



# Annie Dillard

**Biography Timeline:** **April 30, 1945**, born Meta Ann Doak in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the oldest of three daughters of a non-conformist mother, Pam Lambert Doak, and energetic father, Frank Doak, who conveys the wonders of the novel *On The Road* and the call to adventure (which he answers by quitting his job and heading off on a trip down the Mississippi River); during childhood one of her favorite books is *The Field Book of Ponds & Streams*; attends fundamentalist church camp for four summers; **1955**, enters Ellis School; in her high school years, she rebels against her affluent, country club upbringing, as her academic interests shift toward poetry; quits the Shadyside Presbyterian Church because of the “hypocrisy,” but returns when the minister lures her back with a well-thought-out argument based on the works of C.S. Lewis; **1963**, enters Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia; **June 5, 1965**, marries her writing teacher, poet and novelist Richard Dillard – the person she says “taught me everything I know” about writing; **1966**, Phi Beta Kappa during her junior year at Hollins; **1967**, graduates from Hollins College with BA; **1968**, MA, Hollins College, with a thesis on Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or Life in the Woods*; dabbles in Sufism, Buddhism, Eskimo religious systems, Hasidic Judaism; attends Episcopal Church, eventually converts to Catholicism; **1971**, endures a near fatal attack of pneumonia; **1974**, a first book of poems, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* is published; **1974**, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is published (after her initial hesitation to publish it under her own name and considering using a man's name, since “a theology book by a woman would not be well-received”); **1975**, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* receives Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, divorces Dillard, and retreats to Northern Puget Sound (Waldron Island); **1975-1979**, Scholar-in-Residence, Western Washington University; **1979-2000**, faculty, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut; **1977**, *Holy the Firm* (nonfiction narrative); **April 12, 1980**, marries Gary Clevidence; **1982**, *Living by Fiction* (nonfiction narrative), *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (essays), visits China (along with Norman Cousins, et. al.) as part of State Department cultural delegation; **1983**, Phi Beta Kappa Orator, Harvard commencement exercises; **1984**, *Encounters with Chinese Writers* (nonfiction narrative); **1984**, daughter Cody Rose is born; **1985**, receives Guggenheim fellowship; **1987**, *An American Childhood* (memoir); **1988**, divorces Clevidence; marries Robert D. Richardson, Jr.; **1989**, *The Writing Life* (nonfiction narrative); **1992**, *The Living* (novel); **1994**, receives Campion Award from *America* magazine; **1995**, *Mornings Like This: Found Poems* (poetry); **1999**, *For The Time Being* (nonfiction narrative); **1999**, Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Letters; **2007**, *The Maytrees* (novel).

In essays, memoirs, novels, poems, and literary criticism, Annie Dillard dazzles readers with wondrous and gracious ponderings and not infrequent spiritual investigations. She is at once mystical and scientific, elusive of categorization and embracing of tradition, as lyrical as a lily and as blunt as a two-by-four.

Dillard enthusiasts – environmentalists, ecologists, feminists, clergy, theologians, park rangers, poets, steelworkers, river-rafters, et. al. – are consistently amazed by how she weaves seemingly disparate strands of concern into a multi-fold chord which is not easily broken. In her descriptions of nature, in her wrestlings with nettlesome theological problems, in her rhetorical analysis and literary criticism, and in her approaches to prayer, Dillard illuminates the tension between the so-called “profane” and traditionally understood “sacred.”

In nearly every other sentence of her nonfiction work, Dillard employs colloquial language for ultimate realities, using the vernacular to describe the spiritual. She respects and loves the possibilities which language possesses to describe the almost indescribable. And she is unabashed and unhindered in her brute frankness regarding the fleeting, mutable character of human existence. She adroitly combines a deep reverence for God’s immanence in nature, and awe and sometimes terror in the face of God’s transcendence over nature.

Pick up almost any of Dillard's books and one can find an astonishing cornucopia of subjects, allusions, and literary references, including insect brutality, Teilhard de Chardin's genius, a hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit, the blessings inherent in a snake skin, the Bel Shem Tov (the founder of the Hasidic movement), the immensity of sand, the dazzling capacities of the ordinary, and more.

In much of her writing she returns to questions which have haunted her since her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, received the Pulitzer Prize when she was 29 years old. In three of her books – *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Holy the Firm*, and *For the Time*

*Being* – she struggles with the most ancient of theological conundra, namely the theodicy puzzle: How can there be a good God in a world so punctuated with evil, natural calamity and moral turpitude?

Like Henry David Thoreau, whose mantle many believe she inherited, she is enthralled by nature. Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poetic teasings have been compared to her own, she is enraptured by nature's God. For Dillard God is everywhere evident and plainly manifest, but ever elusive of any final, definitive description(1) And her response to such a deity? Always awe and terror.(2)

Early on Dillard declared her identity and purposes: "*I am no scientist.... I am an explorer... I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself.*"(3)

As a writer, as a spiritual sojourner, and as a human being, Dillard is concerned with living with as much authenticity as possible. For Christians this should be particularly clear, as she declares in *Teaching A Stone to Talk*, "*Week after week Christ washes the disciples' dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, It is all right – believe it or not – to be people.*"(4)

