WITNESS MAGAZINE

EVIL IS MIGHTY

but it can't stand up to our stories

VOLUME 83
NUMBER 12
DECEMBER 2000

WITNESS MAGAZINE

CONTENTS

on the cover

©Sean Kernan

From *Cara Pura*, a show of Mexican portraits inspired by the Mexican painter Hermenegildo Bustos travelling in Mexico, 2000-2001.

DEPARTMENTS

VOLUME 83
NUMBER 12
DECEMBER 2000

Since 1917, ***The Witness*** has been examining church and society in light of faith and conscience — advocating for those denied systemic power as well as celebrating those who, in theologian William Stringfellow's words, have found ways to "live humanly in the midst of death." With deep roots in the Episcopal Church, we are a journal of spiritual questing and theology in practice, always ready to hold our own cherished beliefs and convictions up to scrutiny.

Manuscripts: We welcome multiple submissions. Given our small staff, writers and artists receive a response only when we are able to publish. Manuscripts will not be returned.

The Witness

Editor/Publisher
Julie A. Wortman

Senior Editor
Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann

Associate Editor
Marianne Arbogast

Staff Writer
Camille Colatosti

Book Review Editor
Bill Wylie-Kellermann

Magazine Production
KAT Design, Camden, ME

Controller
Roger Dage

Development/Marketing
Wes Todd

Office Manager
Alice Devine

Episcopal Church Publishing Co.
Board of Directors

President	Stephen Duggan
Vice-President	Harlon Dalton
Secretary	Anna Lange-Soto
Treasurer	John G. Zinn

Owanah Anderson, Richard Bower, Louie Crew, Jane Dixon, Ian Douglas, Mark MacDonald, Chester Talton, Mitsuye Yamada

Contributing Editors
Martin Brokenleg, Kelly Brown Douglas, Carmen Guerrero, Mary E. Hunt, Jay McDaniel, Bill Wylie-Kellermann

Subscriptions: $35 per year, $5 per copy. Foreign subscriptions add $10 per year.
Change of address: Third Class mail does not forward. Provide your new mailing address to The Witness.

Offices: To reach Julie Wortman:
HC 35 Box 647, Tenants Harbor, ME 04860
Tel: (207)372-6396.
To reach Wes Todd:
118 Main Street, Thomaston, ME 04861
Tel: (207)354-7041
Subscription questions — Alice Devine:
PO Box 1170, Rockport, ME 04856
Tel: (207) 763-2990

Website: www.thewitness.org

The sexual revolution and the young

Although it was not my fortune, good or bad, to be in Denver for the General Convention last July, when that assemblage concluded I was left with a feeling of depression similar to Julie Wortman's (see *TW* 10/00, ed. notes). This state has worsened as I read "The Comfortable Pew," written by Pierre Bonnet in 1965. Thirty-five years ago this non-churchman, evaluating the Canadian Anglicanism from the outside at the invitation of the Church, observed many of the same inequities talked about today. Two of those are related: the nuances of the sexual revolution and the perceptions and convictions of the young.

In the course of the open hearing on sexuality resolutions at Convention a high-school student from Minnesota made a poignant statement. She observed that the Church was no longer communicating to her generation. Specifically, she referred to sexual preference and gender identification. In her school, she said, those were nothing more than facets of an individual of no more significance than hair color.

As Michael Kinnamon is quoted as having said, devotion to reconciliation is self-defeating when it results in failure to confront actions blatantly opposed to the message of love. Hating the sin while loving the sinner is an indefensible position, leading as it does to the implicit message that all would be well if you would become like me. At the base is fear, clearly expressed by the racist who observed, "If the Black gets his rights, who does the poor White have to feel superior to?"

In the more than 30 years I have been reading *The Witness* I have seldom been disappointed. Keep on going on!

Jack McAnally
Wilsonville, OR

Looking good

Today we received our first two issues, September and October 2000. They look good! Reading the October letters, we find a laudatory reference to your April 2000 issue, "No Easy Answers: Gender and Sexual Ethics for a New Age." Please send us a copy of this and any other recent issues on glbt concerns right away.

Bob and Gwenny Bergh
Riverside, CA

Not activist enough

Please remove my name from your subscription list. It is probably a good magazine for some, but not activist enough for me.

Arlene E. Swanson
Minneapolis, MN

Holiday conscience

We are writing to ask *Witness* readers to join in the People of Faith Network's Holiday Season of Conscience Campaign aimed at Kohl's. The jeans Kohl's sells are made by sewers at Chentex, a Taiwanese-owned factory in Managua, Nicaragua. Although under Nicaraguan law forming a union is legal, Chentex management and owners are responding by firing and threatening workers who attempt to organize. The Chentex factory produces 20,000 to 25,000 pairs of jeans a day for Kohl's. The sewers earn pennies for each $30 pair of Kohl's jeans they sew. (For more info., see <www.nlcnet.org>).

The U.S. Labor Department has dispatched an investigator to the scene, but without a word from Kohl's, the customer, Chentex is unlikely to listen. So we are asking people of faith to write letters to Larry Montgomery, CEO of Kohl's Corporation, N56 W17000 Ridgewood Dr., Menomonee Falls, WI 53051, <Larry_Montgombery@kohls.com>. It doesn't have to be a long letter, or a partisan letter — even a "letter of inquiry" asking Kohl's what is happening in Nicaragua is valuable.

David W. Dyson
pofn@clould9.net

The church, stories and 'lower education'

by Ched Myers

This month we consider the power of sacred stories to save lives as an antidote to the sentimentalizing of the Christmas season in both church and shopping mall. Through the articles he's assembled, guest editor Ched Myers teaches us that telling the "great" stories of our lives and traditions is an essential theological enterprise for these times, a way of doing theology that preserves the nuance, paradox, contradictions and multi-dimensionality of that life-giving, flesh-and-blood reality of God-with-us. Facing up to Herod and the too-abundant blood of innocents requires a courage that doctrinal abstractions seldom inspire. Faithfulness more often suckles on tales that liberate our hearts and imaginations — and remind us that the angels also sing for us. We're especially grateful to Myers for showing us that storytelling is never mere child's play — except in the deepest sense.

— Julie A. Wortman, editor and publisher

[Thanks also to Timothy Whelan of Rockport, Me. and to the folks at LensWork (www.lenswork.com) for their generous and valuable help in locating the fine art photography found throughout this issue.]

I will tell you something about stories ...
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see. All we have to fight off illness and death ...
Their evil is mighty, but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories, let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that ... because we would be defenseless then.

—Leslie Silko, *Ceremony*

FOR THE BETTER PART of two centuries, modernism has waged a relentless war against narrative ways of knowing. The forces of rationalism, abstraction and science effectively marginalized, suppressed or destroyed cultures of story. Utilitarian facts were privileged over useful fictions, and the propositional eclipsed the poetic, while narrative was relegated to parlor, theater, or reservation. And as Native American novelist Silko rightly warns, as people became confused and forgetful about their stories, they became increasingly defenseless against the onslaught of the myths and machines of modernity.

The Enlightenment used the principle of criticism to unfetter our minds from the "pre-rational" myths of religion and traditional culture. More recently, however, the postmodernist movement has used the same critical capacity to unmask modernism's own master narrative: the myth of "Progress." This totalizing narrative has functioned to legitimate capitalism, the Euro-American colonization of third- and fourth-world peoples, and the technological domination of the earth.

The deconstruction of modernity's "story" has been accompanied by a remarkably swift unraveling of its hegemony. Not only are such formerly revered notions as "objectivity" now widely suspect, we have also seen a resurgence of narrative epistemology. The field of biblical studies offers a telling barometer. The historical-critical paradigm of looking "behind" or "through" scriptural narrative in order to extract historical or doctrinal data held sway for 150 years in mainstream circles. Yet in the space of the last two decades, not only did new narrative approaches to biblical criticism resurface in the academy, they now widely prevail.

Many deconstructionists insist, however, that there can no longer be any master narratives. The alienating, fragmenting experience of modernity has shattered Humpty, and his story can't be put together again. Unfortunately, while such a dictum may be plausible in the insular context of university-based cultural studies, it does little to impact the continuation of history's only remaining hegemonic grand narrative, that of globalizing capitalism.

As a "post-modern traditionalist," I believe that recovering the power of narrative is key to the double task of resisting capitalism's cosmology and reconstructing a more humane culture. If Silko is right that sacred stories are all we have to "fight off illness and death," then what resources do we, the orphaned children of modernity, have to work with?

The dominant narrative tradition in North America — television and cinema — is hardly sufficient. Neal Gabler wrote recently that the media industry is exhibiting "narrative fatigue."

"Almost imperceptibly, we have been losing our stories. ... From MTV to the latest movie blockbuster ... what you find is creeping plotlessness."

Gabler asserts that while previously films attempted to fashion archetypal storylines that resonated, now technology provides a "less taxing, more dependable means of affecting the audience ... Through special

effects and creative sound, filmmakers realized they could generate sensations in the audience without the need for a narrative."

Such "sensational-ism," reproduced everywhere from advertising to the dramatics of professional sports, socializes us deeper into a passive culture of spectacle. These stories are just entertainment. In contrast, I would propose the older and wiser tradition of biblical story as the best resource for a cultural process of narrative renewal — at least for Christians! Sadly, however, biblical literacy is at a low ebb among the churches in North America. I have observed this repeatedly as I teach, train and facilitate adult scripture study around the country and across the ecumenical spectrum. But I have also noted two interesting phenomena.

One is that, of the Bible stories adults do know, most were learned when they were children (e.g. in Sunday School or at family devotions). The other is that many persons in the professional ministry did not significantly broaden their biblical literacy in theological seminary. While they may have learned a fair bit of methodology for analyzing biblical texts, they did not necessarily come away with a sense of the "Great Story" of Scripture.

These two impressions suggest that we would do well not to underestimate the enduring power of "lower education." We might call this the art of communicating compelling stories simply and (at least initially) with as little complicating theory as possible, in the belief that such stories shape character, community and (God willing) history. It is time for the church to reject modernity's pejorative derogation of stories as a second-rate way of knowing, for it has not served us well. Happily, as the various pieces in this issue demonstrate, efforts to recover sacred story are well underway.

The profile of Tom Boomershine and the Network of Biblical Storytellers gives an example of a movement that seeks to nurture both the craft and the discipline needed for narrative competence. And Ina Hughes shows how the new literary genre of "creative nonfiction" reclaims the narrative character of life.

According to Paulo Freire, popular education begins with stories, though ones we discover, not ones that are imposed. People learn best by generating and reflecting upon narratives from their own lived contexts. In this vein, Loida Martell-Otero describes how Latino/a theology gives priority to precisely such everyday experience — *lo cotidiano*. Bill Wylie-Kellermann reviews an important book that rediscovers the hermeneutic vitality of the urban marginalized. Finally, Jim Perkinson testifies to the prophetic power of street-level poetic rhythm as "the first word of creation."

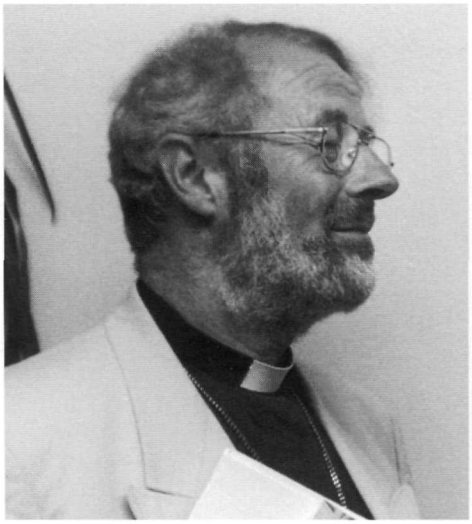
When I was asked to guest edit this issue of *The Witness*, I knew immediatly that I wished to interview James W. McClendon, a pioneer of contemporary narrative theology and my dearest teacher. Just as we were going to press I received the sad news that Jim had passed away at his home in Altadena, Calif. It is with a profound sense of indebtedness and gratitude for his work and witness that I dedicate this issue to him.

