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Faith and Foolishness

The human drive to protect the ego and avoid looking foolish starts when we are quite young. When I was six and my brother was four, we had parts in a church Christmas program. My mother volunteered that I would recite "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," which I memorized over several weeks by listening to a recording of the poem. I don't recall what my brother's assignment was, but after my performance and when it was his turn, he began to recite my poem instead of his own. His mistake was understandable after many hours of listening to me and then hearing me again moments earlier, but he was so mortified that he did a somersault right there in front of the congregation. I'm sure he was more adorable than ridiculous, but he certainly felt foolish.

Most of us hate being fooled or making fools of ourselves, even in rather trivial ways and when the stakes are quite low. Having a more fragile memory now than I had when I was six, I somehow forgot entirely about the Beitner Road closure when I traveled home from Traverse City one day last week. I was engrossed in a radio news report, and I arrived at the barrier before I remembered about the road closure. Instead of retreating the way I had come, I proceeded to get a little lost in a residential area that had been completely unknown to me. Then the worst happened: my phone rang. My husband, of course, had been tracking my phone and was concerned about my odd route home. I would much rather have been left to my own devices instead of acknowledging that I had been a fool—even though my husband already knew my nature well enough to be unsurprised by any new bit of ordinary foolishness. (Also, I will stipulate that he was trying to help!)

Maybe I could rationalize that the fool is sometimes smarter than anyone would imagine. You probably know that in Shakespeare's plays, the Fool is a professional court entertainer and often the most astute character. In the comedy *Twelfth Night*, for instance, Feste has the truest understanding of the other characters and reminds Olivia, "I wear not motley in my brain" (1.5.46). He suggests that Olivia is the one who is foolish, if she despairs over her brother's presumed death even as she expresses confidence that he is in heaven. Feste excels at wordplay and tells Viola that he is not Olivia's fool "but her corrupter of words" (3.1.30). Feste is involved in all the comic foolery, but he also has a melancholy sense that "the rain it raineth every day," as he says in his concluding song (5.1.385), and yet the theatre would "strive to please you every day."

Well, my own minor foolishness was not for anyone's entertainment and did not reflect any insight other than the need to focus on my driving and to think later about many more significant ways in which I'm foolish.
There is such a thing as a Holy Fool or a wise fool. I might feel foolish with good reason if I were to compare myself to another literary fool, the title character of Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" (1957). Singer was a Nobel-Prize-winning Jewish American writer, born in 1903 or 1904 in Warsaw, Poland and descended from rabbis on both sides of his family. He immigrated to the U.S. in 1935 and became a U.S. citizen in 1943. He almost always wrote in Yiddish, and "Gimpel the Fool" was translated from Yiddish to English by another Nobel Prize winner, Saul Bellow.

Gimpel is assumed to be a fool because he is extremely gullible and believes what he is told. The people of Frampol, Poland, can tell him that the czar is coming to town, he must kiss a particular stone after seeing the rabbi, his father and mother have returned from the grave and are looking for him, and a promiscuous woman is a "chaste maiden" whom he should marry. When a child is born four months after the wedding, Gimpel's wife claims the child is his, and she claims that other children are also his, despite continual affairs that are evident to everyone but Gimpel
Gimpel doesn't believe he's a fool, and he offers various excuses for his gullibility and apparent foolishness. He is just "not a slugger" (1), and maybe belief in his neighbors "did them good" (1), After all, "everything is possible" (2), and you "can't pass through life unscathed" (2), "the whole town can't go crazy" (4), one "can't live without errors" (5), and "hallucinations do happen"(7). When he catches his wife with another man, he refrains from making a scene because he doesn't want to waken the newborn child, whom he immediately loves. He has even a "nearly human feeling" (10) for the nannygoat, and so he checks on the goat as his wife suggests when she asks him to leave the bedroom, where she is sleeping with another man.

Gimpel's neighbors consider him foolish because of his loving nature, but at one point in the story, he offers another explanation: "Today it's your wife you don't believe, tomorrow it's God you won't take stock in" (8). Gimpel understands that loving and trusting his neighbors has everything to do with loving and trusting God.

Gimpel is human enough to be tempted to do evil. After his wife's deathbed confession, he dreams that he is visited by the Spirit of Evil, who tells him that he should deceive the world because the world deceived him. He urinates on the bread dough that was to feed the people of Frampol, but he has another dream in which his wife calls him a fool for thinking that everything is false just because she was false. He immediately buries the contaminated bread dough and soon leaves Frampol behind, travels alone, and tells stories. As he nears the end of his of his life, he trusts God and knows that whatever awaits him, he will not be fooled.

Nobody wants to be as gullible as Gimpel, but wouldn't we Christians do well to emulate Gimpel's variety of foolishness, which was more like saintliness? Gimpel loved and trusted God, and except for that one brief lapse, he intended to "return to no person evil for evil." He endlessly forgave those who wronged him. He was a thoroughly *moral* man who believed in vast possibilities beyond his human understanding.
Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote his story for a Yiddish-speaking audience, but we Christians can learn much from Gimpel about the nature of true foolishness and true spirituality. Our Old Testament has much in common with the Hebrew Bible, and not only is the Bible full of examples of human foolishness, but many Proverbs explicitly contrast wisdom and foolishness: "Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice" (12:15, *NRSV*) and "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20) are among a great many examples.

In our New Testament, God offers Jesus as our salvation and the spiritual way to transcend human, earthly foolishness. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks them, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:20-25, *NRSV*). Our worldly wisdom won't save us, but we are offered salvation through Christ, if we will open our hearts to God's grace.

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

Shakespeare, William. *Twelfth Night.* Cambridge: Cambridge School Shakespeare. 2005.
Singer, Isaac Bashevis. "Gimpel the Fool." CMULeeper.com. 1 May 2026. https://www.cmuleeper.com/_generalResources/@literaturArchive/stories/singer/Gimpel the fool.pdf.

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