Nurturing Catholic Community:
Curriculum Connections – Grade 10 English

The Catcher In the Rye

Author: J.D Salinger  (First Little, Brown and Company, May 1991)

The Catcher In The Rye is an iconic novel that tells the story of three days in the life of Holden Caulfield, a sixteen year old boarding school student from New York city. Holden himself narrates the tale in an informal and flippant (and at the time revolutionary) tone back in the 1940-50s. He is writing in the months following events that happened just before Christmas holidays the previous year, and he is currently recuperating in a psychiatric facility in California. His writing is a kind of therapeutic unburdening of himself from the out of control spiral that he found himself in after he was expelled from Pencey Prep in Agerstown, Pennsylvania having failed all subjects except English. It relates his journey from the school through the streets of New York and his encounters on the way with peers, family, acquaintances, teachers, and strangers. In the rough and tumble of the chaos of adolescent crisis emerges the voice of one who cries in the wilderness of the New York concrete jungle, and whose voice still finds resonance in the minds of teenagers and their teachers seventy years on.

Explicit Religious References in the Catcher

The purpose of this comment is not to offer a critique of this famous novel, but to indicate ways in which it evokes reflection from a religious perspective. There are several overt religious references throughout the novel. First, after his fight with his roommate Stradlater over a girl they both liked, and over a written assignment that Holden had written for Stradlater, Holden with his bloodied nose heads to his neighbour in the dorm, Ackley, to find a place to sleep. Ackley is not interested in conversation because as he says, “I gotta get up for Mass in the morning.” (p 49 First Little, Brown and Company mass market paperback edition, May 1991). Holden persists. “What`s the routine on joining a monastery? Do you have to be a Catholic and all?” Ackley gets upset. “I don`t care what you say about me or anything, but if you start making cracks about my goddam religion, for Chrissake-“ (p50) Second, after his unsatisfactory encounter with a prostitute Holden goes on. “I felt like praying or something...but I couldn`t do it. I can`t always pray when I feel like it. In the first place, I`m sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don`t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible.” He goes on to recall that he doesn`t like the disciples, that his favourite Gospel character is the lunatic who lived in the tombs and cut himself with stones, and that, unlike the opinion of his former school mat, Arthur Childs, who is a Quaker, Jesus would never have sent Judas who committed suicide to a
fate in hell (p 99). Third, at Grand Central Station Holden interrupts his breakfast of bacon and eggs to help two nuns with their suitcases, and Holden is shocked that the Sisters who are teachers can hold their own with him on the merits of Romeo and Juliet as a play! (p 108-113)

At one point in the conversation Holden reflects, “Catholics are always trying to find out if you’re a Catholic”, and he tells the reader that his father gave up being Catholic when he married Holden’s mother. Holden is impressed that the Sisters do not try to find out if he is Catholic and finds that as a point in their favour! He makes them a charitable donation of ten dollars, and regrets a little later that he did not give more.

In terms of class discussion, any of these three instances can be a door to explore issues around religious identity; the significance and place of religious ritual in human life; the sensitivity that is called for when it comes to talking about religion; the unexpected situations in which one can feel the call to prayer; the opaque nature of religious certainty; the positive attitudes and prejudices that one can bring to traditional religion and to one’s own religion; the impact and truth of the miracle stories in the Gospels; the importance of the place of religion in the life of one’s parents; the kind of value offered to the world by those who publicly state their religious commitment; the manner in which religion can cause us to be surprised ...either by those who espouse it or by those who critique it; and finally, the place and importance of charity in society and within religious institutions. On all of these fronts the conversations of Salinger’s characters open possibilities to meaningful reflection.

The Catcher As An Exodus Narrative

But there is more to Catcher in the Rye from a religious perspective than a few explicit religious thoughts and characters. The work can be viewed as a classic exodus narrative: a crisis triggers an anguished journey that takes one through the chaos and difficulty of the desert and eventuality on to something of a promised land - a story of loss and hope, of death and the possibility of resurrection, and all in the space of a three day time frame!

The rush that is always taking place in Holden’s mind is mirrored in his urge to keep moving physically. He is unable to turn off the tap in his words or in his deeds. He has a compulsive need to engage those around him, to go searching for close encounters, to get to the bottom of things that are bottomless. He is all the time turning over the stones of life and finding underneath flawed humanity. He calls it for what it is – “phony”- not unlike biblical prophets who could see through insincere behaviour and call it “hypocritical”.

