

Hurrying to Nowhere Reflections on *Castaway*, *Crusoe*, and Character

by Steven Garber, Ph.D.

Knowing my interest in the whys and wherefores of learning, a good friend sent me an essay last summer by the agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry. Hearing about Berry for years, but never listening to him, I was impressed with his critical, careful eye in “The Loss of the University.” In the months since then I have been reading books of his essays, as well as his novels and poems. Though widely lauded as one of America’s most important essayists, he also sees and hears the world around through the lens of one committed to the gospel of the Kingdom. For example, his *The Timbered Choir* is a collection of twenty years of poems on the theme of Sabbath, a theologically rich exploration of the rhythms of worship and work.

Last week on my way to a conference in Florida, I began reading the essay, “Discipline and Hope.” As I flew over the southeastern states, I was taken in one more time with his understanding of human life under pressure from our media-molded and consumption-crazed culture. Page upon page, Berry sets before us a vision of a deeper, more truthful way of being human, and laments the widespread loss of the very qualities which make it possible to know and love, to be known and to be loved.

Perceptively analyzing the meaning of television in shaping personal and public life, he wrote: “The great sin of the medium is not that it presents fiction as truth, as undoubtedly it sometimes does, but that it cannot help presenting the truth as fiction, and that of the most negligible sort—a way to keep awake until bedtime.” This insight moved toward an examination of our social, political, and economic choices as a culture, and “the expedient doctrine that the end may justify the means.” Berry then weighed in with this alternate account of human life: “There is an important sense in which the end is the means.” From there he explored the various ways we have distorted the notion of efficiency, “Instead of asking a man what he can do well, it asks him what he can do fast and cheap.”

Having read much of Berry over the last months I found myself on familiar ground with his critique; in

all that I have read he eventually comes to this criticism. Whether writing of industrialization and our globalizing economy, of raising sheep on the land that his forebears have farmed for four generations, or of the meaning of sexuality in a consumer culture, he cries out—quite eloquently and thoughtfully—against all that presses in upon us to diminish our humanness, as men and women made in the image of God.

As I turned the pages, paying close attention to his analysis, suddenly these words caught my heart: “It means hurrying to nowhere.”

And as I flew, my eyes looking down upon the waterways of South Carolina, I thought of the film *Castaway*. Perennial Oscar contender Tom Hanks plays a FedEx efficiency specialist whose worldwide travels take him from airport to airport, city to city, inspiring employees to meet the demands of the clock. The unpardonable? Wherever his expertise takes him, he asks them to remember the company motto: “Let’s not commit the sin of turning our back on Time.” They are words which come back to haunt him.

With the millions who have seen this film since it came out earlier this winter, I was drawn into the drama of his last-minute, late-night flight across the Pacific, and I found my stomach tightening as I begin to feel the break-up of the airplane. Its crash into the sea took me along, and I gasped for air with everyone else. Almost always Hanks draws me in; his Jimmy Stewart-like, feet-on-the-ground ordinariness, melding intensity and humor with unusual grace, make him an actor whose characters often tell tales that I understand.

I like movies. And on a certain level, I liked this one too. At the right times I laughed, and cried. But several weeks later my assessment is that it is one of the saddest stories I have seen and heard in a long time. If it is about anything, it is about “hurrying to nowhere,” individually and culturally. Tom Hanks is Everyman at the dawn of the New Millennium, and he is—in the words of one of our best prophets, the novelist Walker Percy, “lost in the cosmos.”

Washed ashore on a island, he calls out, “HELLO!?!?” again and again. No one is there... more

profoundly, no one is home in heaven. Not only is there no foxhole faith, there are no windows to transcendence and truth in this story of a soul set adrift in the universe. And though the waves wash up reminders of the technological society in which he has lived and moved and had his being, he like most sons of Adam before him eventually takes these tools and toys and distorts them. Quite crudely, but so sadly, he chooses a volleyball, "Wilson," to be his companion and counselor. If we did not cry at this point – perhaps inappropriately, given the dramatic intent of the story yet to be told – we should have. Castaway, perhaps, but more truthfully, still at sea with regard to the most crucial questions and concerns in life.

Though I have no idea whether the Oxford philosopher Iris Murdoch ever read Thomas a Kempis, their reflections on the moral life have a surprising resonance. Writing in the 20th-century she noted, "At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over." Several centuries earlier he observed, "Circumstances do not make a man frail; rather, they show what he is." Those readings of the human heart are true, whether they focus on contemporary cinema, the push-and-pull of national politics, or the lives of ordinary people in ordinary places; you and me, your neighbor and mine.

