

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPISODE



FOURTEEN

WHETHER OR NOT ANYONE ACTUALLY EVEN BOTHERS TO FOLLOW THIS SHOW ANY LONGER, IT SEEMS THAT OUR INTREPID — AND DARE I SAY INSIPID? — HOST CONTINUES TO LABOR UNDER THE DELUSION THAT SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE IS STILL LISTENING TO HIS STRANGE AND SELF-INDULGENT IDEAS SLOWLY UNRAVEL OVER THE COURSE OF A HALF-HOUR OR SO . . . A SPAN OF TIME THAT NONE OF US, NOT EVEN THE AUTHOR, WILL EVER GET BACK AGAIN. AND YET, HE CONTINUES TO INFLECT HIS INSANITY AND INANITY UPON THE UNIVERSE LIKE A CHILD WHO HAS JUST LEARNED TO MAKE NOISE BY FLAPPING HER HAND IN FRONT OF HER MOUTH, ENTRANCED BY THE JOY OF CREATION AND UTTERLY OBLIVIOUS TO THE WAY THE ADULTS IN THE ROOM GRIT THEIR TEETH TOLERANTLY AND IGNORE THE MINDLESS NOISE INVADING THEIR SOLITUDE. ✱

ECHOES OF OVID

by T.M. Camp

*“Now shall I tell of things that change.
New being out of old.
Since you, O gods, invented mutable arts and gifts,
give me the voice to tell the shifting story
of the world.”*

Anyone know what that is or where it comes from?

No?

It’s okay, this isn’t a test. I’ll just tell you.

That’s an invocation, a specific kind of prayer to the gods. This one in particular is an old prayer, over two thousand years old. Those lines were written by a Roman poet named Ovid. They’re the opening lines to his masterpiece *Metamorphoses*.

Like many of his contemporaries, Ovid began his work with an invocation to the gods. In part, he was asking their blessing on his efforts. He was also sending a nod their way, acknowledging the source of his skill and inspiration.

In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid was taking all of the mythologies that had been told for hundreds of years and bringing them together, uniting the stories of the Greeks and the Romans for the very first time.

Uniting the gods for the very first time.

No wonder he started with a prayer.

Ovid was listening to the echoes of all of the stories and myths that had come before, adding his own voice

to them and crafting stories that would echo down the years to us today.

Metamorphoses is still being read today. You might have studied it in one of your classes. At the very least, you probably will once you get to college.

But you already know many of these tales. The stories of Ovid have spread far in the past two thousand years. You can hear echoes of them in the faerie tales you read when you were little. They echo in the books that you have sitting on your nightstand, your can hear them in the television shows you watch, the movies you go to, the comic books you read — well, the comic books I read — and you can hear echoes of Ovid in the video games you play.

And I even hear echoes of Ovid in your stories and poems. For some of you, the echoes are very strong. In other, maybe a little bit faint. But they are there nonetheless.

Just as Ovid eavesdropped on the past and added his own voice to carry these stories forward, so too are each and every one of you. As Writers — and you are Writers, all of you — you are adding your own voices to strengthen these stories. And others in the future will hear the echoes of your words as well.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser said that “the universe is made up of stories, not atoms.”

Which is, I suppose, precisely the sort of thing you might expect a poet to say.

It’s very poetic but I also believe that it happens to be true.

Think about it. Everything we know about the world and the universe beyond, it's nothing more than a collection of stories.

A mathematical formula is nothing more than a story, putting a shape around reality so we can hold it in our mind.

History and Science, Mathematics and Physics... these are all stories.

Our understanding and experience of the universe?

It's all stories.

Poetic, perhaps. But if anyone believed Rukeyser's was speaking literally, we'd probably say they were crazy.

That might be true. They just might be crazy. And, according to some current research in the area of Quantum Physics, they might also turn out to be right as well.

According to some researchers working today, there is strong evidence to suggest that the universe itself — everything we know and experience, the whole of existence all around us — is the secondary by-product of a primal information.

The burst of information, the force that brought all of this into existence is sometimes called the Big Bang.

And perhaps apropos of our venue here tonight, you could put it another way: "In the beginning was the Word."

Whatever you believe — and I don't pretend to fully understand the science or theology of it — the universe has its roots in some kind of ancient information.

That is to say, everything that's here now is an echo.

Including us.

Everything about us is nothing more or less than a story. If I ask you to tell me who you are, you begin by telling me the shortest story you know: You tell me your name. And then, from there, you tell me more of your stories.

Our thoughts are a collection of concepts and images; they're stories. Our family histories, our memories, our futures and our past — it's all stories.

Your first kiss... Your first day of school... The first time you have your heart broken... The birth of your first child... The first steps they take... The last steps you take...

These are nothing but stories.

We are nothing but stories.

I'm not just saying these things to be deliberately weird. I actually believe them — and not in some kind of poetic, figurative way.

I believe all of this on a literal level as well.

This is a holy thing to me.

And if I were you right now, sitting there, I'd probably be wondering why this guy was telling me all of this stuff.

I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that I'm not kidding around when I say to you: You are, each one of you, a Writer.

Don't say you're an "aspiring" Writer. Don't call yourself a wannabe. Don't say "when I grow up I want to be a Writer."

You already are a Writer. You're writing.

You're doing something special, something other people can't do.

I don't say this arrogantly. This isn't some kind of superiority complex. I'm not saying you're better than anyone else.

Lots of people can put words together, make sentences, communicate their thoughts. Fine.

But Writers are different.

Writers take those things — letters and words, sentences and paragraphs . . . the atoms and molecules of stories — and they combine them together in such a way to produce something greater than the sum of its parts.

That's what Writers do. That's what you do.

When you write, there's a force at work in your words — the same force that echoes throughout the universe — that creates a chain reaction in the minds of everyone who reads your words.

