

May 3

Everyone touring the New Jersey prison was a "professional," but when Joyce Carol Oates made the mistake of smiling at some male inmates, the whole cell block leered at her. This "professional" was reduced to a physical object. ("After Amnesia" in The Best American Essays, 1999; pp. 188-200)

Some women aspire to marriage, but many a married woman isn't content to be identified as wife or mother and wants to be known as a "professional person." In a male-dominated society men don't have that problem to the same degree but only a dolt doesn't get it that men identify themselves by what they do.

"It's who you are, not what you do." That, I think, is no answer; it highlights the problem. Who am I? Again, "it's not who you are but Whose you are." Still not satisfying. A couch potato justifies his life by saying, "I'm a baptized child of God?"

Time marches on and we see our roles in life changing. Especially as a Christian I don't really know who I am. "It has not yet been revealed what we shall be" (1 John 3:2). Jesus, the grand identity robber. "Deny yourself and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). Unbelievably radical, almost.

May 4

"Mom!" Once in a while kids call out "Dad," but we all know it's mom who wins the calling contest.

Besieged mothers should call out too...for their children...to God. Today, May 4th, the church remembers Monica, a great pray-er for her child. Like many young people, her son gave up the Christian faith to sow his wild oats. It happens, these newly independent young adults going their own way, and it tears up a faithful mother more than most of us know.

Monica went to a priest for counsel. He told her, "Let him alone for a while; only pray to God for him." She pestered the priest more. "Go your way," he finally said, "and God bless you, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should be lost." And her son wasn't lost. Her son Augustine became one of the greatest leaders in the history of the Christian church.

Remember how you kids call to you? "Have we trials" Take it to the Lord in prayer." Mothers, besieged by your children's needs, worried about their lives, call to the heavenly Father for them. "Your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

May 5

I'd pronounce it wrong, I'm sure. "Cuidado! Pisa Mojado" More and more we see signs in English and Spanish. This increasing bilingualism is new for me, just like Cinco de Mayo is something I didn't know existed until a few years ago. It's not a big deal in Mexico but this commemoration of a Mexican victory over the French on May 5, 1862 has taken on a life of its own in the United States.

It's easy to dismiss other languages, but language is the vehicle God has chosen to bring us His Good News in Jesus Christ. Vowels, consonants, subjects and objects, grammar, syntax...words...and words not originally in English.

People sometimes say that because the Bible has been translated from ancient Hebrew and Greek, we can't be sure of what it means. Nonsense. That sign, "Cuidado! Piso mojado" is translated: "Caution! Wet floor." Just to be sure the truth is known, the sign also carries a drawing of a man slipping and falling. Truth can be known and it's coming to our world in many languages. Take God's words for granted and the slip and fall will be terrible. Heed the translated words and there'll be an eternal festival coming your way!

May 6

50, 45, 30, 20, 10. Abraham prayed for Sodom. "Sodom," synonymous with the most sinful conducts. The Lord answered, "For the sake of 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10 righteous, I will not destroy it." (Genesis 18:20-33)

"He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). God has a heart for all people, wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), even those who refuse to walk in His ways. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. God has more of a heart for contemporary culture than some hard-hearted religionists do.

That's not to say all roads lead to God, that it makes no difference what you believe. God looks at culture with a special smile, a gleam in his eye for those who walk in His ways, even if they're a minority. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. Not esteemed by society, the faithful are the most precious to God. When judgment comes, as it must, He will save His people.

Today is the National Day of Prayer. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. Is there much difference between then and now?

May 7

This is the date of Germany's surrender in World War II. On the 5th, representatives of the German High Command came by train to Rheims, France. On the 7th at 2:30 a.m....yes, 2:30 a.m....they announced they were ready to sign the papers of surrender.

James Ballard was there. He had landed at Omaha Beach, was later wounded, and after recovering was assigned to the staff of Brigadier General "Beetle" Smith. It was serving Smith that young Ballard witnessed the surrender. He died last month, April 13th, at the age of 85.

His daughter Mary Ballard Deffenbaugh said, "It's hard for those of us so much younger to realize that his generation was pretty private about things. We talk about everything today. I wish Daddy had told me more stories. But he came from a time when people felt that some things are not meant to be spoken." (Claire Martin, "The Denver Post," April 25; 34A)

"Still waters run deep." Some things are too horrible, other things should be too shameful to talk about. "The prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil" (Amos 5:13). The reserve of older people is something to emulate, not regret.

May 10

Here's something that troubles me...and has for a long time.

You've got...I'll call him Joe...an over-the-road truck driver. Good guy, obviously not a scholar.

Same for Sue...just out of college, a new grade-school teacher, puts in long hours, low pay.

