “Mobby Dick. I’ve always heard about that.”

ME: “Mow-by Dick.”

SHE: “MOW-by Dick. *The Idiot*. You would get something called *The Idiot*. What’s it about?”

ME: “An idiot.” (908)

This is just one example of many in which O’Connor lightly and lovingly pokes fun at her mother’s literary ignorance, reminding all of us of how strange of a bird she indeed was in the view of most rural Georgians she lived among. The gently ironic tone in this exchange can only come from someone who is both proud and humble. She was proud of being a Georgia writer, but she was also humble about it, a fact that came through her humor more often than readers seem to recognize. She wrote stories that show disdain for pretentious intellectuals like Asbury Fox in “The Enduring Chill” who think that they are above their hometown, their mothers, and even their own bodies. But she also expressed this mixture of pride and humility directly and indirectly in her occasional prose. Take this little throwaway remark, also from the essay I quoted above. O’Connor writes that:

I remember the last time I spoke to the Georgia Writers Association, the jist of my talk was that being a Georgia Author is rather a spe-

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cious dignity, on the same order as, for the pig, being a Talmadge ham. I still think that that approach has merit, particularly where there is any danger of the Georgia part of the equation over-balancing the writer part. The moral of my talk on that occasion is that a pig is a pig, no matter who puts him up. (843)

As we laugh, we should not let that laughter lead us away from noticing that here O'Connor indicates what she always has believed about the writer: that she is primarily born, not made; that she has been given a gift and a responsibility to use that gift. That gift O'Connor most often called her "vocation."

The idea of a vocation, particularly a Christian vocation, is completely lost on most Americans. If there is one thing that can be said about American culture, it is that we think of ourselves as the architects of our own futures. In school we are taught to listen to and follow our desires and to develop our talents and then to find the best career to match up with them. But the Christian idea of vocation starts from nearly an opposite place. Its first and most important aspect is listening to God, who is primarily saying "follow me." The freedom we have to live out a specific calling follows after that and must be in step with it. Vocation is being called to do what you have been uniquely gifted to do—and then being gifted to do that to which you have been uniquely called. This is why O'Connor's quip about the pig is so revealing: pigs are born, not made. They are gifted with their "pigness," if you will, and if they try to be something else, well, you can imagine the slop that would ensue! In the



Flannery O'Connor. (Library of Congress)

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letters that Emory University just made public between Betty Hester and O'Connor, Hester apparently compared O'Connor to a mystic, a comparison that O'Connor quickly rejected, telling Hester that "All I have is a talent and nothing else to do but cultivate it." She was a writer, which is a considerable talent, but that is *all* that it is. And she also had the time to cultivate it.

Apparently Flannery O'Connor always knew that she was meant to be a writer. According to Sally Fitzgerald, a long time friend of O'Connor's, O'Connor had a journal she kept when she was twelve years old in which she spoke specifically about her calling to be a writer, a calling she saw as no less spiritual than any other calling. This should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with O'Connor through her letters and occasional prose. Read them and you will find a woman who knew that her calling was to be a writer from Georgia, and to be a Catholic writer from Georgia in particular. To be a Catholic writer was as much a part of that calling as to be a Georgia writer, and it meant seeing with the eyes of the church as well as seeing with the Georgia eyes that she was born with. The tension that sometimes comes from the desire to see clearly with *both* sets of eyes is what gives so much life to O'Connor's work.

The Limitations

But what does it mean to *declare* oneself a Georgia Catholic writer—to *own* it, vocationally? O'Connor knew that it meant primarily that you had limitations, limitations adumbrated by each of the three descriptors given here "Georgia," "Catholic," and "writer." I'll start with the noun first. To declare oneself a "writer" is to accept certain rules of the discipline, certain truths about it. O'Connor strongly believed in the idea of art as *techne*, that which is made by a skilled craftsman, not in art as some kind of mystical product born out of the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or out of "automatic writing." O'Connor strongly believed that no writer, no matter her locale, had the privilege of re-making the world according to her desires or according to some mythical powers of the imagination. The imagination, she was fond of saying, is not free, but bound. To be a writer is to be humble before the concrete world. She wrote that, "what the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do

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with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them” (808).

The first thing to notice about this statement is that it is something that all artists know. Take Jazz, for instance. Jazz is an extremely creative art form, one that celebrates improvisational techniques in a maximal way. But those who practice jazz quickly will tell you that improvisation has no meaning outside of the discipline of the music—its rules, if you will. The best jazz artists transcend limitations only by staying within them.

