

“Once upon a time it was,” Ruth remembered, when her mother took her as a child to visit the old wise woman, Abigail. Of all the people she had ever known in her life – at least up until now – no one ever shaped her life as much as did this old woman.

Ruth didn’t really know how old Abigail was. When you are 13, people look a lot older than when you are 40. Abigail had seemed old, and she certainly had the wisdom of someone who had seen a lot of years.

When Ruth’s mother first took her to visit Abigail, she asked the old woman to train her. Ruth was not sure “for what.” And, even to this day, she wasn’t sure if the training were to be a midwife – which it surely was – or if it were to become a wise woman herself. There was so much more she learned from the old woman than simply how to birth a baby ... as if that were some simple task.

When Ruth’s mother asked Abigail to take Ruth on as a student, Ruth was 13 years old. And, truth be told, her feelings were hurt when the old woman’s answer had been conditional: “I have to get to know her, first, to see if she would be a good student.”

Ruth had assumed that the old woman would want to ask her questions, to find out how smart she was. Or, maybe, she would want to ask her to do some things with her hands, in order to tell if she were coordinated enough to manage the special handling of a newborn coming to life outside the mother.

Ruth’s mother, having some wisdom of her own, turned to Ruth, and asked her if she would be *willing to be known* by Abigail.

“*Willing to be known*,” had a special lilt in its hearing, as her mother spoke it. So Ruth agreed. She had never had anyone ask that of her. Little did she realize just what it would entail.

Ruth and Abigail were left alone. Ruth waited for the first question to be asked. She had even anticipated some of the “small talk” that this background check would involve, and had already in her own mind shaped the wording of her answers, so that she could speak them fluently, and appear to do so, without effort.

Ruth waited for the old woman to speak. And waited. But old Abigail simply sat there and stared deeply into Ruth’s 13 year old face.

The face is a powerful thing. In such a small part of the human body – only about 25 square inches – an incredible variety of presence and information can be conveyed. No two faces are alike. There is always the individual expression of the uniqueness of that person’s life. Indeed, if the interrogator knows how to read the face, the human face can be read as an unwritten, but completely public biography.

The face gives expression to the inner world of the person’s life. The face allows the deciphering of what the world has done to the person as well as what the person wearing that face has made of their own particular life. The face always betrays the soul; it cannot be hidden from the knowing beholder. It is especially in the face, where the human soul – in its divinity – finds an echo and an image. When you *behold* someone’s face – not merely “look at,” but “behold” – you are looking deeply into their life. The gaze into the face of another, when properly done, is an entry into the depth and eternity of their life.

It is true that we all share the same physical space in the world; particularly for folks who are living in the same town. But, in a much deeper sense, each one of us carries within a completely private and individual world, which is not only the product of all their experiences, but is also the person’s unique umbilical cord to the Source of Life itself.

Each human soul is housed within a body. When someone comes to visit you, they bring into your home, within their body, all of their inner world, all of

their experience, everything that has ever happened to them since birth (and before). At the moment when that person is present, their life is not elsewhere, but is totally there before you.ⁱ

For the first 15 minutes of Abigail's unspoken interview of Ruth – simply gazing into her face, her eyes, Ruth was painfully uncomfortable. It felt like her life was being taken apart; no secrets were hidden from the intense gaze of this old woman. Ruth considered getting up and leaving; she didn't need to put up with this kind of behavior from some old, probably crazy, woman. But, another part of her – deep down inside – responded with a longing to continue.

After awhile, she no longer felt a need to put up any barrier. She found that rather than just being looked *upon* – looked *into* – **she was also looking back**. And she was fascinated by what her newfound deep vision was discovering, looking into the lines of the old woman's face; looking into her eyes, which did indeed seem to go a very long distance, in their telling. By the end of two hours, their silent conversation was over. Ruth felt like she and Abigail had known one another intimately for their entire lives. Ruth did not feel any particular pride nor surprise when Abigail told Ruth's mother that she would be happy to have Ruth as her student.

Ruth continued to study with Abigail for the rest of Abigail's life. And even after the old woman departed, Ruth felt like she was always in touch with her. From her, she had certainly learned all of the finer points of midwifery, but also had learned many of the deep and profound lessons about the fine, beautiful canvas of art called life.

Like her mentor, Ruth had become a wise woman, whose assistance was sought by many -- and for things other than mere birthing the children of her village. Before she quite realized how the time had slipped away, Ruth had become the wise **old** woman of the area.