Like I said, that's a very holy thing to me. It's the kind of thing that Ovid recognized was at work in his stories, a force for which he humbly gave thanks to the gods.

So should we all.

Now, they asked me to come here tonight to tell you about how writing opens doors for you, helps you find

a good job, expands your career opportunities. All of those things are true but that is not what I came here to tell you tonight.

Obviously.

I came here to tell you this: Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid that you're not good enough. Don't be afraid that you're too young, that you don't know what you're doing. Don't be afraid that you don't have any good ideas.

Just keep writing. Every day.

Don't be afraid. Don't hide what you're doing. Let your parents read what you've written, let your friends see it if they ask.

Don't be afraid that people won't like what you've written. Some of them will love it. Some of them will hate it. Some of them won't even bother finishing it, if they even read it at all.

Don't be afraid of any of that. Just keep writing.

Don't be afraid of other Writers. Don't be afraid to share your work together, to trade compliments and criticisms back and forth. Start a little Writer's Group, get together with a few others once a week and read what you're working on. Collaborate and play together. Encourage and hold each other up.

Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid to send your work out there, when it's ready. Don't be afraid to send it to a magazine or a newspaper or a website. Don't be afraid to send it to an agent or a publisher.

Don't be afraid of rejection. There will be rejection.
Keep writing anyway.

Don't be afraid. Keep writing.

Don't be afraid that you won't ever be famous. Don't be afraid that you won't be on the New York Times bestseller list. Don't be afraid that you won't ever be rich.

Writers don't write to be famous. They don't write to make lists or win awards. They don't write to get rich.

You write — I write, we write — because it's who we are.

It's who you are. So don't be afraid. Keep writing.

Now I'm almost done, I promise. But I've got a few things to say to your parents. You can listen in...

Mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, aunts and uncles: First of all, let me say Thank You.

Thank you for being here tonight, for supporting your children. You've got something special here and I'm glad to see so many of you here tonight.

If a coach took you aside and said "You know, I've never seen a kid throw a forward pass as well as your son does..." or if they said "Your daughter can sink ten in a row from the top of the key, over and over again..." or if they said "Your kid is the best goalie I've ever seen at this age..."

Man . . . you'd be over the moon. You'd move heaven and earth to help your kid make the most of their talents, skills, and abilities.

It's what we do as parents, after all. I've got kids, I know.

You get up early on the weekends to get them to practice. You come home from work and, instead of kicking off your shoes and collapsing on the sofa, you head out to shoot baskets until it's dark. You sit in the rain and cheer them on during the away games. You sacrifice. You pay for uniforms, off-season leagues, summer camps.

It's what we do.

But when your kid's a Writer . . . who knows? Most people don't know the first place to start. They might not discourage their kid . . . but they might not do much else.

Moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles — your kids are Writers. I have to say, some of them are exceptional. They're the equivalent of the star quarterback.

And they need your help.

You need to do everything you can for them. You need to learn about the world they're heading into. You need to help them navigate the path ahead.

You have to learn everything you can about the publishing industry... About how agents and editors work... About submissions and cover letters...

You need to learn about the Internet and the new technologies that are emerging and how Writers are using them.

Your kid needs your help, as much as if they were a star athlete. Even more, because the road ahead is almost unknown, unexplored by most people.

They need your help.

And, like I told them, I'm telling you: Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid that your son's walking around half the time with his head in the clouds. Don't be afraid that your daughter's always got her nose in a book. Don't be afraid if your kids spends all her free time writing in a notebook.

Let them.

Let them read. Let them write. Let them take the creative writing classes and attend the workshops and Writers' groups. Let them write.

These are the things they need to be doing. That's their practice. And you need to encourage them to be doing it every day.

And don't be afraid. Don't be afraid that they're going to grow up to be an (*dramatic pose*) Artist.

Don't be afraid that they won't have any prospects. Don't be afraid that they won't get a good job.

They're Writers.

They're learning how to communicate, to craft concrete meaning from abstract thoughts. They're learning how to capture people's minds and hearts and imaginations, to develop messages that persuade or educate or, yes, even sell.

They're learning discipline, endurance, self-confidence. They're learning how to begin, manage, and complete projects. They're learning how to enjoy the effort it takes to make something good, to make it better.

I've worked in sales, public relations, politics, corporate communications, marketing, internet development, and advertising. And every single boss I had, from the best to the worst, absolutely valued the talents and skills I have as a Writer.

So don't be afraid. They'll be fine.

And even more, your kids are learning about empathy and human life. They're learning how to communicate, how to see things from different points of view. They're learning the skills that will make them better wives and husbands, things that will make them productive members of their community.

And they're going to tell your grandchildren the best bedtime stories ever.

Don't be afraid. The worst case scenario is that they end up with a good job that they enjoy, a life that has meaning and fulfillment.

And that should be all that any parent can hope for their child.

It's all I hope for.

So don't be afraid. The worst that can happen is they sit up at night after the house is quiet and the chores are done, after everyone's asleep, and they work on their latest story, or that poem they've been playing with, or their next novel.

That's a pretty good life.

Every once in a while they might even get to go and say strange things to some high school kids and their parents and hand out some awards.

They'll be happy.

Trust me. I know what I'm talking about.
So don't be afraid.

FIN ✨

This speech was originally given by T.M. Camp at the annual "Write Away" awards ceremony, which was held on April 28, 2001 in Hastings, Michigan. The version contained herein is by no means an exact transcript of that event and most likely contains deliberate omissions and additions contrived to improve the general lucidity, relevance, and quality of the author's words beyond what he probably deserves.

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NEXT UP...

MEMORIES OF GREEN



HE WHO HAS COME TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD
HAS FOUND A CORPSE.