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## Between Truth and Service (2011)

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## Between Truth and Service

*By Anthony Dary*

We have a collection of stories, told in a roughly chronological order, with varying degrees of truth or accuracy. The morals to be taken from these stories are subject to interpretation. In these stories, there is a girl named Martha who is a dutiful server who ignores the greater scope of life, and a girl named Mary who gets to know the truth personally. What have I described in retrospect? I would imagine most people would immediately think of the bible and the gospel of Luke, and they would certainly be correct. But interestingly, this is not the only literary work that fits such a description. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* also features characters of the same names (albeit with a slight alteration; Mary Anne instead of Mary) with a similar literary structure. The gospel story seems to contradict itself in terms of its message, but it is commonly interpreted to be a message to find balance: be neither Martha nor Mary, but a combination of their better parts. But what makes O'Brien such a great author is that he crafted his stories so that they essentially contain the story and lesson of Martha and Mary, told with a different vehicle and with a different figure in place of the Lord.

The passage to which I am referring is short:

<sup>38</sup>Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."  
*(HarperCollins Study Bible, Luke 10:38-42)*

At the surface, it seems to be condemning service and helping those with their tasks. But this doesn't seem to be a very Christian message, does it? This is why the interpretation of the need of balance works. Martha is correct in saying that Mary should help her, and Jesus is correct in saying that Mary needs only to listen to the Word of the Lord. While there is no denying the clear emphasis on listening to God, there still exists a dichotomy on how to live- one must be both Mary and Martha, both listen and act.

Martha of *The Things They Carried* is introduced in the first sentence of the novel: "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" (O'Brien, 1). And from here on, her role is exactly what one would expect: a love interest of First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross. But as we get a better look into Jimmy's thoughts, it becomes clear that there is little hope that she loves him back. Her letters don't seem to contain anything of great importance, being mostly about her professors, roommates, her class work and English literature. She doesn't show much concern about what Jimmy may be experiencing, and never speaks to him of the war at all, other than to tell Jimmy to take care of himself (O'Brien 2). Martha remains a source of anxiety and distraction for Jimmy throughout and after the war. As we find out, Jimmy and Martha met again at a high school reunion after Vietnam, and caught up on their lives. Martha had become a Lutheran missionary, traveling the world to do nursing work in Ethiopia, Guatemala and Mexico. While she clearly has compassion for others, Martha continues to have little care for Jimmy's feelings, as she acts indifferently towards Jimmy's confession of love, telling him she didn't understand his desires (29).

Mary Anne is the title character of the short story O'Brien titled "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Again, the female is the love interest of a soldier, this time of a soldier named Mark Fossie, who somehow gets his girlfriend Mary Anne to visit him at base in Vietnam for a few weeks. Of course, he only allowed this to happen because there is little to no combat action at the base and he feels as if she will be safe there (93). When Mary Anne arrives, it's made clear she knows nothing about war, violence, and death; she is but an innocent young girl. But she slowly adapts to war life- she learns to treat wounds, clean guns, and adapted the hygiene habits of the male soldiers. As she would say, "I'm here...I might as well learn something" (96). In time, Mary Anne's innocence is lost, and she becomes consumed by Vietnam, involved more with warfare than the soldiers in the base. She informally joins the Green Berets and wanders the jungle at night, saying that this place makes her feel alive, that she "can't feel like that anywhere else" (111). Mary Anne went from knowing nothing of war to nothing but war. And from then on, nobody saw her again- she was lost to, but not necessarily killed by, the jungle, Vietnam, and the war.

This is where constructing the metaphors and parallels begin. The Marys of these stories are focused on only one thing. For the Mary in Luke, it is the Lord, and for O'Brien, it is the life of war. In the respective stories of each of these forces, the forces (God and war) are omnipresent, providing a unifying theme for the text. Each represents the foremost item intended to be in the reader's (and characters') subconscious. Both God and war are ways of life central to the respective texts.

