

My Formative Religious Experience

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A complete description of the experiences contributing to my religious formation, including my experiences of the many books that have meant so much to me, would keep us here beyond the patience of anyone except myself. But there are two marker experiences, which I believe have functioned more as summings-up, confirmations, than as formative in themselves. Each of them inspires me to say, "Yes, that is how it is!"

The first: In 1974 my wife and our then only son and our friend Jim visited a lonely beach on the north shore of Maui. Full sun, cloudless sky, flat sea. Susan being pregnant and Steve small, they stayed in the shallows while Jim and I headed out to see what could be seen. Each of us had a mask and snorkel, and each of us had one fin, there being only a pair between us.

It was not long before we found ourselves over an acres-wide field of colorful coral, twenty or thirty feet below. It was glorious. I dove and dove, entranced by its beauty and seeking to come as close to it as I could. When finally I surfaced to rest, I was surprised to see how far from shore the ebbing tide had carried me, and to realize that I was exhausted from the exertion. Jim had gone in, and I was alone on the wide sea.

You have the visible evidence that I made it to shore. I did so only by talking to myself constantly as, single-finned, I sculled slowly like a wounded fish toward shore: "Whatever you do, don't panic. Panic and you're a dead duck."

Here in *Moby-Dick* is Melville's comment on Emersonian Transcendentalism, in the person of a young sailor—Ishmael calls him a "sunken-eyed young Platonist"—at the masthead:

Lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; [and] takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature. . . . But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hand at all; and your identity comes back to you in horror. . . . And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!

The second experience: By 1989 our younger son Nat, then fifteen, was living a bad life: bad outlook, bad friends with irresponsible parents, bad drugs. Nothing had been effective: not therapy for him, not therapy for Susan and me, not therapy for the family. He had to be saved from his own self-destructive behavior and so was admitted to the adolescent psych unit at our local hospital. I went to see him alone that first night. It was just a terrible visit. Later, as I walked to the parking lot the thought came to me: "Here I am John Weston, 44 years old, walking to my car after visiting my son in a psychiatric hospital. I never in my life expected such a thing."

And on the heels of that came this: Being presented with an unprecedentedly horrible experience was in fact an experience I shared with virtually all of humankind. I found in that recognition a balm for my anxiety then and immense consolation ever after. It has led me to understand my spirituality as essentially tragic, more or less in the Aristotelian sense. The world as I experience it is contains great beauty and goodness, but it is not short of conditions inspiring terror and pity. A function of religion, as of art, is to pay attention to such conditions, so that we purge ourselves of our excessive self-concern, and can be present and possibly effective when those conditions visit those whom we are close to.