

Praying *Jane Eyre*

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue



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A student approached me with an irresistible request. “I’m looking for someone to supervise an independent study for me,” she said. “I want to read Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text. Would you be interested?”

Vanessa’s ministry is to seek ways of creating sacred community among diverse groups of people. From Judaism she inherits a conviction that reading together is one of those ways. Each week we read a portion of *Jane Eyre* together, trying to understand Jane’s theology, studying how Jane is transformed through her interactions with others, listening for the ways in which she and other characters are made vulnerable by love.

What does it mean to read Brontë’s novel as sacred? For Vanessa, it means having faith in Brontë’s words. The third-century Christian exegete Origen of Alexandria taught that when we come across stumbling blocks in scripture—things that we don’t understand or even things that can’t possibly be true—we need to read more deeply to discover meanings that lie below the surface.

Vanessa wanted to see what would happen if she put her faith in the words of *Jane Eyre*. She decided to read, as she put it, “as if each word was chosen with rigor and precision, a form of hard-won divine inspiration.” If she didn’t understand something in the text, or if she felt distrustful of its wisdom, she decided to keep reading and rereading. Vanessa has not tried to allegorize *Jane Eyre* as Origen did the Bible. But she patiently wrestles with certain passages until the text gives her a blessing.

As any reader of sacred texts knows, this kind of reading requires faith: faith that the work of close reading is worth the trouble, faith that there is a blessing to be had, faith in oneself as a reader. Over the years I've seen students worry about the formative power of close reading. If I get caught up in the language of Augustine's *Confessions*, one student asked, will I absorb things I would rather resist? If I read closely, believing there is something worthwhile, will I lose the ability to critique what needs to be critiqued?

In reading *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text, Vanessa has not foreclosed on critique. It's impossible to do word-by-word exegesis of a text and avoid critical questions. Vanessa is a terrific reader and skilled in identifying ways that texts undermine themselves, how they can try to lead us places we would rather not go. She knows how to practice the hermeneutics of suspicion. With *Jane Eyre* she wanted to practice something else: having faith that Charlotte Brontë had created something worth our reverent attention.

In the 12th century a Carthusian monk named Guigo II identified the practice of reading as the first step on a ladder to God. Reading a sacred text closely, he said, is like putting a delicious grape into one's mouth. The chewing of the grape extracts its sweetness, and that sweetness leads us to prayer and opens the possibility of a contemplative experience of the presence of God.

Vanessa has found that, as Guigo promised, this kind of reading leads toward the practice of prayer. One of Vanessa's convictions about *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text is that it stands alone as a unity but can also be read in fragments. She has discovered prayers within the text of *Jane Eyre* and begun praying them.

Late one night, awake and fretful because of a conflict with someone, Vanessa prayed a prayer found in the advice of Jane's friend Helen Burns: "The sovereign hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you." After Vanessa prayed, sleep came easily.

Later, thinking back over the conversation that had kept her awake, she came to see that she had heard the mistakes the other person had made in the conversation, but she had not heard the ways in which she too was implicated in a breakdown of understanding. Praying her way through her distress helped her hear the other's distress, and that opened the way to conversations between them that were truer

and more healing.

Vanessa believes that a project like hers has the potential to change us. When we treat our engagements with books and with others as sacred we handle them more carefully, listen more closely, and are more patient when something meaningful doesn't immediately emerge. We loosen our grip on protective strategies that allow us to hold things we don't understand at arm's length. We let ourselves be read and interpreted.

Vanessa and Jane have begun to change the way I read, too. I find that I want to slow down and listen for prayers that might be hiding in plain sight in any book. I find myself holding my books the way Vanessa holds her copy of *Jane Eyre*, in both hands. I hope to continue to learn how to hold more of what I encounter on any given day with such care.