

A Conversation with Penelope Wilcock

The book opens with a quotation from *Grey Owl*: “Down the avenue of trees I can see a spot of sunlight. I’m trying so hard to get there.” How does this image relate to Jabez and Esme’s spiritual journey?

At the point at which the story opens, Esme is living with an unacknowledged numbness, damage from the loneliness of her role as a minister, from the bereavement of her failed marriage, and from her sense of unfulfillment in terms of personal faith. Jabez is frozen at a place of loneliness and grief after the death of his wife, and is coping, but only just. Though he has a deep personal faith, he finds the answers and attitudes he meets in church unsatisfactory. Yet each of them has an instinct to reach for something that makes sense of life; that brings wholeness, healing, and fulfillment. To reach the place of openly admitted love and need of each other that they are at by the end of the book is a matter of struggle for



each of them, permitting vulnerability, risking much. It is the end of one journey toward warmth and light but, as always in life, will be the beginning of another.

***The Clear Light of Day* is about insight. How do you see this theme illustrated in the teachings of Jesus?**

Of the four evangelists, Mark and John focus particularly on this theme. Mark's gospel has a particular teaching structure, seeking to awaken the minds of his readers to the foundational role of suffering in the call of the Messiah. Mark, in his tiny prologue states, "Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God," and what unfolds in the following chapters is an invitation to insight, to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do.

The first chapters are full of questions: "Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him? Who is this who can forgive sins? Who is this who can heal the sick and cast out demons?" etc. Then Jesus asks his disciples, "And you—who do you say I am?" ("I am" of course is the name of God.) This question, and Peter's consequent confession of faith, follows on the heels of the healing of the blind man. And Peter is commended by Jesus for his faith, but then sharply rebuked ("Get behind me, Satan") for remonstrating with Jesus about the necessity of Christ's suffering and death.

There then follows a block of teaching about the crucial necessity for Jesus to suffer and die, and in the middle of this block of teaching, at the midpoint of the gospel, comes the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus is revealed in glory for who he is. At the end of the teaching on suffering comes the healing of blind Bartimaeus, one whose sight is instantly restored—and then the Passion narrative begins to roll, culminating in the declaration of faith by the unnamed outsider, the Roman centurion—“Surely this man was the Son of God” (bringing us back full circle to the prologue). Thus one can see, the whole gospel is about attaining insight into who Jesus is (the Son of God) and what that means (accepting the role of Suffering Servant). The central teaching block about suffering, in the middle of which Jesus blazes forth in transfigured glory, flanked as it is by the two healings of blind men, the first representing Peter who saw but not properly, the second representing the disciple who follows in the way of the cross (Bartimaeus is described as following Jesus “in the Way” after his healing), is all about revelation and insight; hence the healing of blindness being the miracle chosen.

In John’s gospel, the presence of Christ is portrayed as light moving through a dark world. From the prologue, which speaks of light present but not recognized, not understood, but never extinguished, through the miracles that John calls “signs” (pointing the way to us or helping us understand), and through

the teachings that speak of Jesus as light and exhorting the faithful to work while the light is with them for the dark times will come, light and vision are central themes. This culminates in the story of the resurrection morning (John 20:1–10), where Peter and the beloved disciple run to the garden tomb. The English word “saw” occurs three times in this story, but each time it means something different in the Greek. First, the beloved disciple “sees” (glimpses, catches sight of) the grave clothes, but does not go in. Then Peter goes in, and he “sees” (examines, scrutinizes) the grave clothes and the head-cloth, then the beloved disciple also goes in, and he “sees” (catches on, gets it, understands) and believes. So it’s about entering in, and about the movement of light and dark: In the darkness of the tomb, the light of faith and insight awaits them; as they enter the darkness, the light enters them.

The Gospels are wonderful documents, and insight is a central theme in the Gospels: The teaching of Jesus fits into that overall communication, teaching who he was, what he came for, and the cosmic spiritual shift effected by his redeeming death on the cross.

