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*A Memoir*

CAROLYN WEBER



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*Well-written, often poignant and surprisingly relatable."*  
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## Prologue

### Doubt Wisely

Though truth and falsehood be  
Near twins, yet truth a little elder is:  
Be busy to seek her; believe me this,  
He's not of none, nor worst, that seeks the best.  
To adore, or scorn an image, or protest,  
May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way  
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;  
To sleep, or run wrong, is.<sup>1</sup>

—John Donne

As an undergraduate in Canada, I knew of only one “evangelical,” although I did not really understand this nomenclature at the time. Categorically this person would have annoyed me, except for the fact that I respected him so much. He was my seventeenth-century poetry professor, an esteemed scholar and pillar of the university. Quite elderly, he could wax on a bit in class while he incessantly shuffled his notes, which were penciled out in longhand. His popular seminars filled to overflowing. Always the perfect gentleman, he dressed in a suit for lectures and in a button-down and cardigan for office hours. I had never heard him say a gruff word, let alone curse before, which is why what he said to me in the hallway after class one day stopped me dead in my tracks.

Typical sycophantic senior, I worked up my nerve to ask him what he thought of my presentation on the metaphysical poet John Donne. No easy task, as my assigned poem was Donne's sonnet XIV:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labor to admit You, but, oh, to no end!  
Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto Your enemy:  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,  
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.<sup>2</sup>

I gave what I thought was a brilliant analysis of the domination of rape imagery in the poem. I argued that the poem illustrated a classic subversion by the dominant patriarchy (whether it be the church, the priest, the male construction of God or Savior) of the threat posed by maternal power, or the feminine *spiritus*. I thought myself quite clever, but I wanted to hear his take before the grade was finalized.

Dr. Deveaux paused, looked thoughtful, and then resumed walking. I kept pace beside him, expectant. Without missing a step, he said quietly, "It is an interesting reading of the poem, Miss Drake. And you obviously have command of the language. But you didn't seem to get the point. To really get at the essential grappling. You didn't untie that 'subtle knot which makes us man,' so central to Donne's spiritual pilgrimage."

He quickened his stride: “The truth is in the paradox, Miss Drake. Anything not done in submission to God, anything not done to the glory of God, is doomed to failure, frailty, and futility. This is the unholy trinity we humans fear most. And we should, for we entertain it all the time at the pain and expense of not knowing the real one.”

“Huh?” I managed to puff, for Dr. Deveaux was a hard person to keep up with, physically and mentally.

Dr. Deveaux stopped and looked at me hard. He leaned in and whispered, “The rest is all bullshit, Miss Drake. It’s as simple as that. Your purpose here in life is to discern the real thing from the bullshit, and then to choose the non-bullshit. Think of the opportunity that God has given you to study as the means by which to attain your own personal bullshit detector. Sometimes that will be particularly difficult, because those who proclaim to know the truth, well intentioned or not, are spewing the most bullshit. But you will know when you have been properly ravished. And then you’ll see, then you’ll see, how the entire world is eyeball deep in it and that we choose it, and that we choose it every day. But the good news is that, although we struggle with it, there is a way out. Yes, there is a very worthy antidote and option to all the bullshit.”

I stood there agape as Dr. Deveaux strode away. I had no idea what he had been talking about, or that he could even talk like *that*. I was not sure if I should be offended or not. Yet something went off far in the back of my mind, or was it my heart? I could not tell, but it sounded like—it *felt* like—the small click of a combination lock.

*Gee, I thought. I’d better go back and reread the poem.*

*And then I thought, to my great dismay, I’m sure I received an F.*

Fortunately, I did not fail the course. I worked extremely hard, harder for Dr. Deveaux than any of my other professors. I received the thrill of that final A. After grades were posted I went to see him.

Christmas break was about to start, and I could not get the problem of the “bullshit detector” out of my

head. Was it possible that Donne's famous maxim "Doubt wisely" lay back to back with the necessity of "believing wisely" too? Were the two interlocked in that subtle knot that defines our humanity?

I knocked on Dr. Deveaux's door, but there was no answer. I was met by the secretary's dismayed face when I asked when Dr. Deveaux might be in.

"Haven't you heard?" she asked. "Dr. Deveaux passed away just after finals week. He tallied all the grades and then fell asleep in his chair. His wife found him the next morning, poor thing. Cold, pencil in hand. The funeral is next week, if you'd like to attend."

My final memory of Dr. Deveaux was from the last day of our seminar. The class's token joker accidentally spilled his coffee all over Dr. Deveaux's meticulously handwritten notes. A flutter of confusion ensued as the young man, flustered and red faced for once, apologized profusely while several of us sprang forward with Kleenex, sheets of paper, a sock—whatever was at hand. I watched Dr. Deveaux save what was left of his ancient notes without saying a word. We all sat still, too stunned to speak. Suddenly he seemed so much older, so vulnerable. I had not noticed before that his hands shook.

Then he looked up at us, and smiling, said, "No harm done. I always thought my notes too dry for their own good. And with a little faith, nothing is irreparable. Now let's see what our dear man Herbert would have said about that. Please turn next to his poem, 'The Collar.'"

\* \* \*

Just before going abroad on my scholarship, I came across an epigram by Alexander Pope, the eighteenth-century English poet famous for his clever wit and urbane satire. Pope engraved the verse on the collar of a dog, which he then gifted the king:

I am his Highness' Dog at Kew:

Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Granted, the dog image is not as elegant or politically correct as some might prefer, but it does effectively beg the question: just who is your master? For we all have one. No individual, by the very state of existence, can avoid life as a form of servitude; it only remains for us to decide, deny, or remain oblivious to, whom or what we serve.

Before I left for Oxford University, the answer was easy. I was my own . . .



**Author Bio:** Carolyn Weber holds her BA from Huron College, University of Western Ontario and her MPhil and DPhil degrees from Oxford University. She has been Associate Professor of Romantic Literature at Seattle University, and has also taught at Westmont College, University of San Francisco, and Oxford University. Carolyn and her husband share the joy of parenting three spirited children in Santa Barbara, CA and London Canada.

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