Never far from the surface is Holden’s sense of grief for his deceased brother Allie who died at age 11, two years younger than Holden, from leukemia. He also experienced the trauma of a classmate, James Castle, who committed suicide. He has also reason to mourn the loss of an active relationship with his parents who do not seem centrally engaged with his life and
direction. He senses his inadequacy when compared with his older brother D.B. who is a successful Hollywood scriptwriter, or Phoebe, his grade school sister, the idealized one that he adores. He is aware of his weakness in smoking tobacco, or in trying to appear older than his years as he tries to buy alcohol, or in the clumsiness of his sexual fantasies or forays. He carries the burden of seeing much of life in a negative light. And yet he knows that he has the power of self-expression, that he can put experiences into words that work, that he has a way of reflecting on the world that has the ring of authenticity, and that in him is the capacity to wonder at the beauty of the world as seen in the balance of the ducks on the pond at dawn in New York’s Central Park, and also the capacity to relate with total strangers and put them at ease. Beneath his surface he knows himself to be something of an idealist...a rescuer...a saviour....one that would spend his energy preventing the little children playing in a harvest field from falling over a nearby cliff. And so though in his own life he is in a certain sense falling off a cliff, he indicates a kind of assurance that, unlike Humpty Dumpty, he can be put together again!

One can situate the Catcher in the Rye in the larger framework of literature as a piece of confessional writing which is very effective. Within the Catholic religious tradition the Confessions of St Augustine written in the 4th century convey the same sense of someone who is never at a loss for words in an incessant search for hope and meaning. One finds similar attributes in the works of the Spanish mystics: St John of the Cross, and St Theresa of Avila, and closer to our own era in the autobiography of St Theresa of Lisieux. Similarly, in the pen of Blessed John Henry Newman was the capacity to put words on inner experience in order to understand what life is about and what it is meant to mean, and in the 20th century there is a rich legacy of Catholic confessional writing passed on in the writings and diaries of the peace activist Cistercian monk Thomas Merton, and the priest psychologist Henri Nouwen. In each of these authors both the anguish of living and the joy of living yield a flow of words that seems unquenchable. Whilst Holden Caulfield speaks outside of the horizon of religious faith as such, nevertheless as we have seen he is familiar with the architecture of religious language, and religious witness. Implicit in his questing is the same hope that drives forward the questions and the searching of the confessional Catholic authors that have been named.

Holden Caulfield as a Gerasene demoniac

Holden’s favorite Gospel passage is the story of the man who lived in the tombs and cut himself with stones. This story is found in chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus and the disciples reach the country of the Gerasenes and they are approached by a man with an unclean spirit who is terrified that Jesus is going to torture him. He can’t be held down by chains. He lives in the tombs. He howls at night and gashes himself with stones. Jesus enters
into a kind of negotiation with the demons inside the man, and they agree to enter the herd of two thousand pigs that are nearby. As soon as they do so the pigs rush headlong into the lake and are drowned. The swineherds are dumbfounded. The man who cut himself is totally at peace with himself, sitting with Jesus, and with his mind and heart fully restored. When he asks to join Jesus’ mission, Jesus directs him to go home and to tell his story to his own people.

It is as if Holden has a sense that he does not have control over the tumult in his own mind and heart, that he is not at peace, that he desires the kind of peace that God can offer. He is buried in the tomb of his compulsions and insecurities. Sometimes people do still cut themselves in the depth of their depression and anxiety. What is it that can break open the metaphorical tombs in which we can take up residence? What is it that can resolve the urge to self-wound? There are both humanitarian and religious responses to these questions as we consider the range of healing remedies that can be offered to us in the journey to inner freedom. From within the horizon of Christian faith one would have to situate a fundamental response in the conviction that each person has a fundamental dignity, created – amazingly – in the image and likeness of God. It can take something of a lifetime sometimes to get a handle on this. It is as though Holden wants to be on the journey to realize it!

Two Post World War II Headline Documents

One of the reasons for the staying power of the Catcher in the Rye is that Salinger through Holden Caulfield gave voice to the tone of his times - a scrambling, complex, hyper-critical, honest, sometimes humble expose of human striving, and human limitation in a close to postmodern urban setting. Almost twenty years after the publication of the first edition of the Catcher in the Rye, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church on December 7th 1965 passed its Pastoral Constitution On The Church in the Modern World. The ever quoted preface of this document begins: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men (sic) of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.” In this declaration, the Roman Catholic community gave renewed voice to its sense of solidarity with humanity, with its desire to share that humanity, with its conviction that God is at work in every good thing that is going forward, with its desire to speak the language of humanity. The Council was a revolutionary moment in the life of the Catholic tradition in how it reoriented Catholics toward other Christians, toward people of other faith traditions, and toward nonbelievers. The banking system metaphor of thinking of God’s grace as something like money in the bank was completely revamped. The understanding of the Bible and the place of the Scripture in the liturgy were overhauled. The manner in which liturgy itself was celebrated facing the people and in the language of the people represented a step into
seeing how God’s life is not foreign to any of our humanity. Whilst in no way denying the transcendence of God, this gathering of Catholic bishops fully embraced the truth and significance of God’s immanence in the unfolding of the drama of history. It was a call to read the world with new sensitivity and new hope, and when we hear a truth that has the ring of authenticity to be unafraid to embrace it. Holden Caulfield’s confession of three days through the darkness of the night has such a ring.