This narrative renaissance is good news for the church, and for cultural reconstruction. By reaching deep into our storied past we can rehabilitate the future. The evil in our history is indeed great, but it can't stand up to our stories. ●

Ched Myers lives in Los Angeles.

Unpayable debt – have they understood?

by Peter Selby



IN THE JUNE 2000 ISSUE of *The Witness* I tried to paint a picture of people's faces in the Jubilee 2000 demonstration at the G7 Summit in Birmingham, England in May 1998. They wore the expressions of liberation. Economists they might not be; nor politicians either; nor people who constantly attend demonstrations of one kind or another. But in substituting a human chain for the chains of debt they demonstrated a deep understanding of what freedom in Christ might be like. It's like breaking the chains of debt, throwing off a burden you could no longer carry.

In their tens of thousands they understood that. They understood that some of the debts of the poorest countries had been unjustly incurred. They understood that many of them had been paid off many times over because of the hugely increased interest charges of the last two decades. They understood that having two-thirds of the world impoverished by trade systems that produce debt was no way to run the world, and in the end no way to achieve our prosperity. They understood that in Birmingham in 1998 and in Cologne at the summit of 1999. And it looked as though the politicians were really having to take that popular movement on board and make policies on the basis of the same understanding.

So what has gone wrong? And why has the 2000 Okinawa summit produced so little as to be insulting to the aspirations of the campaign and, even more, to the desperate needs of the world's poorest? Basically the problem is that a movement around justice has been turned into an economics of grudging charity. The so-called HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) program is run by creditor nations who have the power to impose conditions on the economies of the poorest for the alleviation of debt.

Of course we want any debt relief to be channelled into improved life conditions for the poorest people — so do the poor themselves. But that is not the same as insisting that the poorest countries take on board the requirements of late capitalism: low public spending, trade liberalization, a free market in money. Those orthodoxies of western economics at the end of the 20th century are neither what the poorest nations want nor what will produce real gains for the poorest of their populations. Imposing that kind of "structural adjustment" leads to poorer education and health care, and the steady "trickle-up" economics that enrich the elites. That is what the demonstrators of Jubilee 2000 at Birmingham, Cologne and Okinawa understood so well, and that is the understanding we have yet to convey to our political leaders.

Ann Pettifor, the forthright director of Jubilee 2000 here in Britain, has always said the campaign ends in December 2000: "Other people may want to make a career out of this, but I don't," she once said. And so the national office will surely close. But it is already clear that there is a groundswell in favor of a continuing campaign for genuine jubilee. There is much debate about the form that will take, and as far as Britain is concerned it will be a while before it is clear how that will evolve.

But what cannot be in doubt is the need to build on the popular understanding that is Jubilee 2000's greatest achievement. We have generated a greater commitment to international development than has ever been there in the past. And we have conveyed something of the real character of liberation as the redeemed in Christ have understood. Many Christians who had no idea that the Bible was so strong on economic justice know it now, and many who knew nothing about Christianity know at least that it has something profound and trenchant to say about usury and jubilee.

So where do we go, we who want that wider and deeper understanding to be shared? I suggest we take the route of making connections. The fact is that in our wealthy countries are millions also living under the burden of unpayable debt, and the economically well-off know deep within themselves that a life built on credit (what is credit but the huge debt of wealthy people?) is a house built on sand. We need a movement for the relief of debt — at home as well as overseas. We need to get people to talk honestly about economic enslavement — of the rich as well as of the poor, and of the burdens they cannot afford to carry.

"I've never talked about money in church — except when the church needs money." Countless people have said that to me, and it has to change. Economic liberation has to change our prayers and our lives. Then the politicians will start to understand what their voters, deep down, already know. That is the campaign we need, on both sides of the ocean. ●

Peter Selby is the Bishop of Worcester, England. His commentaries are a periodic feature of "A Global Witness" on *The Witness'* website, <www.thewitness.org>.

Winter Fire

by Rose Marie Berger, for Josephine Jochimisen, Deer Creek Township, Wisconsin

The fire stretched its old bones,
snapping and popping, as it loosened
itself into the weary wood.

They found Josie's body in the basement.
The twisted modern art of her walker
had fused with the beveled panes
of the kitchen windows. Her grip
slipped as the first floor furring
strips burned beneath her.

Patrick, her son, had not missed
a morning milking in twenty years.
In the barn he leaned into the warmth
of his Guernseys, their breath
forming thin smoke in the frozen air,
and thought of his brother in Germany.
Machines hissed and sucked.

The fire spread like daffodils
on a hillside, a blanket of fierce
yellow melting buttercups, verdigris
greens of old copper and deep
lake blues. Patrick rolled himself
into the burning house until he
nearly smothered in the scent.
He could not find her.

There was a lumbering of trucks —
hoses hissing, voices falling off
short in the sharp air. When the
trucks ran dry, the men cracked
the pond and sucked the last depths
of summer onto the house, wildly
raining frogs, algae, minnows
through the roof.

In those last moments, Josie
called on the angels in the names
of her sisters — Fats, Chub, Snooks —
and her grandfather, Gus, who
held her when the floor collapsed.
Then they all snuck away
to the breathing place under the pond ice
where even the fire could not hide.

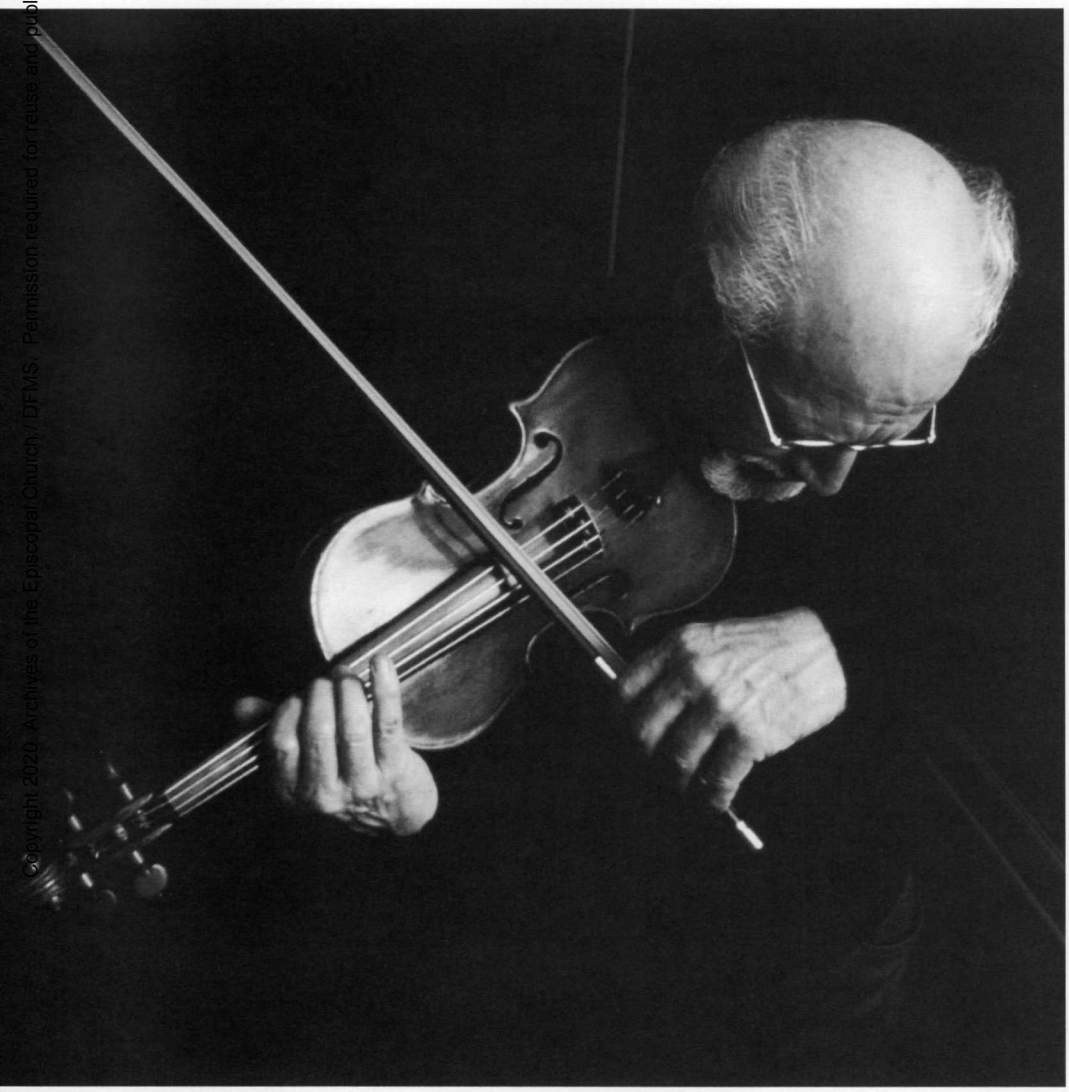
© Arthur B. Davis 1918

Poet ***Rose Berger*** lives in Washington, D.C.

TELL ME A STORY, AN

Doing theology through personal narrative

by Ina Hughes



THE SPIRITUAL CHRONICLER and prose-poet laureate of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, prefaces his book, *The Gates of the Forest*, with this parable from real life:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracles would be accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.

D I WILL REMEMBER

It is not by accident that all great teachers of every religion used stories to get their message across. You can preach me a sermon, show me a doctrine, recite a creed — and I might be impressed.

But tell me a story, and I will remember.

Scholars generally agree World War II not only reconfigured maps, it changed the way bookstores, libraries and publishing houses did business. It used to be that when people went to buy or check out a book, most of what they had to chose from was catalogued under "fiction" and displayed on shelves near the front door. That way the general public wouldn't have to bother scrounging around among dusty poetry anthologies, textbooks and volume after volume of dry-to-the-bone historical compilations.

Fiction. Everybody wanted fiction.

Nonfiction was the wallflower of the literary world: too boring and academic to be entertaining, too self-restrained to tell a zippy story, too stifled to inspire or stay with the reader beyond the moment. Creative nonfiction was an oxymoron, and writers of plain old "not fiction" — it being the only kind of writing described by what it is not — had the reputation of being people who weren't clever enough to make anything up and whose calamaties and happy endings were so homemade they were unconvincing.

Other than cookbooks, dictionaries and an occasional coffee-table book to match the drapes, adults preferred to spend their money on fiction. In elementary schools of the 1940s, nonfiction was, for all practical purposes, limited to little orange biographies of dead white males in American history, Booker T. Washington and Florence Nightingale being the token exceptions.

Nonfiction, creative or otherwise, was to literature as attic sale is to boutique.

Then things began to change, and it was storytellers like Eli Wiesel who started the ball rolling in another direction. Carnage in Europe had devastated whole nations. News traveled faster than ever before, and returning soldiers got home with less time "to put the war behind them." Rumors of wartime atrocities rolled across both the Atlantic and Pacific, atrocities we Americans not only could not imagine, but didn't want to.

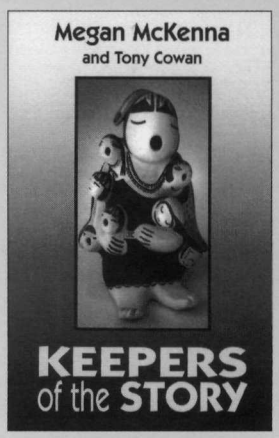
People became less and less satisfied with second-hand reports, myths, commentaries and the John Wayne/Doris Day version of reality. *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life* magazine, the news reels at the movies made events more "current" than ever before. We wanted to read the letters soldiers wrote their moms back home, hear for ourselves the stories from concentration-camp victims, understand the theories and political intrigue of the Normandy invasion.

But even more than that, we wanted to know what people did to survive emotionally and spiritually, because if we knew that, we might be able to believe in, or even construct, our own principles and religious values. William Howarth, who teaches Creative Nonfiction at Princeton, explains it this way: Personal stories flourish in a period of great upheaval. People need something concrete, something real to hold onto.

