

*Symposium:*  
*Barbara Brown Taylor*

## Stepping Outside: Barbara Brown Taylor as Memoirist

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Barbara Brown Taylor's career as a writer stretches from her work as a preacher to that of a spiritual memoirist. The public high point of her first vocation took place in 1995, when Baylor University named Taylor among the twelve "most effective preachers in the English-speaking world."<sup>1</sup> In that group of twelve—which was selected from a pool of over fifteen hundred by a large sampling of seminary professors and editors of religious periodicals—she was the only woman named and, at the age of 44, decades younger than most of the other honorees (for example, Billy Graham, Fred Craddock, James Forbes, and John Stott). Unlike them, she was not an internationally known evangelist, a seminary academic, a prolific sermon publisher (in 1995 she had only two collections), or in possession of a major pulpit. She was instead an Episcopal priest in a small North Georgia parish that "in a pinch" could seat eighty-five people.<sup>2</sup>

Today, twenty years later, Taylor is no longer a parish priest, although she has continued to be a preacher in a variety of churches and to bring many of her sermons into print in seven additional collections. She has, moreover, moved the center of her professional life to the classroom and, as a writer, made a shift in genre as well as in publishing venue. It comes as no surprise that the vivid personal

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<sup>1</sup> "Baylor Names the 12 Most Effective Preachers," [www.baylor.edu/media/communications/news.php?action=story&story=1036](http://www.baylor.edu/media/communications/news.php?action=story&story=1036).

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 12.

asides long valued in her preaching—the snapshots of personal experience—should grow into a more sustained sharing of herself. Her telling of the old, old story has always been made new by her telling bits and pieces of her own.

Taylor has now published what she calls a “trilogy” of books: *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (2006), *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (2009), and *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (2014). They are all dedicated, as she says in the introduction to the third book, “to scooping up the bottom halves of things,” that is, to reclaiming what over the long course of Christian history has been trashed or “rejected on bogus grounds.”<sup>3</sup> She has not exactly “left” church, but has largely been finding God elsewhere—down on the farm, at her father’s deathbed, in a cave.

Her shift in genre has also entailed a move from smaller church-related publishing houses to the wider world of HarperOne, whose Big Tent ambition (according to their website) is to be “the preeminent publisher of the most important books across the full spectrum of religion, spirituality, and personal growth.”<sup>4</sup> Their market, in other words, is white unto harvest not only for the religious and the spiritual, but for those “nones” who are looking for what Taylor speaks of as the “really Real,” “the divine More.”

All three installments of her HarperOne trilogy have made a splash, but it is with her most recent book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, that Taylor reached a high-water mark. This is in part thanks to *TIME* magazine, which on April 28, 2014 made her, if not precisely the cover girl of their Easter Week issue, then at least the subject of their five-column cover story, “Finding God in the Dark.” On that cover an arresting black-and-white photograph shows dimly luminescent train tracks advancing through a dark wood, seemingly upward. They move toward a full moon that shines through the far horizon’s mist. Beneath the issue’s title, “Finding God in the Dark,” is an explanatory subtitle that puts Taylor’s name, if not her face, on the cover: “Beyond enlightenment: Acclaimed preacher Barbara Brown Taylor argues that strength, purpose, and true faith are found in the shadows.”

Only a week later, in its May 5 issue, *TIME* placed Taylor among the world’s “100 Most Influential People,” this time with Beyoncé on

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> “HarperOne Publishers,” [www.linkedin.com/company/harperone-publishers](http://www.linkedin.com/company/harperone-publishers).

the cover. According to *TIME* correspondent Elizabeth Dias, Taylor was “among America’s leading theologians,” and “a centering voice in the wilderness.”<sup>5</sup> Characterizing her as “an accomplished Episcopal preacher and best-selling author,” *TIME* placed her, along with Pope Francis, among the five worthies in the category of religion.<sup>6</sup> Once again she was the only woman in that grouping.