Fred...a bit beyond middle-aged, wrapping up his career in the corporate world.

People like most of us.

Now it's reported that parents are seeking help from an infertility lab for their children who have leukemia. The lab artificially fertilizes mature eggs. Each embryo is then tested to see if it has genes that might help fight leukemia. If it does, that embryo is then implanted in a uterus, a baby born and the stem cells from the umbilical cord are transplanted into the sick sibling. Unused embryos are stored, probably to be discarded. Ethical? An opinion poll reported 61% said it's OK, people like Fred and Sue and Joe and the rest of us casually pronouncing what's right.

On every hand we face tough issues. I don't have the answers but I fear following poll numbers. We need to raise the best and brightest young people to study and research for us all the right solutions to perplexing dilemmas. I pray mother's day is not over.

May 11

"Take away the love of sinning," wrote Charles Wesley in "Love Divine, All Love Excelling." "Sin" is a religious word but even opponents of conservative religious expression would, I think, acquiesce to my saying that the treatment of Iraqi prisoners was sin.

When we honestly face our sins before God, we are assured "with You there is forgiveness, that You may be feared" (Psalm 130:4). "Feared" means an awesome reverence of God, our Maker and Judge, who forgives us. Such "fear" will produce changed lives. "Neither do I condemn you; go and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11).

The goal in the public realm, in the shame a few Americans in Iraq have brought upon our whole nation, is justice, not forgiveness. Government exists "to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil" (1 Peter 2:14-16).

Is America a just nation? We do well to pray privately and with awesome reverence, "Take away the love of sinning" and then live changed lives.

May 12

When I asked my seminary students to prepare sermons for Mother's Day, one shared sayings of mothers he had taken from a church newsletter:

"On irony: 'If you keep crying, I'll give you something to cry about.'

On hypocrisy: 'If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times – don't exaggerate.' On contortionism: 'Will you look at the dirt on your neck?'"

From another student:

"Dear Mother, I am going to make dinner for you on Mother's Day. It is going to be a surprise. I hope you like pizza and popcorn."

"I got you a turtle for Mother's Day. I hope you like the turtle better than the snake I got you last year."

"I hope you like the flowers I got you for Mother's Day. I picked them myself when Mr. Smith wasn't looking."

Another shared a card he made when he was 9: "Dear Mom, if we were in a car and going to crash and there was only one airbag... I would think of you often and miss you dearly. Happy Mother's Day!"

Though her day of honor is past, let's continue to honor her...in mature ways. "I gave up childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

May 13

King Herod "had John beheaded in the prison" (Matthew 14:10).

Searching my feelings on the despicable murder of Nicholas Berg, I found guidance in Jesus' reaction when He heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded.

"When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place" (14:13). The Greek word translated "withdrew" is instructive. Plato used it for leaving the battlefield (Republic 394a) and Thucydides similarly used it for retreating after a defeat (2.89). Jesus is the almighty Son of God but a true human being as well. So He felt the heat. One prophet beheaded; is He next? Jesus retreats to a solitary place.

I need to retreat as well. I have to realize anew that there are evil people. I have to understand that civilized people can rationally discuss disagreements but barbarians cannot. I have to fill out my notion of love with the truth that selfless love can also mean fighting, even killing our enemies so that we can live quiet and peaceable lives.

After Jesus had retreated, He returned to give Himself in the battle against evil. "Therefore God has highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:9). No crown without a cross; no victory now without life and death sacrifice.

May 14

The Psalmist prayed, "Have mercy on me, O God, for my enemies are hounding me; all day long they assault and oppress me" (Psalm 56:1).

Tomorrow, the 15th, is National Peace Officers Memorial Day. Flags will be flown at half staff to honor the thousands of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. God routinely deals with us through intermediaries. Himself unseen, He works good in our lives through the people who pursue honorable careers of service to others. Police officers are such servants of God. Through them the psalmist's prayer is answered in our daily life and the enemies who would hound us, assault and oppress us are restrained.

Such mercies should not be taken for granted. That mighty empire, "Rome was a state without most of the institutions needed to run a state. There was no permanent civil service...The concept of a police force did not exist...All the authorities could do to enforce law and order was to hire their own ruffians." (Anthony Everitt, *Cicero*, p. 10f.)

So in this blessed country, let us lower our flags to half staff to honor the fallen and raise a prayer of thanks for the mercies God gives us through law enforcement officers.

May 17

Today is the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education in which the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools. Long before 1954, the importance of education was being demonstrated by African-Americans. In the 19th century Mary Jane Patterson was the first northern black woman to receive a bachelor's degree. In the south Virginia Broughton was the first. In the 20th century Mary McCleod Bethune founded Bethune-Cookman College in Florida. Among the motivations for these women was religious faith.

