What two pastors from novels taught me about incarnational presence

Mr. Irwine and Tóti offer lessons in going below the surface.

by Samuel Wells in the August 16, 2017 issue

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God is most fully disclosed at times of our greatest distress and despair. Those people who have gotten themselves into a mess (as we all do, more frequently than we care to admit) might be called troubled. Two novels, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (Oxford University Press) and Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (Picador), offer narrative accounts of pastoral presence that have helped me discern what it means to be present incarnationally with troubled people—ministry that is attentive to presence, attention, mystery, delight, participation, partnership, enjoyment, and glory.

Chapter 16 of *Adam Bede* elegantly portrays a sensitive pastoral conversation. Adolphus Irwine, the rector of Broxton, is a generous, thoughtful man who lives with his mother and sisters in the rectory. He ministers to the whole community. His former pupil is Arthur Donnithorne, 20 years old, son of the local squire, enlisted in the army and anticipating taking a seat in Parliament. Arthur has an issue weighing heavily on his mind. He has recently developed a passion for, and entered a liaison with, Hetty Sorrel, a local farmworker and orphan. The liaison seems set only to ruin Hetty and jeopardize Arthur's considerable prospects.

Arthur knows he needs to confide in trusted Mr. Irwine. He decides to join the rector for breakfast. The progress of civilization, Eliot sagely observes, makes breakfast the most suitable time for sharing confidences: "mortal sin," it turns out, "is not incompatible with an appetite for muffins." What follows is an exquisite study in what it means to be with, and yet not fully be with, a person who is troubled.

Mr. Irwine is delighted to see his visitor, but on entering the breakfast room, Arthur's resolution wavers. "The confidence which he had thought quite easy before, suddenly appeared the most difficult thing in the world to him." The prospect of acknowledging his own weakness, misuse of power, and selfishness becomes too humiliating: "Irwine would think him a shilly-shally fellow ever after." Crucially, Mr. Irwine fails to inquire in any detail why Arthur has come.

The conversation meanders on until Mr. Irwine, with ironic prescience, says, "My mother and I have a little discussion about you sometimes: she says, 'I'll never risk a single prophecy on Arthur until I see the woman he falls in love with.'" Mr. Irwine then enjoins Arthur not to let him down and prove old Mrs. Irwine right. Arthur winces and shrinks from telling Mr. Irwine his story: "the mere fact that he was in the presence of an intimate friend, who had not the slightest notion that he had had any such serious internal struggle as he came to confide, rather shook his own belief in the seriousness of the struggle."

Instead, Arthur pursues the subject hypothetically. He maintains, "It is hardly an argument against a man's general strength of character that he should be apt to be mastered by love." Mr. Irwine counters, "A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature. He carries within him the germ of his most exceptional action; and if we wise people make eminent fools of ourselves on any particular occasion, we must endure the legitimate conclusion that we carry a few grains of folly to our ounce of wisdom."

Mr. Irwine is slow to perceive that Arthur may have a pressing reason for pursuing the argument. Finally, he gets there: “He really suspected that Arthur wanted to tell him something, and thought of smoothing the way for him by a direct question.” But it’s too late: Arthur senses there’s too much at stake, and he may later come to regret his confession. Mr. Irwine suddenly wonders if Hetty (whom he knows) is occupying Arthur’s thoughts. But he dismisses the notion and the subject is changed. Eliot slams the door: “The opportunity was gone. While Arthur was hesitating, the rope to which he might have clung had drifted away—he must trust now to his own swimming.”

Arthur is, for sure, headstrong, arrogant, and selfish. But he is also anxious, fearful, and corrigible. Mr. Irwine gets so much right. Yet in the end the pastoral conversation is a failure. The consequences for Arthur are grim, and for Hetty, catastrophic. What can we learn from this scene about the practice of being with the troubled?

