

“...that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Over-Soul

Credo

A statement of belief — on the sacred in ordinary life, on mercy as a method of composition, and on the conviction that we are mended only in the act of mending others.

James Mulhern · August 9, 2026

I. The Ordinary as Sanctuary

I have come to believe that the sacred is not sequestered in a far country, nor reserved for the ceremonies we have built to contain it. It abides here, in the unremarkable hours — in the kitchen light at six in the morning, in the faces we pass and neglect to see, in the small domestic liturgies we perform without knowing that we are performing them. Grace is not clamorous. It does not announce its arrival, nor wait upon our readiness. It waits, rather, in the everyday, with what I can only call patience, for the moment we consent to notice it.

I believe a homely woman singing badly in a cellar stands nearer the sacred than most of what has been painted on a ceiling.

Our failure, then, is not principally a failure of faith but of attention. We mistake the urgent for the important. We defer the essential to a season that never arrives. And we neglect to recognize that the love of others — the plain, unglamorous bond between one person and another — is the single greatest inheritance we are given. Whether we get along or do not get along, love remains the thread that binds us: the one sacred thing, running unbroken beneath every quarrel and every silence, and beneath even our estrangements, which it outlives.

II. Mercy as Method

I was taught early, in an Irish Catholic household populated by eccentric and tender souls, to forgive and to have empathy — not as doctrine received but as household practice, performed daily and imperfectly by people who had every reason to withhold it. Those flawed, devoted figures became the first of my characters, and they instructed me in the truest lesson of my craft: that even those who have wounded us stand in need of comfort.

So it is with the people I make. I will not write anyone off, on the page or in life. To summon a character into fuller being is an act of mercy rather than of judgment — a way of granting each figure its wound, its reason, its intelligible history, its chance to be understood before it is condemned. A reader always knows when a writer has secretly despised one of his creations: the prose stiffens, the character flattens into a verdict, and the fiction, however accomplished, acquires the faint chill of the courtroom. Judgment is the cheapest instrument in the writer's case, and the least durable.

I believe grace does not wait upon worthy people to administer it. It travels through cruelty, exhaustion, and bad temper as readily as through kindness, and it is no less real for the unreliable hands through which it passes.

I believe a body in decline — diabetic, gouty, bald, unsteady on its feet — is not a subject the serious writer looks past on the way to something more dignified. It is where dignity actually resides, if it resides anywhere at all.

III. The Discipline of Attention

I believe the ordinary detail — a chipmunk on a patio, a bottle of suntan oil, a housedress printed with roses — is never merely what it appears to be, and that the whole of a writer's discipline is patience: the willingness to watch a small thing long enough for it to disclose what it is actually for.

I believe a sentence should be revised until it knows more than its author knew when he began it, and that this is not a failure of planning but the only honest way a true sentence is ever made.

I believe fire is not only punishment. In the right light, at the right hour, upon the right stretch of ordinary water, it is the very material of which glory is made.

Imagination sustained me through the hard passages of my life, and I have come to regard the faculty itself as something held in trust rather than owned — a gift on loan from something larger than myself; call it the inner light, or the grace that moves through all things. To write, then, is to answer that gift with attention and with love. It is not self-expression. It is stewardship.

IV. The Classroom

I believe comedy and reverence are not opposites; that a family may be cruel and devoted in the same breath; and that any fiction which resolves this contradiction too neatly has told a lie about something.

I believe every student who has ever informed me that a poem is stupid, that this isn't math, or that they aren't getting wet for nobody, already contains multitudes. Persuading them of it is the whole of the job. Thirty-five years in the classroom, and I have not once completed it in a single semester.

I believe teaching is not the transmission of information but the slow, unprovable work of convincing another person that their interior life is worth the labor of expression. Nothing in the profession is harder to measure. Nothing in it matters more.

V. The Narrow Doorway

I believe in the narrow doorway — that no one passes through it alone, that we are each helped along by another's arm, and that this is not a diminishment of the journey but the entire purpose of it.

For we are all broken. Not one of us escapes the fracture; and any account of a human life that pretends otherwise has flattered us at the cost of telling us the truth. And yet the consolation is stranger and better than we expect. We are not made whole by being helped, but by helping. It is in bending toward another's brokenness that our own is quietly repaired — the healing running outward, and returning to us altered.

This is my faith, and the whole of my art: that love is the creative thread binding life to imagination, truth to searching, and each of us, in the end, to one another.

I believe a book, a poem, or a classroom is a place where a person may be told, truthfully and perhaps for the first time: *you are altogether beautiful, and there is no flaw in you*. I believe that sentence is worth an entire working life spent earning the right to say it.