

The Story Lives: Magical Realism in Religion

Sermon by Rev. Kent Matthies

Toni Morrison and Gabriel Marquez are two of the greatest living novelists in the Americas. Both write stories of magical realism. In this literature, memories and stories take on real lives of their own. Let's explore how our rational religious faith often blurs fact and fiction. (March 21, 2004)

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One Hundred Years of Solitude, opens with three sentences of mastery:

*“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember the distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous like prehistoric eggs. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point.”*¹

Magic is in the air. Concepts of discovering ice, stones the size and color of enormous prehistoric eggs, and a world so recent many things lacked names, captivate the imagination. These ideas, which the reader cannot assume to be literally true, begin the luminous chronicle of one hundred years and seven generations of the Buendia family in Marquez's beloved country of Columbia.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1982 and is perhaps the most renowned novelist in a long line of esteemed magical realism writers. These include Jose Luis Borge, Isabelle Allende and Toni Morrison. This movement is connected to many important artistic, social, political, and psychological influences since World War I. Many agree that the term was coined by the “German art historian Franz Roh in the title of his 1925 book, *Post-Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting*.”² Among many sources, magical realism flows also from Freud's work on dreams and the unconscious.

Within literature, magical realism includes ordinary and unusual elements of human existence to provide a wider representation of the

¹ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, p.1

² Carlo Coppola, *Magical Realism*, p. 795

possible. Magical realism does not limit itself to those experiences which we can quantify and explain. Individual and community dreams, desires, and myths mix and questions, explanations and answers intangibly flow together. At times, with baffling, confusing history, present times and the future are woven like gorgeous tapestry.

Unitarianism Universalism—and especially Unitarianism—have not always embraced dreams, metaphors, and memories as legitimate religious experiences. Certainly not always, but many times, Unitarianism categorically dismissed metaphor. Although at least 100 years before magical realism came into official recognition, Unitarians celebrated efforts such as Thomas Jefferson literally taking scissors to a Bible and cutting out the miracle stories. Our religion continues to be strongly influenced by the 18th century Enlightenment. It is true that in many aspects this focus on reason allows for a dynamic and healthy religion. Many times what we learn in civic and academic society and what we say in church match up quite well. When science and psychology help us to understand humanity and the world in new ways, we can integrate and change our religious thinking. Perhaps the most famous example of this came in the first part of the 20th century including evolution as a religious concept. But at times the pendulum has swung too far towards the rational. At times we have demanded too much proof in our religion and we have left our soulful cravings unfulfilled.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez leads a literary movement which involves reality and magic. I think we can learn from magical realism to enrich our religious experience. Marquez has published the first book in an ambitious trilogy of autobiography in which among many things, he reflects on his understanding of good fiction. His first volume is entitled, *Vivir para Contarla*, or *Living to Tell the Tale*. For those who find Marquez to be one of the top living fiction masters in the world, reading his autobiography provides exciting views into the mind and experiences of the man who has given so many gifts to the world. As with most human beings, seemingly small vignettes from growing up illustrate the development of his worldview.

One story comes for Marquez' childhood when his family was living in the Caribbean coast of Columbia and his father was serving as a doctor. One day a highly distraught man, believing that someone had cursed him by placing a monkey in his abdomen, came to his father. Marquez's father felt this case was beyond his own medical capacities and referred him to the

nearest surgeon “who did not find the monkey . . . but did find a formless monstrosity with a life of its own.”³ Reflecting back in adulthood, the possible medical questions are not what amazed Marquez the most. The significant learning was that the patient was convinced that this curse originated in the only location where it could be removed. In fact, everyone in the area of Sucre “knew” that La Sierpe was a magical center of blessings and evil curses and could only be reached by traveling through steaming bogs. The people of this town continually told stories of the land of La Sierpe which contained snakes wearing golden bells, buried treasures, and a limitless expanse hanging with phosphorescent anemones.

Another story comes from one night in his young adulthood. Gabriel was riding the train when a faun (half man, half animal) came aboard the train as a passenger in normal fashion. Nobody else on the train seemed to notice anything out of the norm, but Gabriel saw the horns coming out of his head and smelled the stink of his pelt. When he got home he couldn’t sleep well and he told his friend about the vision. “In the end, the essential thing for me was not if the faun was real but that I had lived the experience as if he were. And for the same reason—real or dreamed—it was not legitimate to consider this as a bewitchment of the imagination but as a marvelous experience in my life.”⁴

These types of lived experiences help to explain how Marquez wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which is known as a giant metaphor encoding much of the entire history of the Americas. Marquez plays with images in a way that makes the reader think he might be starting off where the Biblical book of Genesis left off. Discovering ice and founding a town deep in the swamps of Columbia, the Buendia family go back and forth from the known to the mysterious. Marquez completed this book in 1967 and had plenty of ideas about modernization, which brings plagues of dead birds falling from the sky and insomnia. The gorgeous stones which looked like pre-historic eggs are crushed into dust. Militarization brings the murders of many of the Buendia men and the death of three thousand civilians in one massacre.