**Romeo and Juliet**

**Author:** William Shakespeare  *(2009 Modern Library Paperback Edition)*

*Romeo and Juliet* tells the story of two young lovers from rival families in Verona Italy. They meet at a masquerade party hosted by Juliet’s father, and very soon the couple plan to marry thanks to the co-operation of Juliet’s Nurse and Friar Laurence, the spiritual adviser to both families. The couple understand that their respective families will be opposed. However, as soon as their plan is executed in secret by Friar Laurence there is trouble on the streets. Romeo’s friend, Mercutio, is drawn into a sword fight by Juliet’s cousin, Tybalt, and when Romeo steps between the two in the middle of the conflict, Mercutio is mortally wounded. Romeo then fights Tybalt, and kills him. Romeo is banished from Verona, whilst Juliet’s parents insist that Juliet marry Paris, a kinsman of the Prince of Verona. Friar Laurence gives Juliet a 48 hour potion in which she will appear to die so that she can join Romeo in exile without her family knowing. However Brother Laurence fails to communicate this plan to Romeo who comes upon Paris on the way to Juliet’s tomb. They fight and Paris dies, and then Romeo upon finding Juliet “dead” kills himself with poison. Tragically just after he dies, Juliet wakes up, only to find her husband dead, and in despair she kills herself with her dagger. In their grief after such a horrific climax, the rival families at last reconcile.

**Platforms for engagement**

Over many decades *Romeo and Juliet* has been a common William Shakespeare selection for Canadian high school students. It is an appropriate kind of pick given that the protagonists are teenagers - Juliet probably equivalent of Grade 10 and Romeo of Grade 12. And given the importance of parents in the lives of adolescents, this work of Shakespeare brings into sharp relief several of the potential areas of conflict that can emerge during teen/young adult years between parent and child.

Romeo and Juliet has resonance as a romantic tragedy in our culture for a host of reasons: the tragedy that can result from conflict between families, tribes, ethnic groups; the difficulty caused when parents are locked inside an inflexible viewpoint; the depth of emotion and
passion in young love; the wisdom or lack thereof in mentors; the impulse to end it all when all appears to be lost. The play can open a conversation on all of these topics.

**A Dialogue Concerning Suicide**

At the end of Romeo and Juliet both of the protagonists take their own lives. It is not a suicide pact as such, but Romeo, on finding Juliet apparently deceased (though in fact in an unconscious state) decides to join her in death. And Juliet in turn, finding Romeo dead, decides to kill herself, rather than live without him. Death by suicide is certainly a difficult topic to address and one might prefer to sweep it under the carpet. And of course wisdom and discretion is needed in addressing it in an adolescent class context. It is also true that it is widely recommended that people vulnerable to suicide can be greatly helped by those close to them by naming their concern for them in this regard head on. The reality is that many people, through family or work, have been touched by suicide, and it is not just through acquaintance with the public media that people have experience of it. It is part of the tragic fabric of life. The World Health Organization cites over 11 suicides per 100,000 population in Canada, according to 2011 statistics. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List)) The issue is in the public mind because of suicide bombing as a method of war and terrorism, because of the phenomenon of murder/suicide in families, because of the apparent high frequency of suicide in some aboriginal communities, because of efforts to “stop the stigma” attached to mental illness, and because of discussion about legalizing suicide and assisted suicide as an option for the terminally ill.

Within the Catholic Church there is a very deliberate pastoral approach taken towards those who commit suicide. The Church evokes the compassion and the mercy of Jesus, the power of God to transform all situations, and the promise of the resurrection brought about through the suffering and death on the Cross by Jesus. For the believing community emphasis is put on the directive of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “Judge not, and you shall not be judged.”(Matthew 7:1) The Church directs us in the strongest terms not to take any human life, much less our own, and the Church affirms that life is given by God and we are the stewards of it and not the arbiters of it; however no human being can judge the heart or the depth of suffering of a person who does take their own life. Instead we trust in the goodness and wisdom of God.

