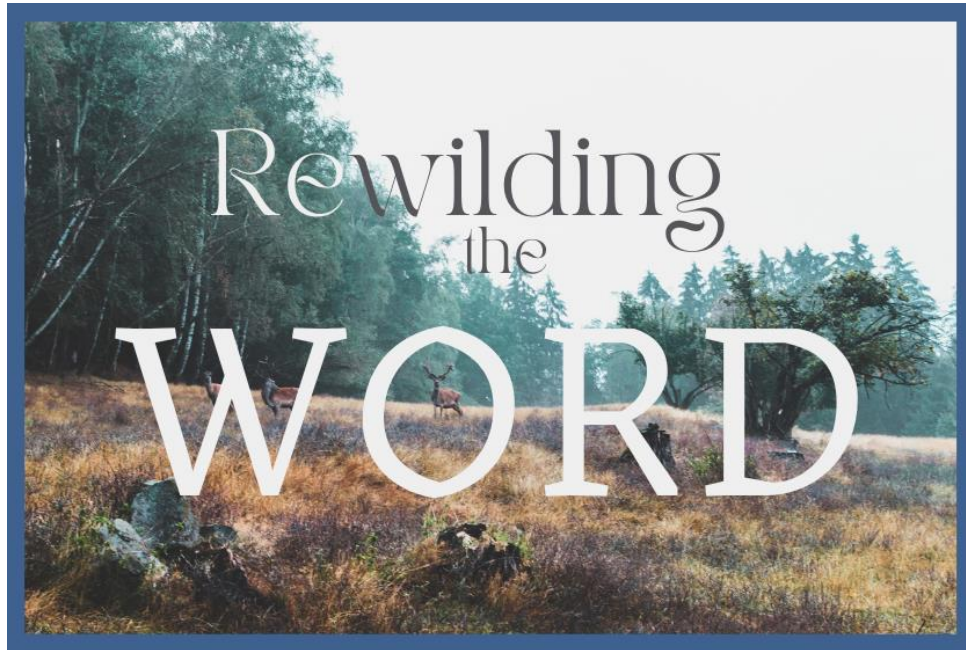

GANZ – REWILDING THE WORD #4 (SEPTEMBER 2023)



A Story

The word “discipline” has always conjured up for me images of what a person of a rebellious will requires: “That boy needs discipline!” And when we hear a person say that another person “lacks discipline”, we hear a distinct harshness in the voice of the one offering this assessment. The use of the word in this way never, in my experience, heralds the arrival of redemption, of a joyful finding of one who was lost, who was found just in time.

Luke 15 (NJB): ⁵ And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders* ⁶ and then, when he got home, call together his friends and

* Is 40:11

neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, I have found my sheep that was lost."*¹

It strikes me as significant that "discipline" came to be associated, and especially in Christian religious practice, with the imposition of a corporate, and personal, will on another person, *making* him or her come to heel, to do what is expected, to quit being difficult, etc. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "discipline" makes this point obvious:

I.1. - a1225 – *Christian Church*. Punishment or chastisement either imposed by ecclesiastical authority or voluntarily undertaken as penance; *esp.* mortification of the flesh (as by fasting, scourging, etc.) as a token of repentance and as a means of satisfaction for sin. Also: a penitential act of this sort.

We consider how Jesus had *disciples*. Yet Jesus does not discipline His disciples with punishment and chastisement. This may surprise us since it seems that disciples should be disciplined, habitually, because it is the same word!

So, what happened to the original meaning of the word in its Latin root: the verb *disco*, which has its root in the Greek verb *didáskō* (i.e., di-DAHS-koh); both of which give us our English word *discipline*? Both of those verbs mean: "to learn, to learn how to know (something unknown), to become acquainted with." Notice the infix "sc" or "sk" inside of those verbs. When that sound – "sk" is added inside the verb form, we are meant to translate the verb's root meaning (in this case, "to learn"), adding to it the phrase "in the process of". Thus, the Latin *disco* means "I am in the process of learning (something)" or "I am getting acquainted with something."

Essential to the meaning of *disciple* (see how that "sc" infix sits in this noun?) is a recognition that learning takes time, and that learning something important can take a really long time. Consequently, the idea of "disciple" assumes that there is a teacher of surpassing patience. But a (supposed) teacher who resorts to censure and punishments and practices shaming his or her students ought never be associated with the idea of disciple. Notice the majestic patience of the master Teacher, Jesus Christ, when He says this to His disciples *who need lots of reminding*:

John 14 (NJB)

²⁵ I have said these things to you
while still with you;
²⁶ but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit,

* 19:10

¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 15:5–6.

whom the Father will send in my name,
will teach you everything
and remind you of all I have said to you.^{* 1}
²⁷ Peace^s I bequeath to you,
my own peace I give you,
a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you.
Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.^{* 2}

As good a teacher as Jesus was, Jesus here bows in deference to the “other” Paraclete or Advocate, Who is the even greater Teacher – the Holy Spirit.

A Text

This delicate, gorgeous poem should first be read as written, from first line to the last line, and then re-read. Feel the power of the poem; notice the insights being shared; appreciate the poet’s ability to express simply things that we could not say as well as he does. In other words, *enjoy* the poem; *appreciate* the poet.

Only then, and according to the purpose of the *Rewilding the Word* essays, consider the words whose meaning I “open up” to deepen your understanding (as it did mine) and to nourish your admiration for the poet’s depth of soul.

“Discipline” by George Herbert

Throw³ away thy rod,
Throw away thy wrath:
O my God,
Take the gentle path.

For my heart’s desire
Unto thine is bent:
I aspire
To a full consent.