O'Connor was also keenly aware that to declare yourself a Georgia writer was to run into the “southern” aspect of those limitations. She expressed the nature of these limitations when she was explaining why southern writers are known for their employment of the grotesque. And here I cannot resist repeating one of my favorite O'Connor quips. She noted that “I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (815). The grotesque appealed to her, because while she was not worried about the modern obsession with originality, she was aware that the writer's vocation is to present her vision in a new way to her readers, to jar them into seeing something that they have never seen or have been violently ignoring.

But if you employ the grotesque as a Georgia writer, you are necessarily writing in a deep tradition of southern letters that you had better be aware of. She explained that “when there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more than ever careful that he isn't just doing badly what has already been done to completion” (818). In other words, the fiction that is already out there is itself a kind of limitation. What's more, for the southern writer, O'Connor continues, “the presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down” (818). I doubt that O'Connor really thought of herself as inferior to Faulkner as this quotation suggests, but in calling her own work a mule-drawn wagon compared to the great steam engine of Faulkner's work, we can see again that mixture of proper pride and proper humility that characterizes the Georgia writer who knows that she is doing what she is called to do.

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The final limiting adjective is the least understood and perhaps the most important to O'Connor, that of being a "Catholic" writer. O'Connor always began by defining what it meant to be a Catholic writer by insisting on what it was not—it was not being pious and sentimental, or using fiction to teach dogma or to provide "instant uplift." She most often said that being a Christian, but particularly being a Catholic Christian, means that you have a whole other set of eyes to contend with. All writers must be humble in the face of "what-is," but the Catholic writer must *also* be humble in the face of the ultimate "what-is" which is called "revelation." And the ultimate revelation is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which she said was the fulcrum of all of her stories.

Many critics think of these two callings as at war with one another in some internecine way, as if either dogma must obliterate art or art must obliterate dogma. But O'Connor did not see it this way at all, because for her, to be a Catholic is just to have another *freeing* limitation to write from inside of. It was as if her Catholic faith meant that she did not have to manufacture the beauty and the significance of the lives of the people she wrote about because the doctrines of the church already did that. To reveal that beauty and significance she just had to be true to it. Though she believed her two sets of eyes to be in tension sometimes, she felt that that fact only enlivened the writing by the power of paradox.

It seems to me that in the end, most critics cannot understand how O'Connor viewed her calling to a life of faith and her calling to a life of writing as inseparable vocations. She believed that, because she was gifted by God with talent and called to use it, that to be true to her vocation as a writer meant to be true to her vocation as a Catholic. *Obedience* must be worked out through both. Consider this interesting formulation. O'Connor wrote that, "The Catholic fiction writer, as fiction writer, will look for the will of God first in the laws and limitations of his art and will hope that if he obeys these, other blessings will be added to his work" (812). Some Christians might consider this formulation to be blasphemous because O'Connor clearly evokes the passage "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." But for O'Connor, there is only obedience: the writer, being a writer, must first seek the kingdom of God *as* a writer, and that means particular "writerly" rules that a person can change no more than he can change the color of the sky. And it turns out that obedience to God and to the rules

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of writing good fiction have one thing in common: they mean limitations, but limitations that also come with considerable blessing.

Although O'Connor considered herself to be both born and called into them, one could say that the limitations outlined by the words "Georgia," "Catholic," and "writer" are entirely self-imposed. But no one will argue that one of her greatest limitations—her struggle with lupus—was self-imposed. The fact that O'Connor was ill almost all of her adult writing life is easy to forget, so little did she complain about her suffering or how it limited her. She did not try to hide it, but you do have to work to discover how much pain she was in. Her bones were literally disintegrating. She eventually had to use crutches, which she called her "flying buttresses." Since she said so little about it, we can only guess at how frustrating it must have been for a writer with so much promise to be limited to working only a few hours a day. The fact that she bore up under the pain so well speaks volumes to her view of what she called, after Teilhard de Chardin, her "passive diminishments."