It was a late night, after Ruth had gone to bed, when the knock came on her door. Ruth had grown accustomed to such nocturnal disturbances, for babies often

decide to make their appearance after the sun has gone to bed. She opened the door and saw before her little Lois, the 12 year old daughter of Rueven, the inn keeper.

“Miss Ruth, come quick,” Lois said urgently.

“Slow down, Lois. We can move more quickly if you slow down and let your words be understood. Tell me what is wrong.”

“Miss Ruth, there’s a baby comin’. It’s down at the stable behind the inn. There was a couple that asked Daddy if they could stay in with the animals overnight, because he had no more rooms to let, and the woman said she was too tired from her travels to go anywhere else. And, well, Daddy knew that there weren’t any more rooms anywhere in town, anyway, so he told them they could stay overnight with the animals. He didn’t think they’d mind too much. Well, it turns out that she wasn’t just tired from traveling. She was getting ready to deliver a baby. And when we heard her cries from back in the stable, Daddy sent me out to check what was the problem. When her husband told me what was happening, I came right here to get you. They need your help, Miss Ruth. Right away. I’m worried, because that woman giving birth isn’t much older than me, she’s not.”

“Did you tell your parents that you were coming to my house, Lois?” Ruth inquired.

“No, Miss Ruth. They don’t know anything about birthing anything other than a lamb or a calf, not a human baby!”

“So they heard the young mother crying, and sent you out to investigate, and then you never came back to tell them anything?” Ruth asked.

“Oh! Gosh! They might think something happened to me. I’d better go tell them what’s going on. Will you go tend to that girl birthin’ her baby?”

“Yes, Lois. You run home and tell your Mama and Daddy what’s going on, and that I am on the way. Ask them to heat up some water and get me some clean towels, alright?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I will do everything just like you said. Thank you, Miss Ruth,” Lois called out mostly over her shoulder as she ran down the path from Ruth’s home toward her own house.

Well, Ruth made it to the stable in back of the inn, in plenty of time, and she helped the young woman – her name was Mary – to give birth to her baby. And, even though Mary was as young as Lois described, she handled the delivery just fine.

As they worked together on bringing this first born child of Mary and Joseph’s into the world, Ruth spent time reading their lives through their faces. She had gone back in memory to that first time she learned about face reading, in her encounter with Abigail. And the two faces of this couple before her were *richer* than she had experienced in quite some time, if ever. “Rich” was actually a good descriptor, for while their life times had not been long, she knew that this mother and father had lived deep lives already.

But their faces paled, by comparison, to the face of the baby born that night. When the little boy came into the world, into Ruth’s strong, welcoming hands, her eyes met his. And she was mesmerized. Indeed she held the baby a little longer than usual, but since Mary and Joseph had never birthed a child before, they didn’t know that her holding the child this long was out of the ordinary.

Ruth wasn’t actually sure of how long she held the baby in her arms, and beheld his face in her eyes. She read this face deeply. Looking into his eyes, she knew that she was not able to read the history of his life, for that was only a few minutes old. But looking into his face, she was able to gaze upon what she had never seen before. This tiny infant child’s eyes revealed a depth totally inconsistent with his age.

When Ruth looked into the baby’s face, she could see a reflection of something within her own face. Ruth was able to see that through his eyes, he was gazing upon her life and seeing a spark of divinity that was *within her*.

It was a powerful experience that Ruth never forgot after that night. Oh, she heard the stories of all the strange happenings that night down at the stable, where it seemed like a celebrity had arrived, even though his cradle was the cow's feeding manger.

It was a powerful experience that night, and Ruth knew that if this baby could gaze so deeply into *her* soul, that looking into his face would be a powerful, life changing event for everyone he ever encountered. It was something – was “holy” too strong a word to describe his face?

No, that was exactly the word – “holy.” For the infant lying in a manger was indeed holy, of that she was certain. And she also knew that for the rest of her life, she would never lose the power of his gaze, as she looked into his face. For the first time in her life, Ruth knew that, in that baby's eyes, she also was holy. And the holiness within her that the baby saw did not embarrass her. She claimed this holiness, this actual divinity, as her own, and from that night on, always would.

**Behold the servant of the Lord, let it be done unto me, according to your Word ...
in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

ⁱ These four paragraphs are largely from John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*.