

THE REDEMPITIVE POWER OF FICTION

by Jan Johnson

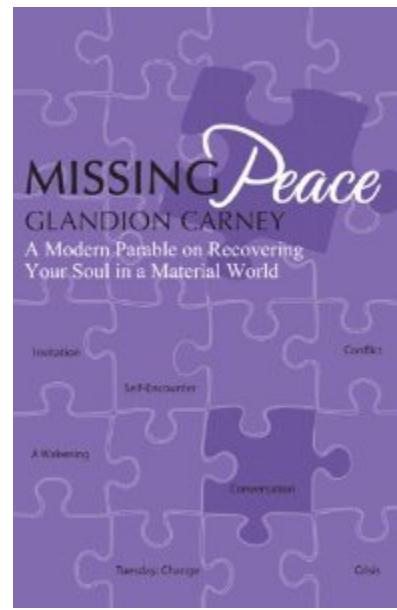
Foreword to *Missing Peace* by Glandion Carney

Many books describe the spiritual journey and help you with it. Most tell us *how* it's done, but too few books paint a picture of it. *Missing Peace* creates a picture—a novel is always a movie in your mind—so you can watch how it happens and get caught up in it. The plot and characters in this book help you see formation with the eyes of your imagination. The characters provide you with examples of people being formed in Christ so you can follow along behind. They also provide community so you can join them in their progress.

Why is a novel about spiritual formation a good idea, you may ask? Alas, we tend to think of fiction's power only in terms of entertainment ("make me feel something," "help me escape"), but its power to be redemptive is often unmined. Through other persons' stories, God's hands pull people back from their slide into sin and despair. This is important because spiritual formation is not only taught but is caught. In fact, it may be *more* caught than taught. While I was drawn to the idea of 'righteousness' as Dallas Willard described it as a deep, attractive goodness in *The Divine Conspiracy*, I saw it played out in the characters of Chingachgook (*The Leather Stocking Tales*) and young but noble Jim Hawkins and his friend Dr. Livesey (*Treasure Island*). These characters wouldn't think of deceiving someone or belittling someone. I caught a desire for that kind of sweet and humble goodness and have such a taste for it that I regularly reread these books. Imaginary people in a novel can woo us into goodness. How?

Fictional characters come alongside us and allow us to "catch" what we need from them. I first read Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* as a young writer experiencing more downs than ups. Cather wooed me into courage and determination as she spoke of the open land of the American West giving drive and purpose. This 'unexplored territory' wrapped itself around the heart of the main character, Alexandra Linstrum, as it had her father Carl. When he died, she became the force behind building a farm and a semblance of civilization in a 'wild land.' Others living on the Nebraska divide did not have Alexandra's pioneer spirit, including her brothers. Wrote Cather, "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."¹ So Alexandra Linstrum as well as Jane and Mr. Rochester (*Jane Eyre*), Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*), Celie (*The Color Purple*), the unnamed Mrs. de Winter (*Rebecca*) and Jo March (*Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*) have spurred me on with the courage I needed to explore the wild land of publishing. Fiction helps us unexplored territory within us and move forward even when others misunderstand.

Stories hold such redemptive power because they are truth offered gently, not as something you could and should do as in a self-help book. You receive the story as something your friends (the characters) did and how things worked for them. Fiction knows how to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant, Success in circuit lies." The circuitousness lies in the story and the



texture of the characters as they weave their web and invite you in. The story makes it a slow journey, which is good, because “The truth must dazzle gradually Or every man be blind.”²

The characters of *Missing Peace* begin to weave their web of invitation in their lack. Joan sees that her high-powered job does not flow out of the core of her life and may have robbed her of the best of life. She meets Brother Theodore whose loss and struggle equip him to walk alongside her with gentleness and wisdom. Her friend Tracy offers Joan her experience of receiving healing from her ‘psychological debris’ (or ‘inner clutter’ as Brother T calls it) that includes bitterness and despair. She says,

These beautiful black women stood up, came around me, put their hands on my head and shoulders and back. They prayed for my deliverance from anger and despair. They prayed for my forgiveness, and for my willingness to forgive . . . They prayed for release of the emotional bonds that were tying me up inside. They prayed like they believed they were talking to a real person who could help. I learned later that they prayed from their own experiences of being delivered from pain and anger and despair.

I have soaked in that scene several times and put myself in her place. If Tracy can forgive more fully, so can I.

Tucked within redemptive fiction such as *Missing Peace* is a healing power and reassurance. You want to enjoy the ride as you read it (exploring John Coltrane’s music and drinking coffee as prayer), but don’t be surprised if parts of yourself are redeemed a little more and you are gradually wooed into more of the with-God life that God invites you into.

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¹Willa Cather *O Pioneers!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 25.

² Emily Dickinson “Tell All the Truth” in Helen Vendler *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (President and Fellowes of Harvard College, 2010), p. 1263.