In his book *The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, Paul Elie provides a good picture of how O'Connor worked through pain, especially at the end of her life. As she neared her thirty-ninth birthday, she had to undergo surgery in Atlanta to remove a fibroid tumor, and the surgery reactivated her lupus, as was feared. When she returned to Milledgeville, she wrote her final story, "Parker's Back" in the hospital. Elie explains that:

After beginning the story in 1960 she had set it aside, then come back to it and kept at it, a few pages at a time, until she had a rough draft which told the story from beginning to end. Now, as she went in and out of the hospital, she worked on the story any way she was able: writing longhand in a notebook; revising pages in a shaky hand; and, when she was discharged from the hospital, typing at her desk in Andalusia. "I have worked one hour each day and my my I do like to work," she told Maryat Lee in May. "I et up that one hour like it was filet mignon." (359)

This little quip O'Connor made to Maryat Lee says a great deal about her. She enjoyed her work, made what she could out of the time given to her, and kept her sense of humor through it all. Elie also points out that Caroline Gordon had visited her at the hospital and recalled that, "She told me that

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the doctor had forbidden her to do any work. He said that it was all right to write a little fiction, though, she added with a grin and drew a notebook out from under her pillow” (361).

Thinking of O'Connor writing such a brilliant story an hour at a time while confined to her bed reminds me of the biblical Joseph. Joseph was a natural born leader, full of promise. You could say that he was born a leader as much as O'Connor was born a writer, a fact made plain by how quickly he rose to influence even after he had been sold into slavery by his brothers. But Joseph was unjustly thrown into prison in the prime of his life, and he stayed there for two years. Certainly he saw this as a limitation, and in human terms, it was. But there is no biblical evidence that Joseph ever saw this fact as outside of God's will. He simply worked within his limitations, and was clearly used by God both in prison and after he was released.

O'Connor's view of her own illness matches this view. She did not believe that God was punishing her or that he willed the illness, only that he allowed it, and that he would be faithful to her through it. And that through it, she would still fulfill her vocation. That through it, she might *especially* fulfill her vocation.

The Gateway to Reality

How is it that limitations are a gateway to reality? In what way can a writer who recognizes and embraces her limitations better fulfill her vocation than can a writer who refuses to? John Paul II was adamant that the primary vocation of the Christian—and indeed, of all persons—was to follow Christ. He even insisted that “without heeding the call of Jesus, it's not possible to realize the fullness of your own humanity” (21). This phrase says a good deal more than it may seem to at first glance. It means that although we are all born human, to become fully human, we must heed the call of Jesus. Certainly this is a call to obedience, but it is more than that. For as one continues to study the thought of John Paul, one recognizes that he also thought of this process of “becoming fully human” as working in the other direction, too. That is, that as one becomes fully human, one realizes the calling of Jesus in our lives. Becoming human in this way means to recognize two things primarily. First, that we are the created, and not the Creator; and second, that our lives are a mysterious gift, not

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something that we fashion to our own ends. As I mentioned earlier, these two ideas could not be further from the minds of most people today, even most Christians.

To give just one mundane example, as a part of my work at Wheaton College I observe some of our student teachers as they prepare to become high school English teachers, so I am often in the local high schools. The banner I saw this semester in one of these classrooms is so typical that I almost did not notice it. The banner read, in bright letters, all capitals: “YOU ARE THE AUTHOR OF YOUR OWN LIFE’S STORY.” Even though it is all beyond clichéd, we Americans really do think—and we teach our children to think—that to be the best version of ourselves we must realize our dreams, that the higher we aim the better we can become, that it is “all up to us,” that “attitude determines altitude,” and that the “sky’s the limit.” We aim to transcend instead of to inhabit our limitations. We strive to float alone in the ether of the divine life, not to live together in the rocky soil of the human one. Ralph Waldo Emerson may have been America’s most seductive false prophet, entreating us to shout out loud: “I must be myself... I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints” (193).

While Emerson tells us that trusting in our own intuition is the best way to find the divine life, Pope John Paul II insists that this approach is the best way to miss it. When he describes how a Christian calling works, there is very little of the self-reliant soul to be found:

We can learn how the Lord acts in every vocation (cf. Exodus 3; 1–6; 9–12). First, he provokes a new awareness of his presence—the burning bush. When we begin to show an interest he calls us by name. When our answer becomes more specific and like Moses we say: “Here I am” (cf. v. 4), then he reveals more clearly both himself and his compassionate love for his people in need. Gradually he leads us to discover the practical way in which we should serve him: “I will send you.” And usually it is then that fears and doubts come to disturb us and make it more difficult to decide. It is then that we need to hear the Lord’s assurance: “I am with you. Be not afraid!” (16)

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The reason why I have quoted this at length is because these are all steps that the character O. E. Parker takes—albeit in a roundabout and less obvious way—in O’Connor’s story “Parker’s Back.” While the story “Good Country People” is my favorite story, “Parker’s Back” is, in my opinion, O’Connor’s most brilliant one. Just as the South is Christ- haunted, so is my mind Parker-haunted, because the story keeps unfolding for me, and I cannot escape it. I cannot escape it because it is one of the most perfect parables and apologies for both the vocation of the artist and the vocation of every human being that I ever have read. And the fact that O’Connor was working on it as she was succumbing to kidney failure makes that much more of a remarkable testimony.