Nonfiction began its regeneration in the early 1940s. In the 1960s, the personal narrative quickly grew into a genre in its own

Keepers of the story

Storytellers Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan are authors of *Keepers of the Story* (Orbis, 1997), a useful volume of tales drawn from many religious traditions — Old and New Testaments, Sufi mysticism, Native American traditions and Eastern religions — and designed not only to help the reader understand storytelling as a powerful form of communication but also to equip those interested in learning how to become effective storytellers themselves. "Stories are crucial to our sense of well-being, to identity, to memory, and to our future," the authors assert. "Some say storytelling is essential to our survival as human beings."



right — as so-called "creative nonfiction." Both of these were times of serious flux. People began to lose sight of who they were. The lines began to blur between faith and reason. Old truths clashed with new discoveries.

We needed real stories, of real people, told with grace and honesty, to see us through.

Oral tradition wasn't even good enough anymore. We wanted to read and re-read these true-life stories, to bring them into our homes because they had made their way into our hearts. We wanted to own them for ourselves, and so both writers and readers began putting more intellectual and emotional energy into nonfiction. Stories whose purpose and intent it is to tell the truth as we know it became more popular than fiction.

Ancient Greeks thought there to be only two genres of writing: poetry and history. There was less interest in labels. No Dewey decimal system yet devised to separate off different kinds of writing, and writers did not have to choose a category in which to define themselves. No line was drawn between storyteller and philosopher. This seems odd to us. Either a story is true or it is not. Nevertheless, Heinrich Schumann used Homer's "Iliad," a nonfictional "document" you might call it, to locate and unearth the actual remains of Troy.

Poetry and history together.
Essentially that is what creative nonfiction is: poetry and history together. Fiction is "made up." Personal narratives or, as it is called today, creative nonfiction, are stories we discover, stories that explain who we are and what we believe. A fancier name for it might be biomythography, but creative nonfiction is nothing less than truth wearing its Sunday clothes.

The nonfiction is in the experience-based nature of these stories. The writer makes a contract with the reader that what she is writing is the truth as she knows it. The creative is in the telling. As opposed to directions on a can of soup or the intricate details of the life cycle of a dragonfly, or even the objective reporting of a good biographer — all of which fall under the non-fiction umbrella — creative nonfiction challenges the writer to uses language and plot in such a way that the reader's story and the writer's story merge into one, the confluences of two rivers.

The implications of all this for theology are obvious.

The Bible is a collection of stories, and although they are in a class by themselves, I have come to believe that holy writ is a continuum. The personal parables we share out of our own experience and the psalms of both lament and praise we compose in our hearts are all part of the same sacred testament, bearing witness to the mysterious ways in which God works.

It isn't doctrines and dogmas that save us when the chips are down. It isn't a working knowledge of the teleological, axiological and ontological proofs of the existence of God that will pull us through the rough patches. What pulls us through are the stories we have been told, or discovered for ourselves. Stories of lost sheep and good fathers, of a rich man in a purple robe, a little boy opening up his picnic lunch, and three women racing through the dawn to find someone to share their story with.

Like all sacred scripture, such stories are meant to be shared. Creative nonfiction is the mother tongue of faith.

Alex Haley once said that when a person dies, a whole library dies. He didn't mean everyone is endowed with the kind of lively imagination that can fabricate great plots and cliff-hangers out of the what-ifs of life. He is describing how you and I have in us stories only we can tell, and if we don't tell them, they will die with us. Stories are our first inklings of immortality. They hold alive the people we have loved and lost awhile. They keep happy experiences fresh, worthy perspectives documented long after their due-date has expired.

They give grief a meaning and
courage a purpose.
The stories of our life become our life. They give witness to family and interpersonal dynamics, show how faith and values are honed and made shatter-proof. Or not.

In them we reap the ability to survive, perhaps even distinguish ourselves as we take on the ghosts and giants that haunt a spoiled, over-stimulated culture. We learn from the stories we are told what is important, how to differentiate between the things we should celebrate and the things we should fear. Because of the stories in us and around us, we have less excuse for boredom, for failure, for diminishing the kind of person we were meant to be, either by God's design or family expectations.

Hard as they try, and we find a hearty supply of efforts on the bestseller lists, impersonal how-to books don't pack the wallop a good story does — whether it's thin thighs or God in heaven we're trying to "get."

Many features have been singled out as the definitive difference between us and our creature cousins out in oceans and up in trees. We are the only animal that blushes, that prays. We're the only animal that cooks its food, paints its face, drinks bottled water.

Listens to Barry Manilow.

Most significant of all we are the only animal that tries to figure life out, that imagines what it feels like to die, that broods and dreams and imagines. We are the only animal that can talk our stories or, better still, write them down to leave behind or to share with others. Our dependence on each other's stories goes back as far in time as to when our ancestors, admiring their opposing thumbs, sat around campfires and talked the night away.

Eli Wiesel is right. The only way to find the light, to puzzle our way through the forest, to remember who we are and whose we are, is to swap those stories. I tell you mine in hopes that you will tell me yours so that together we can understand our story. Why is that so important?

Because only in living our story will
we ever understand the story.

Perhaps that is why creative nonfiction is outselling, outsmarting, outpacing fiction. *The New York Times* consistently reviews more nonfiction than fiction. The growing popularity of reality TV (which may be the devil in the blue dress when it comes to nonfiction), the number of life-based documentaries and first-person tell-alls, plus the fact that we have at least one 24-hour biography channel, further testify that in today's world, nonfiction has gone to the head of the class.

It isn't doctrines and dogmas that save us when the chips are down. It isn't a working knowledge of the teleological, axiological and ontological proofs of the existence of God that will pull us through the rough patches. What pulls us through are the stories we have been told, or discovered for ourselves. Stories of lost sheep and good fathers, of a rich man in a purple robe, a little boy opening up his picnic lunch, and three women racing through the dawn to find someone to share their story with.

But we can't stop there. We need more than the old, old stories — the ones we know word for word, the ones whose endings no longer take us by surprise, the ones time and familiarity have all but sucked the life out of.

As odd as it sounds, the Age of Communication has made it more convenient to allow ourselves and our children to grow up on other people's stories. It's easy to become captives in that great alphabetized empire of ABC, CBS and all the rest, not to mention the bytes and chomps the Internet takes out of our imagination. We can't let technology be the cat that gets our tongue, tempting as it is. We need to share with each other our own situation comedies, commentaries, love stories, documentaries, mysteries. We need to pass along the songs and parables we discover within ourselves, from our own experiences.

Poet Gwendolyn Brooks longs for "a teller in a time like this." Kurt Vonnegut says we need to "become unstuck in time." William Zinsser points out that telling each other our stories is like "reinventing the truth." All of this is just same song, another verse, of all the old hymns and scriptures that call us to be storytellers.

It's how we do theology. ●

Ina Hughes is a columnist for *The Knoxville News-Sentinel* in Knoxville, Tenn.

EMBODYING THE

An interview with James W. McClendon

by Ched Myers

JAMES WILLIAM MCCLENDON, Jr., was born in Louisiana in 1924. Raised and ordained in the Southern Baptist tradition, he liked to call himself a "small 'b' baptist" theologian. McClendon has taught theology for 46 years at a variety of public universities and theological seminaries. These included the University of San Francisco (where he was the first non-Catholic theologian in the U.S. to belong to a Catholic theology department), Stanford, Temple, Goucher, Notre Dame, St. Mary's Moraga, Baylor, and Fuller Theological Seminary. His pioneering *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Abingdon, 1974, Trinity Press, 1990) helped launch the narrative theology movement. He recently completed the last of his three-volume work in systematic theology: *Ethics* (1986), *Doctrine* (1994) and *Witness* (2000). Jim became my teacher in the late 1970s at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and remained my theological mentor and friend over the years. McClendon pasted away on October 30, 2000. — Ched Myers

Ched Myers: As one of the pioneers of, and consistently articulate voices in, recent narrative theology, could you give a sketch of how this movement grew during the 1960s and 1970s?

James McClendon: These past decades have seen so many kinds of theological styles and trends: "death of God theology," the theology of play and so on. They had their day and then faded away. To many, narrative theology was just one more technique for doing the same old thing. But for others of us, the deeper concerns had to do with a growing awareness that in the course of the Enlightenment there had been a consistent attempt to de-narrativize the content of religion.

Enlightenment thinkers spoke of narratives as myths, by which they didn't mean anything complimentary. Their idea was to have a theology that was rational, based upon firm, self-evident philosophical foundations, and quite free of the stories that the Bible told. Those stories might illustrate the true theology, they might even exemplify it, but they couldn't be it. So the Enlightenment was a time in which the narrative character of human existence was reduced to secondary status. For example, John Locke doesn't make anything of the story of his own life or anybody else's life.

In the 1960s there was an increasing sense that the Enlightenment, for all its virtues, had let us down theologically. There was a strong casting about for other modes of doing theology and, in particular, a return to Scripture. It dawned on some of us that the Enlightenment's suppression of narrative was not a good thing, and that the only honest way to talk about God was to talk about the story of the world and God's relation to it. So there should not be such a thing as "narrative theology"; there should only be ordinary theology that ordinarily has narrative content.

Around this time (1970-71), while at Goucher College, I began work on *Biography as Theology*. It occurred to me that the only kind of religious experience that was distinctive and worth talking about was narrative experience — that is, life stories. So I researched lives of outstanding 20th-century Christians. I was particularly interested in those who were not trained theologians, such as the diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld and the composer Charles Ives, as well as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Baptist radical Clarence Jordan, both of whom did have theological training but who were not professors. I was just trying to show how there is theology present in every life, including those of Christians in the 20th century. In their life stories I was able to find content that could speak to the main concerns of recent Christianity. Because humans are so story-engaged, I felt that narrative theology is not a popular fad, but something that is just as enduring as Scripture itself.

CM: What do you mean by "small 'b' baptist theology"?

JM: I was raised in Baptist churches in the south. When I went to teach at the Episcopal divinity school in Berkeley (Church Divinity School of the Pacific), they were fond of saying that they were both Catholic and Protestant. Since I had taught in both Catholic and Protestant schools I thought,

‘GREAT STORY’

"Well, I'll have no trouble fitting in." But I found I did have trouble fitting in as the ecumenical guest; there was a gap there between them and my lingering Baptist convictions and nature. I tried to think what that gap amounted to and decided that perhaps the thing was that Baptists were neither Catholic nor Protestant, but some sort of third sort of Christian thing that wasn't identical with the other two.

Soon after I got to CDSP I read John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. It was a transformative experience that completely changed my life, because Yoder brought to the surface the things I had believed in as a Baptist and made me confront them. My efforts at ecumenism to that point had been to try to seem more Protestant rather than to be who I am. So I seized upon the idea of baptists with a small "b." This refers not just to those who label themselves as Baptist, but Christians of any sort (including Episcopalians) who see the radicals of the 16th century — the so-called Anabaptists — as their spiritual forbears, even if not direct progenitors.

As I tried very hard to spell out in *Ethics*, the "baptist vision" has two mottoes: first,"This is that"; and, second, "Then is now."

Each needs some explanation. "This is that" is taken from the King James Version of Acts 2:16, where Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost reads from the prophets and then says to the audience, this — in other words, what his listeners see here today — is that. It's what the prophet was speaking about. So the right way to read prophecy is not just as historical record of the past, but as a disclosure of the meaning and significance of the present. In a sense, the first century (the New Testament period) is the 16th century, and the Reformation (and especially the radical Reformation) is our own century.

"Then is now" tries to do the same thing. The "end times" about which we read in Scripture is not just information about how things may come out in some remote distant time. It's information about what is of final importance here and now. Eschatology is what comes last, but it is also what lasts, because it is enduring.

The thing that strikes me about the radical reformers is that they were so varied. There is no one person that baptists look to as their founder, no Luther or Calvin. And this is not accidental; there were so many leaders of such different sorts. For example, Menno Simons was indeed an important figure, but Mennonites would still be Mennonites without Menno. Hans Denck, Hans Hut, Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Conrad Grebel — these were each different people with different concerns. What they had in common was this baptist vision that shaped their lives and often caused their deaths, because they were a martyred people. Indeed they believed that the story of the cross is the story of every Christian's life.

CM: In *Ethics* you state that "theology discovers and renovates its own narrative voice." Thus theology is a conversation not only with Scripture, but also with hymns, liturgical content and ministry practices. This is very different than simply being in dialogue with philosophers.

