

Paul Taylor's Rantings

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms – Muriel Rukeyser

KISMET

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If there is one event that explains my life, it is my obsession with a piece of real estate I saw once.

It is a 200 acre tract near Neosho, Missouri. The county road ran straight west. There was a small chapel near the road. It was made of fresh cedar logs and had one large stained glass window facing the road. The orientation of the chapel was evidently made with an eye to the road. There was no view to the north. With a little planning the stained glass could have captured either the rising or setting sun, or, with a little grace, the stained glass could have opened a rose-colored window on the valley to the south. Well, anyway, the chapel was not included with the property but might be for the right price.

A private asphalt road snaked across a flat pasture. Its head began, open mouthed at the parking lot serving the chapel. Nearing its tail, which dropped over the edge of a cliff, an abandoned orchard abruptly sprouted from the pasture. It might have been planted with better care so as to soften the regularity of the rows and columns. There were apple, pear, peach and cherry trees next to walnuts and pecans. The trees bore no fruit. They had not been pruned or pollinated.

Beyond the orchard lay a manicured lawn with no ornamentation other than a simple rectangular swimming pool. The grass might have run to the pool's edge-that would have been something-but, no, there was a cracked concrete sidewalk scribbled like graffiti on the grass. A square cabin stood at the very edge of the cliff. The cabin meant no offense but it was a cheap RV posing as a rustic lodge in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

Beyond the cliff edge...wonderland. A trail had been cut generations before, zigzagging down across the face of a u-shaped cliff. At the bottom, water gushed from a cave and filled a deep pool. At the end of the pool, water spilled across unbroken stone and fell gracefully into a stream below. The stream was the life blood of a valley that opened into a meadow of willows and wildflowers.

I will write about my obsession with this property some day perhaps and how I have imagined reinventing it, but there is a story that became entangled with it. I was a senior in high school. My father had disappeared suddenly in a mist and I was searching for something. I wanted to know who had owned that property and who bought it. I fell headlong into an American tale as rich and powerful as [The Rise and Fall of Silas Lapham](#).

What, pray tell, prompted this old memory? I read a story tonight, of course.

Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu built a reputation as a rising, conservative star by taking a hard line against illegal immigration, attacking the Obama administration and appearing alongside Sen. John McCain in a 2010 re-election ad in which McCain urged federal officials to just “complete the danged fence.” But, on Saturday, Babeu’s conservative image took a beating as he was forced to admit publicly that he is gay and was involved in a relationship with a Mexican immigrant who claims the sheriff threatened to have him deported if he revealed their relationship. At a lengthy press conference, Babeu said he hopes voters will overlook his personal lifestyle and stick with him.

Immigration policy based on bedroom conflict? How often are political fights the public expression of personal battles with private demons?

Ted Haggard was the founder and former pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado; a founder of the Association of Life-Giving Churches; and former leader of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) from 2003 – 2006. Haggard condemned homosexuality, and under his leadership, the NAE stated that “homosexual activity, like adulterous relationships, is clearly condemned in the Scriptures.” In November 2006, he resigned all of his leadership positions after he admitted soliciting a prostitute for homosexual sex and methamphetamine.

Mark Foley was a Florida congressman and one who brayed loudest about Bill Clinton’s sex scandal with Monica Lewinsky. In 2006, Foley resigned his congressional seat after reports surfaced that he was sending sexually explicit text messages and emails to teenage male congressional pages. He blamed his emails on a drinking problem, checked himself into a rehab clinic, and said that he had been molested by a clergyman when he was 13. To top it off, he decided it was time to come out and admit he was gay.

This story goes on and on. There are as many such stories-almost-as there are politicians. What does it have to do with my property?

I found out that the property had been owned by the Reverend Billie James Hargis. Hargis preached on the evils of sex education and communism. He urged prayer and Bible-reading in public schools. He accused the government, media and pop culture figures of bringing about the ruination of America. (The Beatles were a favorite target.) One might say that he invented the political phenomenon that now absorbs so much of Fox TV. He was one of the first fundamentalist Christian figures to urge his audiences to become politically involved-too involved as it turned out. The IRS withdrew the tax-exempt status of his Christian Crusade. Hargis then founded American Christian College in Tulsa to teach fundamentalist Christian principles: “anti-communism, anti-socialism, anti-welfare state, anti-Russia, anti-China, a literal interpretation of the Bible and states’ rights.” Hargis was forced to resign from the presidency of American Christian College due to a sexual scandal. Several students at the American Christian College claimed that Hargis had had sex with them. One couple, whom he had married, claimed to have discovered on their wedding night that each had lost their virginity with him. These events had taken place at the college and his farm in the Ozarks.

