

THE MUSIC OF ANNIE DILLARD

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October 7, 2001

I first met Annie Dillard about four years ago. A dear friend of mine gave me her book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. You have to understand that my friend is not a normal person. She's wonderful and wacky and intelligent and very well read, and, most importantly, --I never know what to expect from her. She often lends me books.

At that time, the latest book she had lent me was about the ability of plant life to communicate by ESP. So, I wasn't expecting too much from this Annie Dillard book.

I started into the book, and was immediately excited by it. It seemed to suggest that vast mysteries were going to be delved into and those vast mysteries at long last answered. But, as I kept reading, I was increasingly disappointed. There were no answers. A lot of lovely writing and some poetry, but no answers.

So, I finished the book and gave it back to my friend. She asked me how I had enjoyed reading it. In a rare moment of politeness, I said, "Oh, I LOVED it! What a GREAT book!"

My friend, not understanding my thinly veiled enthusiasm, lent me ANOTHER Annie Dillard book, American Childhood. I HAD to read it. My friend always expects long literary discussions about any books we read.

This time, however, I truly loved the book! It was funny and insightful, and bordered heavily on Annie Dillard's philosophy of life and religion. So, in that light, I re-read Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, and this time, I understood what was happening—

Annie Dillard doesn't come to us hands wide spread, offering religious answers. She comes with troubled soul and bowed head, with more questions and new ways of looking at old questions. And so, I come to you now a devout Annie Dillard fan.

I am sharing this capsule summary of her writing with you today because I feel it has strong religious connections to how many UU's think, although Annie herself is a Presbyterian turned Catholic. Her approach to living, her anguish at looking at the suffering in the world, her thoughts on nature, are very Unitarian. And, I want you to enjoy this woman as much as I do.

Let me share with you her background. Annie Dillard was born in 1945 and is now living and teaching in Connecticut. She has one child, and has been married and divorced several times. Those are the vital statistics that may help you get an image of Annie in your mind. She is the oldest of three daughters, born to affluent parents. Her parents encouraged her to be creative and to explore her surroundings. They taught her to have a sense of humor.

Much of this service will consist of quotes from Annie Dillard's many books. This one is from her American Childhood, in which she discusses the importance humor played in her childhood. I include it because it is fun, but mostly because, mixed in with her observations and thoughts on life, there is always a generous supply of gentle human and irony. It also explains some of the mechanics of how she learned to write, and how she values the ability to use just the precise word, just the precise turn of phrase.

"Our parents would have sooner left us out of Christmas than leave us out of a joke. They explained a joke to us while they were still laughing at it; they tore a still-kicking joke apart so we could see how it worked....Our father kept in his breast pocket a black notebook. There he noted jokes he wanted to remember. Remembering jokes was a moral obligation...."

"No one tells jokes like your father," Mother said. Telling a good joke well—successfully, perfectly—was the highest art. It was an art because it was up to you. If you did not get the laugh, you had told it wrong."

Work on it, and do better next time. It would have been reprehensible to blame the joke or, worse, the audience.

“As we children got older, our parents discussed with us every technical, theoretical and moral aspect of the art. We tinkered with a joke’s narrative structure....We polished the wording....We analyzed many kinds of pacing. And so my sisters and I learned to love it all, all that any joke-teller needs, and a good bit of what any writer needs. We learned to love thinking about narration—about the imaginative power in its manipulable segments. We learned to calculate and guide a narration’s effects on an audience at every stage. We learned to love careful, controlled language. We learned to love paradox, incongruity and surprise.

Father was fond of stories set in bars that starred zoo animals or insects. These creatures apparently came into bars all over America, either accompanied or alone, and sat down to face incredulous, sarcastic bartenders. (It was a wonder the bartenders were always so surprised year after year, when clearly this sort of thing was the very essence of bar life.)...

Our mother favored a staccato, stand-up style;...Fellow goes to a psychiatrist. “You’re crazy.” “I want a second opinion!” “You’re ugly.”

