

Home is where we start from



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I have found this hard to do. It isn't easy to write about oneself and, as for choosing an influential work of art, as hard as deciding on music for a desert island; but compelling, too. Since 'Home is where one starts from', according to Eliot, in the Four Quartets, when he writes about the search for pattern and meanings, it was impossible to start anywhere else. And, turning back to home, oddly, for an atheist, probably the greatest influence has been the King James Bible.

In my West Highland village home it was read night and morning by my father, and in my grandparents' island home, read in Gaelic, a language I could not speak but could vaguely understand. My grandmother was in the same position with English so we did not exchange much conversation, though her amazingly wrinkled face, black dress and headscarf and still, folded hands as she sat by the fire, remain with me, a gentle, thoughtful presence. This may explain my scepticism about the explicit and spoken as the 'true path' to 'good, healthy relationships'. I find I can't easily bear the way we confidently employ

technologies of helping and use the language of mechanics – all so functional for something as mysterious and momentous and impossible as loving.

Feelings and relationships, in our reserved community, were understood and communicated through stories and through rituals like family worship. Mostly the words washed over – a background to thought: 'Let not your heart be troubled...', 'Now I see through a glass darkly, but then face to face', 'Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these', 'For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow', 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven', 'Now remaineth these three, faith, hope and charity and the greatest of these is charity'. And then how me and my cousins would giggle as my grandfather struggled with the long genealogies of who begat whom, only to be sharply reprimanded and then collapse into giggles again, our parents struggling to keep straight faces.

Scottish Gaelic is a language of soft consonants, warmth and song. The singing of psalms – hymns were forbidden – was unaccompanied, led by a precentor, in a keening, sweeping, rise and fall of voice and feeling that can still move me more than anything else. Of course I didn't know it at the time, but I was seeing the slow dying of a culture.

These daily readings were part of a family and community ritual that had made enduring an impoverished, harsh peasant life and my family hung on to the ritual long after many dropped it as times changed with the post-war prosperity. It used to embarrass me – especially when I brought boyfriends home from University. How intensely I wished my

family was 'normal'. Now, though, what would I give to hear my father reading his favourites again. He was a wonderful reader – slow, weighing each word, alive to the poetry and rhythm of the language. It fitted with the rhythm of the sea and the rhythm of an ordered, pre-ordained life-style that I loved and hated in pretty equal measure. I could not wait to leave.

But, thinking back, it was the daily presence of the language of the Bible, a language strong enough to bear that weight of human feeling – of loss, love, joy, sensuality and frailty, that gave a love of words, how they sound and what they can do, of the power and pleasure of stories as challenge and consolation, and an abiding curiosity. A curiosity that questioned beliefs that were taken for granted at home, and a keen urge to escape the certainties – religious and familial – that framed family and village life. It made me both dutiful and transgressive – an awkward combination. It paved the way for Shakespeare and so much pleasure in reading. Yet it made me feel a stranger – as the Book would say: 'a stranger in a strange land'.

The Bible demanded a punitive standard of behaviour and commitment: 'that ye love one another', 'turn the other cheek', 'I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and you clothed me, in prison and ye visited me'; yet its god was also unforgiving, 'a jealous god visiting the iniquities of the fathers on the children'. It was deeply contradictory, fascinating, terrifying, troubling and comforting by turns.

So while I am completely secular, the King James Bible is hard-wired in. Without any claim to a view, I cannot bear the new versions of the Bible – a kind of artistic sacrilege – to have a jewel and prefer glass. I can find few words more beautiful, more rich in meaning, more consoling in loss.