His farm. My farm.

Poster: The hypocrisy of certain powerful pastors is only hypocrisy because they are measured to a standard.

It is not the hypocrisy that bothers me. It is the poor vision. They see something they like but they do not see it well enough to get it when they reach for it so they reach for something else. Hypocrites can make good, strong leaders as long as they have good vision. Hargis fell from grace for the same reason that his cultivated wonderland was such a poor imitation of the wonderland beyond the cliff's edge. (Reminds me of my rant on Coleridge, Tolkien and subcreation.)

Let me illustrate it this way:

Editor: "Tell me your story—the ten second version."

Writer: She crossed her hands on top of her iPad. "It is a deconstruction of the American rags to riches myth. The protagonist..."

Editor: "Spare me the lit crit crap. Tell it like you would if you were talking to an asshole who doesn't give a shit about literature and is likely to belch in your face and scratch his balls if you don't talk fast and hold his attention."

Writer: "A young woman, desperate to escape her poor white trash prison in northwest Arkansas, becomes obsessed with getting on American Idol. She has some real talent as a singer, but she keeps getting bad advice, and she makes herself into a carbon copy of a previous Idol winner who went on to a great career. She has a selfish harpy of a mother leaching off her and a cowboy wannabe of a boyfriend who encourages her only to make himself look better to his redneck friends. She makes it to the finals but seems destined to be an also-ran until the woman singer she idolized adopts her and tells her to be herself. The star introduces her to the veteran voice coach who helped the star. Transformed, she wins the top prize which includes a recording contract and has some initial success, largely due to the tutelage of the voice coach. In a final victory of self realization, she manages to extricate herself from her past and she dumps the mother and the cowboy. She invests her money wisely and stays out of trouble—no Lindsay Lohan drama. It seems as if she is destined to live the dream. Then, her career unexpectedly loses momentum. She can't understand it. Finally, her voice coach tells her why: she simply does not have sufficient talent. She has earned enough money to be well off the rest of her life, but she knows she has failed. She has an epiphany. She realizes she had never dreamed of having talent. She had only dreamed of having success. It was as if she had been granted one wish but had made the wrong wish. The end."

I am a strong proponent of the beneficial effect of the American Dream. Strong cultures are strong because they are built upon strong stories. However, I worry that our dream vision has gotten a bit cloudy.

Poster: I'm lost. A young, poor, white trash female is crushed when she realized that she has ditched all the people using and abusing her and has money in the bank? I'm missing it, right?

This is a poor, white trash female who is the real deal: she pulled herself up by her own bootstraps; she lived the rags to riches dream and she did it mostly through hard work with her eye on the prize. She realized too late, though, that she had her eye on the wrong prize. This was an exceptional person: the one in a million who validates the myth. Then, she realized that she is still poor because what she really wanted was to be rich with talent and she had failed to work on being good instead of simply being successful.

It is possible that such people exist.

Poster: What does the dream farm have to do with anyone's hypocrisy? Pull the pervert off the farm, and the dream farm still exists...and you can make it your own dream. Or am I missing something?

The Hargis farm was a failure of imagination—just as was the failure of his “ministry.” It is possible to create a natural wonderland, but you have to have a strong, healthy imagination, and, to my mind, imagination is part of perception.

Poster: I understand the minister's failure. I understand the minister's hypocrisy. I understand the American idol's dream should have been about talent rather than success, but are you saying the farm didn't exist? Whose imagination failed? I feel like you have sucked me in and now I want to know what the hell you are talking about.

The farm existed (though I would say that the story holds true regardless). I am drawing parallels between Hargis's failure as an evangelical leader and the part of the farm Hargis “improved” by planting the orchard, building the swimming pool, cabin and chapel. He had enough vision/imagination to see (recognize) the natural wonderland that existed beyond the cliff edge, but not enough imagination/vision to recreate an artistically/aesthetically satisfying “artificial” wonderland on the high ground leading to the cliff edge.

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