One can say that there has been a shift in the approach of the Catholic Church to this topic in the post War World II era. Not many decades ago those who committed suicide were refused Christian burial rites and could not be buried in a Catholic cemetery. In this regard there has been a quite revolutionary approach in pastoral tone and practice. One might see this as an example of the Church condemning the sin, but not the sinner, because Church teaching deeply considers taking one’s own life to be a profoundly flawed option and not one to be condoned or
appear to be condoned in any manner. Those close to the loved one who has passed in this way experience profound mixed feelings of grief, anger, guilt, emptiness and loss that adds a deep layer to the suffering that is caused by natural death in any case, and this confirms the Church’s view of the disorder in such a manner of dying. Yet Christians are sensitive to the suffering, the sense of rejection, the depth of depression that might drive one to see suicide as a final solution to a life of indescribable pain. The Church invites all those who struggle with suicide or the consequences of a suicide to reach beyond the depths of suffering and anxiety, and to be open to experience the grace of God’s consolation that brings true and deep healing out of the worst of the worst. Psalm 22 recited by Jesus on the Cross begins from depths of despair - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” - but ends in words of hope and promise. This indicates to us that there is always a path upward out of hell, towards freedom and fullness. The Nicene Creed states this conviction that Jesus descended into hell, and in that regard we can say that God has somehow touched the depths of the most profound nothingness and alienation that one could experience or imagine. The same creed goes on to say that Jesus then ascended into heaven and in this power and action of God lies the hope of Christians. Just as he breaks the bonds of the tomb, he breaks the bonds of hell, and humanity is still absorbing the wonder and the shock of it.

End of Life Issues in Contemporary Church and Culture

On a societal level, there is going forward now a discussion and dialogue about the best forms of palliative care for those close to death, and about the host of issues that surround end of life. These are very complex concerns that include: the common good; the best use of scarce resources; the rights of individuals to the implementation of their desires; the proper care of the chronically disabled; the challenges of meeting the needs of an ageing population; the pluralism of beliefs around end of life issues; advances in technology; how to judge when extraordinary means to preserve life become ordinary means within the context of one’s culture. Through the *new evangelization* the Church is searching for better ways to communicate the message of Jesus Christ in the 21st century, but no matter how the issue is best expressed the bottom line on this file is that the Church does not and cannot condone or approve or open the door on any kind of mercy killing or assisted suicide. Catholic medicine is always in search of better forms of palliative care. In order to control pain, medicines may be used that can shorten life, but according to Church teaching the intention of the use of that medicine is not the shortening of the life as such – the intention of the use of the medicine is to alleviate pain. Some consider this something of a fig leaf of a distinction, but in the Catholic view it is crucial to the preservation of the principle of the dignity of the human person, and the recognition of God as the author of life.
The Parent Trap

Romeo and Juliet can also open up a fruitful consideration around the issues of parenting in the teenage context, though admittedly from the viewpoint of an example that is on the extreme. In marrying Romeo, Juliet experiences the rejection of her parents in the starkest of terms. She appeals to her parents for some sense of understanding, only to be devastated by their response. Says her father Capulet:

“Hang thee. Young baggage, disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what: get thee to church o’ Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face.
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me:
My fingers itch. Wife, we scarce thought us blest
That God had lent us but this only child,
But now I see this one is one too much,
And that we have a curse in having her.”

(Romeo & Juliet, Act 3, scene 5, lines 165-172)

Juliet responds:

“Is there no pity sitting in the clouds,
That sees into the bottom of my grief?”

(Romeo & Juliet, Act 3, Scene 5, lines 206-207)

Her mother offers her no solace.

“Talk not to me, for I’ll not speak a word:
Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.”

(Romeo & Juliet, Act 3, Scene 5, lines 212-213)

In recent years there have been well publicised instances of children being rejected or even killed by their parents because of conflicts between the traditional culture of parents themselves, and the post-modern culture in which their children are being educated. The harsh drawing of lines that plays out in Romeo and Juliet apparently is no exaggeration in some extreme situations, and the reality of conflict and tension between the values of the older generation and the breaking of the boundaries by the younger generation finds resonance in all cultures. The Catechism of the Catholic Church published in the 1990s offers something of a balanced approach when considering the rights and responsibilities of both parents and children.

2230 - “When they become adults, children have the right and duty to choose their profession and state of life. They should assume their new responsibilities within a trusting relationship with their parents, willingly asking and receiving their advice and counsel. Parents should be careful not to exert pressure on their children either in the choice of a profession or in that of a spouse. This necessary restraint does not prevent them - quite the contrary from giving their children judicious advice, particularly when they are planning to start a family.” (Catechism of Catholic Church)
Certainly Romeo and Juliet provides a great forum to explore these issues, and for teachers of teenagers there is a great opportunity to foster mutual understanding of the necessary tension that is part of the parent/child relationship through the teenage and young adult years.