What else in life so required, and so rewarded, such care? “Tell the girls the one about the four-by-two’s, Frank.” “Let’s see.” “Fellow goes into a lumberyard...”

And Father left the dining room, rubbing his face in concentration, or as if he were smearing on greasepaint and returned when he was ready. “Ready with the four-by-two?” Mother said. Our father hung his hands in his pockets and regarded the far ceiling with fond reminiscence. “Fellow comes into a lumberyard,” he began. “Says to the guy, ‘I need some four-by-twos.’ ‘You mean two-by-fours?’ ‘Just a minute. I’ll find out.’ He walks out to the parking lot where his buddies are waiting in the car. They roll down the car window. He confers with them awhile and comes back across the parking lot and says to the lumberyard guy, ‘Yes. I mean two-by-fours’.

“Lumberyard guy says, ‘How long do you want them?’ ‘Just a minute,’ fellow says, ‘I’ll find out.’ He goes out across the parking lot and confers with the people in the car and comes back across the parking lot to the lumberyard and says to the guy, ‘A long time. We’re building a house.’”

Annie’s parents were also quite fond of the practical joke that often took days and even weeks to set up and execute. Annie says, “When I visited my friends, I was well advised to rise when their parents entered the room. When my friends visited me, they were well advised to duck.”

During her high school years, Annie rebelled against her affluent, country-club upbringing. She hated everyone, got into trouble in school a lot. Around this time, her academic interests turned to poetry. She read all sorts of poetry, and was particularly interested in Ralph Waldo Emerson.

She also wrote a lot of poetry on her own. Her interests in wildlife continued as well—with Annie still rereading her longtime favorite book once a year—The Field Book of Ponds and Streams.

Next, Annie went to college at Hollins College, near Roanoke, Virginia, and studied English, theology, and creative writing. She married her writing teacher, Richard Dillard, who was intensely interested in Thoreau’s Walden Pond. A later husband was also an expert on Thoreau.

In 1971, Annie suffered a near-fatal attack of pneumonia. After she recovered, she decided that she needed to experience life more fully and spent four seasons living near Tinker Creek, an area surrounded by forests, creeks, mountains, and a myriad of animal life.

She was not living in the wilds of nature, as I would have pictured. Instead, she lived in a ranch house, in the middle of a suburban subdivision, with a dinky little creek running through the area.

Nonetheless, Annie spent most days tramping through neighboring meadows and farm fields, and exploring every inch of this dinky creek, Tinker Creek. She walked and camped, and was just there with nature. And SEEING, always observing and recording what she saw.

When she was inside, she mostly read. After living there for about a year, Annie began to write about her experiences there by the creek. She started by writing a journal of her experiences, then transposed it all to notecards when the journal reached twenty-plus volumes. It took her about eight months to turn the notecards into Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

Annie was timid about presenting her book to the public. She had already published a book of poetry, which received little public attention. She even thought of publishing it under a man's name, because she was worried that a theology book by a woman would not be well received. But, the book was incredibly well received and, in 1975, at the age of 29, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction.

About herself, Annie says, *"I am no scientist. I am a wanderer with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts....In nature I find grace tangled in a rapture with violence; I find an intricate landscape whose forms are fringed in death; I find mystery, newness, and a kind of exuberant, spendthrift energy."*

In much of Dillard's writing, she uses her observations of nature as a starting place. From those observations come her philosophy.

In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, it is the creek and the water constantly flowing and washing the land that is the ever-present metaphor. And the light that glistens off the waters of the creek—representing for her God and gnosis and the connection with that presence that inspires.

She uses these metaphors so naturally that it's hard to tell if she is really constructing it that way on purpose—or if it just turned out that way.

She stalks the ever-elusive muskrat in the creek, seeing it only obliquely, out of the side of her eye, and then only when it swims through a freak beam of light that pierces a cloudy sky. She studies giant water bugs that suck the insides out of frogs that live in the creek's waters. She explores the light, as it hits the surface of the water, sometimes illuminating but more often clouding the water's surface.