For those of you who have not yet had the opportunity to enjoy this story, I offer the following summary. Parker is a drifter who finds himself inexplicably married to a fundamentalist Christian named Sarah Ruth, who is pregnant. Before they were married, Parker had spent his whole adult life acquiring tattoos. He was trying to achieve on his own body the effect he had once seen on a man at a fair, whose body was covered with tattoos that seemed to him to coalesce into a glorious “arabesque” of color. Although he does not know why he does it, Parker always tries to please Sarah Ruth, so he decides to get a tattoo of the face of Jesus (how could she resist God, he thinks?) on the one place of his body that he had left blank: his back.

It is at this point that Parker becomes an unwitting example of what John Paul II said about how God acts in vocation. Right after he decides he would get a religious tattoo to appeal to Sarah Ruth, he is baling hay and has a “burning bush” experience. He feels that a huge tree is reaching out for him, which causes him to fall off his tractor and proclaim “GOD ABOVE.” He lands on his back, and the tractor crashes into the tree, and the tree bursts into the flame, burning his shoes in the process. He goes to the tattoo artist, and as he is flipping through the book of pictures of Jesus from back to front, he sees some sentimental images he has seen before: “The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician’s Friend.” But his “wise blood” makes him keep going until he finds the face of the Byzantine Christ, with stern all-demanding eyes, and he hears a voice telling him to go back to that image, which he eventually chooses. With the tattoo on his back, he becomes an unwitting Jonah at the local bar, and he

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returns to Sarah Ruth, thinking that she finally will accept him. Of course, she doesn't, because in her view the icon is idolatrous. But just as he stands outside the door, pleading for her to look at it, Parker sees a lance of light coming from outside of him as he speaks his full name aloud, giving his own body the intricate arabesque of colors he had seen on the man at the fair. The story ends with Parker crying under a tree, rejected by Sarah Ruth but also more whole than he ever has been. The story has all the elements of a man and his vocation: a burning bush, the Lord calling him by name, his being sent to give testimony to others, and trials that cause doubts. And at the end, what we have is a man called to be—quite literally—the face of Christ to others, in spite of the cost.

This story is a stunning picture of the vocation of the artist as well as the vocation of the everyman that Parker is. I lately have begun to think that the tattoo artist in this story might be more like O'Connor wanted herself to be than any other description I have read. First, this tattoo artist's work is by nature grotesque: he makes the body into an inescapable living canvas. O'Connor also considered the grotesque to be her vocation. It is her calling, as she would put it, to show "the face of good under construction" (830). Pointing at the beauty of humanity through fiction is necessarily grotesque because it shows how humanity, despite all its ugliness, all its commonness, is the place where God chooses to incarnate himself: we are, now, his hands and his feet, his body, his face. Second, in this story, the tattoo artist is really in the background. His glory is not in originality, it is in his skill in rendering the truth that even Parker, as "ordinary as a loaf of bread," is called to be the face of Christ in this world. The artist's vocation is to humbly figure forth the reality of *our* vocation, which is found precisely in our humanness, inscribed into our flesh, where we can either choose to participate in ways that animate Christ or turn our backs on that truth that will be seen in spite of our actions.

It is the fact that we reveal Jesus in spite of ourselves that interested O'Connor most, I think, throughout her career. So it is the final stroke of genius in this story that Parker gets the tattoo of the face of Jesus on his *back*. As I have argued elsewhere, O'Connor makes this move to emphasize the role that the eyes of others have to play in making our lives meaningful—that we are not the authors of our own life story. We cannot create our own meaning, and we cannot birth ourselves into divinity. In the last conver-

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sation I had with her about “Parker’s Back” before she died, my mentor, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, told me, with a good deal of excitement in her voice, that the story opened up for her when she learned that pre-Vatican II priests would consecrate the elements with their backs turned to the congregants. While this comment stuck in my mind, it did not engender the same excitement in me until I finally thought about it with regard to the issue of vocation. The calling of the priest is to point to Christ, not to himself. If you look at the priest and see him instead of Christ, then he has failed in some essential way. What is true for the priest is true for the individual, and one could even say it is doubly true for the Catholic writer who wants to be faithful. O’Connor is like the tattoo artist because she wanted us to read her stories and to see Christ walking around in curious and unforgettable ways on the backs of curious and unforgettable characters—*not* to see herself. She crafted them so carefully, so painstakingly, yes because she was proud of her calling but more because she wanted to ensure that they would be read and pondered by future readers, who she hoped would be confronted by Christ thereby. Pope John Paul II put it quite simply when he said that “true living is not found in one’s self or in things. It is found in Someone else, in the One who created everything that is good, true, and beautiful in the world. True living is found in God and you discover God in the person of Jesus Christ” (21).