**Poetry**

**Spring – Author: Gerard Manley Hopkins** *(Themes on the Journey, Nelson Canada 1989)*

Several poems by the 19th century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ (1844-1889) are included in the collection Themes on the Journey, Reflections in Poetry, edited by James Barry (Nelson Canada 1989). They include Spring, a sonnet written in 1877, when Hopkins was thirty three years old. There are fourteen lines in this “Italian” sonnet.

NOTHING is so beautiful as spring—
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush’s eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid’s child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

**A Poem in Two Parts**

In the first eight lines of Spring, Gerard Manly Hopkins waxes eloquent on the beauty of the season of spring. In his estimation nothing can compare. To bring out this beauty Hopkins focuses on wild things that grow in human-made artifacts...weeds in wheels. He focuses on little things...thrush eggs in their nest. Then he focuses on the sound of a thrush itself as it sings in an echoing forest of trees. He notes the effect of the bird song in the listener...how it has the power and the brightness of lightning....how it takes over the ear...how it cleanses it of everything else with its purity. If you go to Youtube and download the exhibits of woodland thrush sounds you will get an idea as to what Hopkins is driving at. Hopkins continues painting with words that seem to gush out in a fast moving stream. He notes how the leaves of the pear tree are like a paintbrush that makes the sky blue and full, and finally at the heart of the scene the lambs prancing and dancing.
The second part of the poem, with its six lines, begins with a question. What is all this? What is all this exceptional energy and happiness? It’s like a remnant of the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall has come down to us into our world as we know it now, something exceptionally innocent and beautiful. Hopkins wants to hold it there, begs Christ to hold it there, not to let it be destroyed or damaged by evil and sin. He refers to Mary’s child, Jesus, as the one with the capacity to bring this about as something really worthwhile to do. “Hopkins’s sonnet typically shifts from a person, often sensual experience rooted in the physical world to moral, philosophical and theological reflections.” (Spark notes)

Hopkins speaks with terrific urgency; it is as if his words cannot capture the depth of his emotion or his hope that innocence will be preserved. He wants God to intervene in the way of the world so that paradise will not be lost.

Finding God In All Things

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit priest and at the core of the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola who was the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) is the notion that God is be found in all things. This approach is totally assumed in Hopkins’ poem. Beneath the surface of the visible is the invisible; in the heart of nature resides the divine. The first part of Spring can stand on its own as song of praise to the spring season, yet we find the word “heavens” nestling there among the bird’s eggs. And then of course Hopkins quickly turns to the divine as he addresses the reality of what happens to the springtime under the pressure of time and events...how ruptured things become and how rotten. Only the goodness and greatness of God has the power to reverse the inevitability of the fall from grace. Only the innocence of the Christ child can make that happen.

A Pleading Kind of Prayer

In the second part of the poem we see that it is a prayer – a pleading to God to make a change of direction, not to allow a bad inevitability to come about. After all something from Eden has survived the fall from grace...the weeds in wheels, the thrush’s eggs, the song of the bird, the leaves of the pear tree, the blue of the sky, the prancing of the lambs of spring. Hopkins asks of God to intervene please!! Protect it, hold it, don’t let it fall apart. “This is no neat little prayer you might say before bedtime, but something urgent created in a moment of deep feeling.” (www.schmoop.com)

There is such packed emotion in Hopkins plea in the final part of the poem that he can hardly get it out of himself other than in short staccato words to indicate a direction and a sense of urgency. It is like he is standing before the shock and horror of the abyss and begging for a divine intervention that he knows will come at a high price, and that will somehow be won by an innocent child, the child of Mary.
We think of Jesus in the Garden just before he was arrested. He was sweating blood. He was pleading with God, “let this chalice pass me by...not my will but thine be done”. (Matthew 26:39) He was in the midst of the work of reversing the damage that came about through the selfish choices of humans as signified in the story of the “fall” of Adam and Eve. The prayer of petition is not some neatly packaged formula of words that we only have to recite to get the job done. The prayer of petition comes from the depth and spontaneity of the heart....like the centurion in the Gospel who begs Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:8), or the father whose daughter has died and is “sleeping” (Matthew 9:18-26), or like the Canaanite woman who was first turned down by Jesus but persisted to speak out of her need and hope (Matthew 15:21-28). During his public ministry many people came looking to Jesus for help; they didn’t approach politely...they came crying out from their depths as the “De Profundis” psalm 129 exemplifies.

