



A Good Word for Marianne
April 18, 2015

The Bellamy Brothers, of country music fame, had it partially right when they sang, “Though her body is immortal, I love her mind.” We’re here today because Marianne’s body was, of course, not immortal. She spent far too many years enduring the pain, the slowly debilitating humility of disease. It is our loss, felt in the grief that comes to children and family, to friends who have become family – our loss, that she could only be freed from the ache of her mortality by letting go of the only kind of life we can know in this world. Our loss was her gain. Our pain her freedom. Such are the scales of time and eternity.

But on the other side of those scales, balancing the injustices that some withstand – and there is no fair distribution here, some get more than a fair share – balancing the injustice of heartache and pain – was Marianne’s enduring spirit, her love of life, her quest to explore beyond any comfortable boundary, her desire to know. Ironically, for those of us who knew her, her loss was our liberation. As she slowly succumbed to the clutches of Parkinson’s disease, she had her moments of honest reflection, but instead of becoming bitter or resentful, she dug even deeper in a quest to understand the mystery and the gift of life.

We come today, and can truly celebrate her life, despite our tears, because in the years we had with her she changed us. Yes, many of us can say, though her body was mortal, “I loved her mind!” Marianne Ausley Anderson represents the best of the legacy Charlie Milford left to this world through Park Road Baptist Church. That legacy is a Christian conviction that refuses to stand still, that will not claim absolute truth, that will not demand a sure and easy certainty, but cannot let go this pursuit, either. It is a conviction that truth is a becoming not a having. I don’t know a better definition of faith. Faith is never letting go of that quest. It is the insatiable longing to make meaning out of cosmic mystery. It is becoming – and Marianne never quit becoming.

I actually think she still is... becoming. Now, Marianne would not want us to spend any of our time today talking about “hobby horses in heaven,”¹ to borrow another phrase from Charlie, but life does go on. I have no doubt. As we say every year on All Saints’ Sunday, when we call the names of our deceased, as long as we can call those names, tell their stories, laugh and cry with them... they are still alive. Still becoming. If you believe that the only life-after-death we will know, is the life we live in the hands and feet, the thoughts and actions of the children who carry our genes, even then... she’s still alive. Still becoming. It need not be “pie in the sky by and by,” but the essence of faith is love, and love never dies.² So even today we can celebrate Marianne’s becoming, in the forever presence of God.³

The last conversation I had with Marianne said so much about her. She was struggling just to produce words, and that physical exertion made for long, tortured strains of thought. She started in with the word “disrespect,” and it sounded like she was concerned she had disrespected me... I just couldn’t tell what she was saying, but then she said rather clearly, “Well... I forgot what the hell I was saying!” And then she said, just as clearly, that I needed to tell the people at church that they needed to laugh. Out loud. At church.

The immemorial Ode to a Capable Woman, which closes the book of Proverbs, sings her praise, and that woman sounds something like Marianne in many of her qualities, including these words: “*Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come*” (Proverbs 31.25). Marianne, even knowing what was to come, never quit laughing. She did not believe in wasting her energy complaining about things she could not change. There is a deep, quiet trust in the soul of someone who can laugh at herself and her circumstances, to the very end. Marianne knew that deep, quiet trust.

¹ This is a phrase I have heard Charlie use. The question, “Are there hobby horses in heaven?” was a means of asking of the question of what “heaven” means, and how we should, and should not, talk about it.

² 1 Corinthians 13.8-13: *Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

³ Amy and I often speak of “the forever presence of God” rather than use the traditional language of “heaven.”

She began a career as a second-grade teacher, though in a few years she had returned to her classroom of three, where she spent the rest of her teaching years, as mother and grandmother. In those growing up years, the family traveled in the Airstream, and it was all about the family, and the education. The Anderson clan has stopped to read every historical marker on the eastern seaboard! Marianne loved to read, and in recent years her teaching came through as she became a kind of reference librarian. Friends would ask, “What have you been reading lately?” knowing they would find only sources of wisdom on Marianne’s reading table. She loved to garden, and there was life in her touch. Some people just have that gift.

And Marianne Anderson loved music. She played the piano, required her children to take lessons for a few years, and for many years she was a cornerstone in the sanctuary choir at Park Road Baptist Church. She was opinionated about what was and what was not appropriate to sing in worship, and she was on the committee that chose the hymnal we use. Not everyone understands that choice, but let me assure you it was made with thoughtful, careful deliberation, because Marianne knew, as others have said, that we learn most of our theology through our music – so we ought not to be careless about what we choose to sing as a congregation.

It has been said that the one who sings prays twice, and there is truth there. Music speaks a language that is deeper than the best theology, because it speaks from a place far below the surface. So we hear it, but we also feel it. Every symphony, every anthem, every harmony and simple melody becomes a prayer; it is the “deep” within the musician calling out to some “deep” mystery that extends beyond our ability to name.

When I asked her children to tell me about her faith, there was something of an uneasy quiet that filled the air, but what they finally said is what I’ve always known about Marianne. They said her faith was unconventional... evolving but always so strong... it was very powerful... As her concept of God changed, as her investment in organized religion waned, some of necessity, some of choice, there was a higher sense of spirituality that would not let her go. There was something more. We need Marianne’s faith today, because far

too many people have left the Church, or worse, have abandoned the joy and depth of faith, because God has just become an old, worn out cliché, and religion has just become the narrow practice of dogma. Marianne knew, through the life the mind, which it was so evident by her deep spirit and joyous laughter, that God is so much more than that – God is Being and Mystery. Energy and Unknown. Life. Light. Love.

So I close this good word for Marianne by reading an ancient poem of the Church. It is not a definition of God to be argued with, it is a song, a poem to be experienced:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, | so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, | for the living God.
When shall I come and behold | the face of God?
My tears have been my food | day and night,
while people say to me continually, | ‘Where is your God?’*

*These things I remember; | as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, | and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, | a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul, | and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, | my help and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me; | therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, | from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to **deep** | at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows | have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, | and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

*I say to God, my rock, | ‘Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully | because the enemy oppresses me?’
As with a deadly wound in my body, | my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually, | ‘Where is your God?’*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, | and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, | my help and my God. (Psalm 42)*

That ancient word speaks of Marianne Anderson, whose living was so deeply entrenched in the life of the mind and a quest for the spirit that it spilled out onto all who knew her.

For the life and the mind of Marianne Anderson, thanks be to God!

