
Sacred Romance

Chapter 9

Less-Wild Lovers

It is the nature of desire not to be satisfied, and most human beings live only for the gratification of it.

Aristotle

In the time of our innocence, we trusted in good because we had not yet known evil. On this side of Eden and our own experience of the Fall—whatever our own Arrows have been and however the adversary has woven them together into our particular Message of the Arrows—it appears that we are left to find our way to trust in good, having stared evil in the face.

Most of us remember the time of our innocence as a Haunting. I (Brent) mean innocence not as being sinless but as that time before our experience with the Arrows crystallized into a way of handling life which is the false self. The Haunting calls to us unexpectedly in the melody and words of certain songs that have become our “life music”: the crooked smile of a friend; the laughter of our children (or their tears); the calling to mind of a mischievous face that still believed in joy; the smell of a perfume; the reading of a poem; or the hearing of a story. However the Haunting comes, it often brings with it a bittersweet poignancy of ache, the sense that we stood at a crossroads somewhere in the past and chose a turning that left some shining part of ourselves—perhaps the best part—behind, left it behind with the passion of youthful love, or the calling of a heart vocation, or simply in the sigh of coming to terms with the mundane requirements of life.

Whenever I hear the old Frankie Avalon song “Venus,” I see the blue eyes and dark hair of my first adolescent love, Kathleen. And I can feel the familiar Haunting seize my heart with palpable waves of longing and regret. We stood under the mistletoe together and I was afraid to kiss her. Even though our family moved to another state not long after, I thought for a long time it was that lost kiss that brought about the loss of the Sacred Romance; Romance that at sixteen is so embodied in first love. I felt there was something I could have done to hold on to the Sacred Romance by holding on to Kathleen.

And each of us has points of contact where the transcendence of the Romance has seared our heart in the fragrance of lovers, geographies, and times. They are captured there and return to haunt us with their loss whenever we return, or are returned, to their heart locale. At the end of the movie *A River Runs Through It*, the author, Norman MacLean, stands as an old man in the Montana river that defined the life of his family, now all gone. He casts for rising trout and something else. He tells us,

Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand in my youth are dead, even Jesse [his wife]. But I still reach out to them . . . when I am alone in the half-light of the canyon, all existence seems to fade to a being with my soul and memories

and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four count rhythm and the hope that a trout will rise. . . . I am haunted by waters.

My best friend experiences the Haunting whenever he reads the words of Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay":

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

The poem hangs on his office wall as a reminder of something lost.

Yet the people and times and places through which the Romance has seared us will betray us if we think that the Romance is in them, C. S. Lewis tells us:

. . . it (is) not in them, it only comes through them and what (comes) through them (is) longing. . . . They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.

It is Lewis's way of telling us that the Romance is both set within us, and still out on the road ahead of us—a Haunting that calls us to pilgrimage.

At one time or another, though, most of us forget the Haunting, or try to; for it often threatens to cripple us, leaving us bent over and unable to deal with the everyday things that life requires to be done. We all, to some extent, take that shining something in us that felt magical and passionate as children, that something that later swirled amid the confusion of sexual passion and our longing for heart intimacy—we take it and push it through the loneliness, ache, and turmoil of life—through various stages of disconnection and hardness to another abiding place: a kind of resignation. There is something inside of us that says, "This is the way it is. I had better learn to deal with it." Thinking Act III, Scene 2 (the Fall) will go on forever, we lose heart.

In C. S. Lewis's science fiction novel, *Perelandra*, the story's protagonist, Ransom, is sent to the planet Venus to hinder Satan's attempts to seduce that planet's first woman, Tinidril. He encounters her still in her innocence on the floating islands Lewis tells us cover the planet.

Beautiful, naked, shameless, young—she was obviously a goddess: but then the face, the face so calm that it escaped insipidity by the very concentration of its mildness. . . . Never had Ransom seen a face so calm, and so unearthly, despite

the full humanity of every feature. He decided afterwards that the unearthly quality was due to the complete absence of resignation, which mixes, in however slight a degree, with all terrestrial faces. This was a calm no storm had ever preceded.