Paradise Lost

We know from history and experience that paradise has been lost and that struggling humanity is seeking to regain that utopia. History is filled with a continuous, at once devastating and heroic, narrative of progress and decline. Humanity is ruptured at a profound level...there is something broken, something that needs the kind of healing that humans may be capable of, but are unable to enact. Whether we focus on recent history or look back down the ages we can see that human problems are immense whether in terms of individual selfishness or the bias that is revealed in whole societies. Gerard Manly Hopkins succeeds in capturing a moment, a recurring one, of innocence and beauty, the season of Spring itself and allows the hope that deterioration as a law of life can be prevented. Yet, he implies that in the mystery of God’s plan this cannot be the case. As the parable of the weeds and wheat reveals (Matthew 13:24-30), the deeper wisdom of our God fully respects the rhythm of progress and decline. God’s dreams for us include the tragedies that happen and the disasters that befall. Our own deepest hopes that all shall be well cannot be grounded in human logic, but only, with the certainty of faith, on the road to Jerusalem and in the folly of the Cross. Therein alone lies the mystery of our complete redemption.

http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/hopkins/study.html
http://www.skool.ie/examcentre_sc.asp?id=1183
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-22ZuQyAJ4
Short Fiction

The Michelle I Know - Author: Alison Lohans (Crossroads, Gage Educational Publishing Company 2000)

The Michelle I Know tells the story of an evening in the life of a young woman, Michelle, who is in the hospital for eight weeks undergoing treatment for leukemia. She is in a desolate mood because her boyfriend Rob is late for visiting and Michelle is afraid he is not coming and that he is going out with another girl instead. Brenda, the night nurse, comes on shift and tries to cheer Michelle up. She brings her to visit Claude who, it turns out, plays the soothing guitar music that Michelle could hear in her hospital bed. Claude has had leukemia for eight years! Michelle is encouraged by Claude not to give up, to fight and to have hope. Then lo and behold her boyfriend Rob shows up; he is late because of a bad fog. The couple are able to resolve some misunderstandings, and suddenly Michelle is able to smile from her depths again. This is the Michelle that Rob truly knows!

The Discernment of Spirits

Early on in this story Michelle has the thought. “Now it was safest not to hope.” She is depressed over the difficulty of the illness, the isolation of the hospital, the loss of some of her friends, the discomfort of the medical procedures, the loss of her hair because of chemo therapy, the apparent ugliness of the wig that she had as a replacement, and now this evening her boyfriend has not shown up and she knows that he had attended a dance with another girl the previous night after a football game. She is grieving her losses on many levels. She wants to defend herself against further disappointment - so yes it is safer not to hope.

St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) wrote a kind of handbook of spiritual direction now called The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius in the first half of the 1500s. In its classic use, it outlines a program of prayer and reflection that can help someone over the course of about four weeks to come to truer spiritual freedom and to reach a decision about the direction of their life under God. One of the features of the text is a section called “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” in which Ignatius sets out clues that can help one get a handle on the movement of God in one’s life. He draws a distinction between “desolation” and “consolation”. “It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul.” (Louis J Puhl SJ: The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, A New Translation Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph, Newman Press 1951, p 141). “It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolation, tears, inspirations, and peace.” (p 141-142) One of the points brought out by St Ignatius is that one should not change one’s mind or make important decisions when one is feeling desolate. To recognize that one is in fact in a state of
desolation is crucially important; sometimes in the midst of depression or a sense of despair
one might not be able to recognize the state of play that one is dealing with. When one
reaches the point where one is feeling that it is “safest not to hope”, it is good to note then
that one is in fact in a state of desolation...a kind of spiritual storm or gloom. One is definitely
under the weather spiritually. Ignatius’ best advice? Wait it out. Perhaps pray your way
through it. Remember that this mood will pass. The more normal state of a person living a life
of integrity is to experience fundamental peace and a sense of consolation. The Michelle of the
story can be helped greatly by simply recognizing the spiritual state that she is experiencing. So
can we all.

