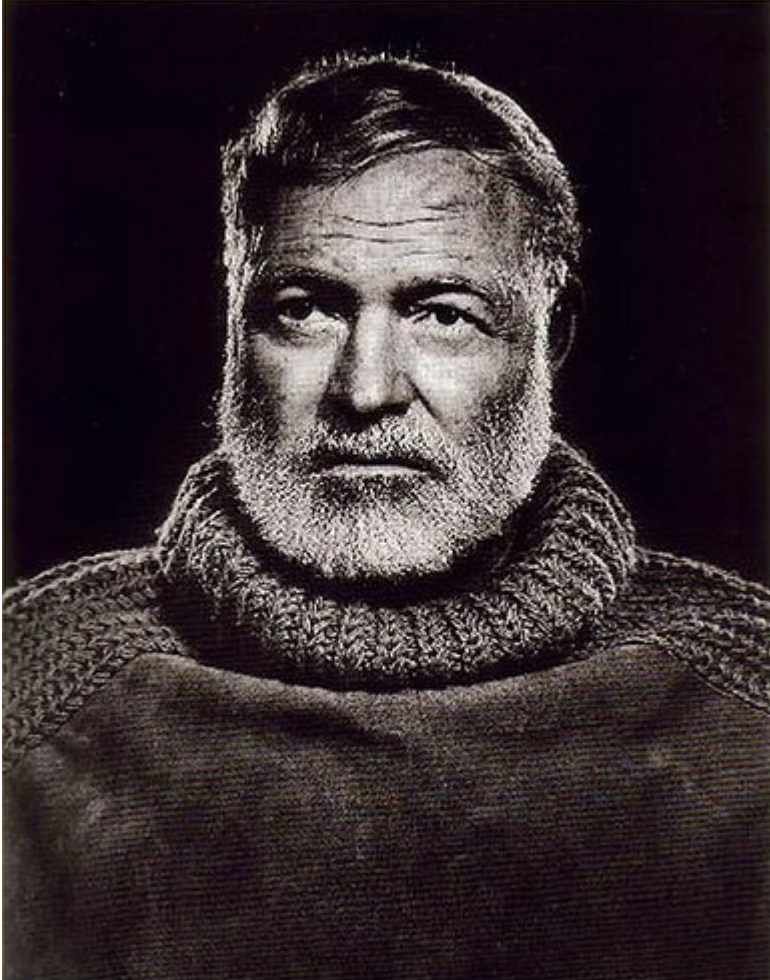


# True sentences

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue



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This fall I found myself bypassing books that every working clergyperson should read in order to follow an impulse stimulated by Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*, an account of Ernest Hemingway's Paris years in the 1920s as told in the voice of his first wife, Hadley. At one point, Hadley remembers Hemingway's mantra: "I want to write one true sentence. If I can write one sentence, simple and true, every day, I'll be satisfied." Hadley comments: "His ambitions for his writing were fierce and all encompassing. He had writing the way other people had religion."

I went on to read *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway's account of his Paris years, and then *The Sun Also Rises*, the novel he wrote in Paris. The title comes from the Book

of Ecclesiastes: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever. . . . The sun also ariseth, and the sun also goeth down."

He describes the drama and ritual of bullfighting as well as the delights of food and drinking. A little bit of religion is included. Jake Barnes, the narrator, visits a Spanish cathedral, sees people praying, then kneels and prays. "I was a little ashamed, and regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic. . . . It was a grand religion, and I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time."

Not all literary critics agree about Hemingway's greatness, but almost all acknowledge that his spare, lean style changed American writing.

Right now I'm savoring Hemingway's short stories. He was a religious seeker if not some kind of believer. In the story "Today Is Friday," he imagines Roman soldiers who have just crucified a prisoner—clearly Jesus, although he is not named. They are drinking late at night and talking about the day's duty:

1st Soldier: He was pretty good in there today.

2nd Soldier: Why didn't he come down off the cross?

1st Soldier: He didn't want to come down off the cross . . . He was pretty good in there today.

I like to think that one of the greatest 20th-century writers was haunted by Jesus, and by the idea of a God who was revealed in that singular life and death.