Resignation is not just the sigh that groans with something gone wrong. Such a sigh can be redemptive if it does not let go of the Haunting we have all experienced of something presently lost. Resignation is the acceptance of the loss as final, even as I chose to interpret it on the bridge that long-ago November day. It is the condition in which we choose to see good as no longer startling in its beauty and boldness, but simply as “nice.” Evil is no longer surprising; it is normal.

It is from this place of heart resignation where many of us, perhaps all of us at one time or another, having suffered under the storm of life’s Arrows, give up on the Sacred Romance. But our heart will not totally forsake the intimacy and adventure we were made for and so we compromise. We both become, and take to ourselves, lovers that are less dangerous in their passion for life and the possible pain that comes with it—in short, lovers that are less wild.

Those of us who have been drawn to understand that God is our Father through conversion in Christ recapture the Romance again—for a while. We find ourselves again in the throes of first love. The Romance we thought we had left behind once more appears out on the road ahead of us as a possible destination. God is in his heaven and all seems right in the universe.

But this side of Eden, even relationship with God brings us to a place where a deeper work in our heart is called for if we are to be able to continue our spiritual journey. It is in this desert experience of the heart, where we are stripped of the protective clothing of the roles we have played in our smaller stories, that the Message of the Arrows reasserts itself. Healing, repentance, and faith are called for in ways we have not known previously. At this place on our journey, we face a wide and deep chasm that refuses us passage through self-effort. And it is God’s intention to use this place to eradicate the final heart walls and obstacles that separate us from him.

I will go before you
and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron.
I will give you the treasures of darkness,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the Lord,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name. (Isa. 45:2–3 NIV)

The Road Not Taken

God's imagery of going before us lets us know that he desires us to go on a journey. This is not so frightening. Most of us are aware that the Christian life requires a pilgrimage of some sort. We know we are sojourners. What we have sometimes not given much thought to is what kind of a journey we are to be taking.

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart," said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag Archipelago. Not realizing it is a journey of the heart that is called for, we make a crucial mistake. We come to a place in our spiritual life where we hear God calling us. We know he is calling us to give up the less-wild lovers that have become so much a part of our identity, embrace our nakedness, and trust in his goodness.

As we stand at this intersection of God's calling, we look down two highways that appear to travel in very different directions. The first highway quickly takes a turn and disappears from our view. We cannot see clearly where it leads but there are ominous clouds in the near distance. It is hard to say if they hold rain, snow, or hail, or are still in the process of fermenting whatever soul weather they intend to unleash upon us. Standing still long enough to look down this road makes us aware of an anxiety inside, an anxiety that threatens to crystallize into unhealed pain and forgotten disappointment. We check our valise and find no up-to-date road map but only the torn and smudged parchment containing the scribbled anecdotes and travelers' warnings by a few who have traveled the way of the heart before us. They encourage us to follow them but their rambling journals give no real answers to our queries on how to navigate the highway.

"Each heart has its own turns and necessary overnights," they say. "Only God knows where your road leads. But come ahead. The journey is purifying and the destination is good." Faced with such mystery and irritating vagueness, we cast our glance down the other highway. It runs straight as far as we can see, with the first night's lodging visible in the appropriate distance. Each mile is carefully marked with signs that promise success on the leg of the journey immediately ahead if their directions are carefully followed. The crisp map we take from our valise assures us that heart baggage is not needed on this journey and would only be in the way.

As we turn to look at the old parchment one more time, our eyes find the sentences left by one former traveler, "Don't be afraid of embracing the disappointment you feel, old or new. Don't be scared of the unreasonable joy either. They're the highway markers home. I've gone on ahead. Yours Truly."

