

*And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value . . . Phil 1:9-10a (NAB-RE)*

I walk four miles most days. To take my mind off the fact I'm exercising, I listen to podcasts: New York Times Book Review, Times Literary Supplement, London Book Review, BBC Radio 4 Books and Authors, Penguin Books UK. I will never need to read another book.

On the Penguin Podcast a host interviews an author, asking her to describe four objects that inspire her work or facilitate her creative process. Elizabeth Strout lives and writes in Maine. She is best known for *Olive Kitteridge*, which was adapted for TV by HBO and starred Frances McDormand.

Elizabeth chose a ring, a postcard of F. Scott Fitzgerald, a coffee mug gifted by her husband, and a thesaurus she rarely finds helpful but yet comforts her.

When Elizabeth was young, she lived near a great aunt and uncle who adored her. She walked into their house one day and her uncle said, “You know, I was just thinking about you. You are really the answer to an old man's prayers.”

After the uncle died, her aunt gave Elizabeth a ring. It was the aunt's pre-engagement ring. It reminds Elizabeth when you are so loved when you are young, it never, never goes away. “Aunt Dot was just a vessel of love,” she says. The interviewer, Isy Suttie, observed “Family and love are enduring themes in Strout's work.”

his is an exciting time for book lovers; the arbiters of taste are selecting best books of the year. The editors and reviewers for the NY Times create their ten best list—five fiction, five non-fiction—by debate and finally, a vote. A thousand page biography of Sylvia Plath, who lived 31 years, has been selected along with a 141 page history of 400 years of slavery in the US.

The TLS invites sixty-five writers to describe, in a hundred and fifty words or less, their favorites. One of mine, *Roland in Moonlight*, is called the dottiest (British slang for slightly crazy, eccentric) book of the year by A. N. Wilson, who admits he keeps returning to it.

France's top literary award, the Goncourt Prize, is selected by a committee. On the long list this year is a book nominated by a member of the committee, which was written by the member's partner. This apparent, at least to the English, conflict of interest, seemed lost on the French. It wasn't until this same member of the committee published a scathing review of another nominated book, that the French were forced to change the rules.

While discerning the best books of the year is great fun for book lovers, discerning what is best for one's life is a tad more serious work. Do we seek the counsel of experts, create a committee, consult an Ouija board as Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's husband, was wont to do? I find it endlessly fascinating that people who decry religion and religious practices, as Ted Hughes did, seriously engage in occult practices, as Ted Hughes did.

Paul knows the challenge of discerning what is best and resorts to prayer: “This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with full insight to help you to determine what is best.”

The tense of the word translated “overflow” is progressive and expresses desire. Paul prays for a love that never stops growing, a love that begets more love. This love fills and overflows everyone like water fills and overflows a glass. Even if it fills the universe, it continues to overflow into all creation.

The word translated “knowledge” refers to a knowing that comes from personal experience. This is whole person knowing. It is not head knowledge or heart knowledge or instinctual knowledge alone, but a knowing that is rooted in all aspects of the self. This kind of knowing is wisdom!

The word translated “insight” refers to discernment in the spiritual life. It is moral and spiritual perception as it is related to practice. The goal of discernment is both discovery of the truth *and* the ability to act appropriately according to the truth.

To discern is to prove as in to “test out.” Literally, it means “tested by sunlight.” The Romans held wine up to sunlight to see if it was pure. The work of discernment is to hold up our lives to the truth, allowing truth to reveal our character. Discernment requires unflinching honesty and disinterestedness.

The REB’s translation of this verse captures the sense of Paul’s prayer: “This is my prayer, that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, enabling you to learn by experience what things really matter.”

Paul believes the wisdom we need to discern what really matters increases as our love increases. The greater the love, the wiser we become. This is not “Father knows best,” but “love knows best.”

The love that knows best is not sentimental and easy, it does not grin at the wrong time. It is not a love that shrinks from telling the truth. This love is a refining fire that purifies and refines our lives like gold and silver, making us fit for the service of God in righteousness.

Knowing what is best is complicated by the fact that we seldom know our own hearts and minds, let alone the hearts and minds of others. Isy Suttie says the unknowability of another human, even of those closest to us, even of those we love most, is the most striking thing about Elizabeth Strout’s work. There is a joy in trying to know another human and there’s an acceptance that we can’t ever know them.

e.e. cummings wrote: “We do not believe in ourselves *until* someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of trust, sacred to touch.” This belief is the gift Elizabeth Strout’s great aunt and uncle, those vessels of overflowing love, gave her.

When we are loved into knowing our sacred nature, we are able to discern what is worthy of our lives, what matters most.