

Relics, Remains, Fragments, Traces of New Life

By Mary Farrell Bednarowski

When Mary Potter asked me to join her and Victoria Ries in writing about relics, my first thought was “No, thank you.” My relic days are over: having them, thinking about them, reverencing them, explaining to the skeptical and the scandalized that, no, we Catholics do not worship them. Certainly not wanting to write about them. But I led myself into temptation by reading her essay. It was moving to learn how her interpretation of relics has emerged from the particular journey born of her spiritual maturity, an unfolding over many years.

Then I read the introduction to a collection of essays Mary had sent me: *Relics and Remains* by church historian Alexandra Walsham. Relics, it became obvious, are back. I was compelled to self-diagnose a case of arrested development on this subject. Two things really hooked me: Walsham’s description of a relic as “a mnemonic ligature to a world that has been lost” and her statement that, “At the most basic level, a relic is a material object that relates to a particular individual and/or to events and places with which that individual was associated.”

Walsham’s matter-of-fact statement that relics are, first of all, material objects, jolted me into asking: “I wonder if that’s absolutely true? Might there not be—how to identify them?-- experiences? phenomena?--that we could call something like belief-relics or faith-relics? Not bones or hair or ashes or pieces of cloth but memories, beliefs, images, a lump in the throat at the memory of a hymn—traces or fragments of an all-encompassing spiritual reality I once accepted literally but now embrace in more complicated, earth-bound ways. Might it, in fact, be fruitful to think of our very bodies as reliquaries? This half-formed thought jarred loose a desire to muse about stories I’ve been drawn to for many years, although I’d never thought of them in terms of relics. As a Catholic who came of age profoundly formed by the metaphysical worldview of pre-conciliar Catholicism, I have lived most of my adult life in the

world that Charles Taylor has so famously written about in *A Secular Age*, a cosmos in which transcendence floats downward, not up and away, in which embracing transcendence in any form is not only a choice but an embattled choice, as he puts it.

But embrace it I do. The traces of a totalizing spiritual reality I once believed in without question continue to emerge in my life and my psyche as remains of a spiritual reality I once believed in without question: not as absences, in the sense that Jacques Derrida used that term—reminders of what once was there but no longer is—but as presences in the oh-so-tentative but oh-so-deeply felt, always-unfolding faith that I hold today. Thought-relics that are not dead, not inert, but still have life to offer.

For years I have been drawn intellectually and in ways that touch my heart/soul/spirit/body (whatever we are calling the “all” of us these days) to stories that hint of belief-relics. I have been affected deeply by Marcus Borg’s description of the tears that ran down his cheeks as he remembered the Jesus hymns of his North Dakota Lutheran youth. What did those tears *mean* to the efforts of this famous Jesus scholar in constructing a coherent, personally meaningful, mature, scholarly faith that did justice to his heritage and opened his future to new understandings?

I am astonished by the creativity of Mary Szybist (who could be my daughter but whose faith formation sounds like my own) who won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2013 for *Incarnadine*, poems about both “Mary the Mother of God” and the life of the poet herself. I assess those poems as full of belief-relics: remains of a tradition, but remains that hold new life, that re-vivify the Marian tradition by calling it into question. In a poem-essay in *America*, Szybist writes, “Hail/Mary who mattered to me, gone, or asleep/among fruits, spilled/in ash, in dust, I did not leave you. Even now I can’t keep from composing you, limbs & blue cloak/& soft hands.” Her poetry, said the National Book Award Judges’ citation, “is a religious book for nonbelievers, or a book of necessary doubts for the faithful.”

I identify with Frank Wilczek, theoretical physicist and mathematician, who in the biographical material accompanying the announcement of his Nobel Prize reveals that he was raised a Roman Catholic. The

study of Bertrand Russell and science in general moved him away from the religion in which he was raised, but, he confesses, “I loved the idea that there was a great drama and a grand plan behind existence. A big part of my later quest has been trying to regain some of the sense of purpose and meaning that was lost. I’m still trying.” Could we not call that question a belief-relic that retains sufficient lively remains, to stir new kinds of knowledge and belief?

What about the creativity of scientists who are religious naturalists, like Chet Raymo and Ursula Goodenough, for example. In memoir-like publications, they reveal the religious underpinnings—the remains—of traditional upbringings that still provide them with insights, convictions and vocabulary. Long since an agnostic non-theist, Raymo continues to claim a “natural sacramentality”: “The sacramental tradition is a treasured part of my being,” he says. “A sacrament is a ‘visible sign of invisible grace,’ according to the Church, and ‘invisible’ need not imply ‘supernatural’” (*When God Is Gone Everything Is Holy*).

In *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Ursula Goodenough says that though she attends a Presbyterian church and sings in the choir, she is not a believer in the traditional sense. Her goal is to shape a planetary ethic. She used to ask herself why she is *not* religious in the traditional sense. Her emerging self-understanding brought into play the still-live remains of her upbringing. “What is being religious anyhow?” she asked herself. “What about the way I feel when I think about how cells work or creatures evolve? Doesn’t that feel the same as when I’m listening to the St. Matthew Passion or standing in the nave of the Notre Dame Cathedral?” Is there not something we can call a faith-relic evident in her work?

Or, how to consider the thousands and thousands of volumes written by women over the last 65 years or so after they have asked of their traditions: “Once the worst has been acknowledged about exclusions and injustices, is there anything left? Are there faith relics, living remains, we can claim and renew?” All those writings shout, “Yes!”

There is no denying that faith-relics are “old” and partial, just as are material relics. They are both those things. And often submerged in denial and faulty memory and sometimes anger and even disgust, not just in sweetness and poignant renewal. But I think we can also say that they are preserved in ways that can be life-giving within the reliquaries that are our bodies, those multi-dimensional, spirit/body entities that sustain mnemonic ligatures to worlds that have been lost—but not completely. And that there will be times in our lives when we are moved to summon them on behalf of needed depths of wisdom for new times.