In both cases, someone who cares for Mary disagrees with Mary's actions- be it Fossie's futile attempts to "protect" Mary Anne from the war or Martha's desire for Mary to give up some of the time she spends listening to Jesus and help her with chores. Despite the fact that their

actions are disagreed upon by others, both Marys are at heart content with their actions, and rightly so. Mary would be perfectly happy listening to Jesus preach all day, and Jesus tells her that this wouldn't be wrong, and that this "will not be taken away from her" (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, Luke 10:42). By a similar token, Mary Anne seems to have found fulfillment in war life. She would be perfectly happy running around the jungle. She may be scared at times, but she has never before felt so alive, and as she says, "You can't feel like that anywhere else" (O'Brien 111). Mark Fossie would be in the wrong to take anyone he supposedly loves away from that.

But what kind of life is it to live solely to listen to someone preach the Word or simply to make war? While it may make Mary and Mary Anne satisfied, certainly a more fulfilling life can be found. It won't do to know the teachings of Jesus but not act on them, and it won't do to know the struggles and triumphs of war but remain stuck in it, removed from real life. The purely 'Mary life' is not one to be lived.

Martha differs from Mary in that her priorities are essentially in the opposite place. The biblical Martha is less mindful of the Word of God and more mindful of serving others than her sister. While this serves her well for the time being, can it really fulfill her? Jesus would say no, as "there is need of only one thing" (*HarperCollins Study Bible*, Luke 10:42), and this one thing isn't what Martha is doing. The analogous situation in *The Things They Carried* is Martha and her awareness of war and the world at large. The problem with Jimmy's Martha is that she is too concerned with her studies and personal problems to be aware of the world around her. She exchanges letters (for who knows what reason) with a soldier in Vietnam and tells him only about mundane things in her typical life, never bothering to ask anything about the single most important and relevant subject of the time: The Vietnam War. And like Jesus' Martha, this does serve her well to an extent. She lives a virtually stress-free life. However, Martha is doing herself a disservice by remaining ignorant to the truth that there is in fact a war and lives other than her own. Shouldn't anyone strive to be well-rounded and for the ability to see importance beyond one's own life?

It would be unfair, however, to completely discredit non-biblical Martha's intentions and actions. She does eventually find a vocation in a Lutheran missionary, performing services for those less fortunate than herself. And while this is surely a valiant cause, the impression that her work is important to her or makes her happy is never made strong. She doesn't seem happy and explicitly tells Jimmy she doesn't intend to marry (no pun intended, or is there?). After all these years, Martha still doesn't seem to have any respect for Jimmy's feelings and experiences, and this is how we know that she still has many ways to improve. While more exaggerated in the novel, it is clear the Marthas share (though possibly to varying extents) blindness towards the truth and a larger purpose.

Examining Martha in the novel is complicated by the fact that she exists in two times, 10 years apart. While originally, she is closed off to the outside world and comes across as unsympathetic, she later travels the world to serve others, clearly a turnaround. But as I said, Martha's life is still lacking after she figures out what she wants to do. She still is missing something that will make her happy, complete, or otherwise feel meaningful. No matter what this might be, she is missing something parallel to the Word of God that would give her purpose.

One important note to make: In saying that one needs to serve as well as God's Word, I am not saying that Jesus was wrong when he said "there is need of only one thing". I'm saying that by knowing the Word, acts of service and kindness will be second nature- to truly know the Word is to act on it. As far as Mary Anne is concerned, she has no need to be consumed by war, as war is not intended to be a permanent state of living just as listening to lectures isn't either. Perhaps she should instead learn what war truly is so that she might use that knowledge to help others, to come to the personal realization that war is terrible, or to know how to raise awareness for peace. To know and not act is equally a fault as to act and not know why.

This is precisely why none of the four women get it completely right. Caught up in their day to day lives, both Marthas ignore the greater powers and situations present in their respective lives, and this limits their potential. Obsessed with doing nothing but intimately learning the truth about these greater forces, Mary and Mary Anne fall short of using their knowledge to make their time spent learning worthwhile to others. Surely, these stories *The Things They Carried* acts as a retelling of Luke's story, a theme consistent with the novel. The story in the gospel may be difficult to interpret due to its isolation, brevity, and seemingly mixed messages. But through examining the more detailed and lengthier 'retelling' by Tim O'Brien, one can get a much better idea of how to interpret it: find a balance between learning the truth and helping others.