In other writing, her creek is one of sand—a dry creek bed, whose sand eventually is washed down to the rivers and the oceans in times of flood. The sands are one day washed ashore from the oceans onto far distant lands.

Let me flood you with some of Annie's writing in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek:

"...the creek never stops. If I seek the senses and skill of children, the information of a thousand books, the innocence of puppies, even the insights of my own city past, I do so only, solely, and entirely that I might look well at the creek. You don't run down the present, pursue it with baited hooks and nets. You wait for it, empty-handed, and you are filled. You'll have fish left over. The creek is the one great giver. It is, by definition, Christmas, the incarnation. This old rock planet gets the present for a present on its birthday every day."

Annie once took a jar of the water from the creek home and put it in a fish bowl. She painted a large black circle on one side of the bowl, and a large white circle on the other side of the bowl, and later, looking under a microscope, she learned that all the light-loving tiny creatures in the bowl of creek water, swam to the white side and all the shade-loving tiny creatures swam to the dark circle.

"I don't really look forward to these microscopic forays; I have been almost knocked off my kitchen chair on several occasions when, as I was following with strained eyes the tiny career of a monostyla rotifer, an enormous red roundworm whipped into the scene, blocking everything, and writhing in huge, flapping convulsions that seemed to sweep my face and fill the kitchen. I do it as a moral exercise; the microscope

at my forehead is a...constant reminder of the facts of creation that I would just as soon forget. You can buy your child a microscope and say grandly, 'Look, child, at the Jungle in a Little Drop.' The boy looks, plays around with pond water and bread mold and onion sprouts for a month or two, and then starts shooting baskets or racing cars, leaving the microscope on the basement table staring fixedly at its own mirror forever—and you say he's growing up. But in the puddle or pond, in the city reservoir, ditch, or Atlantic Ocean, the rotifers still spin and munch, the daphnia still filter and are filtered, and the copepods still swarm, hanging with clusters of eggs. These are real creatures with real organs leading real lives, one by one. I can't pretend they're not there. If I have life, sense, energy, will, so does a rotifer. The monostyla goes to the dark spot on the bowl: To which circle am I heading? I can move around right smartly in a calm; but in a real wind, in a change of weather, in a riptide, am I really moving, or am I 'milling around'?"

Again—

"I am sitting here looking at a goldfish bowl and busting my brain....I am sitting here, you are sitting there. Say even that you are sitting across this kitchen table from me right now. Our eyes meet; a consciousness snaps back and forth. What we know, at least for starters, is: here we—so incontrovertibly—are. This is our life, these are our lighted seasons, and then we die....In the meantime, in between time, we can see. The scales are fallen from our eyes, the cataracts are cut away, and we can work at making sense of the color-patches we see in an effort to discover where we so incontrovertibly are. It's common sense; when you move in, you try to learn the neighborhood."

Back to the giant water bug, which Annie saw one day in the creek. She actually saw first the empty skin of the frog still posed in a sitting position by the side of the creek. Annie thought the frog was sitting there motionless. Soon, she realized that this was just an empty skin—a giant water bug, which does this sort of thing for a living, had sucked the life out of the frog for a meal.

This image haunted Annie for years, and keeps recurring in the book. Annie uses this image, among others, to explore why cruelties and horrible disfigurements of babies, and terrible deaths occur in what would seem to be a beautiful world.

"...The frog that the giant water bug sucked had, presumably, a rush of pure feeling for about a second, before its brain turned to broth. I, however, have been sapped by various strong feelings about the incident almost daily for several years.

Do the barnacle larvae care? Does the lacewing who eats her own eggs care? IF they do not care, then why am I making all this fuss?

Our excessive emotions are so patently painful and harmful to us as a species that I can hardly believe that they evolved. Other creatures manage to have effective matings and even stable societies without great emotions, and they have a bonus in that they need not ever mourn. (But some higher animals have emotions that we think are similar to ours: dogs, elephants, otters, and the sea mammals mourn their dead. Why do that to an otter? What creator could be so cruel, not to kill otters, but to let them care?) It would seem that emotions are the curse, not death—emotions that appear to have devolved upon a few freaks as a special curse from Malevolence."