JM: Yes. It helps to distinguish between primary and secondary theology. Primary theology is the church trying to think out its own convictions, and this gets expressed in sermons, prayers, hymns — the sources of its ongoing common life. Eventually, primary convictions by which it tries to live get written down in creeds and confessions of faith or expressed afresh in new hymns and new sermons or simply lived out in the lives of existing members of the community. Secondary theology, which is the main thing that universities are concerned with, is theology about theology. It tries to take a step back from primary theology and ask questions about justification, truth, legitimation, and the significance of primary theology. Very often it forgets that there is primary theology and simply ends up talking about its own justification, truth, and verification, which is a regrettable lapse, a diminishing.

CM: One thing I and so many others have appreciated is that you help us understand some of the great theologians not only as secondary theologians, but also as primary theologians. Your dramatic lectures on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a human being as well as theologian really fired my imagination, for example. And you include in your writing the biographies of non-theologians such as Dorothy Day as well. This seems to function to reclaim theology as an ordinary Christian "practice," and not just a profession.

JM: A primary practice, yes. Because to think about our convictions is already to be engaging in some degree in primary theology — whether my primary convictions are about God or something else.

CM: Your work on theology as a "science of convictions," as in *Understanding Religious Convictions* (with James Smith, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) and *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Trinity Press, 1994), was closely related to your work as an ethicist who was very much part of the emerging movement of "character ethics." Could you tell us a little about that?

JM: This does bring up a funny little story. When I went to teach at CDSP I had taught at a number of other places, but never had been assigned the duty of teaching ethics. Fortunately, in the interview there I was asked whether I could teach ethics — not if I had taught ethics. So I said, "Yes." And, sure enough, I could. I guess it's like discovering that you can play the violin — you pick it up and you get a sound. I've cast about for various ways to teach ethics. I was much influenced early on by Karl Barth, who scattered his ethics through the volumes of *Church Dogmatics*. I was then much influenced by my contacts with Stanley Hauerwas; it's really Stanley to whom we Christians owe the language of the ethics of character and virtue. He was laying claim to elements that he thought had been missing from Enlightenment ethics, just as I thought there were elements missing from Enlightenment theology. He and I gradually came to share the view that ethics and theology were not two things but one thing. Character and virtue were then picked up by others who were much more philosophical in their approaches, such as Alasdair MacIntyre.

CM: One of the many themes you were ahead of the curve in discussing was the concept of "embodiment" and of the body

— both the individual body and the corporate body — in ethics. This has become quite popular in theological discourse in the 1990s.

JM: In the original edition of *Ethics,* I spoke of ethics as a three-stranded cord — the cord wouldn't be itself if all the strands weren't there. One of those strands was the strand of embodied selfhood. In the revised edition I link this with what my wife, philosopher Nancy Murphy, calls "physicalism." Human nature is not found in the old Cartesian dualism between mind and body, but rather in the identity of body and spirit. I found "embodied selfhood" in the 18th-century lives of Jonathan and Sarah Pierpont Edwards. He, in particular, is thought of as just a "talking head," a kind of detached intellect. But if you study their shared life you find that they had very rich emotional and physical lives and that what they had to say theologically was inseparable from those riches. So I used their lives to illustrate "body ethics," just as I used the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to illustrate social ethics and the life of Dorothy Day to illustrate resurrection ethics.

CM: You've written that narrative in many ways bridges the gulf between experience and Scripture that was opened up by 19th-century theology. In *Doctrine* you go so far as to say that the Bible is best read by paying attention throughout to character, setting and episode, as well as to who is doing the narration and who is doing the hearing. This narrative approach to Scripture has begun to carry the day in biblical studies, though only belatedly. Yet there are still many who say you can't speak of a plot of the Bible; it's just a collection of random notes and moral traditions and so on. But you are very clear from a theological perspective that one can trace a plot throughout and pay attention to the various settings and thereby grasp the story of God and the story that God wants us to participate in.

JM: Yes. I refer to this sometimes as the Great Story, the big Bible story of which all the smaller stories are component parts. I don't know that we have any infallible way of telling the Great Story. I tried to paraphrase it in *Ethics* and *Doctrine*. In the Great Story, God creates in love and God's loved ones rebel, but that doesn't end the story for God. In a way it only begins it, because God loves the sinner, which leads to all of these God-initiated overtures, which in turn climax (for Christians) in Jesus and his cross. That's a kind of a plot and it issues in what Ralph Wood would call a comic or happy outcome. And the comic outcome is in the rest of the New Testament and the rest of our lives.

CM: Do you feel that your embrace of a narrative way of doing theology, history and ethics has something maybe to do with how and where you were raised?

JM: Oh, I'm certain of that. I grew up in Louisiana. My father was a Methodist — the Methodist Episcopal Church South it was called. My mother was a Baptist — Southern Baptist it was called, but we just said Baptist at home. I was taken along to the Baptist church so that's the one I ended up in. And I think that the way the Bible was taught in Sunday School and in my home did emphasize the stories — probably emphasized the parts more than the great story, but that came up also. I'm sure it shaped the way I thought about the Bible.

CM: You are well aware of the ambivalence — even suspicion — that many philosophically trained theologians and historical-critically trained biblical scholars have had toward what you call in *Ethics* (in G.M. Rophins' words) the "counter, original, spare, strange" character of the biblical salvation stories of Abraham and Jesus. Those old stories sit so uneasily with the modern mind and yet you insist on building theology around them.

JM: I don't have any quarrel in principle with the scientific, historical, critical approach to the Bible, but I don't think it's the most helpful approach. At the end of *Doctrine* I have a section on the temptations that face people who try to read the Bible. One of them is the historical-critical temptation: to try to penetrate through the Bible to find the alleged facts behind it and in doing so missing what the Bible itself has to say. There is, of course, historical or concrete reality behind the Bible — it's not all just fiction. But we don't get closer to the Bible if we get past the text and focus on our projection of the concrete reality.

CM: Why does this way of thinking and being — the narrative voice, the narrative mind, narrative discourse — continue to be seen by scholars as a second-rate way of knowing, when most human beings for most of history have lived and continue to live out of it? This seems to me another interesting case of the majority being ruled by the minority.

JM: I think that's still the heritage of the Enlightenment with us, and I don't think it will last forever.

CM: It's interesting that as a baptist theologian you conclude in your *Biography as Theology* that the role of saints needs to be revisited by Protestants. Subsequently there's been sort of a renaissance in interest in the lives of saints.

JM: Well, we all have saints, whether we're Episcopalians or Pentecostals. There is in every church some figure or figures who are perceived as larger than life, as more authentically displaying the way that we're all trying to follow. And when these figures pass into the past, they get posted on the wall of the church or on a marble monument or something like that and all the more are they treated as saintly. I think that's a good thing — the more local the better. Perhaps one of the mistakes that Roman Catholics make is to try to press too hard for universal saints and thus pay too little attention to the flexible possibilities of local saints. So I'm for saints and for sainthood, because it is just biography as theology. It represents the Christian life lived out in a given time and place, with all of its faults and flaws — and saints have always got those as well as the glories and hopes. ●

Biblical scholar ***Ched Myers*** is a former contributing editor of *The Witness* who lives in Los Angeles.

BREAKDOWN TRANSFIGUR

New Beat Poetry as theological discourse

by Jim Perkinson

© Calvin Stewart 1989/ SHOOTING BACK

THE POWER of language today has been lost in a fetish. Our post-industrial, globalized culture that is busy making the entire world into a parking lot has also sold the word for a dime. Here and there, however, weeds take root in the post-industrial cement, transform toxicity into chicory-blue, hide pheasants, frame rain in green and shout a silent "om" skyward. And here and there, amidst the mud, old griot voices emerge new and wet, wrap tooth around taunt, lip language fresh, and whisper like the first cry of crow. Spirit has never yet found an easy home in the flesh. Incarcerated in the "body" of the 10-second commercial, it begins to choke. It labors to breathe. But given a sensual body to gather in, it can still break open the wall between the worlds. Indeed, life can breed like infinity in the merest of cracks between a few spoken words. Listen to a piece entitled "Revelation," by Detroit poet Ron Allen:

open
the
head
walk
up
the
neck
look
in
the

open
the
head
walk
up
the
neck
look
in
the
cortex
read
the
bones
fly

open
the
head
walk
up
the
neck
look
in
the
cortex
read
the
bones
fly

ED INTO BREAKTHROUGH

But of course, you who read this can't "listen." You are not present for the performance. You can only read and imagine, through the medium of dead tree. Yet it is precisely imagination that Allen seeks to open here. Since you cannot hear the tone or see the motion, background and "breakdown" have to go bail for the body.

In fact, Allen is a former drug user and schizophrenic who wrote his way out of a different kind of breakdown 20 years ago and is now a renowned poet-playwright on the arts scene in Motown. More accurately, Allen has not attempted to escape his struggle with his pen, but rather has transfigured "breakdown" into "breakthrough" by doing art on pain. If queried, he equates his writing with his spirituality and talks about both as necessary to becoming "human" in a culture of triviality. In a society dominated by advertising, capable of instantly commodifying every new impulse of creativity and selling political resistance like an "X" on a T-shirt, poetry is prayer. But Allen is very sophisticated in what he means by "poetry."

Poetry taken seriously as spirituality means resistance to the form. Domination takes in the contemporary moment. Not just content is at stake in such a practice, but modality. It is possible to lose the spiritual battle even while speaking against the forces of violence if the form of one's speech itself partakes of violence. In a culture of the sound bite, where political discourse is dominated by trivialized perceptions and complex issues are reduced to comic-book-level reflections, resistance requires a new grammar. It is not enough just to get the content right. The very way one speaks through one's body must itself "break" with convention, if "Spirit" is not going to end up as a Budweiser commercial.

"Rhythm," in this grasp of spirituality, is the first word of creation. It precedes "meaning." It is the womb of meaning. The word of revelation defies repetition. Vision that is vital demands an ever new wineskin. Allen supplies that skin as a "skein" of syncopation. The "thread," the "yarn" of mere narrative — proceeding prosaically from beginning, through middle, to the end — is understood as itself suspect. It invites to predictability and routine. It promises the fiction of "control." It is easily taken over by the intention to dominate. Poetry that refuses the clear clichés of narrative, that works at the edge of surreality while remaining close to the passion of the street, can function as antidote. This is exactly what Allen's poetry does. "Listen" again (this time to an excerpt written for a benefit for imprisoned American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier):

The city village of aboriginal angst
The repressed fervor of exploded poetry
Blue black steel rhythms exploding funk
Absolute, absolute funk of blood
The blood of the struggle
Frozen in commerce
The mission of a transformed people
Bleeding poems through
The drum ...
... The deep drum drama of tree and soil
Drum speak time walking fist
Like arias and chants
Speak a new blues
A blues of octave drum riot time
change the riot of my nerves
Inside rain cement
and iron fences
The tongue is a bullet
Rippin, lyric media passion time
Speak like guru of kaleidoscope dreams
Round moon time ...
... Aboriginal lookin, for bullets
Lookin, for a new sky
Lookin, for sentences hung in space ...

By putting together images that "normally" are not allowed to dwell together, this kind of poetry incarnates contradiction. But it also "practices" in speech the possibility of something like different cultures dwelling together in the same neighborhood or warring "races" on the same street. It practices — immediately and spontaneously in a spiritual discipline of the present moment! — the old dream-vision of the "lamb dwelling with the lion." It does not pretend the world is pretty, but puts harshness and gentleness side-by-side in the same raw incantation. When words are used as much for their sound-effects as for their "pictures" of meaning, the result is new experience, a plumbing of the depths of experience, where it has not yet been colonized by conventional categories. Sight is here crossed with hearing. Words "tense up" in proximity to each other. Complexity is offered as the new "vessel" of identity.

Poetry performers like Allen push their audiences to stop settling for a narrow representation of themselves, in the typical images offered by commercials, and instead invite them to descend into the depths of their psyches and bodies where paradox lies. Schizophrenia, in this pilgrimage, becomes a matter of inhabiting parallel universes, of embodying multiple ways of being human. Rather than being banished as "disease," it becomes the dangerous ground of a transcendence that all human beings stand close to and are called to honor.

