

Nora Gallagher's *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith*.

.Question #1 How Ms. Gallagher grows at Trinity Episcopal. How you are growing at (your parish?)

"It takes a long time to understand what is being asked, and who is doing the asking."
(p. 66)

It does seem that during her time at Trinity, Nora Gallagher comes to understand "what is being asked, and who is doing the asking." She grows a lot—or, so it seemed to me. She grows in her understanding of what is being asked of her as a member of her larger, more social communities, both the community of Trinity Episcopal Church and the community of Christ, and she also grows in her communion with herself.

How does she grow? Cite for yourself specific examples. Who are the people in her life who led to that growth? And what is it about the culture of Trinity Episcopal that created the potential for that growth?

Question for Personal Reflection:

How are you growing in your own communion, both with others and with yourself? How has your life as a parishioner contributed to that growth?

Or, how do you *wish* you were growing? You may remember the Candid Camera joke shared by a priest Ms. Gallagher had contact with, Roy Parker, at Mount Calvary Monastery. Candid Camera comes into this restaurant and sets up a trick plant that starts growing whenever someone sits next to it. So this woman comes in, and sits down beside the plant, and, poor dear, the plant starts absurdly growing; and after looking furtively around to find out if any of the other diners have seen it, she gets up and moves to another table. The priest concludes, "When we are visited by grace, and everyone else is just eating and talking, we tend to move to another table." Do you sometimes feel like that woman? How so? Or, maybe you really *don't* feel like her right now; maybe you know that you are living with courage and presence, and that it's challenging, but that you're doing it. What, in your worship, in your community, led you there? What's going on?

Question #2: The differences between Trinity Episcopal Church and your own parish.

Browse through the book again and name some of the things about Nora Gallagher's church you found especially remarkable. I know I was struck by several things, including a liturgy of "inclusive language" in which the pronouns indicating God were not all male, the soup kitchen, and the labyrinth. What were the things about the community and culture at Trinity that especially impressed you?

Question for Personal Reflection

Are there things about Nora Gallagher's church you envied? What are they, and why do you envy them?

And what are the things about Trinity you don't envy?

To open conversation, I'll give you an example of my own confusion as regards the differences between Trinity and my own church. The confusion was generated by certain very provocative remarks made by both Gallagher and another member of her parish, Ann Jaqua, all of which fall on p. 47 of the book.

Up at the top of the page, you'll see Gallagher talking about the period during which Trinity didn't have a priest. She says:

"In those months we lived without a priest at Trinity, as laypeople held together a community of faith, we grew in worth and dignity. In the base communities, we were learning an adult form of theology, our own experiences reflected in the light of the Gospel, unmediated by "Father." (p. 47)

I remember experiencing contradictory feelings as I read this passage. On the one hand, I wanted myself to be a member of a base community at my own church, believing it would put me in more regular and immediate contact both with the Gospel and with other parishioners. But I also had a hard time imagining church without a priest, and felt glad for the experience I enjoy at my own church of being led and guided, of being one of the "fold," of being a "child."

I also found myself fascinated by some of the things said just two paragraphs later on this same page (p. 47), remarks made by Ann Jaqua, a parishioner at Trinity. She says:

"The community comes before the Eucharist because the community is the living thing in the moment, made up of bodies. Its work, its energy, its feelings, what everyone in it feels, thinks, hopes for, is the most important thing. We have come to believe that it is not, that our feelings as members of churches come second, after the Eucharist, after the sermon, after the form."

Jacqua goes on:

"The Church was originally designed...to shape itself to us, not to force us to shape ourselves to it."

I remember finding this an amazing proposition: the church designed to shape itself to us. Is that really how the church began? I wondered. Again I experienced contradictory responses. On the one hand, I envied those many ways in which the culture at Trinity seems to reflect the immediate concerns of its parishioners. Some of you may remember Gallagher mentioning a Thursday evening Eucharist during Lent which began with the questions, "Who have I hurt this week?" and "Who has hurt me?" (p. 103) When I read

those questions I wished that the church services I participate in could “speak” my failures and disappointments so directly and succinctly. But I also felt—and here I’m about to contradict what I just said—glad for the formality of the services at my own church, for reminding me that in worshipping Jesus Christ I participate in a centuries-old tradition shared by millions. The “forms” teach me scale, teach me that I am one of many, teach me that “I” am centuries old.

Anyway, where do you fall here? And, to expand the question, how else did you find yourself comparing your own church to Trinity?

Question #3: Communion with and/or service to those in need and how it forms and “un-forms” us.

Are you ready to be un-formed? (p. 73)

In her “Epiphany” chapter, Gallagher talks about how her time both in Nicaragua and in the soup kitchen at Trinity challenged her sense of her world, even at a base perceptual level. She speaks of being “shaken,” of no longer wishing to live as before—“working, eating, tending my marriage, dropping in on church.” “If it can be put into words,” writes Gallagher, “what I yearned for was to embody my shaky faith, to feel my faith in my flesh, acted out, incarnate.” (p. 72) She quotes a line from one of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, a line that runs through her mind as she tries to figure out how she might “embody” her faith: “God has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order.” She finds herself asking the following questions:

“What if those words are about something real? What if they are a hint about the kingdom? A hint about god? What if this religion I’ve been practicing and this Gospel I’ve rarely read, but heard from the priest every Sunday, is not a metaphor but a description of reality?”

Later on this page, as she decides not to return to Nicaragua, but to work in the soup kitchen instead, she quotes a question once put to her by a priest, “Are you ready to be un-formed?”

Have you ever felt “un-formed” the way it seems Gallagher felt herself “un-formed” by contact with and/or service to those in need? I know that I have had felt “un-formed” like this, when, after college, I worked at a rape-crisis center, and then, later in my twenties, at a homeless shelter. The feeling was at times terribly depressing and disorienting—and I say this to underscore the word “ready” in the priest’s question to Ms. Gallagher. When, in your life, have you felt “ready” essentially to lose yourself to others, and to have your world dis-assembled by contact with them? Do you feel that readiness now?

Question #4: Has this book challenged you? How so? Be specific in your answer.

Question #5: Has this book comforted you? How so? Be specific in your answer.

Question #6: What, for you, was the most powerful moment in the book? Why?

Question #7: A question for those of us who are writers and/or those of us interested in literary forms:

Did you notice certain choices Gallagher made in the composition of her book that seemed especially adequate to its subject matter? For instance, I liked very much how Gallagher let the parishioners at Trinity speak for themselves, often without interrupting them to gloss what they had said. Were there other choices Gallagher made in the writing you particularly admired? Her diction, her tone, a strikingly appropriate metaphor? The larger organization of the book? The balance between the personal and the parish-ional, or the personal and the universal?

Question #8: Has this book made you want to write? If so, what would you write?

Question #9: This last question isn't so much a question as it is a request. Please write up a brief reflection on some aspect of Ms. Gallagher's memoir that has especially moved and/or challenged you. Make the response 100 to 300 words long, and bring it with you to our meeting. You needn't share this response, but please write it up anyway—doing so will help articulate the book's importance for you apart from the doings of the Book Group.

Question #10: This is a totally innocent question that came up for me as I read.

What is meant by the "small opening"? It comes up twice. We hear about it at the end of the first paragraph of the first page, and then again on p. 17, as a metaphor for how Ben feels as he prepares to die. He says, "I feel as if all of my life were being pushed through a small opening. It's all coming down to this"—and then he brings his hands together to form a funnel.

What is "this?" What is the funnel?