* 16:13–15

* 20:19; Rm 5:1; Ep 2:14–18; Ph 4:7; 2 Th 3:16; 14:1–3

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 14:25–27.

³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb “**to throw**” - III. To cause to move by means of a sudden or forceful action; *spec.* to propel through the air by a movement of the hand or arm, and connected uses; to cast, fling, hurl; extended and figurative senses.

Not a word or look
I affect to own,
 But by book,
And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep:
Though I halt in pace,
 Yet I creep
To the throne of grace.

Then let **wrath** remove;
Love will do the deed:
 For with love
Stony hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;
Love's a man of war,
 And can shoot,
And can hit from far.

Who can 'scape his bow?
That which wrought on thee,
 Brought thee low,
Needs must work on me.

Throw away thy rod;
Though man frailties hath,
 Thou art God:
Throw away thy **wrath**.

A Reading

“throw away” – This verb in the imperative mood (i.e., expressing a command) is written twice in the opening stanza and twice in the last stanza. It is a bold way to address God with a command because God rarely, if ever, commands us. God, as St. Irenaeus of Lyons grasped (as St. Augustine did too), works by *persuading* us not by making demands on us or by giving commands. It is human beings who have a habit (a bad habit) of commanding others. We can avoid the hard work of earning their trust (being worthy of trust), and of working through friendship (not using people), and of growing in our capacity to persuade a person, or persons, with eloquent speech and convincing reasons.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130 to c. 202 CE)⁴ – “The Word of God, powerful in all things and unfailing in his justice, was just even when he confronted the Satan in person and redeemed from him God's own property [human beings], for he did not redeem us by doing us violence – the way the Satan gained dominion over us by insatiably snatching what did not belong to him – but God redeemed us by persuading us. Thus, *it was fitting for God to be persuasive* and not violent in obtaining what he wished to recover.”

“wrath” – The conviction that God has a habit of indulging wrathful feelings has caused real harm to religious people, causing Christians with this conviction to struggle their whole lives confused about what “God is love” means, and who are justifiably reticent about ever being honest with God about what they feel. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“wrath”** defines it as “Vehement or violent anger; intense exasperation or resentment; deep indignation.” What can we make of this? First, we can easily imagine occasions when God *ought* to have let us have it (!), to blaze with anger, because we recognize occasions when we have acted in a way unworthy of us, of our friends, and of God, and we have hurt others. But the fact is that God does *not* do as He ought; God chooses another way. Second, we have failed to keep clear in ourselves the distinction between, on the one hand, *wrath that is a capital sin* (I will call it malign wrath) – one of the most lethal sins in the arsenal of weapons that the evil spirit uses to kill the life in us who indulge such wrath – and, on the other hand, *holy wrath*, which is about courage at its most fiercely effective against evil. Holy wrath is praiseworthy bravery, which is resolute and implacable against those, especially bullies, who harm others.

“I aspire to a full consent” – Notice how saturated with affect/emotion⁵ is this poem. Why? Because it is more typical for humans to need *a change in their affect* before they are ready to be persuaded by reasons. For example, if we feel that something is wrong, or we just don’t prefer it, or if we have let ourselves get filled up with discontent and resentments, then no matter how many reasons we are given, and no matter how

⁴ **Irenaeus of Lyons.** Second-century bishop and apologist against Gnosticism. Little is known about Irenaeus’s early life, though he recounted listening to the elderly bishop Polycarp at Smyrna as a young man. From this account, Irenaeus’s birth was likely around 130 or 140, given Polycarp’s martyrdom in the 150s. [J. H. Edwards, “Irenaeus of Lyons,” *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).] This quote can be found at: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* V.1.1.1121 [Migne]).

⁵ There is a helpful distinction to be made, and kept, between **“emotion”** (inner states of feeling over which we have little control; we just feel things, have reactions, etc.) and **“affect”** (feelings we have that directly link us to our values, what we care about – we can only “know” our values when we feel that this or that is valuable). Our “affects” have a steadiness about them, because what we value (it could be both good things and bad things) is steadily present to us. Our “emotions” ebb and flow; get riled; can be as superficial as the anger we feel when we get too hungry. **Herbert’s poem that we are “reading” here is all about affect, through which we can know what he values.**

eloquently those reasons are expressed to us, we will not be persuaded. *Our affect has overpowered our ability to want the truth and to work hard to discover it.*⁶ The poet here is making obvious his affect to God (what he really cares about), so that God might meet him there with a similar transparency of affects (what God really cares about). Notice how the poet knows what God is likely feeling about *him* (!). It is exactly those divine feelings that the poet commands God to *throw away*! He poignantly suggests that God's affects might impair (!) God's ability (!) to see the truth about him.

An Action

An awful lot of people are sounding wrathful in our society right now because they are. Consider cultivating the habit in October of noticing how different *malign wrath* is from *holy wrath*. How can you tell when **malign wrath** is controlling a person (the bodily signs – distorted, ugly faces; violent gestures; the loudness of volume; the kind of language being used; the inflaming of fear and suspicion, etc.), and when **holy wrath** is being revealed in a person of praiseworthy courage? Malign wrath is not brave; its deepest core is cowardice. By watching for and distinguishing the two wraths, we pray that we ourselves may learn to “throw away” malign wrath when it seeks to make us puppets of its destructive power.

⁶ The cardinal virtue of **temperance** is what has been compromised in us, which is the overpowering of our intellect, of our capacity to seek the truth and carefully to weigh the evidence for it, by affects that have overmastered us, which then drive us, control us, rob us of peace. Our affects become like wild horses no longer able to be controlled by the reins.