Pope Francis aside, she was certainly the “most read” of *TIME*’s religious leaders in 2014. Less than a month after she was placed among the 100, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* was ranked number sixteen on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list in the “Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous” category. The book appears there lodged between William Davis’s *Wheat Belly* (“An examination of the role wheat plays in modern diets”) and Rick Warren’s *The Daniel Plan* (“A spirituality-based approach to health and wellness”).<sup>7</sup>

At the crest of this surge in fame and (at least for HarperOne) fortune was the “Super Soul Sunday” conversation with Oprah Winfrey, televised on November 9, 2015. Over the course of an hour Taylor spoke with her host about her book’s exploration of “lunar spirituality,” about the value of darkness, of what good can happen when you are clouded by “unknowing.” Oprah pushed back, taking the familiar solar line that *Learning to Walk in the Dark* works very hard to challenge. “For me,” Oprah said, “whenever I start to feel the darkness, I think that means I need to get closer to God, which is the light, or some light sources.”<sup>8</sup>

Whatever may be the differences in their planetary spiritualities, however, it is easy to see why Oprah wanted to interview Taylor at a time when she was developing her network’s five-part “Belief” series, which debuted on October 18, 2015. Oprah’s TV spotlight on the dramatic changes in contemporary religious life all across the globe covers some of the same developments Taylor records in her own spiritual life: leaving church, finding the holy outside ecclesial doors, and finding it especially in those dark places she was early taught to fear rather than learn from—to flee rather than work with. According

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Dias, “Barbara Brown Taylor,” April 23, 2014, <http://time.com/70780/>.

<sup>6</sup> “The 100 Most Influential People in the World 2014,” <http://time.com/time100-2014/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Books: Best Sellers,” *The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/2014-05-18/advice-how-to-and-miscellaneous/list.html](http://www.nytimes.com/best-sellers-books/2014-05-18/advice-how-to-and-miscellaneous/list.html).

<sup>8</sup> “Barbara Brown Taylor,” [www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/Barbara-Brown-Taylor](http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/Barbara-Brown-Taylor).

to Diana Butler Bass, writing in the *Washington Post*, Oprah's "Belief" series argues that "across the planet, people are taking responsibility for their own versions of meaning and, in the process, are remaking faith in ways that are more inclusive, more personal, more connected to the natural world and more attentive to their community."<sup>9</sup> This is also one way to describe the thrust of Taylor's trilogy.

Taylor describes this cumulative venture in the introduction to *Learning to Walk in the Dark* not only as "scooping up the bottom halves of things," but also as moving forward in a sequence of measured steps: her books engage "first the world, then the flesh, now the dark."<sup>10</sup> This sequence is provocative. Without waving red flags, it marks a reevaluation of what Christianity has "rejected on bogus grounds": the world, the flesh, and the dark. Anyone marinated in the old-style *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy, as Taylor was during her Yale Divinity School years at Christ Church, New Haven, would recognize in this tripleheader an echo of Thomas Cranmer's Great Litany, typically rehearsed by Anglo-Catholics at the beginning of Advent and Lent: "From all inordinate and sinful affections; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, *Good Lord, deliver us.*"<sup>11</sup>

One way to understand Taylor's three books is to see them as a "how to" guide for being delivered *from* the misuse of this prayer, that is, from the conventional naysaying of world and flesh. For her, what has long been dismissed as "inordinate" is more likely to be "out of the ordinary," and therefore an uncomfortably useful resource in authentic living. "Sinful affections" may often be the mess of desire that, rather than being expunged, needs only to grow up in order to become love. Besides, the world is not necessarily our enemy, but a fellow creature in need of nurture and care. In any case, it is our home—declared by God to be "good" in the beginning, the source of endless wonder ever since, and without which humanity simply could not live. Likewise the flesh, for all that it is heir to, is the means by which we give and receive love, not to mention the medium God

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<sup>9</sup> Diana Butler Bass, "Oprah's new 'Belief' series shows how dramatically the nature of faith is shifting," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/10/18/oprahs-new-belief-series-shows-how-dramatically-the-nature-of-faith-is-shifting/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/10/18/oprahs-new-belief-series-shows-how-dramatically-the-nature-of-faith-is-shifting/).

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> "The Great Litany," *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 149.

chose for Incarnation and Resurrection. Why, then, would we pray to be “delivered” from it?