Annie struggles with her religion throughout all of this. She does not appear to question the existence of a God, but what kind of a God is he? And for Annie, God is always a He.

And always—what kind of god would allow all this suffering?

"The question from agnosticism is, Who turned on the lights? The question from faith is, Whatever for?"

"Consider the ordinary barnacle, the rock barnacle. Inside every one of those millions of hard white cones on the rocks—the kind that bruises your heel as you bruise its head—is of course a creature as alive as you or I. Its business in life is this: when a wave washes over it, it sticks out twelve feathery feeding

appendages and filters the plankton for food. As it grows, it sheds its skin like a lobster, enlarges its shell, and reproduces itself without end. The larvae 'hatch into the sea in milky clouds'. The barnacles encrusting a single half mile of shore can leak into the water a million million larvae. How many is that to a human mouthful? In seawater they grow, molt, change shape wildly, and eventually, after several months, settle on the rocks, turn into adults, and build shells. Inside the shells they have to shed their skins...All in all, rock barnacles may live four years.

My point about rock barnacles is those million million larvae 'in milky clouds' and those shed flecks of skin. Seawater seems suddenly to be but a broth of barnacle bits. Can I fancy that a million million human infants are more real?

What if god has the same affectionate disregard for us that we have for barnacles? I don't know if each barnacle larva is of itself unique and special, or if we the people are essentially as interchangeable as bricks....I examine the trapezoids of skin covering the back of my hands like blown dust motes moistened to clay. I have hatched, too, with millions of my kind, into a Milky Way that spreads from an unknown shore."

"But it is for gooseneck barnacles that I reserve the largest measure of awe. Recently I saw photographs taken by members of the Ra expedition. One showed a glob of tar as big as a softball, jetsam from a larger craft, which Heyerdahl and his crew spotted in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The tar had been in the sea for a long time; it was overgrown with gooseneck barnacles. The gooseneck barnacles were entirely incidental, but for me they were the most interesting thing about the whole expedition. How many gooseneck barnacle larvae must be dying out there in the middle of vast oceans for every one that finds a glob of tar to fasten to?

I have always had a fancy for these creatures, but I'd always assumed that they lived near shores, where chance floating holdfasts are more likely to occur. What are they doing—what are the larvae doing—out there in the middle of the ocean? They drift and perish, or, by some freak accident in a world where anything can happen, they latch and flourish. If I dangled my hand from the deck of the Ra into the sea, could a gooseneck barnacle fasten there? If I gathered a cup of ocean water, would I be holding a score of dying and dead barnacle larvae? Should I throw them a chip? What kind of a world is this, anyway? Why not make fewer barnacle larvae and give them a decent chance? Are we dealing in life, or in death?

I have to look at the landscape of the blue-green world again. Just think: in all the clean beautiful reaches of the solar system, our planet alone is a blot; our planet alone has death. I have to acknowledge that the sea is a cup of death and the land is a stained altar stone. We the living are survivors huddled on flotsam, living on jetsam. We are escapees...

The faster death goes, the faster evolution goes. If an aphid lays a million eggs, several might survive. Now, my right hand, in all its human cunning, could not make one aphid in a thousand years. But these aphid eggs—which run less than a dime a dozen, which run absolutely free—can make aphids as effortlessly as the sea makes waves. Wonderful things, wasted. It's a wretched system....

Say you are the manager of the Southern Railroad. You figure that you need three engines for a stretch of track between Lynchburg and Danville. It's a mighty steep grade. So at fantastic effort and expense you have your shops make nine thousand engines. Each engine must be fashioned just so, every rivet and bolt secure, every wire twisted and wrapped, every needle on every indicator sensitive and accurate.

You send all nine thousand of them out on the runs. Although there are engineers at the throttles, no one is manning the switches. The engines crash, collide, derail, jump, jam, burn....At the end of the massacre you have three engines, which is what the run could support in the first place. There are few enough of them that they can stay out of each other's paths.