Christianity believes that God reveals Himself to us through the biblical word. That's an inheritance from Judaism. "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). How can you read the Bible if you don't know how to read? How can you understand theological concepts without knowing such non-religious things like grammar and syntax?

The consequence of an inquisitive religious faith is a vital interest in education. "Vital," by the way, comes from the Latin word for life. Christian education is a matter of eternal life. Is it in yours? Jesus prayed for us, "Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth," (John 17:17).

May 18

Now and then during the 12 years I spoke on the national radio program "The Lutheran Hour" I talked about homosexuality. I spoke my conviction based on biblical texts that the homosexual life style is sin. That brought criticism, not so much from homosexuals as from straight, conservative, religious parents of practicing gays. They lashed out at me, their hearts torn between parental love that wanted to see their children happy and their equally powerful conviction that there are some absolute truths by which we should live, homosexuality not being one.

Their personal anguish mirrors our divided society. A 5th century critic of Greek religion, Xenophanes said, "If the ox could paint a picture, his god would look like an ox." In the gay battles of our culture wars, Americans are promoting divergent pictures of God, some the laid-back God of permissive love, others the moralistic sheriff who with a ready posse is hunting down bad guys.

What's the picture for anguished parents? Unlike the confused societal picture, God is not divided. God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4) and this undivided God is love (1 John 4:8). He is, as Jesus paints Him in the parable of the prodigal son, a waiting Father (Luke 15:11 -24). He lets us go our self-chosen way, even if it's wrong (cf. Romans 1:26), but He's always watching and waiting for our children, His children, to come back to those ways of married love taught by the Bible and long accepted as the definition of marriage in western civilization.

In society's confusion about God there are too many half-truths with little substance, but there is real comfort for anguished parents who look to the Bible and see the picture of God waiting for His children to come back home.

May 19

Congratulations to this year's graduates! I wonder who really graduates, the student...or the parents? Obviously the student, on to high school, on to college, on to a career, on to a changing world. But mom and dad graduate as well...to ever less control, to a nest that can be empty save for memories.

The other day I began to check in electronically at the Portland airport. Swiped my card and before I knew what was happening, a helpful agent was punching the screen for me. Too helpful. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Mom, I can do it myself." She replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. I raised 5 kids." I felt like the sixth.

Here's to the parents of the graduates who now face the herculean task of letting go. My daughter once asked me if I wanted to live her life for her. "Well, yes I do," I answered but I couldn't, I can't, and, for better or worse, she has to punch her own check-in screens and whatever else life brings her.

Experts say that graduation causes a kind of grief. Something's being lost. Here's to the parents who have to deal with it. "Here we have no lasting city" (Hebrews 13:14).

May 20

We're all experienced, too much so, in days when "the sun doesn't shine."

"You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live," said God to Moses (Exodus 33:21). So at Mount Sinai , "a thick cloud (settled) on the mountain" (Exodus 19:16). God was as close as close could be, but veiled Himself so that His people would not die but live.

Here's how He led them through the wilderness: "Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out." (Exodus 40:36).

When Solomon dedicated the Temple , "a cloud filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:10).

When Jesus was transfigured and gave His disciples a fleeting glimpse of future glory, "A cloud came and overshadowed them...and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, my Chosen One; listen to Him!'" (Luke 9:34-35).

Today is the Day of the Ascension. "As they were looking on, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Not a Weather Channel cloud; the cloud of God receiving His Son into glory.

"I am with you always," says the exalted Jesus (Matthew 28:20). Perhaps He's especially with us on our cloudy days!

May 21

At the end of the week I usually write out a check for our Sunday offering. Church finances are big business. The congregations in my denomination took in well over \$1.2 billion in 2002. On top of that are related organizations, all with fund-raisers well equipped with persuasive reasons to invest in the Lord's work.

A new book by Beate Dignas tells how the temple of Zeus near Mylasa in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) offered loans at lower interest rates than commercial lenders. This second century B.C. "non-profit" solicited gifts, "so that the gods will enjoy the revenues from sums bequeathed to them for all times," as an ancient inscription reports. A charitable foundation to provide dependable income! The great temple of Artemis at Ephesus was beneficiary in people's wills. Today we call that "estate planning." (Economy of the Sacred in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor, pp. 103, 145)

So as I write out my check for my church – and I hope you for yours – the question is what, if anything, makes this transaction distinctively different... or am I just doing in my own idiom what religious people have been doing for millennia? Is there "nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9), or is there something distinctively different about our Christian offerings?

May 24

Feuding with someone?