Mr. Irwine is certainly present to Arthur. He knows Arthur well, and they share a meal—a perfectly orchestrated, socially privileged form of presence. But Mr. Irwine proceeds to delight too rapidly, without passing through the necessary dimensions of attention and mystery. Mr. Irwine is thrilled to be joined at breakfast, his moment of male solitude in a largely female household, by a young man whose attention makes the senior man feel less old. The rector is fond of Arthur—perhaps too fond, such that he fails to take seriously how easily Arthur can feel captivated by the beautiful Hetty and take advantage of her.

A minister’s need for conversation keeps him from doing his job.

Mr. Irwine is sharp, but he doesn’t pay enough attention. He doesn’t immediately ask Arthur why he’s come. Instead, he casts doubt on Arthur’s judgment in matters of the heart, holds forth on the significance of character, and speaks of those who fall into temptation as objects of pity. The fairway is no longer clear for confession. Suddenly an idea dawns on Mr. Irwine—an idea that should have struck him long before. “But I never knew you so inclined for moral discussion, Arthur. Is it some danger of your own that you are considering in this philosophical, general way?” Now, too late, Mr. Irwine is all attention. With everything that’s been said, Arthur can’t present his relationship with Hetty as an idle affectation. Mr. Irwine has already made it clear that something of this kind reveals a profound moral flaw. To speak now would be, for Arthur, humiliating.

A direct question could have elicited the truth. But Mr. Irwine fails in his apprehension of mystery, closing off too quickly the myriad possibilities of intrigue and circumstance. He thinks of several reasons why no such liaison could have come to pass: Arthur would never see Hetty except at church, he would soon join his regiment, he cared too much about keeping the good opinion of his neighbors. Fatally, politeness intervenes where direct inquiry was so desperately required: Mr. Irwine, says Eliot, “was too delicate to imply even a friendly curiosity.” Disaster ensues.

The encounter discloses a tension between participation (dwelling in the mutuality of engagement) and partnership (working together through complementary roles). Mr. Irwine is having a ‘good day at the office, with excellent company and matters of substance to discuss. But in the process he loses perspective on his own role: he becomes a philosopher rather than a pastor, a duelist in argument rather than a shepherd of souls. Partnership means both parties playing their respective roles so together they can achieve something they could not have aspired to apart. Arthur arrives fully expecting to play his role. But Mr. Irwine is not thoroughly in character—his own need for conversation, his interest in the argument, his desire to win it, and delicate politeness all hold him back from the part he needs to play. He has insight, but, as Eliot beautifully crafts the scene, he’s overplayed his hand by the time he senses there could be something serious afoot, and his desire for all to be well outweighs his awareness that all might not be.

Mr. Irwine’s fundamental mistake is that he assumes from beginning to end that Arthur has come to see *him*. But Arthur has come to face the truth about his behavior, his feelings, and his predicament—and Mr. Irwine is important only insofar as he can help Arthur do so. Arthur leaves having not done so—indeed, having dug further into a place of denial and shame and self-deception. Mr. Irwine has been worse than useless, albeit in an agreeable and gentlemanly way.

The key to incarnational ministry is enjoyment. If Mr. Irwine were enjoying Arthur, he would gladly entertain all possible outcomes, all likely motivations, all fanciful dimensions, and all undisclosed eventualities. Instead, he narrows down the range of possibility to that which sets him in a good light, enables him to retain an avuncular wisdom, and keeps Arthur from having to announce what he fully intended to reveal. Fundamentally, Mr. Irwine is using Arthur rather than enjoying him. Because there is no enjoyment, there is no glory.

A humbler—and considerably more tortured but nonetheless more positive—account of being with the troubled is found in *Burial Rites*. A servant, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, stands condemned of inciting a neighbor to murder two men, including her master and lover, Natan. There are no prisons in Iceland in the 1820s, so Agnes is kept over the winter with a family at a local farm, awaiting execution. A Lutheran priest, Thorvardur Jónsson, known as Tóti, is assigned to visit her and prepare her for her death. Over the bleak months of waiting he makes several visits to the farmstead and abides with her as she begins to articulate her story and her fears.

