

Slow-motion grace: Shaped by faith and hope

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

Toward the end of Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the title character reflects on his life as a barber in a small Kentucky town: "I am a man who has hoped, in time, that his life, when poured out at the end, would say, 'Good-good-good-good-good!' like a gallon jug of the prime local spirit. I am a man of losses, regrets, and griefs. I am an old man full of love. I am a man of faith."

Jayber comes to this sense of being a man of faith, hope and love only through a long journey of struggle, anger and loneliness. Indeed, his first encounter with a gallon jug of the prime local spirit is anything but good. Jayber is invited to a gathering of men out in the country on Saturday night, and they down quite a bit of prime local spirit. But the effect is to induce destructive quarreling and dissension, not goodness.

Jayber struggles throughout his life with his hatred of Troy, the local agribusinessman who marries the girl that Jayber adores. He says:

Of all the trials I have experienced, [Troy] was the hardest. He was the trial that convicted me over and over again. I did not like him. I *could* not like him. Maybe I didn't need to like him, but I needed at least not to *dislike* him, and I did thoroughly dislike him. I also enjoyed disliking him. In his presence I was in the perfect absence, the night shadow, of the charity that I sought for and longed for.

Jayber struggles with his anger and hatred, and realizes that it corrodes his soul. He longs to be capable of love, but recognizes the fiery spread of hostility: "Anger and contempt and hatred leap from one heart to another like fire in dry grass. The revelations of love are never complete or clear, not in this world. Love is slow and accumulating, and no matter how large or high it grows, it falls short. Love comprehends the world, though we don't comprehend it. But hate comes off in slices, clear and whole—self-explanatory, you might say. You can hate people and

kill them in an instant.”

I recognize a lot of people I know in Jayber’s description; unfortunately I also recognize myself. I would rather focus on other people’s problems, on their refusals to love, on the ways their hatred is destroying them. I can then sit in judgment of them and avoid the reality of my own soul. It is much more difficult to acknowledge my own anger, bitterness and hatred, whether it seems justified by what others have done (or failed to do) or inspired by petty animosities and jealousies. Can I come to terms with the wildfires of my own sinful anger, contempt, hatred?

Perhaps I can do so only by patiently focusing on the love that is the very character of God, a love that is costly, redeeming—and eschatological. Whereas hate may appear to succeed in the short term, love endures through time and beyond time. James Thurber once asked a woman who had been married for 27 years and had several children for her definition of love. She replied, “Love is what you’ve been through with someone.”

Jayber longs for the love that could help him overcome his anger and contempt and hatred: “We must take love to the limit of time, because time cannot limit it. A life cannot limit it. Maybe to have it in your heart all your life in this world, even while it fails here, is to succeed. Maybe that is enough.” Jayber discovers this love in the character of God, whose love is manifest in Christ’s compassion, anger, wounds, tears, forgiveness, even a suffering unto death. It is a love that triumphs beyond time.

Yet Jayber realizes that it is not enough simply to understand God’s love in Christ, or even to absorb it into one’s soul. It must be lived in the company of others; one must cultivate a way of life that bears witness to love through membership in a community. Jayber’s community is no sentimental gathering of like-minded people predisposed toward affection; rather, it is a company of people who know each other all too well, people who are marked by anger and contempt and hatred. For Jayber, it is membership in a community that includes Troy.

Jayber describes it this way:

My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as

somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

Jayber knows that his life and Troy's are bound up together (see Eph. 4:25). His realism won't let him pretend that this membership is anything but challenging. Still, because it is also rooted in love, Jayber's life continues to be shaped by faith and hope even as he struggles with Troy and others who are indifferent to the community or even against it. Through the course of time, with a view to the love beyond time, Jayber endures.

A few pages later, Jayber says this about Troy: "I stood facing that man I had hated for 40 years, and I did not hate him." In one sense, that doesn't sound like much. But given the capacity for anger and contempt and hatred in his soul, and in all of our souls, it sounds like a miracle—the kind of miracle that it takes God to perform, a lifetime of practice to embody, and membership in a community to sustain.