You go to your board of directors and show them what you've done. And what are they going to say? You know what they're going to say.. They're going to say: It's a hell of a way to run a railroad.

Is it a better way to run a universe?"

Perhaps I should say at this point, that, when I started preparing for giving this talk, I decided to reread all the Dillard books I had and pick out just my favorite favorite quotes in them. I did that—then discovered I had over twenty typed pages of just my favorite favorites. Consequently, I've had to leave out of this talk some of the really good stuff.

In her book, For the Time Being, Annie Dillard begins with discussing a book she had read describing in pictures and graphic details the various genetic deformities of children. Many of the children were severely mentally retarded as well. But, what truly shook Annie was reading that many of these grossly physically deformed babies were of above-average intelligence. They were aware of their plight.

And so began her exploration of how a compassionate God could do this. Why is there so much suffering? These passages are from her book For the Time Being.

"One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic." Joseph Stalin, that gourmandizer, gave words to this disquieting and possibly universal sentiment.

How can an individual count? Do individuals count only to us other suckers, who love and grieve like elephants, bless their hearts? Of Allah, the Qur'an says, 'not so much as the weight of an ant in heaven and earth escapes from him.' That is touching, that Allah, God, and their ilk care when one ant dismembers another, or note when a sparrow falls, but I strain to see the use of it.

People are always trying to convince themselves that their times are really important. But if you really, truly understood that you are going to die, and how many people there are now and how many people there have ever been, just beads in this never-ending string, how then, do we live? How can you take yourself seriously?

Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, "All your actions show your wisdom and love." Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, "That's a lie!"—just to put things on a solid footing.

"He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly." "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

Again, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him."

When was that? I missed it. In China, in Israel, in the Yemen, in the Ecuadoran Andes, and the Amazon basin, in Greenland, Iceland, and Baffin Island, in Europe, on the shore of the Beaufort Sea inside the Arctic Circle, and in Costa Rica, in the Marquesas Islands, and in the United States, I have seen the rich sit secure on their thrones and send the hungry away empty. If God's escape clause is that he gives only spiritual things, then we might hope that the poor and suffering are rich in spiritual gifts, as some certainly are, but as some of the comfortable are too. In a soup kitchen, I see suffering. Do-nothing God, who, if he has power, abuses it."

It's very difficult to see Annie as a Catholic, isn't it? I'm thinking she's really a Unitarian in fish's clothing.

Again.—God is not more blinding people with glaucoma, or testing them with diabetes, or purifying them with spinal pain, or choreographing the seeding of tumor cells through lymph, or fiddling with

chromosomes, than he is jimmying floodwaters or pitching tornadoes at towns. God is no more cogitating which among us he plans to place here as bird-headed dwarfs or elephant men—or to kill by AIDS or kidney failure, heart disease, childhood leukemia, or sudden infant death syndrome—than he is pitching lightning bolts at pedestrians, triggering rock slides, or setting fires. The very least likely things for which God might be responsible are what insurers call ‘acts of God’.

Then what, if anything, does he do? If God does not cause everything that happens, does God cause anything that happens? Is God completely out of the loop?...Does God stick a finger in, if only now and then? Does God budge, nudge, hear, twitch, help? Is heaven pliable? Or is praying...delusional? I don't know. I don't know beans about God.

In Teaching a Stone to Talk, Annie spends many pages using her expeditions to the Antarctic to set the stage for her philosophies and religion.

Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?

The tourists are having coffee and doughnuts on Deck C. Presumably someone is minding the ship, correcting the course, avoiding icebergs and shoals, fueling the engines, watching the radar screen, noting weather reports radioed in from shore. No one would dream of asking the tourists to do these things. Alas, among the tourists on Deck C, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts, we find the captain, and all the ship's officers, and all the ship's crew. The officers chat; they swear, they wink a bit at slightly raw jokes, just like regular people. The crew members have funny accents.