Tóti initially shrinks from the task: “he caught himself wishing that he were ill, gravely ill” to give him an excuse not to ride to see her for the first time. He wonders whether he should be “kind and welcoming, or stern and impenetrable.” He mouths the word *murderess* to himself over and over. But as he nears the farm, he whispers, “I will save her.” He fluffs his opening encounter with Agnes, fails to elicit a word from her, and retreats, clumsily and too hastily. Chastising himself later for his cowardice, he enters a church and prays, “Strengthen my ability to withstand the sight of suffering, so that I might do Your work in relieving those who endure it.” And he asks God to guard his heart “against the *horror* this woman inspires in me.” Before his next visit he asks his father, also a priest, “What would you say to her?” His father answers, impatiently, “Who says you’ll need to say anything?”

Tóti’s second interview with Agnes goes worse than the first. He stumbles over formal, rehearsed language, and she quickly realizes she’s dealing with a fumbling “red-headed boy” who has no more idea how to face this journey than she does. She’s chosen him to be her confessor because he once, several years before, assisted her across a river. He, it transpires, has forgotten. Again, Tóti feels like reneging on his commitment to prepare her for death. But, he reflects, “perhaps she didn’t have a friend left in the world.”

As he keeps visiting, listening begins to replace prepared words, trust starts to develop, and Agnes, without either party realizing it, teaches Tóti how to be with her. He discovers that truth looks different for her, an abandoned child, with no place to lay her head—and the truth has not set her free. She starts to tell him of her deep anger, her experience that men cannot cope with an intelligent woman. For the first time she says, “I’m glad you’re here” and allows him to pray for her in her fear. His gentle questioning, while she knits and remembers, elicits more and more of her story. Tóti can hardly breathe as she tells it.

Agnes shares with Tóti a dream she once had in which she was walking barefoot across snow and felt she would die from fear. A young man appeared, wearing a priest's collar, and, though she was still terrified, he gave her his hand, and it was a comfort. Then the ground gave way, she fell into the darkness, and the ground closed over her again. Tóti realizes he is that priest. From this time on, Agnes begins finally to speak of her relationship with Natan, and "it was as though she could not stop talking, even if she wanted to."

Tóti becomes ill with fever, and his father, probably rightly, suspects that the fever has been brought on by becoming emotionally overengaged with Agnes's plight and her story. Eventually Tóti returns to the farm to tell Agnes that her execution has been set for six days later and to promise that he will be there with her. And he is, standing right beside her, holding her hand as she approaches the scaffold, ignoring the smell emanating from the loose bowel of her fear. He says, squeezing her hand, "I won't let go of you. God is all around us, Agnes. I won't ever let go." Then the ax falls.

What does Tóti get right that Mr. Irwine gets wrong? In being present with Agnes, he withstands his own fears, failures, and tentativeness, visiting repeatedly until the membrane between him and Agnes begins to thin. Unlike Mr. Irwine, who assumes all is well with Arthur, Tóti knows he's facing a challenging conversation, which makes his attention sharper. Several times he observes precise details about Agnes, such that he begins to be able to read her before she begins to be able to trust him with her words. Tóti has no great pastoral skill at putting people at ease or making small talk. But Agnes, after the testy opening exchanges, never doubts his profound attention. They both know what they are about, so charm and social ease become irrelevant.

The crucial transition comes when Tóti realizes that his carefully rehearsed words are proving counterproductive. Gentle inquiry guided by close observation is a better way of demonstrating God's concern for Agnes. This is the territory of mystery and delight. Only when he lays aside the narrow task of hearing her confession of sin, offering as much time as it takes to discover the truth of her story, does she stop seeming the caged monster of everyone's imagination and start becoming a person of depth, texture, struggle, and humility—a person evidently more sinned against than sinning. Openness to mystery and delight can yield danger. The narrative hints at sexual attraction, rooted in the visceral context of the story told and the threats pending. The inevitably brief timeframe of the relationship

provides both a stimulus to intimacy and a protection against anything beyond conversation and reassuring touch.

