

More saints than we can know

On the feast of St. Paul's conversion, Google kept reminding me that it was also Virginia Woolf's birthday.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue



Google doodle of Virginia Woolf

Several weeks ago, I was about to search the Internet for some stray bit of information when I saw a portrait of the novelist Virginia Woolf inside the second o of Google. It was her birthday, January 25, and Google was honoring her in its logo. I study Woolf, so all day long friends sent me screenshots from Google. “Did you see the Google doodle?” my students asked excitedly when I ran into them around campus. The world having been reminded of her birthday, my Twitter feed filled with delicious passages from Woolf’s novels and essays, her stories and diaries and letters.

It was an ordinary Thursday, full of the usual meetings and appointments. But it was also a day of unexpected connections, a birthday party, a feast of words.

What would Virginia Woolf have thought of having her image yoked to a powerful corporate brand? I’m afraid she wouldn’t have loved it. But I have to admit (forgive me, Virginia!) that I loved finding her there. Every time I needed Google (and I need it often, apparently), there she was, reminding me to go beyond whatever random fact I sought. Woolf would have looked for its hidden connections to other facts and

so shaped a new perspective capable of searching depths Google can't reach. "There is always more to be understood," Woolf writes in her novel *The Waves*.

This is what the saints do for us, isn't it? They remind us of things we might otherwise forget, things we might not consider as we tick through the day's tasks. They remind us, as Paul Tillich once put it, of the depth of existence. They lift up the extraordinary possibilities that one human life can hold. And they gather us, even if only for a day, into communities that remember them.

January 25 was also the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, which I discovered not on Google but during the weekly Eucharist at my school. One student read aloud the story of the dramatic events on the road to Damascus with such simplicity and attention that I felt like I was hearing it for the first time. Another preached about the role of blindness in that story and her own struggle to see her way forward in her vocation. The cord that runs through Paul's story and the student's story and the stories of all of us sitting and listening and trying to see our own lives more clearly was pulled taut as we remembered Paul's conversion together.

Virginia Woolf wasn't a great fan of St. Paul, finding him at the root of the exclusion of women from education along with the priesthood. To listen to a woman read Paul's conversion story aloud, to hear another woman reflect on it from the pulpit, and then to receive communion from the hands of a woman ordained to ministry seemed exactly the right way to observe a day in which St. Paul and Virginia Woolf occupy the same square of the calendar.

Every day of the year is crowded with saints—some global, some local, some known only to a very few. A few weeks after Woolf's birthday, a special day in my holy calendar rolled around: February 11, the date of the death of Marguerite of Oingt, a Carthusian mystic and writer who died 708 years ago in France. She's not a saint on any church's calendar; her cult died during the French Revolution. Her portrait is not likely to turn up in any of Google's *o's*; we have no idea, for one thing, what she looked like.

But February 11 is the saint's day that I most reliably observe each year, the one I write into every new calendar. I began to honor Marguerite decades ago, when I was a graduate student and was slowly working my way through her writings. Marguerite experienced God as a writer who wrote on her heart, leaving her feeling so sick that she thought she might die. To heal herself, she also became a writer, joining her

own creative gift to God's creativity and crafting visionary accounts that draw her reader into deeper and deeper understanding. Like Virginia Woolf, Marguerite knew that there was always more to be understood.

This year February 11 landed on a Sunday, an auspicious occurrence that called for a special observance. I was lucky enough to spend the morning listening to Peter Hawkins, the great scholar of religion and literature, speak at Trinity Church in Boston about Marguerite of Oingt's contemporary and fellow visionary Dante Alighieri. Peter's long devotion to his poet helped me remember and honor Marguerite, who was herself devoted to finding the right word, the right rhythm, the right form to express something true about the depths she had reached in her life with God.

Each day holds the lives of more saints than we can know. We are fortunate when we know at least a few of them. They are way-markers rising out of the busyness of our days and the chaos of our times, reminding us of what is possible. Their devotion is contagious, their wakefulness an antidote to all that would lull us to sleep. In drawing us toward themselves, they also draw us toward each other. Remembering them, we are not alone.

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