In traditional cultures, the break that modernity labels as "breakdown" was elevated as the sign of spiritual possibility. The community gathered around whoever was being so "disturbed" and provided a cultural idiom and a social intimacy that was poised to receive the "crazy communication" as "spiritual revelation" relevant for the whole community. The "possessed ones" were embraced as dramatizing alternative "possi-

bilities of being" for the sane ones. Spirituality meant leaving "safe form" behind, and venturing into the chaotic waters of creation from which form first emerged.

And interestingly, when thus embraced, "craziness" in fact became craft. What appeared at first blush as aberration was disciplined into re-creation — of the entire community! Our own "recreation" industry is anything but that. Passive consumption of seductive images hardly re-vitalizes. It rather enervates. It inculcates resignation and atrophy. Real re-creation means re-visiting the primal stuff that predates the management power of control. What is "life"? Where does it come from? Who am I really? Who am I still "becoming"? If these questions ever cease exercising us in wonder or pushing us into innovation and risk-taking, we are already dead. Poetry that throws off the constraints of conventional communication and gives free rein to sound-associations and syncopated, "jazz scat-like" juxtapositions of words, may indeed open one's head to "flying." It becomes the very grammar of transformation. After all, isn't that what spirit does in the flesh? And inevitably such an "up-welling" proliferates.

In recent years, under such untamed influences, I, too, have become a poet. My own homage would be something like this:

preacher preaches flung notes of sun
foot in the grave-thump of dead rising
pelvic ground round world
gyrating limb of fruit
slice the plumb of night
bite the apple
peel the shadow
open the eyeball
climb inside the light and down
idea-root of raised hair
rib-walk of ancestor ta
talking my name
shouting cemeteries of summons
singing europe back to africa
singing america under water
singing me below the ground
singing unrepentant!
this! is the bliss of burn!

But we can say more. This kind of poetry promises not only the "breakthrough" of re-creation, but portends the break-up of oppression. It not only exorcises at the individual level, it "prophesies" politically. In our day, after learning from the likes of Martin King and Mahatma Gandhi, who themselves learned from sibyls like Sojourner Truth and Gauri Ma, prophecy has finally begun to come clear. It is less a matter of clairvoyant "foretelling" than confrontational "forth-telling." The Jewish nabi'im ("prophets") from whom we take the term were gurus gripped by the agony that was relentlessly quarantined at the bottom levels of their society. They were ordinary folk assailed by the unordinary anguish of the poor of their day who did all they could to carry that anguish into the public sphere as a cry of judgment upon the whole body politic. Their voices did not offer coherent narrative, but molten lava. Image tumbled upon image in a tumult of tears and anger and sudden blushes of raging affection. The Spirit that possessed them did not bother with beginnings and ends when the little ones were being raped continuously, but leapt straight into the middle of a hot verb.

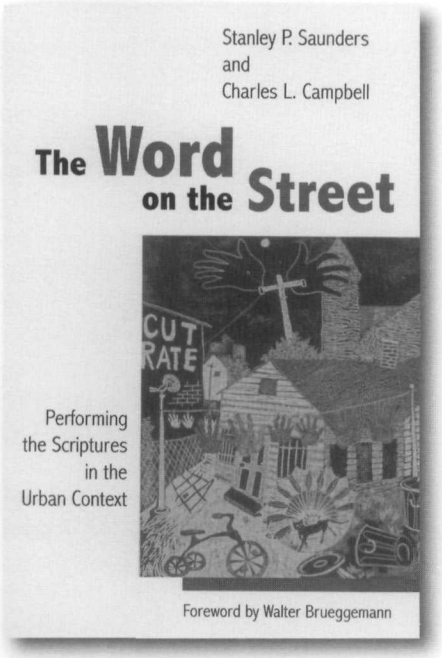
In the history of violence that is our history, the tremor that is the ghost of spirit in the flesh is first of all a broken torrent, a meaning bent in two, a force of groaning, a cry full of night and blood and the tremors of too much feeling locked up in too small a space. Its first word is necessarily poetry, not story.

Poetry in its most ardent attempts to give expression to what has not yet been clearly "experienced" is poetry in the mode of prophecy. Offered as an uncertain probe of one's humanity rather than a "nice" effort to sound "beautiful," it leaves behind both clarity and security. Instead, it opts to explore what is still so fresh and "bloody" it may appear as "ugly." In such a moment, poetry serves the "underground" agenda of the community, the unfinished business, the needs that have not yet been met, the freedoms that have not yet been given flesh to live in. Here, poetry — along with other art forms and mysticism and shamanism and interestingly enough, in our time, science fiction — represents a first attempt to articulate the future. The drive of human beings to "speak" themselves into being, to make meaning out of longing, to shape aspiration into satisfaction, to transform pain into a power to change, is primordial. It also gives rise to "tomorrow." Poetry that is willing to break open the conventions and codes of the present for the sake of what has not yet been "birthed" in speech or gestured in a body, is augury. It is pointing toward the aching frontier from whence hope arises and toward which responsibility acts. In this function, poetry is pronouncing a pox on all of our compromises with injustice and saying, in effect, "You have not yet emerged as a full human being. As long as any person anywhere is still suffering unjustly, all meaning everywhere, all sense of yourself as living a coherent life in a secure narrative is false. Your narrative is not yet big enough. You must try to speak what still hasn't been said. You are not yet you. Say more! Say it more deeply! Speak your word with a greater body, with a more complex resonance, with more rhythmic room in it for the 'other' impulses — all the other words and desires and persons and communities and cultural codes of meaning and vibrations of Life — that are still trying to become 'you'! The real you has not yet found a home in language. Break the bread of speech open and give yourself away in new fragments of experimental meaning, that awaken new soundings of truth in those who are still locked away in prison. You will discover it is not just 'them' you are freeing, but yourself. Truth is a polyrhythm that is still trying to happen in history. And 'everything' is what it is saying. And 'god' is who is speaking." ●

Detroiter ***Jim Perkinson*** teaches courses on world religions, African diaspora philosophy, liberation theology, colonialism and racism, death and dying, and social ethics through a joint appointment at Marygrove College and Ecumenical Theological Seminary. He is also a performance poet who regularly reads around the city.

The Word on the street

by Bill Wylie-Kellermann



The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context

by Stanley P. Saunders & Charles L. Campbell

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000)

IN *THE WORD ON THE STREET*, Chuck Campbell tells the story of taking a class to spend a night with homeless folks on the streets of Atlanta. After guiding them through the ordeal of locating sufficient cardboard to insulate them from the cold of the ground, James (one of the regulars who sleep in the backyard of the Open Door Community) quietly left the circle to return with his personal stash of doughnuts, which he broke and shared among the class. Campbell recognized this as a sacramental act. He discerned in it an emblem of the Lord's Supper.

This book is actually a series of overlapping and intersecting stories. One set concerns two seminary professors whose pedagogy involves changing the location of their classes, taking students into the city, the parks and public spaces inhabited by the homeless. Another are the stories of homeless people themselves, whose names and lives are given voice. Weaving through is also the saga of the Open Door Community, a catholic worker (small c) house founded by an activist Presbyterian couple, Ed Loring and Murphy Davis. There is also the story of Atlanta, its self-proclaimed glory, beneath which corporate powers ordain and enforce the criminalizing, invisibilizing, and scapegoating of homeless people. Where these stories interconnect or clash, the Word happens. It is there to be seen and heard.

In similar fashion this book comprises an assortment of stitched-together literary genres (like, I suppose, the scriptures themselves). The two professors contribute meditations and articles (written for the Open Door's political rag, *Hospitality*) along with sermons, footnoted scholarly works published in academic journals and supplementary material written expressly for the book. In the cracks are black-and-white prints by Christina Bray, each itself an evocative study in streetlife. Somehow it all manages to read, if not seamlessly, at least with an utter coherence (like, I suppose, the scriptures themselves).

Since Saunders is a New Testament scholar, his contributions are largely biblical and hermeneutical. These include close readings and striking new takes on well-worn parables, hymns, and resurrection narratives. But his emphasis is on reading site — and by that not simply social location, but actual physical placement. He tells a funny story of his class spreading out on a hot summer day in the plaza between a bank skyscraper and the park which was "home" to many poor folks. Their study? The fifth chapter of James with its devastating critique of wealth. As a student led them in an imaginative exercise of listening from the perspective of various people in the tower and the park, they were confronted by a security guard for posing some sort of threat! One of Saunders' most important contributions is a stunning analysis of how urban social architecture inscribes our hearts. It is a concise and wondrous examination of contested spaces as the locus of urban spirituality.

As a professor of preaching, Charles Campbell is struck with how the enterprise of proclamation is likewise altered by the location of the street. Whether his students are preaching good news to the homeless or to the principalities arrayed against them, they find their own voices changed and oddly freed in that placement.

All this strikes one as a new mode of public theology. And yet when Campbell rehearses a suggestive history, it seems more normative than aberration. From the prophets to Jesus, Peter and Paul, it is really the biblical mode. Add Francis, Luther, Whitefield, Wesley, or mention Abolitionism, The Great Awakening, and the Salvation Army and a recognizable tradition comes into focus. Think of recent movements: the Catholic Worker, Freedom Struggle preachers, or anti-nuclear liturgical direct action and this new mode is novel only with reference to the captivity of sanctuary and academy.

In like manner, marginal and neglected charisms such as solidarity and hospitality emerge in this volume as foundational Christian practices, discipleship disciplines embedded in baptism and eucharist, contesting the spaces of our very lives.

And that, it would seem, is the further story to be noticed: the tale of two professors whose lives get transformed by their own pedagogy. It is a story sometimes told in confession and tears, sometimes with the joy of new sight, always as gift. Let the reader understand (and beware): It is as well our own lives that are being read and told before our eyes. ●

Witness contributing editor ***Bill Wylie-Kellermann*** works for Chicago's Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE).

LO COTIDIANO

Finding God in the spaces of the everyday

by Loida I. Martell-Otero

Theological thinking among our people is like a woman who goes to a laundromat to wash her family's clothes. She sits and watches the clothes go round and round in that washing machine, and after a bit, she'll say, "Life in Christ is just like that. There are problems that tumble you around, but by the time the process is done, Christ assures that he will clean you with his blood, and you come out white as snow." Our people are a deeply theological people. —*Elizabeth Conde-Frazier*

One cannot understand the Latina/o worldview unless one sees the world of the everyday through our eyes. We consider *los del pueblo* (the people) to be the true theologians. Observing this, U.S. *feministas/mujeristas* have developed the concept of *lo cotidiano* as a theological category of knowing. María Pilar Aquino has defined *lo cotidiano* as the "whole of doing and thinking of our people in their daily lives and recurring routine." It encompasses the aesthetic and the celebratory (fiesta) elements of our lives, as well as the tedious and the mundane.

Daniel H. Levine views *lo cotidiano* as the space where the oppressed live in spite of the domination of sinful social structures. It is the space where people struggle daily to survive, where the effects of injustice, poverty and discrimination are concretely felt. It is also where the poor resist the religious, economic or social powers, and thus experience the salvific presence of God.

Feminista/mujerista theologians have criticized the patriarchal penchant for dismissing the "private" or "domestic" dimensions of life as being irrelevant to theology, to social analysis and to the struggle for change. They insist that *lo cotidiano* should not be reduced to what is "private" or "individual" and made secondary or subordinate to the "public" domain. The "public" has often been the space of the powerful (mostly men), who make invisible those at the periphery (particularly women), and who ignore those impacted the most by the decisions they make. For example, welfare legislation was debated, legislated and enforced by those affected the least by it; conversely, the greatest impact has been suffered by those whose voices were muffled or ignored in the debate. It is poor working mothers who must now face the day-to-day care of their children without safety nets and little community support. This "domestic" reality has a profound effect on the public domain, of course. So-called "welfare mothers" are forced into waged labor (since raising a child is not considered "work") in low-paying jobs. They must send their children to child-care or after-school programs — if they can afford to. This places a strain on public delivery systems and affects educational institutions.