The Tom Hanks character has a character. He is a man full of habits of mind and heart which day after day lead him in certain directions, and not in others. When he is pressed to the proverbial wall, at work, at home, at play, he makes characteristic decisions, choices which are his, and him. To an extent which is sobering, even in a fallen world where it is possible to be sinned against – even horribly so – we *are* our choices. Augustine of Hippo, a keen interpreter of the human heart in his own day, put it this way: "As sure as I lived, I knew that I possessed a will, and that when I willed to do something or willed not to do something, nobody else was making the decision." As the playwright-become-president Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic reminds us, "The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility."

The most interesting question to me, pondering the story of *Castaway*, is the question of his response to his circumstances. He is able to respond; he is responsible. Being "castaway" has not diminished his humanness. The surf and the sun, the sand and the sky are the constants of the created order in which he is still responsible and accountable for the moral meaning of what he sees and hears.

One cannot think very long about this story, without wondering about Daniel Defoe's classic; in fact most of the popular press about *Castaway* offers it as "a modern Robinson Crusoe." Though the broad

outlines of the stories are similar in that they tell of a man washed ashore, left alive and alone to forge a life on a tropical island, from that starting point they offer quite contrasting accounts of human life under the sun. If the one is about a man hurrying to nowhere, a human being lost in the cosmos; the other is about a man whose desire for moral autonomy comes crashing down upon his soul, and who by amazing grace begins to see himself and the world in relation to the Creator of the cosmos.

Defoe's novel is, in a word, a story of providence. The first chapter tells of Crusoe's choice to go his own way, shaking his figurative fist at father on earth and God in heaven, embarking upon his great adventure in lawlessness, circa 1600. The years pass, his ships take him to Africa where he is nearly killed, and eventually to South America where he builds a plantation and fortune. On a trading expedition with the fruit of his labor, his ship wrecks, leaving him "castaway." Still angry at God, he recounts his first moments:

"After I got to shore and escaped drowning, instead of being thankful to God for my deliverance, having first vomited with the great quantity of salt water which was gotten into my stomach, and recovering myself a little, I ran about the shore, wringing my hands and beating my head and face, exclaiming at my misery, and crying out I was undone, undone...."

Days go by, and weeks turn into months, all the while Crusoe is sorting out his soul. Keeping a journal, he writes of the daily duties which occupy him in his new life. The first small opening into his heart comes as he observes thrown-away corn husks amazingly turn into green shoots and then edible barley.

"It is impossible to express the astonishment and confusion of my thoughts on this occasion. I had hitherto acted upon no religious foundation at all; indeed I had very few notions of religion in my head, or had entertained any sense of anything that had befallen me otherwise than as a chance, or, as we lightly say, what pleases God; without so much as inquiring into the ends of Providence in these things, or His order in governing events in the world. But after I saw the barley grow there, in a climate which I know was not proper for corn, and especially that I knew not how it came there, it startled me strangely, and I began to suspect that God had miraculously caused this grain to grow without any help of seed sown; and that it was so directed purely for my sustenance on that wild miserable place. This touched my heart a little, and brought tears out of my eyes...."

The pages are literally full of his thoughtful, probing encounter with God. Sin and salvation, the gospel of grace, fears and temptations, learning to love God and the world – it is all there.

In his essay, Berry argues that the arts “refine and enliven perception.” I think he means that they enable us to see more clearly, more truthfully. That is plainly a possibility, and perhaps that is their true purpose. If so, then *Robinson Crusoe* tells a better tale than *Castaway*. Defoe pulls no punches in his story of the human hunger for autonomy, and of its creational consequences; in God’s world, the world in which we really live, there are consequences for the choices we make – blessing and curse. Crusoe is a son of Adam, full of glory and shame. In his anger, his perseverance, his fear, his introspection, his creativity, from beginning to end we meet a man who is like us, somehow both fully material and fully spiritual, at the very same time. He is someone who runs from God, and who cries out to God. There is nothing cheap here, about faith, hope, or love.

It is only the lesser stories that pull punches, in fact. They are the ones that Walker Percy was thinking of when he wisely observed, “Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition.” At heart, that is my lament with *Castaway*. It offers a picture of the person which seems far away from the reality of human experience, stretched out as it is from cradle to grave. Pushed to the edge, Crusoe’s pilgrimage rings

true in a way that *Castaway*’s shallow secularism simply does not, and cannot.

But I suppose, at the beginning and the end of days, that is where hurrying to nowhere gets us. It is the problem of confusing means and ends. For years I have asked my students, “Do you have a *telos* which can meaningfully orient your *praxis* over the course of life?” More playfully put: “Why do you get up in the morning?” They are questions which grow out of hope, yearning that my students will learn, as Berry reminds us, that “There is an important sense in which the end is the means.” That is not a hard-to-understand truth for folk whose first question of faith asks, “What is man’s chief end?” We are on our way, not to nowhere, but to Someone.



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