And yet, of course, there is much in what the New Testament refers to as “world,” *aion*, that one definitely does not want to be conformed to; so too *sarx*, the flesh. In her critique of Christian naysaying, however, Taylor is not embracing naively everything that scripture reviles as “flesh and blood”—degradation and exploitation, greed and the hateful use of power. Instead, she is asking us to give the creation its due, not to reject what we do not easily understand “on bogus grounds.” I take this to be her charge. Make friends with the world and the flesh as aspects of the good we are meant to love. Explore experience that takes you into the risky unknown, walking carefully forward—eyes open—with the caution of the spelunker who is rightly uncertain of what’s next. Discover what normally you do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. The floodlit straight and narrow is not, after all, the only way to God.

And so, valuing the world and the flesh as she does, Taylor’s third memoir invites the reader to learn to walk in the dark. In it she follows a strategy also employed in the earlier books: she works with, rather than against, Christian tradition by gently prodding us to explore the world off the beaten path rather than fear it. As in her second memoir, *An Altar in the World*, she asks the reader to recognize that there are altars everywhere, not just in church, and that practices of attention and risk-taking are themselves forms of devotion. But now for the first time she faces the dominant solar tradition head on. She argues that the church has mistakenly turned “the dark” into “the devil,” and thereby alienated us not only from much of our deepest human experience but also from a God who has (to recall Henry Vaughan’s “The Night”) deep reserves of darkness:

There is in God, some say,  
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that night! where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim!<sup>12</sup>

Like Vaughan, whose poem could well serve as this book’s epigraph, Taylor puts scripture’s strong preference for light, its

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Vaughan, “Night”; [www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180789](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180789).

overall disparagement of the dark, into perspective. Even though “Christianity has never had anything nice to say about darkness,”<sup>13</sup> the scriptures themselves actually do: “Once you start noticing how many important things happen at night in the Bible,” she says, “the list grows fast.”<sup>14</sup> Along with Light and Day, Darkness and Night are there together in the prelapsarian “beginning.” God asks Abraham to look up at the stars and count them if he can. Jacob dreams at night, and later wrestles in the River Jabbok until he gets a name and a blessing from that nighttime struggle. Joseph dreams at night. The children of Israel walk through the Red Sea in the dark, which is also when manna falls from heaven. Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai in “thick darkness.” To change testaments, recall that at night the Magi follow a star to Bethlehem and Nicodemus makes his way to Jesus. At night, in Gethsemane, Jesus reveals his full humanity when fear keeps him up while others sleep.

But if Taylor works to establish the viability of darkness by retrieving its positive associations within scripture, she is primarily asking the reader to do something off book: to take a moon walk with her into suspect and sometimes scary territory, into places where the sun never shines. Sometimes this means following her into actual places where she has been. There is “Dante’s Down the Hatch, a jazz club in Underground Atlanta,” where she worked as a cocktail waitress just before going to seminary.<sup>15</sup> More recently, there is her visit to a traveling exhibition called “Dialogue in the Dark,” where (to quote its website) “the blind really do lead the blind”<sup>16</sup>; her investigation of the crypt underneath the cathedral at Chartres and its Chapel of Notre Dame de Sous-Terre, Our Lady of the Underground; her descent to the depths of Organ Cave in West Virginia (the description of which confirmed my inclination *never* to go into a cave).

But in addition to these literal places there are also spiritual geographies that she invites the reader to explore, states of mind and heart she asks us not to flee from but instead to engage: “dark emotions,” grief, melancholy, and “night terrors.” This is the territory that Gerard Manley Hopkins explores in what he called, with accuracy, his “Terrible Sonnets”:

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 49.

<sup>16</sup> “Discover the Unseen,” *Dialogue in the Dark*, [www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/](http://www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com/).

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
 Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
 May who ne'er hung there.<sup>17</sup>

Yet ultimately, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* is about night's pleasures rather than its sweats. The book's opening chapter presents the author stretched out in her front yard on a blow-up mattress, hoping to watch the progression of twilights from civil to nautical to astronomical. Who knew there was more than one? But this diversity is what you learn when you study how the night unfolds, how the moon runs through its phases, waxes and wanes with the seasons—just like her faith, she confides. On this particular night, the weather does not cooperate: the “honey-moon” she hoped for is seemingly off for the night. She is tempted, in fact, to call it quits. But, as she observes in a burst of metaphor that, true to her form, prizes the natural above the manufactured:

To go inside would be like putting down a glass of cool spring water to go drink a store-brand cola. It would be like blowing out a pearl-colored candle to go read by a compact fluorescent light. Why would someone do that? . . . On a night like this, it is hard to understand why anyone would choose a reading lamp and the hum of the air conditioner over a box seat at the sound-and-light show outside, where it is always opening night.<sup>18</sup>

Weather be damned, she chooses to stay outside. Taylor is not, however, a solitary figure, like Thoreau in his cabin and pond. Rather, her night watches are most often shared. When a child, as we learn in *An Altar in the World*, there was her father Earl, who taught her reverence for the sky one early August in Ohio by having her and her sister stretch out on a blanket and take in the Tears of Saint Lawrence, the night of falling stars: “When I breathed in, I seemed huge to myself. I felt as much a part of the sky as a feather on a bird's belly. When I breathed out, I became so small that I feared I might vanish. What was a seven-year-old girl, under that great weight of stars?”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,” [www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173663](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173663).

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 24–25.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 18.

Decades later, it is her husband Ed who joins her *en plein air*. In *An Altar in the World* we watch them at a North Carolina campground as they figure out how to negotiate their way in complete darkness through a tunnel of laurels. Without a flashlight they have to rely on one another, on the sixth sense and the “physical fine-tuning” that links them. It is, she says, a connection that “felt more like [the mountaineer’s] belay line than a tow truck.”<sup>20</sup> Here the figurative becomes literal: they find themselves in that green tunnel moving forward by faith, not by sight.

And then in *Learning to Walk in the Dark* there is their scramble one evening in late December as they prepare to watch the moon rise above the highest point on their property. Whereas in the parish Taylor had relied on the Prayer Book to find the Golden Number and determine when Easter would fall on a given year, she now consults the *Farmer’s Almanac* to locate the lunar rising. It is December 28, exactly seven days after the winter solstice, and the moon is due to appear at 6:11 p.m. It is also a Friday, which makes for “a Sabbath moon as well as a full one”:

The evening is already so beautiful that it is easy to see why the Jews imagine the Sabbath as a bride. When three stars appear, she will arrive. Even now, she fills the space without saying a word. She is present even in her absence, with everyone waiting on tiptoe for a glimpse of her, wanting to be the first to see her and let everyone else know she is here.<sup>21</sup>

Two pages later, readers are still waiting for the moon to rise, trying to find the right vantage point on a hilltop whose horizon is all treetops “except for the roofline of one house a couple of miles away.”

Then I see it: a thin slice of perfectly round persimmon showing just above the roofline of the house. There is one house on the whole horizon, and that is where the moon comes up? “Quick!” I say to Ed. “We have to move!” “Why?” he says, but then he sees it too, and we break [our old dog] Dancer’s heart by moving six feet away. At least now we can see the show without the silhouettes of satellite dishes, chimneys, and bathroom vents on the moon. Her face is perfectly round,

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 168.

perfectly orange, perfectly huge. She is the perfect bride, with one bright star shining behind her right shoulder.<sup>22</sup>

There are a number of things to note in this passage. First, a reminder that Taylor finds spiritual nourishment in many places. She turns to Jewish tradition for a way to frame her moon watch. The spirit of Shabbat shalom, in fact, pervades the passage, as the advent of the Sabbath becomes the occasion of a wedding between heaven and earth. Just minutes after 6 p.m., here comes the bride, “with everyone waiting on tiptoe for a glimpse of her, wanting to be the first to see her and let everyone else know she is here.”

And what a beautiful bride she is! Taylor lets her language become gorgeous, sonorous, tintured, as persimmon shades into orange. She also hints at the inadequacy of her words, with five claims of the moment’s perfection to suggest what cannot actually be said about it, hard as she tries. The poet may court the moon with metaphor but the moon wins sheerly on its own.

Nor is the scene itself as “perfect” as it should be. “There is one house on the whole horizon, and that is where the moon comes up?” Determined to have the best seats for the show—front row, no partially obstructed view—the couple moves their arthritic dog a stone’s throw away to avoid the encroachments of manmade “satellite dishes, chimneys, and bathroom vents.” Such visual clutter will not be allowed to crash the wedding.