For Dillard full human maturity involves an awakening to one's own life and the immensity of our surroundings. An astonishing world awaits our engagement. Not to engage with the world is to abide in a nether realm outside the present moment. "*What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch – with an electric hiss and cry – this speckled sphere, our present world.*"(5)

Dillard remains aghast at how blithely anyone, but especially church people, can speak about and give homage to God. She yearns for deep reverence and awe-struck

wonder in all responses to the intersection between the human the divine. In a frequently quoted passage, Dillard invokes a series of rhetorical questions to challenge and disturb those who are blasé about the transformations made possible by the holy: *"Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?... Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."*(6)

To many admirers Dillard reigns supreme as the master of nonfiction prose. She has been heralded and celebrated by some of the most esteemed writers of American letters, including Loren Eiseley and Eudora Welty. In his seminal assessment of Annie Dillard as *"an exegete of creation,"* Eugene Peterson declared, *"... American spirituality needs her."*(7) In his review of *Holy the Firm*, Frederick Buechner lauded her literary efforts with high praise: *"One thinks of Gerard Manley Hopkins,... [or] the conceits of Donne.... If there are faults to find here, let others find them. This is a rare and precious book."*(8)

Like a butterfly adroitly escaping a netter's grasp, Dillard has consistently and staunchly evaded all attempts to pin her down about her specific religious commitments.(9) She is obviously steeped in the multivalent riches of the Christian way. But she remains wide open to revelations about mystery from all traditions. Her poetry holds some keys to how she understands her life before God and how she practices her faith.

About confronting the end of life, she says *"I think that the dying/ pray at the last/ not 'please' but 'thank you' as a guest thanks his host at the door."*(10)

About the duty of praying she implores, *"In Luke eleven/ and again in Luke eighteen,/ Christ demands/ importunate prayer,/ prayer that does not faint./ Fatigare deos,/ wearing God*

*out./ Is Christ as good as his word?/ If God does not tire, still/ we may tire of/ longing./ Pray this prayer:/ receive this prayer./ Teach us to pray, teach us to pray, to pray, to pray."*(11)

About her focus -- and presumably the focus of us all -- as we abide in God's grace, she proffers an enrapturing poetic summary: *"And ...I go my way...and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen'...upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise."*(12)

## **Praying with Annie Dillard – Suggestions for Use**

Day 1 Pray today by recalling Dillard's bemused challenge: *"Spend the afternoon, you can't take it with you."* Take some time -- whether brief or extended -- and pay attention to a specific place in all of its particularities. Come awake to that place and open yourself to the astonishing revelations that are there for you. As your awareness and engagement with your surroundings are quickened and expanded, simply say *"Thanks be to God."*

Day 2 Pray today for the children of the world, but especially the children you know, that they might know the truth that Dillard would have all of Christ's followers to know: *"It is all right – believe it or not – to be people."*

Day 3 Pray today by giving thanks for writers who continue to tend their calling and craft in order to increase the wonder and the thrill of being alive. Give thanks on this day to God (the original Author) for Annie Dillard's particular tending and her inspirational authorial efforts.

Day 4 Pray today by pondering what Annie Dillard says about writing: *"One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now.... Something more will arise for later, something better.... the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes."*(13) Now apply what she says about writing to your life. Tally up what you've been hoarding for a later moment in your life or for a future occasion in a relationship. Pray to God for the courage to *"give it all, give it now."* Pray also for an increase in your capacity to trust that *"Something more will arise for later, something better."*

Day 5 Pray today remembering those you know who are confronting the end of their lives. Offer a prayer of intercession for them, that they will be graced enough and sufficiently at peace to say "Thanks" at the end of their lives.

Day 6 Pray today by remembering Annie Dillard's facile use of language and how she revels in mixing metaphors and the powerful meanings that result. As you pray, hear your breath, see your song, taste the cries of the hurting, smell the dreams of others, caress the hopes of your family and friends. Offer all these "sensational" experiences to God for blessing.

Day 7 Pray today by taking a walk. After the first few minutes of the walk, focus your attention on the two words with which Dillard concludes her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: "And ...I go my way...and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen'..." Behold the astounding beauty and the profuse provision of creation and utter "Glory!" and "Amen!," as you go your way.(14)

#### NOTES

- 1 See Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), p. 144.
- 2 See Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 139.
- 3 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, pp. 13-14.
- 4 Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 38.
- 5 Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 248-249.
- 6 Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 58.
- 7 Eugene Peterson, "Annie Dillard: With Her Eyes Wide Open," *Theology Today*, Vol. 42, No. 2, July 1986, p. 179.
- 8 *NY Times Book Review*, Sept. 25, 1977, p. 40.
- 9 On her website, in the description of her nonfiction narrative book *For the Time Being*, she states bluntly, "I quit the Catholic Church and Christianity; I stay near Christianity and Hasidism." (See <http://www.anniedillard.com/books-annie-dillard.html>)
- 10 Annie Dillard, *Tickets for A Prayer Wheel* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974), p. 127.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 12 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 271.
- 13 Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 78-79; see also, Annie Dillard, Inscribed & Illustrated by Sam Fink, *Give It All, Give It Now: One of the Few Things I Know About Writing* (New York: Welcome Books, 2009).
- 14 Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 277.

#### FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

- Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987)  
Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999)  
Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)  
Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974)  
Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982)  
Annie Dillard, *Tickets for A Prayer Wheel* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974)  
Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989)