Both the life and the work of Flannery O’Connor suggest to us that our limitations are a gateway to reality because our limitations keep us, or should keep us, from thinking that true living is found primarily in our strengths. True living is found in our weaknesses, because it is through those weaknesses and limitations that we best see our lives as the grace gifts they are and not as the creation of our own handiwork. Paul famously declared, after he pleaded with God to remove the thorn in his flesh—his limitations, whatever they were—that the Lord told him that “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12). While American Christians might be tempted to interpret that sentence as Paul saying that “God will pick up the slack in my areas of weakness,” I think O’Connor knew better. O’Connor knew, as the theologian Marva Dawn would later put it, that God *tabernacled* in her weaknesses. Marva Dawn, who has struggled with physical limitations her whole life, has written extensively on this passage in 2 Corinthians and

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other passages that illustrate how God chooses again and again to display his power *through* human weakness, not in spite of it. She concludes that “even as Christ accomplished atonement for us by suffering and death, so the Lord accomplishes witness to the world through our weakness. In fact, God has more need of our weakness than of our strength. . . as the Psalms and Isaiah teach us, God’s way is not to take us out of tribulations but to comfort us in the midst of them and to ‘exchange’ our strength in the face of them. By our union with Christ in the power of the Spirit in our weaknesses, we display God’s glory” (47). I’m convinced that O’Connor knew that God tabernacled in her weaknesses just as he does in the ordinary, if a bit odd—and certainly all flawed—characters that populate her stories.

We can thank O’Connor for teaching us how it is that faithfulness means having both gratitude and humility. It means seeing our lives as a grace gift and our talents as pure bonus. It means recognizing that we are personally loved by God and given purpose by God, but it also means recognizing how small and insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. The Christian faith is the only tradition that holds these two realities—of our human value and our human insignificance—in proper tension.

With this idea we can begin to see what is so important for our day in Flannery O’Connor’s example of faithfulness. To give just one example, my current research leads me to study people who call themselves transhumanists. Transhumanists are kind of a kooky lot who specifically and aggressively turn to technology to try to overcome all limitations, with the expressed ultimate goal being to conquer all suffering and death. They even advocate cryonics—the practice of freezing someone who is declared legally dead in the ultimate hope of future resuscitation when technology permits. It seems that these ideas are finding resonance with more and more people, as the membership in the World Transhumanist Association has increased from two thousand to nearly five thousand in a mere seven years (Egan: 46). Though their beliefs seem to be an example of “be all that you can be” thinking gone haywire, their desires are actually quite typical of many Americans. Even though my father was in the US Air Force and I had no interest in the military life for myself, I remember being quite affected by the Army commercial I saw when I was growing up, the one in which a soldier, with a cup of steaming coffee in hand, declared that “we do more before 9 am than most people do all day”—as if *doing* more was

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being more. It took me a long time to get over that kind of thinking, and I still struggle with it. The ironic thing about transhumanism is also the ironic thing about our culture: if we have not learned how to find the true value in our lives as they are, what makes us think that extending them or overcoming all limitations is going to provide us with that meaning? There can be no doubt that our culture has replaced the search for the good life with the busyness and demands of a hyperproductive culture and the unrelenting consumer economy that drives it.

In this environment, knowing, as O'Connor did, that our limitations are a gateway to reality provides the real freedom that people, especially young people, are really looking for. If you know that faithfulness for you means to be the very best bricklayer you can be, then each day that is full of quality brick laying is full indeed. You are free not to worry that you have not written the great American novel, and you can receive the day in peace. O'Connor was too ill to write more than a few hours a day, and she died at a younger age than most of us will, yet her daily faithfulness left us with an incredible body of work. Quite simply, she did what she was able to do, and what she was gifted to do, and she did it well. What is even more to the point, in the midst of all her limitations—and I think, because of them—she did not consider herself to be above taking the time to write letters and to minister to people who asked for her help. Her limitations were, indeed, a gateway to a deep and abiding reality. May ours be the same for us. ✠

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