The world holds its breath whenever those nuclear-armed enemies, India and Pakistan , face off. Andrew Wang of the Associated Press reports that every evening

at a border crossing between India and Pakistan "soldiers from each side lower their nation's flags in mirror-image displays of high-step marching and jingoistic posturing that routinely draw thousands of onlookers...." The soldiers, writes Wang, are friendly with each other during the day but turn out "at sunset to rattle their sabers in ostentatious displays of chest-pounding fervor." (The Dallas Morning News, May 16; p. 71).

Enemies can be civil with one another, be they nations at war or feuding people. Thank goodness the civilized world isn't completely filled with Jerry Springer Show antics or World Wrestling Federation brutes!

Of course, the best thing at our personal level is the prayer Jesus taught us. "Our Father who art in heaven, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." When you do that, you and your enemy may not become the best of friends, but you'll enjoy the new freedom of not feeling compelled to rattle your saber. "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Psalm 133:1)

May 25

Columnist Elinor Markgraf wrote about her recent bout with pneumonia. Confined to her home, she turned to books. "I can't think for a minute why I planned to read the letters from Harry Truman to his wife, Bess. Initially, Harry seemed like a fine guy, concerned and doting toward his wife and child. But after a couple hundred letters, I started feeling downright sorry for Bess."

Ha! When I discovered Diane had kept all the letters I wrote her when we were dating, I felt sorry for her...and embarrassed by my cloddish style. We still laugh about it, that bundle of boring letters. No one's ever described me as romantic.

Still, she kept the letters. Maybe she saw something in our relationship, something she's nourished for over 30 years. I thank heaven for her patience, waiting as she has for me to realize what a wonderful thing our long, worked-at marriage is.

Wrote Ms. Markgraf, "Why she saved the darn things is beyond me." I think the answer is love, and most men are slow understanding it. (The Oregonian, May 15; C5)

May 26

Rivers in the upper Midwest are overflowing their banks. Sandbags, boats, shelters...you see those pictures on the news. I suggest adding the picture of stilts.

Think of floods in the Bible and the great flood of Noah comes immediately to mind (Genesis 6-9). Start concentrating on whether it really happened or not, finding the ark and the like, and we're off track. Good questions, but off track.

The chaos of a flood is more important, the chaos that overwhelms the order we must have to live. Biblical religion teaches that God at creation restrained the chaos: "You set a boundary that they may not pass" (Psalm 104:9). For several reasons the waters are passing those boundaries now, and one sure reason is that the world, nature included, shows evidences of rebellion against God's good order.

So sandbags, boats...and stilts. It's common in river country to see some homes and cabins built on stilts. When the floods come, as they must, the house on stilts offers safety and a different perspective. So it can be with faith. "The Lord sits enthroned over the flood" (Psalm 29:10). Faith gives a higher perspective to our momentary problems and for those now struggling, I pray, will provide hope of order to be restored.

May 27

Passages like Genesis 8:21 ("Every inclination of man's heart is evil from childhood") irritate many Americans. Rather than see ourselves before God as "poor, miserable sinners," we like to see the good in people and even imagine that reason and diplomacy will bring out the good in our enemies.

But what about this? "The United States is al-Qaida's prime target in a war it sees as a death struggle between civilizations... An al-Qaida leader has said 4 million Americans will have to be killed..." (Barry Renfrew, AP; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 26, 2004 ; A2).

Not all the founding fathers were optimistic about the goodness of mankind. Alexander Hamilton believed and quoted what Sir David Hume said: "Every man ought to be supposed a knave and to have no other end in all his actions but private interests." (Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, p. 60). In no small measure our magnificent republic was founded on that darker view of human nature.

Paradoxically it's the darker view that offers a better assessment of our present situation and a more realistic way to hope than does the Pollyanna view that we can assume the essential goodness of our enemies. 4 million casualties? We won't survive the optimistic view of human nature.

May 28

Years ago I visited the Viet Nam Memorial, the memorial not too old at that time. In addition to the famous wall, there's a statuary group of combat soldiers, life-size and with little imagination, life-like. An elderly woman, well-meaning, told her husband to take a place by the statues so she could take a picture. He quickly said no, his hushed words and humble body language clearly indicating the place was too sacred for such tourist stuff.

In a class I teach, I have students watch the D-Day landing from "Saving Private Ryan." Standing in the back of the room, I watch their silent attention. The scene over, I ask how they feel. They start to intellectualize, but I hold them to their feelings. No abstract thoughts, now their responses are profoundly human and subdued. Have years of relative peace led us to intellectualize, to forget the horror of war and the cost so many paid for us?

Another monument will be dedicated tomorrow. Not far from the Korean War Memorial where life-size infantry men also command silence, not far from that Viet Nam Memorial where an elderly man showed his devotion, stands the World War II Memorial. May it too command the silence of our deepest gratitude and awe.