The Nature of Hope

This story can also open the door to a fuller discussion of the nature of hope. What is hope?
It is an orientation of trust in the future despite its challenges. From within the horizon of faith
this is a grounded optimism. It is not a “sunny” optimism that papers over difficulties. It is not
presumption – the view that success and salvation are guaranteed regardless of how we use or
misuse our freedom. It is the antidote to despair, for it insists that ultimately goodness will
prevail. It can become most manifest in those situations where grounds for positivity seem to
have been cut away – as Jesus experienced in the agony in the Garden, or in the process of His
dying on the Cross. It emerges into sharp relief in Victor Frankl’s Man’s Search For Meaning in
a context where the future was bleak for Jewish concentration camp prisoners and the
prominence of death and evil overbearing. Hope is that gift from God which aids and supports
our desires to discover what is true, and to live by the truth. (Bernard J Lonergan: Insight p 702)
It keeps us in forward motion when the wind is strong against us and the current is in the wrong
direction. At its pinnacle, it drives us towards a desire for a vision of God that fully satisfies our
minds and hearts. (Insight, 725). Firmness of hope sustains the development of rational self-
consciousness in the on-going struggle to overcome evil (Insight, 741), for hope is in its essence
the ardent desire of a love that hungers for God (Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Geoffrey
Chapman 1967, p 213). This hope in no way excludes our concern and love for humanity and
the world which we inhabit – rather all of that tremendous desire for fullness and
transformation of the very best kind is built into it, for in the same breath that we praise God’s
love in The Lord’s Prayer, we beg that God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.
One of These Days - Author: Gabriel Marquez
http://www.classics shorts.com/stories/ootdays.html

A Gentle Extraction

One of These Days tells the story of Aurelio Escovar, “a dentist without a degree”, pulling out a wisdom tooth for the Mayor of a small town. The story begins by describing Aurelios’ deliberate morning routine, his quaint dress code, his office preparation, his using a foot drill to polish false teeth. When he takes a short break to observe two buzzards drying themselves, his eleven year old son calls out to him that the Mayor is present and wants a tooth pulled. The dentist refuses at first. Then the son says: “He says if you don’t take out his tooth, he’ll shoot you.” Aurelio stays very calm, checks out his own gun in the drawer of his desk, and invites the Mayor in. The Mayor is in great pain, with a swollen face. He observes the ancient and poor state of the office. The dentist examines the Mayor’s mouth and observes that the extraction has to be without anesthesia because the tooth is infected. As the Mayor composes himself for the ordeal and feels the hot forceps being clamped around the tooth the dentist observes; “Now you’ll pay for our twenty dead men.” The author vividly describes the crunch of the extraction and stoicism of the Mayor. He tells the dentist to send the bill. “To you or the town?” Without looking the Mayor answers: “It’s the same damn thing.”

We can infer from the story that the dentist and Mayor have a deep history and are on opposite sides of a political divide, and that one of the consequences of being on the losing side was that the dentist was poor. We also know that the conflict involved a violent struggle and loss of life. In this moment of extracting a bad wisdom tooth without anesthesia the dentist can exact some measure of revenge. The author observes that the dentist does this deed “without rancour, rather with a bitter tenderness.”

Love And The Enemy

This story offers a platform to explore the topic of revenge. There is a very challenging teaching on this issue from Jesus when he asserts: “You have learnt how it was said: ‘You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). Of course we know that Jesus practiced what he preached, that he prayed for the forgiveness of God on his persecutors as he faced the Cross. He didn’t suggest that they should be damned to hell.

Humans prefer to have their enemies brought to justice, and to be punished. It is very difficult for humans to forgive and forget or to reconcile. Generation after generation remembers and vividly replays the wrongs done to them by previous generations; victims harbour wounds and resentments that seem allergic to any possibility of healing.
There are some exceptional standouts. Sister Helen Prejean CSJ has for years spoken out against the death penalty; her viewpoint reached popular culture in the movie, Dead Man Walking. Blessed John Paul II publicly forgave the person who shot him as he was ministering in St Peter’s Square in May 1981. Archbishop Desmond Tutu spearheaded the truth and reconciliation commission in South Africa, and this kind of leadership was extremely influential in helping to bring about a similar effort in Rwanda after the genocide there. The Palestinian doctor, Izzeldin Abuelaish, has campaigned vigorously for peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of the killing of three of his daughters by Israeli shells in the Gaza war of 2009.

These standouts are in a way like prophets who cry in the wilderness. Living in the era of drone warfare and fear of terrorism, ice cold hatred of the enemy runs in the veins of postmodern culture. Christian Peacemakers are thought to be naive, or disloyal, as they appear to aid and abet the enemy. The works of John Dear SJ *Lazarus Come Forth!* (Orbis Books, 2011) and *Transfiguration* (Doubleday 2007) eloquently express the point of view of a Christian peacemaker activist.

When we pray The Lord’s Prayer we beg: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” One interpretation suggests that we call down the wrath of God upon ourselves to the extent that we refuse to forgive. Yet the headline of Jesus in his own words and deeds is that the problem of evil can only be resolved through self-sacrificing love aided by an abundance of grace from above.