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

I'm going to end with a long passage from Annie Dillard. Here she creates an image of our lives that returns to me often. It certainly isn't an image of hope for the human race, or even our planet. But at the same time, for me it puts my life in a nice perspective. This is again from For the Time Being.

If survival is an art, then mangroves are artists of the beautiful; not only that they exist at all—smooth-barked, glossy-leaved, thickets of lapped mystery—but that they can and do exist as floating islands, as trees upright and loose, alive and homeless on the water.

I have seen mangroves, always on tropical ocean shores, in Florida and in the Galapagos. There is the red mangrove, the yellow, the button, and the black. They are all short, messy trees, waxy-leaved, laced all over with aerial roots, woody arching buttresses, and weird leathery berry pods. All this tangles from a black muck soil, a black muck matted like a mud-sopped rag, a muck without any other plants, shaded, cold to the touch, tracked at the water's edge by herons and nosed by sharks.

It is these shoreline trees which, by a fairly common accident, can become floating islands. A hurricane flood or a riptide can wrest a tree from the shore, or from the mouth of a tidal river, and hurl it into the ocean. It floats. It is a mangrove island, blown.

There are floating islands on the planet; it amazes me.

Trees floating on the poisonous sea. A tree cannot live in salt. Mangrove trees exude salt from their leaves; you can see it; even on shoreline black mangroves, as a thin white crust. Lick a leaf and your tongue curls and coils; your mouth's a heap of salt.

Nor can a tree live without soil. A hurricane-born mangrove island may bring its own soil to the sea. But other mangrove trees make their own soil—and their own islands—from scratch. These are the ones which interest me. The seeds germinate in the fruit on the tree. The germinated embryo can drop anywhere—say, onto a dab of floating muck. The heavy root end sinks; a leafy plumule unfurls. The tiny seedling, afloat, is on its way. Soon aerial roots shooting out in all directions trap debris. The sapling's networks twine, the interstices narrow, and water calms in the lee. Bacteria thrive on organic broth; amphipods swarm. These creatures grow and die at the trees' wet feet. The soil thickens, accumulating rainwater, leaf rot, seashells, and guano; the island spreads.

More seeds and more muck yield more trees on the new island. A society grows, interlocked in a tangle of dependencies. The island rocks less in the swells. Fish throng to the backwaters stilled in snarled roots. Soon, Asian mudskippers—little four-inch fish—clamber up the mangrove roots into the air and peer about from periscope eyes on stalks, like snails. Oysters clamp to submersed roots, as do starfish, dog whelk, and the creatures that live among tangled kelp. Shrimp seek shelter there, limpets a holdfast, pelagic birds a rest.

And the mangrove island wanders on, afloat and adrift. It walks teetering and wanton before the wind. Its fate and direction are random. It may bob across an ocean and catch on another mainland's shores. It may starve or dry while it is still a sapling. It may topple in a storm, or pitchpole. By the rarest of chances, it may stave into another mangrove island in a crash of clacking roots, and mesh. What is it most likely to do it drift anywhere in the alien ocean, feeding on death and growing, netting a makeshift soil as it goes, shrimp in its toes and terns in its hair.

...thoughts of despair...crowd back, unbidden, when human life as it unrolls goes ill, when we lost control of our lives or the illusion of control, and it seems that we are not moving toward any end but merely blown. Our life seems cursed to be a wiggle merely, and a wandering without end. Even nature is hostile and poisonous, as though it were impossible for our vulnerability to survive on these acrid stones.

...The planet is less like an enclosed spaceship—spaceship earth—than it is like an exposed mangrove island beautiful and loose. We the people started small and have since accumulated a great and solacing muck of soil, of human culture. We are rooted in it; we are bearing it with us across nowhere. The word “nowhere” is our cue: the consort of musicians strikes up, and we in the chorus stir and move and start twirling our hats. A mangrove island turns drift to dance. It creates its own soil as it goes, rocking over the salt sea at random, rocking day and night and round the sun, rocking round the sun and out toward east of Hercules.