Lo cotidiano allows us to see how both the realities of structural sin and of God's grace, justice, and love are manifest in everyday occurrences, especially at the level of our communities of faith. It makes the social location of the U.S. Hispanic/Latina community explicit, and does so in the narrative tradition, allowing the voiceless to tell their stories. Here, we cry out to the heavens for justice and peace. Stories of living in overcrowded tenements with no heat or hot water, or of shopping in supermarkets with spoiled food and inflated prices, or of schools with racist teachers, broken chalkboards, unsafe physical plants, and dilapidated and outdated books are not irrelevant to the task of theology.

Hispanic religiosity is often misperceived in individualistic categories. But a strong sense of community, inherited from our indigenous and African foreparents, is central to the cultural and religious legacy of U.S. Hispanics/Latinas. The functional unit of the community is the family. *Familia* is not just the nuclear family, but the extended family, similar to the Hebrew concept of *mishpahah*. It not only includes blood relatives, but also friends, neighbors, and even those who come from the same town of origin. Puerto Rican society, for example, has the concept of *hijo/a de crianza*: a child that is adopted through the informal ties of community. If a child needs a home, a family who is able takes the child in and raises her or him as one of its own. No difference is made between *los/las hijos/as de crianza* and one's birth children.

Familia is a sanctuary. It is the place where one's identity is affirmed and the source of moral decision-making. Here one's language or beliefs are not mocked as in the larger society; here Hispanics/Latinas can feel they belong. "To be exiled from family and friends," writes Paul J. Wadell, "would be not to exist."

Community and family are thus central for a theology of *lo cotidiano*. Theologians who have analyzed structural sin at the level of political, economic and social institutions have ignored it at the level of *familia*. They have not paid enough attention to everyday problems such as alcoholism, domestic violence, sinful patterns of patriarchy, and other such problems. Neither have they adequately assessed the human impact of poor housing and schooling, toxic dumping, lack of medical or recreational facilities or police brutality upon *familia*. Poor and marginalized families and communities must contend with these realities on a daily basis with little or no recourse to justice.

Another important element in *lo cotidiano* is the role of religion. U.S.

Hispanic/Latina religiosity is, like our culture, a mestizo/mulata phenomenon that can be traced to our African, indigenous and European roots on one hand, and to biblical and pre-Tridentine religious traditions on the other. (Thus we are often mocked or rejected by modernists as pagan or superstitious.) These roots have contributed to an organic worldview that is deeply relational and incarnational. We do not perceive a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular or between the spiritual and the material. Rather, the material world is permeated with the spiritual. God is the One who has "tabernacled" in the midst of us, and Jesus is truly a historical person, part of our *familia.*

U.S. Hispanic/Latina religiosity is particularly indebted to Spanish Catholicism. During colonial times, the *conquistadors* would always build a central plaza in each town that was defined by two buildings: a city hall and a cathedral. Religion dictated the rhythms of daily life. *La vida cotidiano* was ordered around its sounds and liturgical celebrations. Social events revolved around church weddings, baptisms and wakes. The result is a culture that is deeply embedded with religious undertones, and explains why sociologists often refer to U.S. Hispanic/Latina Protestants as "cultural Catholics." A good example of this was my maternal grandmother, a life-long American Baptist and Sunday school teacher. Her typical exclamatory phrases were "*Ave María Purísima*" ("Hail Mary, most pure") or "*Ay Virgen.*" Even today Protestant Hispanics who do not recognize infant baptism will nevertheless ask friends or church members to become godparents (*padrino/madrina*) of their children.

U.S. Hispanic/Latina Catholic theologians have thus claimed that the most authentic locus of theological reflection is popular religiosity. This has not been studied as much, however, among Hispanic Protestants (or *evangélicos/as*). There are, however, some defining characteristics of popular Protestantism, particularly that which arose from the Holiness movements of the early 1900s and from the charismatic movements of the late 1960s.

The lives of *evangélicos/as* are filled with attendance at worship services, prayer meetings, Bible classes, and *sociedades*. There is also visitation to the sick, street revival services, and home evangelism. These are supplemented by *el altar familial*, a gathering in the home where the Bible is read and prayers are conducted among family members, friends and neighbors.

True to their Protestant roots, Scripture plays a central role among *evangélicas/os*. Scripture is considered to be the rule of practice and faith, but also is a source of comfort, guidance and assurance that God is indeed present in the daily lives of those who suffer and have faith. Bible reading is done from a nonmodern cosmology, which the dominant culture often disparages as "fundamentalist." But this approach to the Bible in fact can empower those marginalized by modernity, inspiring faith that God's saving grace pertains to their everyday lives.

Other elements that are important in popular Protestantism are *vigilias* (all-night prayer vigils), fasting, *coritos* and *testimonios*. *Coritos* are short refrains that serve as theological statements. They are often Scriptural citations put to music, and often play a subversive role. Missionaries taught their Latin American charges that truly "Christian music" was found only in traditional Europeanized hymnody, accompanied by the organ or piano. The charismatic revival, however, brought a surge of indigenous musicians, who penned *coritos*. Bongos, *timbales*, tambourines, guitars, *güiros*, drums, and other indigenous instruments are often used as accompaniment. Thus, popular Protestantism has affirmed U.S. Hispanic/Latina culture and music.

Testimonios are shared stories of God's presence and salvific actions among the community. Through *testimonios* Biblical interpretations and insights are tested for validity. *Testimonios* are how the community is encouraged and nurtured, celebrating victory over adversity and sharing in suffering. Most importantly, *testimonios* are a way to transmit the faith and oral histories of the community to the next generation.

In the U.S. Hispanic/Latina community, women are the primary transmitters of the faith and religious practice. In the Protestant community, most Sunday school teachers are women. They teach their children Bible stories at home and in the church. Visiting the sick in hospitals or participating in a street evangelism activity, women share their stories of triumph and pain through their *testimonios*. In this way many women who would be otherwise silenced claim their voices. Only they can tell their stories, which are then confirmed by the community of faith. These stories are conduits of liberation and healing, affirming the humanity of those who must survive in the midst of a society that dehumanizes.

Another important element in popular Hispanic/Latina Protestantism is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to those who are made to feel like nonpersons through discrimination and oppression. It is the Spirit that empowers the voiceless, affirming their worth before God in a society that makes them feel *que no sirven para nada* ("that they are no good for anything"). The Spirit is the daily presence of the divine, incarnating the salvation of Jesus Christ in the everyday lives of those who suffer and those who seek justice.

Lo cotidiano is a rich theological paradigm that opens up our ability to reflect both on the sin that assails our people and the salvation that appears in hidden and unexpected ways in the everyday. The rich and powerful are often perplexed by the celebration that exists among the poor, unable to understand how they can be so joyful in the face of overwhelming tragedy and loss. Perhaps because the powerful rely so much on their material resources and social standing, they are blinded to the presence and power of God that manifests itself in the everyday. For example, U.S. Hispanics/Latinas believe that disease always has a spiritual component. As a community that has often been deprived of adequate health care, we know that the true Healer is Jesus Christ. When we become ill, we go to church and pray. We may not be able to afford psychiatrists, specialists or expensive laboratory tests, but the God present to us without appointment and without charge is the One who created us and who walks with us daily. It is to this God we turn. Whether healed or not, we know that God has heard our cries, and that salvation will be experienced in some wonderfully unexpected way. Those in the dominant society often disparage such a worldview. But those who walk in the spaces of *lo cotidiano* live in "abiding astonishment" as we witness God's enriching grace in our lives. ●

Loida I. Martell-Otero is a veterinary doctor and an ordained minister with the American Baptist Churches/ USA living in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

AND GOD GRINNED

First Adventist Church of Washougal

EVERETT WAS CRAMMED — like all the other POWs (Prisoners of Worship) — into a crowded pew, cringing like a fresh-kicked dog as the sixty-member Walla Walla College Choir blared out what the church bulletin called "a rousing medley of Authentic Negro Spirituals." It must have been ninety degrees inside the church. Everett couldn't figure out how the choir was still standing. Must be their faith, he reasoned after a while, since it was primarily the brain that needed oxygen to function, and faith, as he saw it, was a kind of scripture-breathing brain-eating termite you turned loose in your head on the day you were baptized, causing your need for oxygen to steadily decrease. Loosening his tie when Mama wasn't looking, sighing three sighs to get one sigh's worth of air, Everett wished for the millionth time that he had Peter's constitution. But not (at least today) for its baseball ability. What he envied this day was its squeamishness — because when Pete had stood for the opening hymn he'd fainted on the spot, so he was now outside in the shade, basking in the oxygen-rich zephyrs. Most of the POWs looked as alert and slap-happy as the choir, though. Four-part "Authentic Negro" harmony was an unheard-of commodity in these parts. The choir was singing,

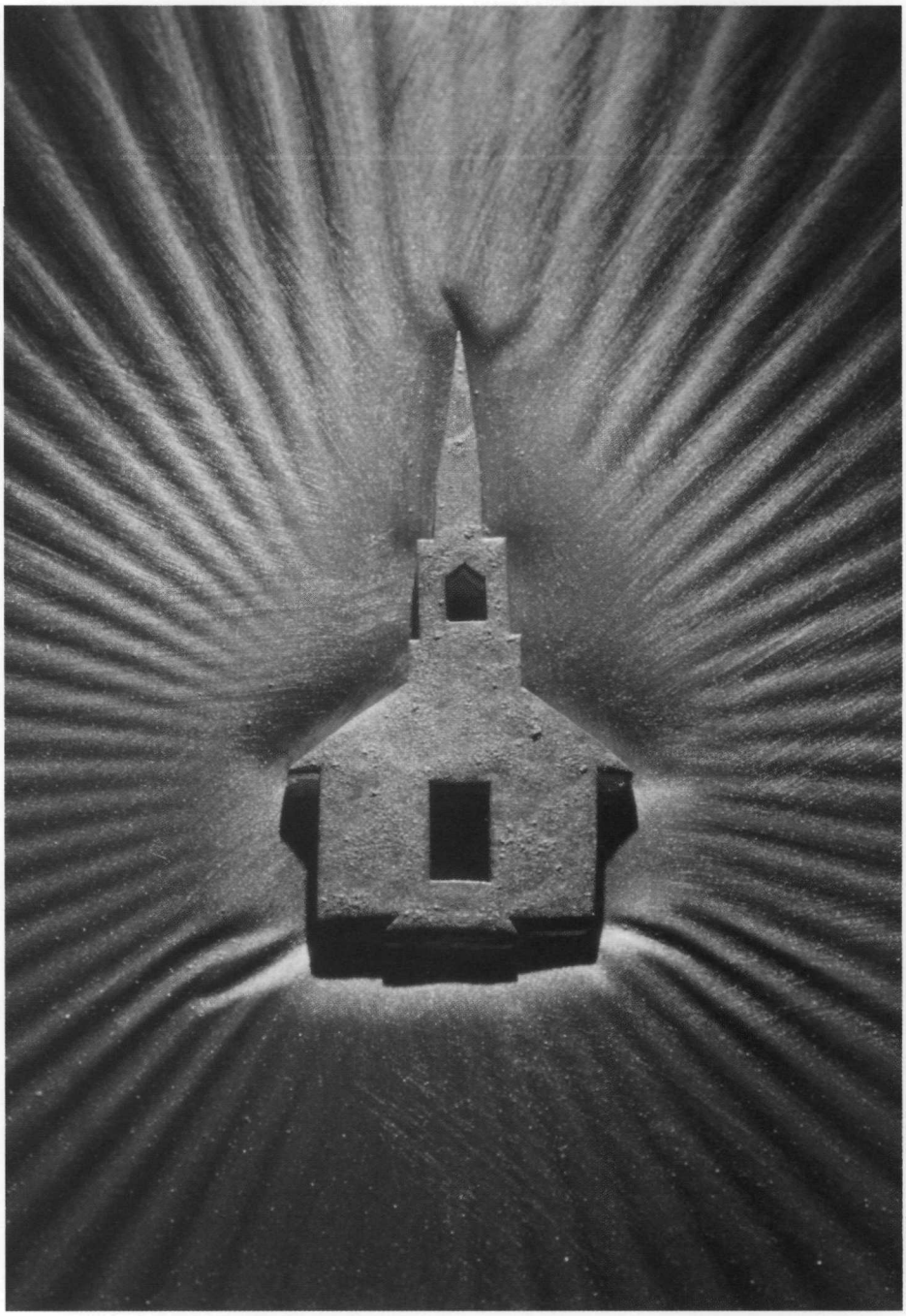
Keep so busy praisin' my Jee-suss, keep so busy praisin' my Jee-suss,

Keep so busy praisin' my Jee-suss, ain' got time to die!