***The Clear Light of Day* follows the quest of an ordained minister’s personal search for inner peace. How does Esme begin to find her way out of formality and into a natural expression of her faith?**

The Clear Light of Day is intended as the first book of a trilogy. In this book, Jabez and Ember each have quite a clear and settled outlook on life, but Esme is reaching for something that feels more real to her than what she currently has. Right at the end of the book, because of the healing that comes about in her through being loved, and because of the glimpses she is reaching of a vision of simplicity, Esme comes to a position of hope that her uncertainties and restlessness may begin to resolve. I am working at present on the second book of the trilogy, *The Light Returning*, which will explore the relationship between the spiritual and the physical, and the natural rhythms of the seasons with the teaching of the Christian faith.

Like Esme you have served as a minister in the Methodist church. Is *The Clear Light of Day* in any way autobiographical?

I think maybe all novels must be a little autobiographical. I have been pleased to find that readers of *The Clear Light of Day* who are Methodist members, in the different Methodist circuits where I had worked, all thought it was their circuit I was writing about. So I guess there must be something true to life there. But Esme is not me, though I am familiar with the dilemmas and stresses of her working week.



The novel seems to suggest that spirituality is expressed in the daily rhythm of life. How does this view of spirituality differ from one that creates a false dichotomy between the secular and the sacred?

On British television recently, we saw a program called *God Is Green*, which threw a challenge to all the mainstream religions, especially to those in leadership, regarding their silence about the serious issues of climate change and global warming that face us all. The problem for church leaders, of course, is they are so busy doing all that must be done in service of the organization, there is no way they have the leisure for the detailed thinking and transformation that such challenges as climate change and global warming require. In order to discover and exercise vision, we have to disentangle from the treadmill of maintaining the status quo, and take time and space to be with the silence of what is real, like Jesus going into the desert. I believe that spirituality is holistic and expresses itself essentially in attitude and in choice. However holy we feel, however fervently we praise God, if the small daily choices we make don't celebrate the Creator in his creation, or serve the Redeemer in loving his lost sheep, or reverence the mystery and wonder that encounters us in the ordinary moments of life, then we haven't grasped the meaning of righteousness.

As a pastor, I found this especially challenging. I once heard a member of one of my congregations say with appreciation and approval, regarding an act of worship led by a visiting preacher, “We told her what we wanted, and that’s exactly what she did.” My difficulty was always that fulfilling the expectations and established traditions of my congregations never allowed me to demonstrate and develop my own sense of call and vision, which saw things differently.

At the present time, I am working out a new form of expression for my ministry and am not currently the pastor of a congregation. I believe that the threshold of all spiritual practice is simplicity. Without simplicity, the spiritual path can’t even get started. I am establishing a spiritual daily path that practices the presence of God in the detail of everyday life. I preach and teach about faith, life, spirituality, and practice healing, craft liturgy and ceremony, conduct retreats, and write about the way of faith. Other than that I live very, very quietly, eating simple food mindfully prepared, chosen with thought to honor the Creator in his creation. I consciously create beauty, and do not engage in fast and worldly pursuits. I focus on modesty and reverence, on quietness and prayerfulness. I think about the links and consequences that my actions and choices set in motion—the journey that will be made by the coins I spend in purchases I make: Who will they enrich? Will they bless my neighborhood community by

becoming part of the trade network of family businesses, or impoverish it by being taken away for the pockets of corporate giants and their shareholders? The food I eat: Will it make me calm and peaceable, healthy and alert for service and positive relationship—or will it make me nervy, tired, aggressive, and ill, one who has to be served rather than serving?

I believe, along with so many other people of faith, that God speaks through the joy and immediacy of creation. So I touch the presence of God in the birds in my garden and in the ancient stone of the pillars in the parish church and in the flowing of rivers, clouds driven by the wind, the currents of the sea.

And most of all, the light—ordinary light; sunlight, firelight, starlight, the light that shines out of all living beings—light is a carrier of mystery, and acts as a parable for me, of the Christlight, of the light that betokens the presence of the living God, of the light that is shining in a person when they wake up, when faith is born.