The practice of participation is visible in the host family, initially hostile, long suspicious, but eventually accepting and embracing. There is participation too in the early exchanges between Agnes and Tóti, where neither knows how to proceed. The key to partnership in this story is that Tóti finds the ability to relax his role, at least in its formal dimensions. Certain boundaries remain. Agnes continues to address him as Reverend, for example. But rather than reprimanding Agnes for her sin and awaiting repentance, Tóti gives her the space to discover for herself what has happened and why. Remembering, probing, and cherishing without judging, he helps her to construct a truthful story.

Unlike Mr. Irwine, who enjoys himself but uses Arthur, Tóti truly enjoys Agnes. That, in many ways, is what the novel is about. Everyone in Agnes's life hitherto has used her. Tóti is the first person who enjoys her—not as a means to an end, but as an end in herself. Initially he comes to the farm to use her—to extract from her a confession to secure for her the grace of God. But gradually he learns what it means truly to enjoy her, with all the attention and mystery and delight that involves.

Agnes is not saved from the ax. But she's saved from the misery of a world of deceit, bullying, cruelty, suspicion, envy, and violence, and she finds, in her final weeks, a world of truth, honesty, integrity, kindness, trust, and gentleness. It's too much to say hope, or even faith. But she's been transformed from a feral, fearful creature into a dignified, articulate woman who is in the process of becoming fully alive at the point she is executed. In such unpropitious circumstances, this is indeed glory.

Ideally, being with the troubled involves enabling the speaker to locate his or her story in some poignant way within the scriptural story. It may be in wilderness or exile, in passion or in the upper room, on the Sea of Galilee in a storm, or with Jonah in the belly of the whale. Sometimes, as with Agnes's situation, given her skepticism about the church and its ministers, it can be hard to find an invitation to do this. But the listener, unlike Mr. Irwine, should always at least be alert for an opportunity.

Tóti does three things that Mr. Irwine doesn't do, and all of them are crucial to being with the troubled. The first is to stay with the formless and void, to hover over the deep, until it becomes creation, until the speaker finds words and weaves together silences—to show the speaker that the painful things she says cause the listener to

wince, that the terrible things she's done grieve but don't shock, that the miserable things she's experienced sadden the listener, and that the unresolved situation she's in doesn't make the listener rush in with a solution to fix it or a rapid remedy to settle it or a joke or a story to distract from or belittle it.

Second, Tóti models a way of listening that involves checking and demonstrating understanding. He invites the speaker, after she has told her story, to explore further and explain more fully. Like an osteopath or chiropractor passing a gentle hand over a patient's back, this is about stroking in one place and pushing in another, trying to find the tender area and see which movements make it worse and better. It involves remarks like, "I wonder which was your lowest moment in this whole saga," or, "I wonder what it's like to realize you don't come from a happy family," or, "Do you still dream about what happened?" Such questions not only give permission to say the scariest, most embarrassing, shameful, or bitterly painful thing; they also show that it's possible to live beyond it, outside it, around it, and then begin to face it down together and make a story that's not poisoned or dominated by it.

The final thing that's important in pastoral presence with the troubled is to say, "Is that the whole story?" Of course, it never is. It's important to stay silent for a while, to indicate that it's OK to say more. That silence is the crucial moment in the whole conversation. It's a moment of lingering, a stretching out of the hands and dwelling over the sensitive place, just as priests hold out their arms over the bread and wine during the Eucharist while asking the Holy Spirit to infuse these earthly elements with heavenly grace. It's an invitation to the speaker to go deeper, where the mystery lies and the pain resides. It's a promise in which, like Tóti at Agnes's execution, the listener is saying, "I'll be here as you go way down there."

Tóti is clumsy, faltering, emotionally fragile, and liturgically inarticulate. Mr. Irwine is urbane, wise, and generous. But when it comes to being with the troubled, only one of them has a clue.

A version of this article appears in the August 16 print edition under the title "Hovering over the deep." It was adapted from Samuel Wells's book Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church, *forthcoming from Eerdmans.*