That's what you think, Everett thought.

But he saw tears of joy threading down Irwin's cheeks; saw Bet's flesh covered with goose bumps despite the heat; saw Mama's stone-stolid face lit up like neon by the glory, saw behatted POW heads and shiny-shoed feet bobbing and tapping all over the place. Even Elder Babcock had busted out one of his Antediluvian Patriarch Grins and started tapping a big wing-tip against his throne chair — out of time to the beat, of course.

Mmmm, I praise Him in the mornin', mmmm, I praise Him in the evenin',



Mmmm, I praise Him in the mornin', ain't got time to die!

There was actually one "Authentic Negro" in the white-robed white-faced Walla Walla choir — an even greater rarity in this town than four-part harmonies. He was a short, overweight kid with a face almost as black, shiny and pocked as Babcock's wing tips. His wire-rimmed glasses gave him a scholarly look, and one front tooth, made of something silver, made Everett wish he had one every time it flashed. But the kid's face had been serious to start with, and when the choir eased into "Old Black Joe" it grew downright morose. Everett felt miserable for him. How must he feel — standing up there crooning crapped-out songs about whip-scarred plantation chattel to a big White-God-worshipping flock of crackers?

I's a-comin', I's a comin', dough my head is bendin' low,

I can hear dem faifful voices callin' Old Black Joe ...

bleah. The absurdity of it was too great, the oxygen too scarce, the sky outside too blue: Everett's mind began to drift, he started to compose his own little medley:

Stephen Foster wrote dis song, doo-dah, doo-dah,

An' he was white as de day is long, Oh, doo-hah day ...

He shut his eyes, smiled, realized no one could hear him over the choir, and started to croon it aloud.

He nevah ran no nights, he nevah ran no days,

He nevah put no money on no bobtail nag, No doo-dah way ...

Then Everett did Stephen Foster one better; he turned himself black; he became the sad, silver-toothed Walla Walla Negro kid. But once he became him he saw no reason not to stretch himself out, to make himself taller, thinner, stronger, better-looking, till he was no longer some Token Black Tenor surrounded by cross-licking hicks. He was the glint-toothed leader of his own scarlet-robed eighty-member all-black choir now, with a (why not?) twenty-piece blues band backing them, and a (what the heck?) dumpy Token White fat boy back in the percussion section — a dead ringer for Babcock in his youth — playing a ... let's see, a triangle. Yeah. Everett shut his eyes, gave his audience a solemn nod, and informed them in the mellifluous, almost Elizabethan English he'd learned as a lad in Trinidad that they were about to perform a *contemporary* spiritual, with *eight-part* harmonies — a song composed, of course, by the dashing young E.M. Chance himself.

He turned to his choir. The young Camas ladies, in unison, lifted their church bulletins to fan their lust-flushed faces. He raised his baton, and —

arrrrgh! The Walla Walla Warblers charged like rebels at Gettysburg into "When Dem Saints Go Marchin' In." Everett shuddered, scrinched his eyes and brain shut, focused on the rows of beautiful black faces in his mind, delicately raised an eyebrow, dropped it, and in a soul-stirring, hair-raising a cappella, the Big Black Plus One Cracker Choir thundered:

Dem heads are gonna roll when Jesus comes!

The POWs froze. The elders paled. The infants all smiled. The Lord God grinned.

Yes dem heads are gonna roll when Jesus comes!

Y'all gonna be sad you called us nigger

'Bout time He pulls dat heavenly trigger!

Yes, dem heads are gonna roll when Jesus comes!

E.M. gave the elders a little eye juju, sent a black fist skyward, yanked it back down, and his twenty-piece blues band crashed in behind the choir:

Well you fat cats are goin' to court when Jesus comes!

Yeah, you fat cats are goin' to court when Jesus comes!

Dere won't be no trick tax exemption,

You either gonna burn or get redemption!

Yeah! you fat cats are goin' to court when Jesus comes ...

Back in the stifling gray banality called "reality" the Walla Walla saints were marching out, and when Irwin and a few other kids started to cheer for them, Elder Babcock and all the other old war-horses who'd figured out that God hates gratitude quickly squelched it with massive scowls. But Everett didn't know it. His eyes were shut so

tight his lips were drawn up like a mummy's; he was covered with goose bumps, shining with sweat. Bet nudged Freddy, Freddy nudged Irwin, and Irwin nudged Everett and whispered, "Jeez! Looks like you liked the music!" But Everett didn't hear that either: he just nipped an eyebrow — raising his Blacks Plus Cracker Choir one step higher — and beamed beatifically as they roared:

Well we ain' goana be in yo' shoes when Jesus comes!

(when Jesus comes!)

No we ain' goana be in yo' shoes when Jesus comes!

(when Jesus comes!)

(Take it Ella): No I ain' goana be in yo' shoes

All o' you twisters o' God's Good News

(Billie Holiday): An' I ain' goana be in your sandals,

You gossipin' biddies and lovers of scandals!

(Ms. Chuck Berry): Or your shitkickin' red-neck boots

When Gabriel's horn goes a rooty-toot-toot!

(the Walla Walla kid): 'Cause I'll be singin' an' clappin' my hands

In my cheap loafers from Thom McAn's!

(Ever'body): No we ain' goana be in your shoes when Jesus comes!

(When Jesus cuh-huh-hummmmmms!)

"What's he doing?" Bet whispered.

"He's all sweaty!" said Freddy.

"An' he's getting so jumpy!" Bet added.

"Uh-oh," Irwin whispered sideways to Everett. "Mama's watchin'." But Everett was gone. "*Last verse*!" He told his choir. "Jump it, tromp it, whomp it!"

Yes dem heads are gonna roll when Jesus comes!

It be the Lord God's turn to bawl when Jesus comes!

You smart folks better clear de aisles

'Cause dere gonna be sinners heaped in piles!

An' you may think we's whistlin' Dixie

But the King o' the Kings, He ain't no pixie!

Dere won't be no trick tax exemption,

You either gonna burn or get redemption!

AN" DEM HEADS ARE GONNA RO-HO-HOLLLLLLLLLLL

"Everett!"

WHEN JESUS —

"Everett!"

"Huh? Oh. Yes, Mama."

"You tighten that tie!"

"Oops. Sorry, Mama."

"Quit Fidgeting!"

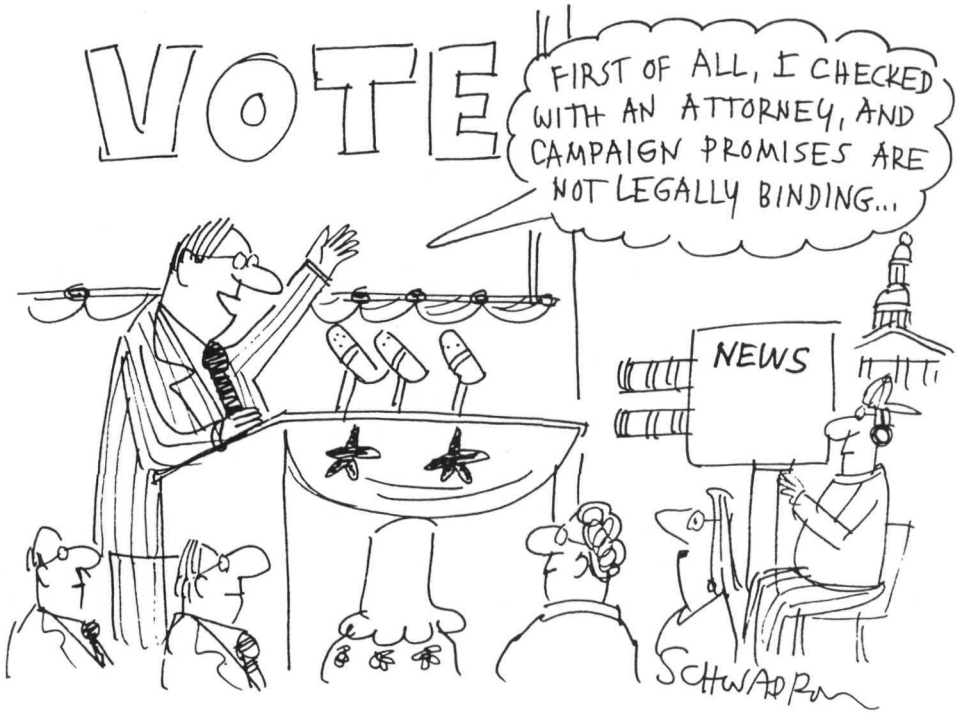
"Okay, Mama."

"And get that *look* off your face!"

"Sorry, Mama."

●

— from ***Brothers K by David James Duncan***, copyright © 1992 by David James Duncan. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.



Confronting big oil

In a September article in the *Toronto Globe & Mail*, Naomi Klein raised questions about the portrayal of the oil blockades in Britain and France.

"Watched from a distance, the oil blockades in Britain look like spontaneous popular uprisings: regular working folk, frightened for their livelihoods, getting together to say, 'Enough's enough.' Indeed, the fuel protests began when a couple hundred farmers and truckers formed blockades outside the oil refineries. But the protests became effective only when the multinational oil companies that run those refineries decided to treat those rather small barricades as immovable obstacles, preventing them from delivering oil to gas stations.

"The companies — Shell, BP, Texaco et al. — claimed they wouldn't ask their tanker drivers to drive past the blockades because they feared for their 'safety.'

"The claim is bizarre. First, no violence was reported. Second, these oil companies have no problem drilling pipelines through contested lands in Colombia and political revolts directed against them in Nigeria. ...

"Third, the truckers' 'pickets' were illegal blockades since the protesters were not members of trade unions — unlike the cases in which union members form legal pickets and companies hire scabs to cross them anyway.

"So why would the oil companies tacitly cooperate with anti-oil protesters? Easy. So long as attention is focused on high oil taxes, rather than on soaring oil prices, the pressure is off the multinationals and the OPEC cartel. The focus is also on access to oil — as opposed to the more threatening issue of access to less polluting, more sustainable energy sources than oil.

"Furthermore, the oil companies know that, if the truckers get their tax cut, as they did in France, oil will be cheaper for consumers to buy, which will mean more oil will be sold. In other words, Big Oil stands to increase its profits by taking money out of the public purse — money now spent, in part, on dealing with the problems created by Big Oil.

"More mysterious has been the government response to the illegal trucker protests. While Tony Blair has not caved in to demands for lower taxes (yet), he didn't clear the roads, either, a fact all the more striking considering the swift police crackdowns against other direct-action protests in Britain and around the world.

"The oil blockades in Britain and France ... likely caused more real economic damage than every Earth First!, Greenpeace and anti-free-trade protest combined. And yet, on Britain's roads last week, there was none of the pepper spray, batons or rubber bullets now used when labour, human-rights and environmental activists stage roadblocks that cause only a small fraction of the fuel protest's disruption."

Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center, who forwarded this excerpt to *The Witness*, comments that "this whole scenario reinforces the sense that for people who are committed to social justice and healing the earth, it's important in the U.S. and Canada to prepare in advance a very different analysis and campaign — one that focuses on taxing excess oil-company profits, not reducing taxes on gasoline or heating oil. And on channeling the money raised to: a) assistance for the poor who will be hardest hit by higher prices for heating oil and natural gas, and b) to support for mass transit, biking, conservation of energy and renewable energy sources."

Sacred earth and space

On Sept. 9, the 20th anniversary of the first "Plowshares" disarmament action, five women entered the Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs to carry out a "Sacred Earth and Space Ploughshares" action. The women, all members of Roman Catholic religious congregations, were arrested after they hammered and poured blood on a mockup of the Milstar communications satellite and an F-18 A-1 plane, a type used extensively in the ongoing bombing of Iraq.