We snort with disdain at such quaint sentiments, and our choice made, we stuff the parchment into our valise and strike off down the straight highway of discipline and duty. All goes well for a while, sometimes for years, until we begin to realize that we're really not feeling much anymore. We find ourselves struggling to weep with those who weep or even rejoice with those who rejoice. Mostly we don't bother looking people in the eye. They may want to engage us and nothing much inside feels very engaged. Our passions

begin to show up in inappropriate fantasies and longings interspersed with depression, anxieties, and anger we thought we had left behind. With a start, we realize our heart has stolen away in the baggage. It is taking the journey with us but under protest.

We redouble our efforts at discipline to get it to knuckle under but it refuses. Some of us finally kill it well enough that it no longer speaks as long as we're occupied. Any quasiredemptive busyness will do. We look as if we're still believing. Others of us decide the deadness is too high a price to pay and agree to let our heart have a secret life on the side. We even try to be passionate about our faith but the fiery embers that once sustained it have turned to cool gray ash, the evidence that life was indeed once present.

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," wrote Robert Frost in perhaps his most well-known poem, "The Road Not Taken":

"And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as long as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth. . . ."

Ironically, having ignored the road that "bent in the undergrowth" and taken the more traveled highway of discipline and duty, we find ourselves at the same place of heart resignation we left so many years ago before we were Christians. We arrive at the Vanity Fair that John Bunyan describes in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a familiar city populated with many of the companions we had hoped to leave behind: deadness of spirit, lack of loving-kindness, lust, pride, anger, and others. Nonetheless, having been out on the Christian journey for a number of years by now, we assume that this is as close to the Celestial City as we're ever going to get. We set up housekeeping and entertain ourselves as well as possible at the booths in the Fair that sell a variety of soul curiosities, games, and anesthetics.

The curiosities sold at the fair are endless in their diversity, many of them good in and of themselves: Bible study, community service, religious seminars, hobbies we try to convince ourselves are eternally transcendent (e.g., "Wow, I can't wait to ski deep powder!"), service to our church, going out to dinner. But we find ourselves doing them more and more to quiet the heart voice that tells us we have given up what is most important to us.

Life in Vanity Fair

Not even the most concrete of us live in a totally black-and-white world. Even so, we tend to fall into two groups when it comes to taking up housekeeping with these less-wild lovers—lovers who promise to deliver us from the Haunting of the Sacred Romance God has placed in our heart. Those of us in the first group choose anesthesia of the heart through some form of competence or order. These may be expressed in countless arenas: a clean desk, perfect housekeeping, Scripture memory and Bible study, a manicured lawn, a spotless garage, preparing and hostessing dinner parties that would make Martha

Stewart proud, sending your boys to the best sports camps to ensure they (we) never experience disappointment that might provoke thirst, formulaic religion that has three-step solutions to every problem—the list is endless.

We don't stop to consider that the curse God announced to Adam and Eve dictates that we will never be under control, either in our vocations (we will not defeat the thorns and thistles of life), nor our relationships (Eve would desire to control Adam, but would fail). God's intentions here strike us as strange if not sadistic until we remember that Satan's offer to Eve was that she could bring about her own redemption through knowing good and evil.

If we were to try to picture the one who anesthetizes her heart to control life's Arrows as a wife, we would see a soul occupied by a seemingly redemptive busyness—involvement with her household and community that is productive and worthwhile. When her husband comes home from work, she is satisfied with a peck on the cheek and a few pleasant words about the day. She doesn't mind lovemaking if it's not too spontaneous but she rarely if ever pursues it. An evening of television or a good book would do just as well. Like Cinderella, she often settles into the lesser role of maid and housekeeper rather than risk rejection by wanting romance. Her husband will feel guilty—even accused—for wanting anything more with her. If he expresses his sadness over something lost in their love affair, she chides him for his melancholy spirit.

Sadness on this order, sadness about something they once had together but had lost, is what God was so often expressing to Israel (and to us) through the prophets. He was continually trying to invite her into a lovers' quarrel while she kept hearing his words on the level of an attack on how well she was performing her duties. One with an anesthetized heart hears God with Israel's ears.