Throughout his writing Marquez tells many stories of people going to heaven and angels coming down. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude* Remedios the Beauty caused considerable consternation among men and women due to her extravagant habits and outstanding looks. At one point

³ *Living to Tell the Tale*, p. 348

⁴ *Living to Tell the Tale*, GGM, p. 270

she simply rises up in light winds and becomes, “lost forever in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her.”⁵ Her sister was upset about the good bedsheets Remedios took with her.

In “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” a rather decrepit old man is found face down in the mud with his wings. Pelayo and his wife Elisenda have mixed feelings about whether this angel has come to bring blessings. Although their sick child immediately reduces his fever and gains his appetite, they still lock up the angel in the chicken coop and make a spectacle of him. They actually torture him to try to make the best show as they charge visitors for viewing. The angels show great miracles of patience and in the end barely garners the energy to fly away.

Marquez often allows the reader to interpret his or her own meanings of these stories. With Remedios the Beauty, Marquez certainly was playing with the idea of Mary of Magdalene and exclusionary claims on the holy. Maybe he was saying that some aspects of life are so precious they must be preserved in the most holy of places. Maybe we don’t know the interpretation of the rising beauty. With the fallen angel, perhaps we are to recognize that we might see the holy in each other every day and we often don’t treat each other with adequate love and respect. Perhaps we don’t have to arrive at reasonable analysis of magical events.

In his autobiography Marquez writes about growing up as a reader and how he came to understand that the best books are those which helped him to discover worlds he never knew existed within himself. In other words, the plagues, struggles between ancient and modern, wrestling with good and evil are all worlds existing within the reader. Marquez lives to tell the tales, which help us—as individuals and communities—to discover and see our worlds in new ways.

As a very young reporter, Marquez found living in Bogotá to be a major treat for many reasons: one being that Bogotá was a world dominated by poets. Marquez says, “We not only believed in poetry, and would have died for it, but we also knew with certainty, as Luis Cardoza y Aragon wrote, “Poetry is the only concrete proof of the existence of man.” The world belonged to the poets.”⁶

⁵ GGM, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, p. 255

⁶ *ibid*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, p. 252

Even with our emphasis on reason, our theological roots also have deep connections with this type of insight. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a highly influential Unitarian thinker. In many ways he and Gabriel Garcia Marquez arrived at the same conclusions about the most important elements of life. Emerson liked to say that the world itself is the great poem. In his 1844 essay, "The Poet," Emerson wrote, "The secret of the universe is profound, but who or what shall be our interpreter we know not. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet."⁷

In our religious tradition we have embraced Robert Fulghum, Joseph Campbell, and many feminist theologians' heightening of the importance of myth and stories in our religious lives. Many of our congregations have held in high esteem the psychologist Carl Jung who said that, "the physical is not the only criterion of truth: there are also psychic truths which can neither be explained nor contested in any physical way."⁸ We have tried to heed the call of Langston Hughes who inspired us to "hold fast to dreams." Hughes said, "Without dreams, life is like a frozen field." As human beings we are starved for narratives and stories. We need a lyrical religion to feed our souls. We need poetic, engrossing, and mesmerizing religious language.

As our world becomes more connected and in many ways smaller with globalization we need more than ever to embrace and respect the stories, myths and memories of diverse communities. Wade Davis is an ethnographer who studies indigenous peoples around the world. Davis boldly states, "Storytelling can change the world." He believes that hearing the stories of the world helps individuals to realize, "that the world into which you were born is just one model of reality. These other cultures aren't failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit." While Davis reports on the brilliant array of dreams, myths, and stories of people from around the world, he worries terribly that the sacredness of many cultures is being lost. While "Today nearly 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide but fully half of them are not being taught to children. When a language is no longer spoken it is very difficult for that culture to keep alive its unique wisdom and way of life."⁹ At a time when the world needs all the good ideas it can get, we are quickly losing cultural diversity and the wisdom of differing minds, perspectives, and experiences.

⁷ "The Even Better News," Reverend Robert M. Hardies, Nov. 11, 2003

⁸ MEA p. 39

⁹ "Tales of the Ethnosphere," by Juniper Glass, *Utne Reader*, March/April 2004

Of course these issues of international economics, politics, and religion are highly complicated. I am sure many of us often feel incapable of having any effect on current trends. Like many spiritual issues, we can always work on our local communities and ourselves. Last night I learned of a lovely story, which has been developing for an entire decade between a father and son in our congregation. Daniel Borodin is now 14 years old. Over the last ten years, every night his father David Borodin has been telling him a narrative. This story is not written down, but expands and deepens every night as father and son talk. If Daniel thinks the story should change or go in a new direction he helps tell the story. Together, father and son participate in a magical journey of imagination. I am sure that many of your homes and families engage in similarly wonderful telling of stories. In our Small Group Ministries and in all our endeavors in our community, we can take the time to tell our stories. For cultural survival and growth we need to lose ourselves in our dreams, desires, and fantasies. With stories about the good, the bad, and the ugly we can discover new worlds within ourselves.

Closing Words

Eduardo Carranza was a Columbian poet who influenced the life and work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Carranza wrote these words which I believe can and should be applied to religion:

“If poetry does not make my blood run faster, open sudden windows for me onto the mysterious, help me to discover the world, accompany this desolate heart in solitude and in love, in joy and in enmity, what good is poetry to me?”

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