But finally what strikes me as remarkable in this account is also a feature of Taylor’s spiritual memoirs in general: the presence of Ed. Unlike the other writers of spiritual nonfiction to which she is typically compared—C. S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner (*TIME*), Annie Dillard and Anne Lamott (*Library Journal*)—Taylor’s experience of the “really Real,” the “More,” is most often partnered. To be sure, the memoirist’s “room called remember” is frequented at least a bit by other people. Augustine had his friends Alypius and Nebridius as well as his mother, Monica. Lewis had his wife Joy, Buechner his family members, Lamott her Pastor Veronica and her son. But Ed more than frequents the trilogy: he is essential to it.

You would not guess this, however, from the *TIME* magazine issue “Finding God in the Dark,” where he appears in the opening paragraph as a piece of local color, a domestic aside: “It’s 10:45 on a Sunday night when Barbara Brown Taylor sets off from her front

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<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 169–170.

porch. The lights in her northern Georgia farmhouse are off, the chickens cooped, and her husband Ed has cleaned the kitchen and gone upstairs to bed.”

In fact, Ed is everywhere in the memoirs as he is not, in fact, in the sermons. He is never a homiletic “illustration.” His importance should not come as a surprise given the dedication to *Leaving Church*: “For Edward, always and again.” Sometimes he is a partner in discovering “thin places” in Ireland,<sup>23</sup> or sharing the adventure of getting lost in Mexico,<sup>24</sup> or enduring the ordeal of life without electricity for four winter days in the country,<sup>25</sup> or even learning the intricacies of rescuing a loggerhead turtle in Sea Island, Georgia.<sup>26</sup>

But apart from being her fellow traveler, Ed is also Taylor’s “best reader and best friend,”<sup>27</sup> and sometimes her teacher. His lessons can be practical: he knows about compost and how to dig for potatoes.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, he is usually ahead of her on the path to the “really Real.” She may be the ordained priest trained in ministry but it is he who knows about blessings. When Taylor’s father was dying, Ed knelt beside the hospital bed and placed his father-in-law’s hand on his head, leaning close to receive his whispered blessing. “This kind of blessing prayer is called a benediction,” Taylor writes. “Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony, often tender, always life-giving hand above their heads.”<sup>29</sup>

Although a churchgoing man, Ed knows how to color outside the ecclesiastical lines long before she does. During her days in the parish, for instance, Taylor was squeamish about Ed’s Native American piety and, in particular, about his hosting of gatherings on property that once had been Cherokee land. What would the congregation say if they actually knew what went on there? In *Leaving Church*, Taylor talks about how she learned to appreciate the North Georgia Sun Dance community once she “lightened up,” learning both to admire

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 80–85.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 81–82.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 141–146.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 66–67.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 53–57; Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 147–149.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 208.

and envy their genuine embrace of “all sorts and conditions,” their freedom from books, their direct encounters with a God they both feared and loved, whom they knew to be “as far above them on the food chain as an eagle is to a mouse.”<sup>30</sup>

But it is seeing Ed at the end of four days of Native American dancing, fasting, and prayer that takes her breath away. It is as if Mount Sinai has been transposed to their Georgia acreage and Moses has come down the mountain:

He looked a thousand years old, with a bad sunburn and a four-day beard. The word *wizened* was invented for how he looked, all except his face. His faced leaked light, as if every ray of sun that had landed on him that week had seeded his pores. Ed shone, and when he looked at me I felt the beam hit me in the chest across fifty feet of wet pasture.<sup>31</sup>

Autobiographical writing of any kind often leaves a reader with a sense of envy. If only one's own life had been as rich and eventful as the author's, as full of significance and of experiences worth remembering. If only one had had an Ed! Yet it is Taylor's ability to speak of her glimpses of the holy in the ordinary experiences of her life that suggests the possibility that we too have more daily encounters with the holy than we know. Finally, I think one of the major gifts of Taylor's memoirs, in addition to their insight and beauty, is their portrayal of the spiritual life as possibly a shared experience. The genre often describes a solitary path through the dark wood, the journey of an alone to the Alone. Taylor reminds us, however, that wherever we end up finding God, be it in the dark or at high noon, we might well be doing it in company. There is much to be said, after all, for what can happen when two or three are gathered together.

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 189.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Leaving Church*, 191.