The heart sentences of one who has taken on some form of anesthesia to tame her own heart as well as the heart of anyone who would want a romance with her, sound something like this: "My heart is not available for any love affair that requires engagement. I live only to avoid the surprises that the wildness of your desire, or mine, might bring. And if you were smart, you would do the same."

And underneath those brusque sentences is a person's story.

For some of us who have chosen anesthesia to tame our heart and the hearts of those who would love us, there is a hail of fierce and identifiable Arrows whose damage we try to contain by simply closing the door to the damaged heart places. For others of us, it was perhaps living in an atmosphere too fragile to bear the weight of our unedited souls. We grew up with a certain civility under which was an unadmitted demand that things be good. We learned that nothing considered "not nice" could be entered into without our world being in danger of shattering. Those around us let us know in no uncertain terms they needed us to be less-wild lovers. Sometimes whole cultures put this demand on us. Rosemary Daniell, in her book, *Fatal Flowers*, describes how the Southern culture she grew up in demanded that she literally divide her soul in two to be acceptable: a helpless

Southern belle who was nonthreatening to men and Southern society, and a competent, independent career woman who could make up any family deficiency.

Our adversary also seduces us to abide in certain emotions that act as less-wild lovers, particularly shame, fear, lust, anger, and false guilt. They are emotions that “protect” us from the more dangerous feelings of grief, abandonment, disappointment, loneliness, and even joy and longing, that threaten to roam free in the wilder environs of the heart. These are feelings that frighten us, sometimes even long years into our Christian journey.

As I (Brent) write this chapter, Ginny and I are walking through a time in our marriage where we are trying to allow some of the sadness we both feel, due to years of misconnection and detachment in a certain area of our relationship, to be felt and expressed. Over the years, we have kept the feelings at bay with a bantering anger out of fear of where they might lead us (divorce?) if we admitted them. Having allowed ourselves to mourn, we both feel that there is a greater possibility of deeper romance in the years ahead.

If those of us in the first cadre of less-wild lovers choose to control our desire through various kinds of “stay-at-home” anesthesia, we who hang out in the emotional nightclubs of Vanity Fair choose a different kind of control: indulgence. We put our hope in meeting a lover who will give us some form of immediate gratification, some taste of transcendence that will place a drop of water on our parched tongue. This taste of transcendence, coming as it does from a nontranscendent source, whether that be an affair, a drug, an obsession with sports, pornography, or living off of our giftedness, has the same effect on our souls as crack cocaine. Because the gratification touches us in that heart-place made for transcendent communion, without itself being transcendent, it attaches itself to our desire with chains that render us captive.

A few years ago, I was counseling with a Christian man just ending a yearlong affair. He was married to an attractive and energetic woman who was also a believer, and he knew that he really loved her. He also began to understand that whatever it was that attracted him to the affair, it was not the woman herself, but something she represented. As we talked of making his break with her final, he wept with grief, immersed in the fear that some shining, more innocent part of himself would be left behind with the affair—left behind and, perhaps, lost forever.

And this is the power of addiction. Whatever the object of our addiction is, it attaches itself to our intense desire for eternal and intimate communion with God and each other in the midst of Paradise—the desire that Jesus himself placed in us before the beginning of the world. Nothing less than this kind of unfallen communion will ever satisfy our desire or allow it to drink freely without imprisoning it and us. Once we allow our heart to drink water from these less-than-eternal wells with the goal of finding the life we were made for, it overpowers our will, and becomes, as Jonathan Edwards said, “like a viper, hissing and spitting at God” and us if we try to restrain it.

“Nothing is less in power than the heart and far from commanding, we are forced to obey it,” said Jean Rousseau. Our heart will carry us either to God or to addiction.

“Addiction is the most powerful psychic enemy of humanity’s desire for God,” says Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace*, which is no doubt why it is one of our adversary’s favorite ways to imprison us. Once taken captive, trying to free ourselves through willpower is futile. Only God’s Spirit himself can free us or even bring us to our senses.

If God’s experience of being “married” to us, who are his Beloved, is sometimes that of being tied to a legalistic controller in the ways I’ve described in the paragraphs on anesthetizing our heart, at other times it is more like that of being married to a harlot whose heart is seduced from him by every scent on the evening breeze. In our psychological age, we have come to call our affairs “addictions,” but God calls them “adultery.” Listen again to his words to the Israelites through Jeremiah:

“You are a swift she-camel
running here and there, a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,
sniffing the wind in her craving—
in [your] heat [how can I] restrain [you]?
Any males that pursue [you] need not tire themselves;
at mating time they will find [you]
Do not run until your feet are bare
and your throat is dry” (Jer. 2:23–25).

God is saying, “I love you and yet you betray me at the drop of a hat. I feel so much pain. Can’t you see we’re made for each other? I want you to come back to me.” And Israel’s answer, like that of any addict or adulterer, is: “It’s no use! / I love foreign gods, / and I must go after them” (Jer. 2:25).

Perhaps we can empathize with the ache God experienced as Israel’s “husband” (and ours when we are living indulgently). Having raised Israel from childhood to a woman of grace and beauty, he astonishingly cannot win her heart from her adulterous lovers. The living God of the universe cannot win the only one he loves, not due to any lack on his part, but because her heart is captured by her addictions, which is to say, her adulterous lovers.

Many of us have had the experience of not being able to bridge the distance between ourselves and others, whether they be parents, friends, or lovers. Whether the distance is caused by unhealed wounds or willful sin in our lover’s heart—or our own—we experience their rejection as our not “being enough” to win them. Unlike God, we begin to think of ourselves as having a problem with self-esteem.

Whereas God became even more wild in his love for us by sending Jesus to die for our freedom, most of us choose to both become and take on lovers that are less wild. We give up desiring to be in a relationship of heroic proportions, where we risk rejection, and settle for being heroes and heroines in the smaller stories where we have learned we can

“turn someone on” through our usefulness, cleverness, or beauty (or at least turn ourselves on with a momentary taste of transcendence).

The list of our adulterous indulgences is endless: There is the exotic dancer, the religious fanatic, the alcoholic, the adrenaline freak, the prostitute with a man, the man with a prostitute, the eloquent pastor who seduces with his words, and the woman who seduces with her body. There is the indulgent lover who never really indulges physically, but spends his life in a kind of whimsy about what is lost, like Ashley in *Gone with the Wind*. What these indulgent lovers have in common is the pursuit of transcendence through some gratification that is under their control.

In the religions of the Fertile Crescent, access to God (transcendence) was attempted through sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes. Perhaps, as we indulge our addictions, we are doing no less than prostituting ourselves and others in this very same way. “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God,” said G. K. Chesterton.

At first glance, those of us who live by indulgence—illicit affairs of the heart—appear to have a certain passion that is superior to those who live by anesthesia. But it is a passion that must be fed by the worship or use of the other and so it is a passion that does not leave us free to love. Indulgence leaves us empty and primed for the next round of thirst quenching in an endless cycle that Solomon described as “vanity of vanities.” Jimi Hendrix, one of our modern-day poets, just before his death of a drug overdose, said it this way: “There ain’t no livin’ left nowhere.”

Life on that first road where the signs promised us life would work if we just applied the right formula—the road that seemed so straight and safe when we first set out on it—gives us no wisdom as to what we’re to do with the depth of desire God has placed within us. It is desire that is meant to lead us to nothing less than communion with him. If we try to anesthetize it, we become relational islands, unavailable to those who need us; like the father who lowers his newspaper with annoyance at the family chaos going on around him, but makes no move to speak his life into it.

If we try to gain transcendence through indulgence, soon enough familiarity breeds contempt and we are driven to search for mystery elsewhere. So the man having an affair must have another and the man who is an alcoholic must drink more and more to find the window of feeling good. “There is only One Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ,” said Oswald Chambers.

At the Edge of the Abyss

What, then, is the way of that less-traveled second road—the road that is the way of the heart?

We usually think of the middle years of the Christian life as a time of acquiring better habits and their accompanying virtues. But inviting Jesus into the “aching abyss” of our heart, perhaps has more to do with holding our heart hopefully in partial emptiness in a

way that allows desire to be rekindled. “Discipline imposed from the outside eventually defeats when it is not matched by desire from within,” said Dawson Trotman. There comes a place on our spiritual journey where renewed religious activity is of no use whatsoever. It is the place where God holds out his hand and asks us to give up our lovers and come and live with him in a much more personal way. It is the place of relational intimacy that Satan lured Adam and Eve away from so long ago in the Garden of Eden. We are both drawn to it and fear it. Part of us would rather return to Scripture memorization, or Bible study, or service—anything that would save us from the unknowns of walking with God. We are partly convinced our life is elsewhere. We are deceived.

“We are half-hearted creatures,” says Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*, “fooling about with drink and sex and ambition [and religious effort] when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

The desire God has placed within us is wild in its longing to pursue the One who is unknown. Its capacity and drive is so powerful that it can only be captured momentarily in moments of deep soul communion or sexual ecstasy. And when the moment has passed, we can only hold it as an ache, a haunting of quicksilver that flashes a remembrance of innocence known and lost and, if we have begun to pass into the life of the Beloved, a hope of ecstasies yet to come.

At some point on our Christian journey, we all stand at the edge of those geographies where our heart has been satisfied by less-wild lovers, whether they be those of competence and order or those of indulgence. If we listen to our heart again, perhaps for the first time in a while, it tells us how weary it is of the familiar and the indulgent.

We find ourselves once again at the intersection with the road that is the way of the heart. We look down it once more and see what appears to be a looming abyss between the lovers we have known and the mysterious call of Christ, which we now realize is coming from the other side. Jesus appears to be holding out his hand to us even as he calls us. He tells us he will provide a bridge over the chasm if we will abide in him. We hear his words, but such language is strange to us, sounding like the dialects of many who have used us or consumed us and then left us along the highway, exposed and alone. We pull back. Many of us return to Vanity Fair and mortgage our heart to purchase more of what is religiously or materially familiar.

A few of us arouse our spirit and take a step toward the chasm. We dig into our valise and pull out the old and torn parchment of road map and journal entries left by those who have traveled the way of the heart before us; the ones we had treated with such disdain. This time the words intrigue us. We realize they are telling us something about our heart that is true. One of them writes:

Tis hard for us to rouse our spirits up—
It is the human creative agony

Though but to hold the heart an empty cup
Or tighten on the team the rigid reign.
Many will rather lie among the slain
Than creep through narrow ways the light to gain—
Than wake the will, and be born bitterly.
(George MacDonald, Diary of an Old Soul)

Yet, “holding our heart an empty cup” and “tightening on the team the rigid reign” is language we are not familiar with. Our lovers have so intertwined themselves with our identity that to give them up feels like personal death. Indeed, they have kept us from knowing the emptiness of our heart’s cup. We wonder if it is possible to survive without them. We look once more at the journal to see if this sojourner ahead of us can offer any encouragement. He writes:

But we who would be born again indeed,
Must wake our souls unnumbered times a day
And urge ourselves to life with holy greed.
Now open our bosoms to the wind’s free play,
And now, with patience forceful, hard, lie still
Submit and ready to the making will,
Athirst and empty, for God’s breath to fill.

We are surprised and somewhat anxious at his words. We had expected him to give us religious instruction. Instead, he commands us to be greedy in our thirst, to open the windows of our heart to the “wind’s free play.” “What does this look like?” we ask.

“The answer is somewhat surprising,” answers one who is standing at the chasm with us. “It is surprising because it happens in the context of everyday relationships and vocation.” She tells us a story of how her own less-wild lover held her prisoner one day. She is a counselor, she says. Not long ago, two of her clients expressed their thankfulness for her help, saying she had done more for them in two sessions than previous counselors had done in months. Strangely, she found herself angry with them, admonishing them not to expect her to do “what they must do for themselves.” As she reflected on her surprising anger, it became clear to her that she did not yet totally trust that she could live in freedom as a woman who was truly enjoyable. When her clients complimented her, her old less-wild lover of living by competence shouted at her that she had better keep coming across with counseling insights or her clients would no longer value her. It was how she had survived as a child and for a moment, she forgot the hope that God has placed something in her that is truly enjoyable, separate from her competence.

As she finishes her story, we puzzle over the truth that setting her heart free depends so deeply on trusting in her own beauty; on hoping in what is wildly good. We remember that the last line of the inscription on the gates of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* reads, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” We pull out another of the old journals and read the apostle Peter’s warning that our adversary is constantly at work (the lion seeking to devour us) to convince us that there is nothing wildly good, either in us, in God, or in his plans for the

future of our love affair. “There is no such thing as true goodness,” our adversary roars, “and if there is, it’s deadly dull.”

We wonder if it is our enemy who has convinced us that “good” is synonymous with “nice”: the way we would be required to behave in Aunt Suzy’s parlor on a warm summer afternoon when we would rather be swinging from a rope over the swimming hole.

It strikes us that to hope in the kind of goodness that would set our heart free, we must be willing to allow our desire to remain haunted. This side of the Fall, true goodness comes by surprise, the old writings tell us, enthralling us for a moment in heaven’s time. They warn us it cannot be held. Something inside knows they are right, that if we could do so, we would set up temples to worship it and the Sacred Romance would become prostitution. We understand that we must allow our desire to haunt us like Indian summer, where the last lavish banquet of golds and yellows and reds stirs our deepest joy and sadness, even as they promise us they will return in the fragrance of spring.

Intrigued by these things and feeling the wind’s free play on our face in a way we have almost forgotten, we seriously consider stepping out down the road we have so long feared and avoided. Just then our old lovers reach out for us with a vengeance. They promise us they will fill our heart to overflowing again if we will just give them one more chance. They even promise to become more religious if that will help.

Drawn by the familiar sound of their voices, and still somewhat anxious about the unknown journey ahead of us, we reach into our briefcase one last time to see if there is any solution to such double-mindedness. We find these words written by another traveler who also faced the chasm that has tortured and perplexed us so deeply. He assures us that even our deep ambivalence is part of the journey of the heart and that only severe measures by God himself can free us. He exhorts us to pray like this:

Batter my heart, three personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend.
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new,
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but, oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend;
But is captive and proves weak or untrue.

Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain;
But am betrothed unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

(John Donne, “Batter My Heart”)

Partly afraid to pray for such bold movement from the wild God who loves us, we sit down to reflect on our plight. But this time, we are honest with ourselves. We admit that Vanity Fair really never has felt like home. We confess that we are truly captured by the less-wild lovers we have taken on, hoping that they would protect us from the Arrows even as they quenched our thirst. And we cannot deny, like it or not, that our lives have always been entwined with the characters in the Sacred Romance. We have lived under the hail of life's Arrows, some dragonlike in their ferocity, others—the everyday nits—small but continually troublesome. The Sacred Romance has touched us for a moment, but then has gone. It strikes us that we have nothing to lose. We get up and grip our valise for the unknown journey ahead of us. Something makes us search in it for an old scrap of paper. The words scrawled on it always bothered us when we came across them back in Vanity Fair. Now we read them for assurance:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

We strike off down the road feeling much more alive than we have in a while. We are clueless as to how we will cross the abyss, but we feel a gladness to be on our way. Nonetheless, many questions nag at our consciousness as we walk. How are we to understand this journey which so few dare to travel? How are we to bring all of the characters and plots of the Sacred Romance together in our hearts and minds in a way that allows us to be transformed by the Story God is telling? Do we have all we need for the journey? Did we pack carefully enough to travel this more unknown road that is the way of the heart? Perhaps we should return home and get a few more things and a good night's rest before we undertake such a pilgrimage. All these things are on our heart as we begin.