**War** - Author: Timothy Findley (Crossroads, Gage Educational Publishing Company 2000)

War tells the story a ten year boy’s response to the news that his father is to join the army. The story is set in the lakes at Muskoka and on an Ontario farm where the boy, Neil and his older brother Bud are on holiday. Whilst at the lake, Neil buys two little boxes of birchbark and porcupine quills from a Native man as a gift for his parents when they would come to visit and fills one with red stones for his Mom and the other with a golf ball for his Dad.

But it is only when they begin their stay at the farm owned by the Currie family that Neil happens to find out from Bud that his Dad has joined the army. This throws him for a loop because he doesn’t see how his father as a salesman can sell his stuff in the army; besides his Uncle Frank died as a result of injuries received when serving in the First World War. His image of an army life is of sitting in a trench in France and dying. He is upset that his Dad hasn’t written to tell him about his joining the army, that he won’t be able to build the backyard rink that he had promised, nor be able to teach him to skate as he had promised. He is upset that
his Dad isn’t there to greet him when he arrives at the farm. So he decides to hide….to hide long enough in the barn that his Dad wouldn’t join the army.

He hides in the barn even though the Curries and everyone are going crazy looking for him all night long. In the morning a police man finds him but no one really gets it as to why he was hiding. So after lunch he wanders back to a truck to wait for his parents. When his Dad does come, Neil refuses to talk to him, and instead throws one of the red stones at him and hits his hand. Then he retreats to the barn and hits his father with a stone in the back. Then he scampers up a ladder into the hay and when his Dad comes after him he hits him on the cheek. Then when his Dad climbs the ladder he misses with the golf ball but with another stone hits him over the eye and knocks him unconscious, and throws the remainder of the stones at everybody else coming into the barn to resolve the situation. Finally Neil is crying and crying, and sitting under the cherry tree with his Mom, and his Dad there, and she takes a picture of himself, his Dad and Bud that still stays in the birchbark and porcupine box.

David and Goliath

Findley does a masterful job in capturing the emotional roller coaster experience of a ten year old boy as he grapples with fear and insecurity, and the non sequiturs of his own stream of consciousness. This is a David and Goliath story. Neil is the stone thrower and he does slay this Goliath, his father. However the David of Scripture is engaged in a task that the adult community approve of, and they consider David to be a person of skill and wisdom. The David of this story is on his own, fighting his own battle, with no allies or friends who think of him as a hero. And of course the Goliath of the Scriptures is ungainly and lacking in any sympathetic qualities. Neil’s Dad on the other hand asks and is trying to understand why his son is so angry. Neil is a small boy perplexed and angry, confused and lashing out from a sense of hurt, a lot younger than his years. He uses as weapons against his Dad and his mother the objects that he had intended for them as gifts. He doesn’t trust his father, and he fears for his father. A Dad is supposed to keep his promises. A Dad is supposed to be there for you. A Dad is not meant to fool you….to turn up in civilian dress when he is really in the army. His feelings are so deep and real that he cannot find words with which to express them. His spirit lights up to fight a war against war itself - an eruption of child anger against the ultimate contradiction of humanity’s inherent thrust to live in community.

Mother and Child

Findley paints a beautiful word scene of Neil and his Mom sitting in the cherry and plum tree orchard after his “rescue” from the barn. She totally gets his situation, totally accepts him for who he is, totally allows him to shed his tears and begin some healing in the whole sorry mess. She is not scolding him for throwing stones at herself or her husband, or upbraiding him.
for knocking him out. When we look at the classical images of Mary and Jesus that have been painted through the ages, we see in the mother one who can absorb what is painful and difficult, one who can empathise completely, and one who has the capacity to love unconditionally. We imagine this is what the Catholic visionaries at Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, Medjugorje, and Knock may have experienced.

**The Transformation of Gifts**

Neil buys two birchbark and porcupine quill boxes filled with red stones in one and a golf ball in the other as gifts for his Mom and Dad respectively. But then he uses the stones and the golf ball as weapons in his “war” against his father. However in the aftermath of it all when there is some understanding and healing taking place Neil makes sure that the boxes go to his parents, and he says that in the one for his mother there is a string of red beads from Orillia. In the other is the photograph of his Dad, his brother Bud, and himself that was taken by his mother in the hours after the barn incident. These are transformed treasures...since originally Neil did not know how the original red stones would be stringed, and since originally there was only a golf ball in the box intended for his Dad. Both of these gifts have been exceptionally enhanced. In the larger narrative of Christianity – whether one thinks of the widow who put in a couple of coins into the treasury, or the young boy with the five loaves and the two fish, or the water that filled the jars at the wedding feast at Cana, or the pieces of bread and wine which Jesus took and blessed the night before he died – the habit of our God is to lift up what is fragile and limited and to transform it into something indescribably magnificent while preserving its origin and essence.