Colorado peace activist Bill Sulzman, director of Citizens for Peace in Space, said of their action that "the cutting edge of Christian anti-war resistance has for the first time come head-to-head with the cutting edge of futuristic, space-based war-making."

According to a 1/00 *Progressive* article quoted in the Fall 2000 issue of *Nukewatch Pathfinder*, the U.S. military "explicitly says it wants to 'control' space to protect its economic interests and establish superiority over the world.

"Several documents reveal the plans. Take 'Vision for 2020,' a 1996 report of the U.S. Space Command, which 'coordinates the use of Army, Navy and Air Force space forces' and was set up in 1985 to 'help institutionalize the use of space.'

"The multicolored cover of 'Vision for 2020' shows a weapon shooting a laser beam from space and zapping a target below. The report opens with the following: 'U.S. Space Command — dominating the space dimension of military operations to protect U.S. interests and investment. Integrating Space Forces into warfighting capabilities across the full spectrum of conflict.' A century ago, 'Nations built navies to protect and enhance their commercial interests' by ruling the seas, the report notes. Now it is time to rule space.

"'The medium of space is the fourth medium of warfare — along with land, sea and air,' it proclaims on page three. 'The emerging synergy of space superiority with land, sea and air superiority will lead to Full Spectrum Dominance.'"

The Sacred Earth and Space Ploughshares statement quotes Peter's words in Acts 14: "Friends, what do you think you are doing? ... We have come with good news, to make you turn from these empty idols to the living God who made sky and earth and the sea and all that these hold."

Welfare reform and civil rights

Gary Delgado argues that welfare advocates should reframe the issue in terms of civil rights (*ColorLines*, Fall 00).

"Studies of what happens to women forced off welfare into the low-wage job market are just beginning to come out. Not surprisingly, they show that most of those leaving TANF have found their way into the gender ghettoes of service, sales, and clerical work where, even in northern industrial states, they are earning barely above minimum wage. ...

"And for women of color leaving welfare, there is the old triple whammy of race, gender, and welfare-recipient-status to shape their experiences in the job market. A 1999 study comparing the treatment of black and white welfare recipients, conducted by Dr. Susan Goodman of Virginia Tech University, found that black women earn less than whites, are less likely to be employed full-time, and are overrepresented in lower paying occupations. Gooden also found that black job applicants were asked twice as often as whites to complete a pre-application and that blacks were less likely to receive thorough interviews (45 percent as opposed to 71 percent for whites). Furthermore, 36 percent of African-American respondents were subjected to drug tests and criminal record checks, while the 24 percent of whites who were asked to take any test at all were merely asked 'character questions.'

"While there is not yet an overwhelming body of research, the research that does exist clearly establishes that racial and gender discrimination is compounded by welfare reform. ...

"A civil rights approach to welfare organizing isn't traditional, but the new demographics suggest that emphasizing race and gender discrimination in the welfare system might be just the wedge we need to get into broader efforts to reframe the national debate as welfare reauthorization comes before the Congress in 2001. Race and gender discrimination may not be the most screwed-up thing about welfare deform, but it is one of the few areas in which legal rights exist."

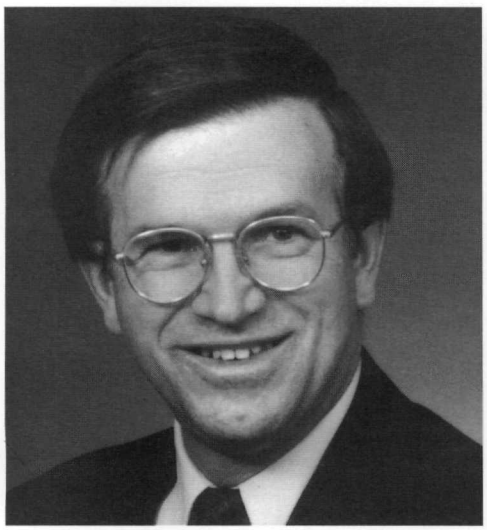
Transcending repair

"Mending is a major occupation in traditional societies," Barry Boyce writes in a reflection on the demise of shoe repair in the U.S. (*Shambhala Sun*, 9/00). "It is one of the perverse virtues of advanced civilization to have transcended repair and renewal. We have abandoned a more basic understanding of economy — the careful ordering of the house (which is what it means etymologically) — and have redefined it as the sum total of our consumption.

"We need to repair and reuse not because the earth will run out, not because the cosmic meter maid is coming down the street to give us a ticket, but because it is the only way to live well. Our willingness to toss away that which we so recently valued, our unwillingness to repair the material things in our lives, speaks volumes about our unwillingness to repair other things that really matter — our errors, our relationships, our lives, our world."

The storyteller's vocation: enabling an intimacy of relationship with God

by Marianne Arbogast



"I wanted to find a common language that would cut across divisions and be a common ground between people of different backgrounds and different educational experiences."

AS A YOUNG PASTOR involved with the civil rights movement in Chicago in the 1960s, Tom Boomershine listened to black preachers tell the stories of the Bible.

"I had never heard preaching like that before," he says. "I was studying the gospels and I knew about oral tradition, but when I read the stories I couldn't believe that anybody told them for more than three or four minutes because they were so boring. Then I went to black churches and I'd hear storytelling sermons that would go on for 45 minutes to an hour — and at the end everyone was cheering and wanted the story to go on! I had never heard storytelling that was so powerful and energizing."

This experience, combined with Boomershine's desire to understand the original form of the biblical narratives, led him to further academic study and to a unique ministry of fostering a revival of biblical storytelling.

"When I went back to New York to do a PhD. in New Testament, I went back explicitly with the purpose of trying to recover the biblical storytelling tradition," Boomershine says. "I wanted to find a common language that would cut across divisions and be a common ground between people of different backgrounds and different educational experiences."

Boomershine's approach was regarded with suspicion in the academic community, and his dissertation topic — the Gospel of Mark as narrative — was highly controversial. Colleagues tended to dismiss it as "naive, intellectually lacking in rigor, and essentially irrelevant," he says.

"In classic biblical study of Mark, there were two primary questions that were asked," he explains. "One was, what is the historical significance of a particular story? And the other has been, what was the theology that was implicit in the story? So the gospels have been studied for their historical meaning and their theological meaning. The meaning of the story simply as story was not a question that scholars asked."

Boomershine started with a different set of questions.

"What was the shape of the characterization of Jesus? What's the structure of the plot? What was the impact of the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection for those who originally heard it? How did the stories actually sound?"

His research took him to Orthodox churches and synagogues to hear the biblical narratives chanted in their original languages, and he memorized and chanted the passion narrative of Mark in Greek. He also began listening to contemporary storytellers, and then telling the gospel stories himself.

"During those years I was telling the stories in coffeehouses in New York and for youth groups or Sunday evening meetings," he says. "I was a kind of traveling troubadour."

Listeners responded with enthusiasm.

"The steady response, for 30 years, has been, 'I can't believe it — it's a wonderful story! I'd never heard the story before.' They'd heard it read in scripture lessons for years, but they'd never heard the story told. They respond with amazement — first of all, that someone could learn it by heart and tell it, and then, that it's so interesting and powerful."

When Boomershine was seriously injured in a car accident, he discovered another dimension of the power of gospel stories.

"I had a long period of recovery, and during that time I found that the stories that I

had memorized and that I could tell to myself were a primary gift from God. The story of the healing of the paralytic was a story that I told myself over and over in the whole process of my physical therapy, getting up and walking. And that was true with a number of stories that I had learned — at different times they would come up and they would be a way in which God would be present for me. So I decided that one of the things that was crucial was enabling other people to learn the stories so they could tell themselves the stories in times of crisis. I also remembered the importance that people who were in concentration camps during the Second World War gave to storytelling: Those who could recite poetry, who could sing songs, but especially those who knew stories — and especially those who knew biblical stories — were heroes."

Boomershine developed a storytelling workshop at New York Seminary, where he was then teaching, in which students learned to tell biblical stories, connecting them with stories from their own lives. In 1978, he founded the Network of Biblical Storytellers (NOBS), which has grown into an international association with a website (<www.nobs.org>), a newsletter and a yearly "festival gathering."

Members come from varied backgrounds and Christian traditions.

"Many of them are people who have had a lot of experience with art or music or literature or drama," Boomershine says. "Or people who have an interest in non-philosophical ways of talking and being, and so are drawn to the story."

They do not tell the stories in order to teach lessons or illustrate doctrines.

"In general, there has been very little interest in biblical storytelling in the evangelical community, especially among fundamentalists," Boomershine says. "Their interest and commitment is to the Bible as a source of doctrinal truth."

Boomershine's purpose has more to do with community and spiritual formation.

"I think the most accurate experience that we can have of the character of Jesus and who he was can happen in the context of a community of people telling the stories of Jesus from the gospels," he says. "There is a kind of community that happens among people who tell the stories of the Bible to each other, a depth of connection between people from radically different experiences. And there's an interiorization, a personal appropriation of that tradition that shapes and forms you in ways that are different from, say, learning the Apostles' Creed or affirming certain beliefs. It is a way of entering into an intimacy of relationship with God."

Boomershine stresses the importance of learning the stories by heart.

"The central metaphor is jazz," he says. "If you improvise on a song before you know the song, the jazz is usually not all that great. The same is true of biblical stories. People who know the stories well can improvise better than people who are sort of vaguely familiar with them. I encourage people to treat biblical stories with the care with which they would treat classical music or any other composition that is beautiful and that we value highly."

Boomershine recently took a leave of absence from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, in order to begin a new company — Luminon Digital Productions, part of UMR Communications (formerly the *United Methodist Reporter*) in Dallas. The company will produce digital resources for worship and church education programs. Boomershine regards this work as an outgrowth of his commitment to storytelling.

"I experienced it as a call from God to move from what I call the known areas of the church's ministry in literary culture, to the formation of a new institution and pattern for the church in electronic culture," Boomershine says. "The Gospel is increasingly associated with a culture that *used* to be the most powerful communication system of the culture. So in order to hear the stories of Jesus, the children of digital culture essentially have to step back into an earlier culture where there aren't TVs, where there aren't screens, where there isn't electronic music. This culture is a new global culture for which the church is largely inept in its efforts to communicate."

Boomershine rejects the "literate culture critique" of electronic culture.

"I think literate culture has seen electronic culture as a primary threat to its power," he says. "But literary culture has been the primary enemy of oral community. There's nobody who's more disassociated from normal human interaction than scholars, who spend all their time by themselves reading books. Electronic culture is much more interactive. In order to produce things in electronic culture you have to have a team that works together, whereas in order to write a book you have to go off by yourself.

"Electronic culture has been called a secondary oral culture. There are many lines of connection between post-literate electronic culture and oral culture — first of all the primacy of sound. And electronic culture is essentially a storytelling culture. Television is a storytelling medium. Film is a way of telling a story.

"And the global community is a product of electronic culture. So while there are new ways in which you can lose yourself on the Internet and have a kind of pseudo-community with people, on the other hand there's a reality to it that is even more immediate than writing letters.

"But I also see the way in which electronic culture and electronic media are creating a whole new structure of injustice and inequality. The church has been the primary agent of communication justice in the culture of literacy, the major agency in the history of western civilization that has extended literacy to those who were illiterate. The question now is, who's going to do that in relation to the digital divide? The church needs to be the advocate of the liberation of electronic communications from being used solely in the interests of profit, and for the power of that communications system to be used in the interest of the kingdom of God and for the sake of the poor. That's why I'm pursuing storytelling and why I'm pursuing this work now in electronic communications for the church." ●

Marianne Arbogast is associate editor of *The Witness*.

INDEX 2000

AUTHORS

ARTISTS

EDITORIALS

KEEPING WATCH

POETS

REVIEWS

WITNESS PROFILES

(listed by subject)

THEMES

TIM WHELAN / *Santa Fe, New Mexico*

The Witness Magazine
P.O. Box 1170, Rockport, ME 04856

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No.893
Champaign, IL

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED