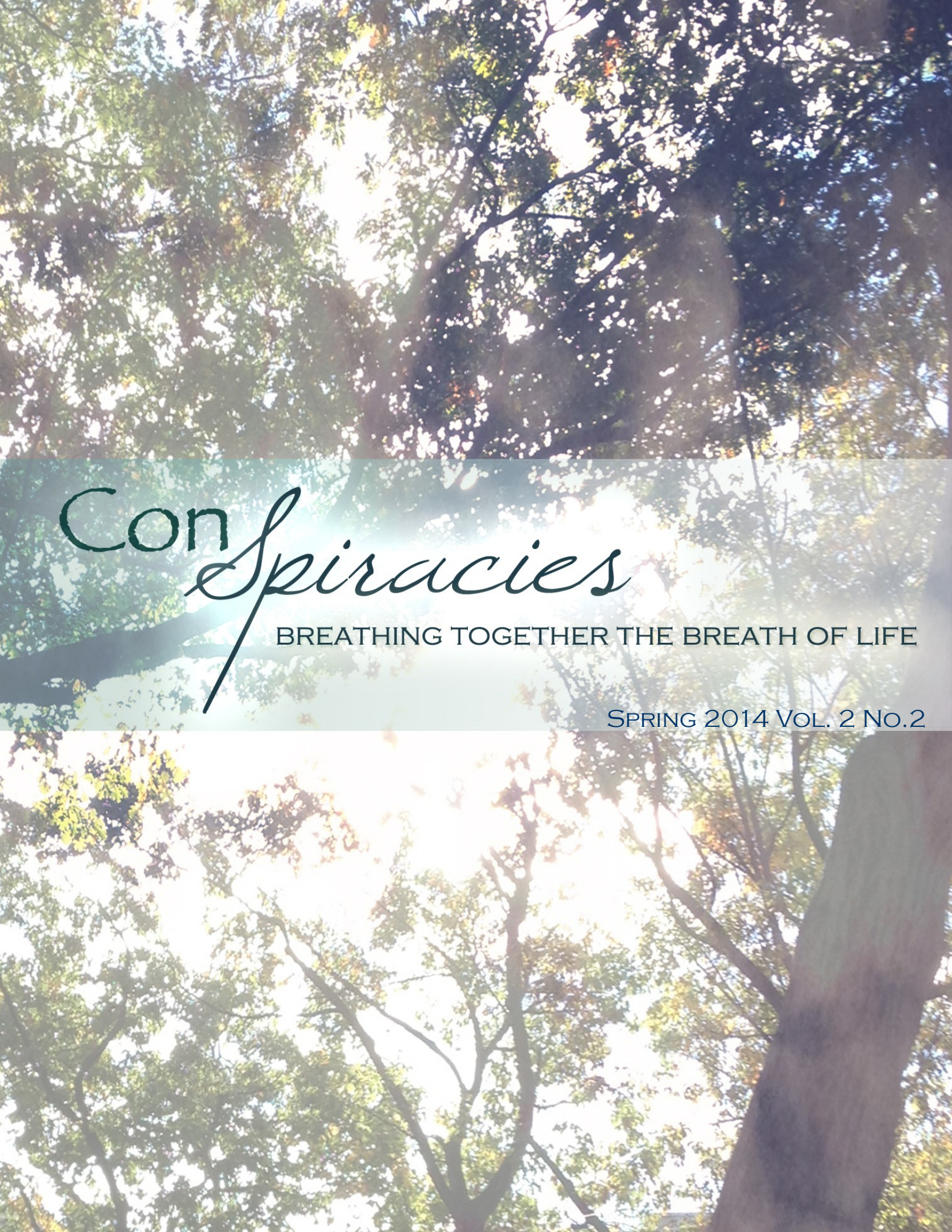




Con*Spiracies*

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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Conspiracies

SEAMUS HEANEY (1939-2013): A REMEMBRANCE

DAVID N. HEMPTON.....2

TRY TO PRAISE THE MUTILATED WORLD

LUCIA HULSETH.....4

STRANGE MATTER

OLIVIA HAMILTON.....6

INCREASE IN US UNDERSTANDING

USRA GHAZI.....7

THE HUMILITY OF GRATITUDE

NANCY CHU.....8

PURIM: TIME FOR NEW INTERPRETATION

RABBI JORDIE GERSON9

ONE LOVE: HDS HARAMBEE AND FRIENDS UNITED AGAINST RACIAL VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

NATASHA THOMPSON & MELISSA BARTHOLOMEW.....10

COMPOST & ASHES: A SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

ANNA MULLEN.....11

COPERNICAN PROPHECY

ARIENNE JOHNSON.....13

LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

STEPHANIE A. PAULSELL.....15

A SERMON FOR THE THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

POLLY CARDEN.....22

SEAMUS HEANEY (1939-2013): A REMEMBRANCE

DAVID N. HEMPTON

DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY

ALONZO L. McDONALD FAMILY PROFESSOR OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

JOHN LORD O'BRIAN PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY



Dean Hempton delivered these remarks at Morning Prayer in the Memorial Church at Harvard on September 6, 2013.

Exactly this time last week I awoke, as did many of you, to the sad news that the Irish Nobel prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney had died. As most of you know, Heaney was the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard from 1984-97 and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Poet in Residence from 1997-2007. Harvard also granted him an honorary degree in 1998. Although I never met him, we share an unusual trajectory as natives of the north of Ireland, graduates and teachers at QUB, and professors at Harvard. I wish we had shared the Nobel Prize for Literature as well, but alas.

One of the unavoidable consequences of coming from a small place is that you feel deeply invested in the lives of its heroes, most of whom you have never met. This syndrome seems more poignant in Northern Ireland because many of those heroes seem unusually vulnerable or precociously talented. C. S. Lewis wrote best-selling children's stories and works of Christian apologetics, but his Christian populism deeply offended his fellow Oxbridge professors. George Best, the world's first soccer superstar, drank himself to death. Rory McIlroy plays golf like a wayward genius, either with springy step or sloping shoulders depending on the erratic fates of any given day.

Heaney was also an unusual genius. How could the first-born of nine children of a rural cattle dealer in mid-Ulster write with such profound sensibility about the deepest things of life – our attachment to the land, our childhood memories, our experiences of love and friendship, our encounters with death and separation, and much more? Like many of us who grew up in the dark days of violence and civil conflict in Ulster, the “troubles” affected Heaney deeply. He found it hard to live and talk and write in that interstitial zone between the languages of forthrightness and diplomacy, between cultural allegiance and tolerance, and between

courage and reticence. He wrote a poem about this using an old Irish aphorism I once heard from my father – “Whatever you say, Say Nothing.” Heaney was educated at Queen's University Belfast, where he was part of a talented writing circle of poets and writers, but he chose to live out his life in Dublin away from the sectarian toxin of the North. His funeral mass was in Dublin, but his body is interred in his native County Derry, in the land that shaped him.

Heaney suffered a stroke in 2006, and some critics have picked up a growing tone of instability and separation in his poems thereafter. He wrote a haunting, dream-like elegy to his fellow Ulsterman, David Hammond a singer and broadcaster, whose death he also marked with a self-revealing obituary in the *Guardian*. The qualities Heaney most admired in his Irish friend were “unsanctimonious trust and tolerance,” “his ease with being an Irishman, a lifelong resident of Belfast, immune to its constricting ideologies, free from its sectarianism, exultantly and resolutely his egalitarian self.” Hammond like Heaney celebrated music, verse, humor, hospitality, education, and art over sectarian exclusivity, religious intolerance, and the violence that comes with it. His obituary of Hammond is really a celebration of the humanities, broadly and unpretentiously conceived, his poem a beautiful affirmation that such values survive even death itself. He visits Hammond's dark, empty house in a dream, but instead of danger and fear he finds:

Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming
Emptiness, as in a midnight hangar
On an overgrown airfield in late summer.

No wonder then that I thought Heaney would be just the right person to deliver the Divinity School's annual Ingersoll lecture on Immortality – a topic, understandably, not many people feel qualified to talk about. I used every persuasive tactic in the book to lure him here, and sadly failed. He declined with characteristic grace, self-deprecatory humor, and linguistic precision. He wrote “It's not every day that the chance to deliver the Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality arrives, and not every day that a fellow in QUB arms hails another from the groves of MA 02138 ... but the calendar is too full of marks and the head too full of obligations.” He added with self-irony,

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“Where is the lad who once gave three public lectures at Oxford for five years running.” I wrote back that I refused to believe that that lad was gone, and promptly invited him for the following year. Alas, that is now an invitation without an answer.

Seamus Heaney will never give the Ingersoll Lecture, but in a sense he doesn't need to. We know roughly what he would say. He would speak in beautiful language about the eternal truths enshrined in his poetry. He would tell us to be suspicious of ideologies and sectarianism, to be skeptical of privilege and pretentiousness, to be nervous of academic languages that restrict communication, and to heighten our spiritual sensitivity to the beauties of land, life, and love. He might have rehearsed some of the themes he developed in his lecture “Writer and Righter” to the Irish Human Rights Commission, which is a powerful celebration of the eternal role of poets and writers in holding candles for human dignity in the face of the endless brutalities perpetrated by cruel regimes and their inquisitors. He stated that “An artist whose work is capable of entering the place of ultimate human suffering and decision in his or her own being will bring readers to a realization of the same stratum in themselves.” The work will strike them “as a remembrance, and as it begins its obscure pilgrimage through memory and conscience, the human condition will be registered at a private personal level, yet the experience will involve a sense of common human belonging. And at that moment the art and the artist become allies in the great work of ‘saving nations and peoples.’” This is Heaney's spirit and it will not die with him.

Please hear again the poem read at his funeral.

“The Given Note” is about a Blasket Island fiddler who retrieves the mysterious tune of the fairies. The fiddler is really a metaphor for the poet himself who shows us the beauties and mysteries of our world, even in and through “loud weather.”

On the most westerly Blasket
In a dry-stone hut
He got this air out of the night.

Strange noises were heard

By others who followed bits of a tune
Coming in on loud weather

Though nothing like melody.
He blamed their fingers and ear
As unpractised, their fiddling easy

For he had gone alone into the island
And brought back the whole thing.
The house throbbed like his full violin.

So whether he calls it spirit music
Or not, I don't care. He took it
Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.

Still he maintains, from nowhere
It comes off the bow gravely
Rephrases itself into the air.

Seamus Heaney has spoken to us in and through “loud weather.” His poems live on, immortally, as the Ingersoll Lecture that was never given.



Credit: Kristie Welsh

TRY TO PRAISE THE MUTILATED WORLD

LUCIA HULSETH
MDiv '14



Lucia is a third-year Master of Divinity candidate at HDS. She delivered these remarks at Morning Prayer in Memorial Church at Harvard on September 11, 2013. We print them here in ConSpiracies in April 2014 as Boston observes the one-year anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings.

Try to praise the mutilated world, by Adam Zagajewski

Remember June's long days,
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.
The nettles that methodically overgrow
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.
You must praise the mutilated world.
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,
while salty oblivion awaited others.
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.
You should praise the mutilated world.
Remember the moments when we were together
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.
Praise the mutilated world
and the gray feather a thrush lost,
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes
and returns.

The photographs, two by two, invite us into their worlds. On first glance each pair looks identical: same backdrop, same body placement, the same lighting. And then it sinks in, and the backdrop and bodies and light fade. We see absence.

Two sisters holding hands at a table. One hand stretched toward nothing. Brothers running gleefully down a hill. A man seeming to tumble down the same hill alone. An infant cradled by two smiling parents. A young woman sitting alone.

In the year 2000, photographer Gustavo Germano began assembling a photographic series called *Ausencias*, or Absences. Starting in Argentina, he sought to document what he called "the incommensurable void" inflicted on people and communities

during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. He would travel across South America's Southern Cone. Brazil. Chile. Uruguay. Peru. Bolivia. All nations implicated in Operation Condor, an operation of state terror executed by military dictators, and backed by the United States, under the guise of anti-communism.

Thousands upon thousands of people were killed and "disappeared" in these years. Germano's project is returning, documenting invisible histories, dwelling in the devastating erasures that still shape our present day.

Absence stares back.

Absence. September 11, 2001. The image of a New York skyline, before and after: absence. The people, maybe some here today, who after 9/11—or that attack closer to home, the marathon bombing—could take pictures like the ones collected by Gustavo Germano: absence. Absence we cannot shake and the gaps that will not stop staring back, asking for some restitution.

Judith Butler writes that when we grieve, it is not only over the life is lost. "Who am I without 'you'?" she asks. I know who I am in and through my relationship to you. When you are gone—when there is absence in your place and the world I have always seen is destroyed—who I am I now? This is a question we ask when we grieve.

Today, on the twelfth anniversary of attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, we will no doubt hear answers to this question, answers that will seek to fill in those gaps. From our public officials, will hear that America's spirit will remain unchanged in its valor and commitment to freedom no matter the cost. From our clergy, we might hear that the love of God is so abundant and unified that it can transform our losses into victory. We even hear drumbeats of war, justifying the absences that came before.

If you are grieving today, do not let those offerings cheapen your grief. The temptation to explain a loss away, or justify it by taking another life, or fill in the gap with declarations of retaliatory violence or easy, redeeming love do not help. Our absences still loom. And our grief is worth more; it is real; it is precious to God.

TRY TO PRAISE THE MUTILATED WORLD

LUCIA HULSETH
MDiv '14

The theorist Lauren Berlant says, “History hurts,” and I think she is right. Whether our lives are marked by visible trauma and violence, or whether our losses are unheard and unspoken, we mark the passage of time through loss. It might be something so private: a lover realizes the change when she listens for her partner’s footsteps after work, but only hears silence. A limb is gone, signaling the end of former running years. Loss may be public and symbolic: that New York skyline, changed and empty. Vacant spaces in Boston’s downtown.

To leave ourselves vulnerable within such absence—with such gaping holes in our lives—feels impossible to bear. What do we do? Too often we lash out, seeking false security in walls, starting wars in our homes and across the world. It is easier to fight, than to reconstitute a life in the face of absence.

But there is another way. It is a way grounded in liberating, active,

fierce love: the love that *tries* to praise a mutilated world when the losses are incommensurable. What do we do in the face of incommensurable loss? We grieve. We pray, hold hands, cry, and tell the stories that have covered up by pens too quick to generalize. Our grief becomes its own action. By facing its absence without covering it up, it protests the refracting violence that has become the false balm for our wounds. It says “no more”: no more pictures like the ones Gustavo Germano is compiling, no more easy and vacuous theologies telling us that God’s universal love heals all, no more trying to filling our own empty frames with the bodies of other children.

This is my prayer: that today we will try to live into a world where all of us—no matter who we are, where we were born, or even whether we are marked as “terrorist” or “patriot”—are constituted in and through each other. Today in grief, may we try to praise this mutilated world.



From the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life

STRANGE MATTER

OLIVIA HAMILTON
MDiv '14



Olivia delivered this homily at the HDS Noon Service hosted by Queer Rites in February 2014.

It's strange, this theoretical matter that is hypothesized to exist in the core of neutron stars, if the pressure there is high enough. Physicists in the 1970's developed a theory about strange matter when they wondered what might happen if protons and neutrons were squeezed together superhumanly hard. This squeezing, they imagined, would burst apart the protons and neutrons into quarks, and if squeezed even tighter, these quarks would change identity altogether, becoming *strangelets*, the building blocks of strange matter. These strangelets are incredibly different than the matter that gives birth to them: infinitely denser, and lacking an organized and predictable structure. These strangelets are shape-shifting, boundary-less things, whose structures are chaotic and whose logic is impossible to define.

It is hypothesized that strange matter exists in stars that, having spent all of their fuel, collapse under the influence of their own gravitation. Such stars have stopped shining; they are optically invisible. Strange matter is always close to death. A generation of gay men that are optically invisible, whom we will never know, and young queer kids who, some twenty years later, are still contracting HIV at devastating rates. Trans women of color murdered: Islan Nettles, Lorena Escalera. A justice system that criminalizes our difference, that locks us up and attempts to contain our beautiful chaos and define and control our bodies and our lives. Our own gravitation pulls us toward a world that is fundamentally different than the one we know ... but sometimes we collapse under the influence of this gravitation. We burn our fuel at a rate that is unsustainable.

We must work towards a world that is one we all want to live in, that is big enough to contain all the strange, that opens its arms to us and says "Hello Strangelets, it is you I have been looking for in this world that feels all too rigid. You who are under such immense pressure. You who are squeezed, and expand and make the new. You who together compose this strange matter that is dense and rich and unpredictable and shapeless and always grieving, healing, grieving, healing. You who imagine, You who stretch. You who question and critique and push out beyond the knowing. You whose quirks and quarks are misunderstood. You who are hypothesized about but never seen. I see you. I am ready for you."

INCREASE IN US UNDERSTANDING

USRA GHAZI MTS '15



Usra delivered these remarks at Morning Prayer in the Memorial Church at Harvard on February 28, 2014. Usra is a Junior Fellow at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, a member of HDS's Muslim

Council, a founding member of Harvard's Better Together, and the incoming Coordinator of the HDS Student Association (2014-2015).

Bismillah arRahman arRabim, In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

I'll begin with a reading from the *Qur'an*. Surah 2, Verse 177. "It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the god fearing."

I am honored to be here with you on this Friday morning, on a day that is considered sacred in Islam. In a few hours, Muslims from across Cambridge will gather just a couple blocks from here at Lowell Hall for *Jumma* prayer. And although it was during Friday prayer meetings of my high school Muslim club where the spark of spirituality was ignited in my adolescent heart, I am the Muslim I am today because of moments like this, opportunities for conversation with those outside of my faith community.

It was in a Catholic Church, during an interfaith meeting, that I was first asked about the Islamic value of "hospitality." At that time, I was about 16 or 17 and I had *no clue*. I went

back home and started to read about the stories I had learned in Sunday school or heard from my parents about the virtues of being a generous host, and the kindness of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

It was in the home of a Jewish friend when I was asked to describe the importance of community service in the Muslim tradition. By then, I was prepared. I told him about the Caliph Umar (may God be pleased with him) and how he roamed the streets at night during a time of famine to ensure that all was well in his community, and that no household suffered from hunger. He came across the home of a woman whose children were weeping because they had no food to eat. He immediately went to the city treasury collected provisions and carried them to the woman's house, assisted her in preparing a meal and inquired about her needs.

Learning that story impressed upon me the importance of service to the most downtrodden of our community. My Jewish friend responded by telling me about the work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Jewish value of *Tikkun Olam*, or repairing the world. In addition to our conversations, we worked together on interfaith community service projects.

In the verse I recited earlier, God calls us to be righteous. I believe that much of that righteousness is found in community, in conversation, and in collective action across lines of difference. It is in these interreligious encounters that we can challenge each other, ask questions, and look inward. And the act of translating our deeply held values for those outside our communities are opportunities to better understand ourselves.

A couple years ago, when I was still living in Skokie, I took my little brother, who was 7

years old at the time to the neighborhood park. It was getting late in the afternoon and there was only one other boy playing by the swings with his father looking on from a short distance. I noticed my brother, who's usually a bit on the shy side, approach the boy and strike up a conversation. On our walk home, he told me excitedly that he'd made a new friend.

He said "The boy told me he was Christian, and I said I was Muslim! But then he said, *no* his *name* is Christian...and he's Christian too! Isn't that cool!?"

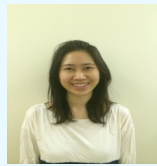
I thought this exchange between him and Christian the Christian from the park was adorable. His excitement reminded me about why I will never tire of interfaith work. When my brother gets older he will realize that it's often taboo to discuss religious identity with strangers in public. What's thrilling about institutions like the Memorial Church and Harvard University more broadly, is that we are able to counter that taboo by creating a culture of interreligious encounter, and opportunities for students to get excited about exploring the diverse identities that make up our community. But we can also do more.

This year, a group of students from the across Harvard's graduate schools and college have started the first university-wide interfaith organization called Harvard Better Together: Students for Interfaith Action. I'm excited about how my work with this group will deepen my faith identity and how this group will build pluralism across our campus, *Insha Allah*, God willing.

I'll end with a prayer: God, we thank you for the great diversity of your creation. Please make us steadfast and consistent in our prayers and our righteous deeds. Increase us in Knowledge. Increase us in Wisdom. Increase us in Understanding. Ameen.

THE HUMILITY OF GRATITUDE

NANCY CHU
MDiv '15



Nancy is a candidate for the Master of Divinity degree in the Buddhist Ministry Studies program. She is a co-convenor of the Harvard Buddhist community and a field education intern at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions.

Once I was at a group meditation and when it was finished and everyone was milling around, for no conscious reason I spoke in an extra-friendly way to a middle-aged stranger. A few months later through some other source, I found out that he was processing some childhood traumas. I was a bit overwhelmed by the grace of that happy accident. That I had met someone who was suffering and without knowing it or meaning to, I had been kind to him. It had nothing to do with me or my kindness and everything to do with grace, which I know because it brought me a great sense of gratitude rather than satisfaction.

And so it is with most things. The things I am most grateful for having done, I have often been the least conscious of doing. How then to look at a life and to know the good or harm it might have done for others? A certain kind of humility is required for this, which is the humility of gratitude. Gratitude for being able to witness another's pain, for being able to grieve for others. Gratitude and relief to be, even if for a moment, less self-centered. The people who have done me the most good have likely never sought to do so. They have just been their blessed, entire selves, and I have been so touched by the sincerity with which they live their being that I have had to change mine.

It strikes me that the one thing I have never been able to be cynical about, the thing that never fails to move me, is the possibility of absolute and unconditional love and acceptance. I have to wonder how few moments in my life I have ever been able to offer it to anyone—or, indeed have had the grace, wisdom, and courage to accept it when it was offered. What haunts me is my failure to give and receive unconditionally, to see another person always first as another human being, unburdened by my judgments and calculations and wishes and desires and fears and speculations. It feels a bit like opening a Pandora's box, when I start listening to those little voices and desires. *Want this; don't want that. Like this person; don't like that one. This person is useful to know. How does that person see me? Do they like me? What should I do to make them like me?* And it is most clear with the people I care about most and who care most

about me. I preen. I calculate. I scheme. And I do this every day, often without my being aware of it until much later.

In the face of all this, I seek grace, which is the trust that in spite of my selfishness and my greatest efforts to instrumentalize and utilize others in the pursuit of self-benefit, I am never able to touch the perfect sense of the other. That there is a holiness and perfection in them that I can never harm with all my calculations and schemes, and that is a relief.

Which brings me back to grace. Grace is what happens when you are at your most desperate self-hating, self-judging moment, and in that frenzy suddenly experience someone seeing you with total kindness and acceptance. I can tell you, it knocks the breath out of you.

It may be that measuring myself against an ideal of perfect selflessness is stupid or futile. But as long as I continue to be moved by unconditional kindness and acceptance, as long as I love and believe in the possibility of genuine selflessness, it is worth going in that direction and measuring myself in that direction, and if I continue to fail, to fail in the direction. And I do continually fail.

But I am also continually moved by it. This movement is transformation. It is change and hope. My constant failure does not mean that I stay in the same place—at least, that is the hope. It is entirely possible that even as I think I am changing, I continue the same habits, just in a more refined or subtle form. It might be asked, why not just accept selfishness as a part of human nature? As healthy and productive and maybe even good? And most painfully, what if wanting to be selfless is the most insidious kind of selfishness? The last question is so uncomfortably discerning that I am sure there is at least a large grain of truth in it. But still.

In a sense it doesn't matter whether or not I "achieve" perfect selflessness. Because I continue to love it and be moved by expressions of it in others. And if I love it, then everything follows from there. Because what are the foundations of our lives? For what do we live and breathe and weep and toil? When it is time for me to go—and without exception we all must someday go—what is the last thing to which I will hold on?

PURIM: TIME FOR NEW INTERPRETATION

RABBI JORDIE GERSON
MTS '04



Rabbi Jordie Gerson serves Temple Emanu-el Beth Shalom in Montreal.

I was teaching an Introduction to Judaism class this Tuesday night about (fittingly) Purim. I was in the midst of explaining to my class the mitzvah to drink until you don't know the difference between blessing Mordecai and cursing Haman, and how it has been traditionally interpreted (get extremely drunk), when one of my students stopped me.

"What if," she began, "What if we're interpreting the commandment too literally. I mean, we've learned how many of the commandments have been analogized, or understood metaphorically," she said, "but it sounds like this one is always taken literally, across Jewish communities."

"Generally, yes." I answered. "Purim is treated as an opportunity to drink heavily."

"But what if," she asked, "the commandment is not meant to be taken literally, not to mean that you should get really drunk, but perhaps, that you should use Purim as an opportunity to blur the distinction between good and bad people, to imagine that everyone, even our enemies, are good *and* evil, that people are complex, and that cursing people is a dirty business."

There was a long silence. This was a brilliant and beautiful interpretation, but I wasn't sure (in fact, I highly doubted) that it was what the Rabbis intended when they suggested the *minhag*. In fact, knowing what I do about Jewish history, and how Purim is, in many senses, a wish fulfilling fantasy of revenge on all those who have hurt Jews throughout the ages, I knew how unlikely it was.

But we live in a different world now. We live in a world where Jews wield power (political and otherwise), where we have our own state, and where humanist values have come to inform our understanding of what it means to be Liberal Jews. We live in a world where it is possible to find the wholesale slaughter of Jewish enemies (75,810 people!) at the end of the book of Esther morally troubling, and the

cursing of Haman's name discomfiting (however much he may deserve it). So what if we can use the commandment to blur the lines to teach complexity, nuance and that the notion that only in fairytales and Disney movies are people all good, or all evil. Too often we gloss over the slaughter of non-Jews that occurs at the end of Megillat Esther because it complicates the fairytale, because it's too hard to explain to kids (let alone adults) the moral complexity of revenge fantasies.

For the past week, I have been reading Israeli journalist (and Haaretz columnist) Ari Shavit's book, *My Promised Land* which has been hailed by everyone from Leon Wieseltier to Jeffrey Goldberg as exceptional. This is largely because of Shavit's ability to hold and wrestle with multiple narratives about the founding of the State of Israel; the horrors of the Holocaust and the nightmare of the naqba, the miracle of Israel and the ongoing disaster of Palestinian displacement. What sets the book apart is its painful – and brilliant – ability to compassionately hold all of these narratives: the horrific losses of Iraqi Jewish olim, the unthinkable trauma of Holocaust survivors in the same period, and the nightmare for Palestinians who once inhabited the city of Lydda and were displaced by traumatized Jewish immigrants. These stories are told with grace, nuance and a heart big enough to hold – and mourn – all of them. Purim gives us a similar opportunity; to know that in every victory there may also be great loss, and in every loss there may be a victory for our enemy, and that praying for tremendous suffering – for anyone – compromises us all. Purim is an opportunity to think deeply about these contradictions, and to acknowledge the pain, and nuance, contained in this reality.

So what did I tell my student? "That's a beautiful interpretation." I answered. "Really beautiful. But, I mean, given the historical context that the commandment comes out of, I'm not sure it's accurate."

"Maybe" she said, "It's time for a new interpretation."

Maybe it is.

Chag Purim Sameach.

ONE LOVE: HDS HARAMBEE AND FRIENDS UNITED AGAINST RACIAL VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

NATASHA THOMPSON & MELISSA BARTHOLOMEW
MTS '14 MDiv '15

These remarks were delivered by Natasha Thompson on the HDS Campus Green on Tuesday April 1, 2014 at the beginning of a campus vigil and march sponsored by Harambee, HDS Students of African Descent, to commemorate the victims of racial violence in our country and to call for an end to all such acts of terror.

Our presence here today signifies our collective acknowledgement of the persistent epidemic of systematic racism that permeates our country. It is the animating fuel of many of the social dilemmas of our society. The United Nations recognizes this fact and calls attention to the need to address racism in the United States, and around the world, by designating one day a year as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, falling on March 21st, of this year. This year's theme: "The Role of Leaders in Combating Racism and Racial Discrimination," was chosen to highlight the key role that leaders play in mobilizing political will to combat racism and racial discrimination. As students of religion, and as leaders of today and tomorrow, we have a role to play in mobilizing political will within our own spheres of influence to combat racism and racial discrimination.

From our country's inception, the genocide of the indigenous people of this land, and the enslavement of the Africans brought to help build this country, has created an atmosphere of fear, hate, and disconnectedness that racism feeds on. It has produced a culture of racial violence and discrimination that exists to some degree throughout every facet of our society. There is racial discrimination and violence between people of all races in this country. These acts are perpetuated as a result of the long and pervasive history of racism that feeds the minds of those who commit these acts, instilling thoughts of worthlessness and a general hopelessness. While I could stand here in front of you all and attempt to recite and pay remembrance to all of those who have been victims of race-related violence throughout history, I know that I wouldn't be able to get through even 1% of all the names of those who have been lost due to senseless acts of racial violence and discrimination. This vigil is not solely about recognizing each individual person that has been involved in racial violence, whether a victim or [perpetrator]; it is also about recognizing that those who commit these acts, and those who suffer them, are mere pawns in a system of racism whether it is realized or not, and that we—as students, professors, leaders, citizens of this country and of this world—have a responsibility to address the fact that racism continues to be a real threat to our very ability to build a Beloved Community. We are here today to acknowledge that this is an issue that we must attend to, and, that whatever method we decide to employ, individually or collectively, we will utilize the resource of *love*. *Love* is the force that binds us together and that will dismantle racism from our hearts and collective consciousness.

So, we are here to honor the victims of racial violence and discrimination in our country, and to acknowledge our country's ongoing need for racial reconciliation and healing. We are One Love, my brothers and sisters. We are Friends United Against Racial Violence and Discrimination. One Love.



Credit: Michael Woolf

COMPOST AND ASHES: A SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

ANNA MULLEN
MDiv '15



Anna preached this sermon at her field education placement, Peace Lutheran Church in Wayland, MA, on March 5, 2014.

The ashes we place on our foreheads this evening serve as an outward reminder and sign of our humility. I just learned this, though you may have already know it, that for the early Christians, having dust on the forehead was an indicator that one has bowed her or his head all the way to the ground in prayer before God. I like this idea that having dirty foreheads—with ashes, or dust, or dirt—is a sign that we have been in deep pray, as if in order to most fully lay our lives before God, we must lay our head on the earth. Touching the Earth brings us closer to God. As I have been thinking about this idea of bowing our heads literally down to the earth in prayer, I remember something I saw when I was living with a group of monks at monastery in France. Whenever a new brother takes his vows in the community, he lays his entire body flat on the ground in front of the altar. This act of total prostration is not unique to this monastery, but what it highlights for me is our incontestable connectedness to the earth within our relationships to God. It is beautiful to me that in the monk's effort to give his life over to the community, to show his deepest commitment to God, he lays his body down to be in full contact with the earth. To think of it, we do not jump, or stand on ladders, or climb to the top of mountains to be closer to God. We bow. We get closer to the ground. We lay our foreheads in the dirt and the dust of the earth.

Perhaps we may recognize that this mark of the earth upon our bodies is unifying. On this Ash Wednesday we hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” As Genesis 2 says, “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” We are creatures of God's divine creation, a beautiful combination of dust and the breath of life. We are dirt. We are dust. To our deepest core, we are sisters and brothers with all of God's creation. In our acts of bowing—of laying our heads on the ground—we remind ourselves of our humble unity with all of God's created cosmos. And, perhaps in this act of remembering what it means to be created by God out of the dust of the earth and with the breath of sustaining life, we can find ourselves in deeper and closer relationship with our Creator.

When I was working on a farm, educating kids about where our food comes from, I always tried to stay away from the word “dirt.” It has a connotation of unclean, lifeless, burdensome matter. I would always try to give dirt some dignity by calling it soil. And you know what? Soil—the dust and dirt that we are made of—is pretty incredible stuff. We know that it is from the soil that our food is grown. It is in the soil that the trees that build our homes are rooted. It is within the soil that billions of tiny microbiotic communities that we cannot see with our naked eyes live and thrive. But do you know what I think is this the most amazing thing about soil? The best soil—the richest, healthiest, most vibrant soil—is made out of piles of discarded waste. Our trash. It has a fancy name you've probably heard of—compost.

The best soil a gardener could ask for is made out of yesterday's dinner, dead leaves, eggshells, newspaper, animal manure, grass clippings, and vegetable peels. You throw all of this junk, the stuff you don't want anymore, into a pile, and you mix it about and turn it over every few months, and you eventually get this incredibly beautiful, nutritious fertilizer from which new life will spring forth. My favorite poet and agricultural advocate Wendell Berry has written that, “Soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life.”

For me, compost is a beautiful metaphor for our season of Lent, a time of self-reflection, repentance, and humility. Lent is a time for us to take the things that make us broken, the things in our lives that we know we want to put behind us, and to offer them up to God so that something new can be created. Like the scraps we throw into the compost pile, we can rid ourselves of the things that get in the way of us being in deeper relationships with God. I know that Pastor Jeff [of Peace Lutheran Church] has asked us to think of disciplines we would like to adopt for Lent, whether it be giving something up, or maybe adding something to our daily routines that will enrich and deepen our relationships with God. Whatever your discipline may be, I challenge you to see it as an element of the metaphorical compost pile. If you're giving something up for Lent, throw it in the pile and watch what new life can come from discarded things. If you're adding something to daily routines, see it as the pitchfork that stirs the scraps of yesterday to create a vibrant tomorrow.

COMPOST AND ASHES: A SERMON FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

ANNA MULLEN
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Just as the gardener uses compost to prepare a garden, Lent is a season of preparation to prepare our heart for the coming of the risen Christ. So as we throw our scrap in the compost pile, as we use our acts of humility and self-reflection to help foster deeper and more meaningful relationships between us and both our neighbors and God, may we make an effort to bow down and remind ourselves that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. May we get our hands dirty in this work of preparation, and when we wipe the sweat off of our brows with soil covering our hands, may we see that the mark of our Creator is upon us.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
— Psalm 51:10-12



COPERNICAN PROPHECY

ARIENNE JOHNSON MDiv '14



Arienne preached this sermon in the 2013 Billings Preaching competition, sponsored each year by the Office of Ministry Studies at HDS. To view the 2014 Billings Preachings Finals, visit the [HDS website](#).

“Two things fill my mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the more often and persistently I reflect upon them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.”

This Kantian quote is positioned at the beginning of the third chapter of this little book titled *God’s Universe*, which is a compilation of a lecture series given in 2005 at Harvard by the renowned astronomer Owen Gingerich, who just so happens to be a member of my little Mennonite Congregation of Boston. His third chapter is called “Questions Without Answers” and next to Kant’s quote is pictured a little cube of uranium 238, shown in actual size.

*1Bless YHWH, o my soul!
YHWH, my God, how great you are!
Clothed in majesty and glory...
19You made the moon to tell the seasons,
And the sun knows when to set
Psalm 104, verses 1 and 19*

This year’s winter vacation at HDS lasted 40 days. No joke: our vacation was *as long as LENT*. And for many students I talked to upon return, it made for a perfect modern-day parallel for wandering-in-the-wilderness-transformation between semesters. Mine was packed: From Christmas in Tallahassee with parents to New Years in DC with sisters, to a whirlwind week in Nicaragua—reuniting with a beloved college roommate (Andrea) who has spent the past year and a half working at a cultural center in Managua.

Now, I didn’t know what to expect from Nicaragua. I don’t speak Spanish, I’ve never been to Central America, and I certainly didn’t plan that Andrea and I would somehow land on an idyllic volcanic island called Ometepe in the middle of Lake Nicaragua for the majority of the trip.

*Glory forever to YHWH!
May you find joy in your creation!
You glance at the earth and it trembles;
You touch the mountains and they smoke!*

Psalms 104, verses 31-32

Today I want to share one particularly striking moment from that trip with you.

On our last night in Ometepe, we went scouting for alligators on a night kayak tour. What I will remember most is feeling blown away by my life’s complete randomness as I floated on that little kayak at midnight, gazing up at the Milky Way spinning above me. It was easily the clearest display of stars I’ve ever seen.

*YHWH, what variety you have created,
Arranging everything so wisely!
The earth is filled with your creativity!
There’s the vast expanse of the Sea,
Teeming with countless creatures,
Living things large and small.*

Psalms 104, verses 24-25

In *God’s Universe*, Owen says, “Let us go back to our cube of uranium and think a bit about randomness. Atoms, they are very small, to paraphrase a line from John Updike. So small that there are about six million billion billion uranium atoms in [the pictured] little cube. But these atoms are unstable. Their nuclei have a tendency to eject a so-called alpha particle, thereby transmuting the uranium nucleus into another unstable nucleus, thorium 234...”

“An unanswerable question is when will any particular uranium atom will decay... It is as if these minute specks have free will! Within the ensemble, constraints prevail, but at the individual level ‘choice’ exists. And since we live in a universe that is likewise indeterminate at its lowest level, the mutations caused by similarly random processes are also indeterminate.”

Randomness and serendipity seem so often like primary guiding forces in our lives. I have spoken with many Harvard affiliates who conclude from these creation characteristics that individual lives and ultimate reality are thus effectively purposeless and godless. But for me, like Owen, the mystery in these random world- mutations has always seemed so loudly to establish the opposite.

And strangely—in the life-moments we experience as random—those mutations often make sense somehow years down the road. Why did I go to Nicaragua? Maybe it was purely for the purpose of

COPERNICAN PROPHECY

ARIENNE JOHNSON
MDiv '14

reconnecting with myself through reconnecting with my friend and witnessing the glory of creation from a Central American perspective. Maybe there is more to it than that. For now, I can only delight in the randomness of it.

*Wrapped in a robe of light,
You stretch the heavens out like a tent.
Psalm 104, verse 2*

However, I also give high credence to logic, proofs, and understanding. So much of faith is so often couched in terms of pure mystery. But God not only appears to us through mysterious coincidence; throughout history we see God works from within extremely logical frameworks in day-to-day life.

I am the highest skeptic when it comes to people proclaiming divine reasoning for traumatic events. I am also the type of Christian who has a pen handy when reading the bible. Call me heretical (or just Mennonite), but I have no qualms in marking up sections, questioning prophetic proclamations, and taking offense at accounts of God-ordained violence, whether they are plastered as anti-gay billboards in Kansas or as war crimes listed as divine vengeance in the book of Kings.

To me, many prophetic proclamations of God are imbalanced and misinterpreted. Then again, unlike many Christians, in circumstances of destruction and terror, I do not see God's divine hand of judgment; instead, I see God in crying faces. I see God in laments.

*All creatures depend on you
To feed them at the proper time
Give it to them—they gather it up.
Open your hand—they are well satisfied.
Hide your face—they are terrified.
Take away their breath—they die and return to dust.
Psalm 104, verses 27-29*

In his book, Owen points out that the Bible is full of information that is scientifically inaccurate. This has historically given Christianity a reputation for not totally appreciating new scientific discoveries. For one case, he highlights the Copernican principle—that crazy impossible-to-fathom notion that the earth is not the center of the

universe and instead that we are all constantly being flung through space on a spherical planet that is absolutely tiny in comparison to the sun. Now—according to Psalm 104, verse 5: “The Lord God set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.” Today, we accept models of planetary rotation around the sun as basic fact, but throughout the 17th century, Catholics and Protestants alike went about scoffing at Copernicus’ hypothesis. Owen says it well. “Surely a sun-centered cosmology, with the earth spinning daily on its axis and whirling annually around the sun, was ruled out in sacred scriptures.”

*You lay the beams for your palace on the waters above;
You use the clouds as your chariot
And ride on the wings of the wind;
You use the winds as messengers
And fiery flames as attendants.
Psalm 104, verses 3-4*

Jesus' life proposes something similar to Copernicus' bizarre new notion, the claim that the earth rotates around the sun instead of the other way around. His ministry inverts the framework of how society perceives God's identity. He shows us that God is not some royal, distant, angry man-king sitting on a throne in the sky bringing wrath and doom and fiery judgment on humans who mess up Deuteronomy's laws; instead, God is present here and now, constantly walking within us and around us.

I invite you to revisit Psalm 104, one of the bases that previous church leaders used to reject Copernicus' hypothesis. Reading the Psalm today, I accept that it is scientifically inaccurate and includes verses at variance with my own theological stances. Yet the words resonate so deeply within me that as I look up into the galaxies and ponder all the unanswerable questions still lingering, I joyfully echo it as a form of timeless Truth:

*I will sing to you all my life,
I will make music for my God as long as I live.
May these reflections of mine give God
As much pleasure as God gives me!
May the corrupt vanish from the earth
And the violent exist no longer!
Bless YHWH, o my soul!
Alleluia! Amen.
Psalm 104, verses 33-35*

LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

STEPHANIE A. PAULSELL

HOUGHTON PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY STUDIES



Professor Paulsell delivered these remarks in March 2014 in the "In Conversation" series, sponsored by the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life.

This series invites HDS faculty members to share their intellectual and spiritual autobiographies with attention to the ways in which those aspects of their lives have developed in communion and in tension.

I

It's hot, but not as hot as it's going to get. We're driving from Wilson to Oak City in the early morning, my dad and I, the windows of our green Impala wound down, fields of Bright Leaf tobacco shimmering in the heat on either side of the road. Most are nearly picked clean by migrant workers and local kids, moving through the fields again and again, harvesting leaves from the bottom up. A few fields are neglected, the flowers growing out of the tops of the plants making breezy accusations of laziness, inattention. It's Sunday morning. Except for the rattle and whine of insects, all the fields are quiet.

Oak City Christian Church is between pastors, and my dad is filling their pulpit. His plain, black, hardback Bible lies on the seat between us, his sermon neatly folded up between its pages.

Some Sundays we hurtle through the humming, green morning without saying much, just watching the fields go by and the fragile-looking barns where the tobacco will hang to cure. Other Sundays, we're more talkative. Once my dad told me about walking over the knob of a hill at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, just as the setting sun washed the valley below in one

last flood of brilliant light, and he felt God's presence just as surely as he had ever felt anything. Sometimes I ask questions. "Dad, do you think there's really a hell?" "No," he'd answer. "Why would God build a permanent place for evil?" This was the catechism of the car.

Back in the seventeenth century, the English poet and pastor George Herbert advised preachers to dip and season "all our words and sentences in our hearts" so that the congregation "may plainly perceive that every word is heart-deep." My dad types his sermons on a manual typewriter and then, with a pen in his hand, tests the depth his words have reached, scratching out, filling in. Even as a child I can see that this heart-deep work gets rewarded with attention. In Oak City, there's one young man in particular, in his late teens or maybe his early twenties, who leans forward in the pew, his chin in his hands, eyes bright, when my dad preaches. He looks like he would drink every word like water if he could.

My dad is serious about preaching, as those marked-up sermons testify, and he takes his listeners seriously, never hesitating, for example, to quote from Bernard of Clairvaux, a twelfth-century Cistercian writer he adores, when he feels Bernard can offer a clarifying word. Not that my dad's not funny. Like a lot of preachers, he often opens with a funny story, the doorway across which he beckons his listeners, a place for the congregation to find their bearings and settle in to the work of listening. Sometimes these stories involve me, like the one about him overhearing my friend Jessica and me talking about the Blessed Virgin as we clamp skates onto our shoes, tighten them with a key, and skate

back and forth across the smooth cement floor beneath our carport. At dinner he asks me, "Do you know who the Blessed Virgin is?" And I reply, "I thought you were a religion professor!" My dad thinks this is hilarious, and he laughs every time he tells it with the abandon and volume that have led his students to coin the phrase "the Wild Bill laugh." When he tells stories like that in front of whole congregations, I blush with real embarrassment, but I also kindle with real pride.

George Herbert also instructed preachers to choose "texts of Devotion, not Controversy." I can't say my dad always meets this standard. He tends to head straight for the most difficult knot in any passage of scripture, and sometimes chooses something distasteful like Psalm 109, in which the psalmist prays that the wife of his enemy be made a widow and his children begging orphans. His friend, Matthew Kelty, a Trappist monk, says that "the one true purpose of monastic life is to discover reality." Substitute "religious" for "monastic" and you have my dad's own conviction, perfectly expressed. The really real is what he's after, and so he cannot do without even one of the psalms, even though I've heard him say from the pulpit, "as I work my way through the psalms day after day, I dread coming to number 109. I hate it. I wish it were not there." But it is there, every time through. And so he reminds himself of what his friend Matthew loves to say, that the psalms take us "all the way in and all the way down." They shine a light into every corner of our selves. If we can't face it, my dad asks as he looks out at congregations that are largely rural, largely white, wholly southern, how will we ever be able to change?

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This morning in Oak City my dad is preaching my favorite of his sermons: “Lost in the Mystery of God.” I’ve heard him preach it in other churches, but I haven’t gotten tired of it yet. This is what my dad wants for all of us, whether we work on a farm or teach in a school, whether we are an adult or a child: that we be lost in the mystery of God. Not that we use our beliefs to protect ourselves from the difficult world, but that we become so lost in the mystery of God that we become permeable, available, vulnerable to what is really real.

I want to be lost like that. I’ve tried a few things: turning in circles in the front yard until I fall down, drunk and dizzy on the spinning earth. Swinging in the swing set my dad set up for my sister and me in the back yard, chanting *Narnia*, *Narnia*, in the hopes that I would suddenly break through. Pressing my hands against my closed eyes as I lay in bed, watching chips of pink and blue swirl against the dark. Kneeling in the woods behind our house, a cathedral of pine trees, building altars of moss and mud in its side chapels, well off the paths where the neighborhood boys raced around on banana seat bikes, playing cards clipped to their wheel spokes with clothing pins for maximum racket.

We pull into the dirt parking lot of Oak City Christian Church, and an elder smoking under the oak trees stubs out his cigarette and comes to greet us. “Morning, preacher,” he says. “Going to be a hot one.” “Sure is,” my dad replies.

Once inside my dad disappears to do whatever it is ministers do behind the scenes before the service starts. I find a place in the pew that will be easy for him to see from the

pulpit, on the aisle, about halfway up. When the organ music starts, and he walks out into the chancel with the elder who will lead the service, the first thing I do is look for me, and catch my eye, and smile.

The elder makes the announcements: a work day at the church next Saturday. Christian Women’s Fellowship circles meeting in member’s homes. The youth group will have a trip to the skating rink in Kinston. Who’s in the hospital, who’s just returned home, who’s recently bereaved. He asks us to bow our heads, and he prays for all in need and that God will be with us this morning. We sing a hymn. The windows of the church are open to catch any stray breeze that might come along. I am wearing a short yellow dress that my mother made, and the bare skin of my thighs sticks to the pew. When my dad comes into the pulpit, though, I forget how hot it is. He reads the scripture, offers a prayer, opens his whole attention to the congregation, and begins.

I wish I could remember the words of that sermon. When I asked once if I could read a copy of “Lost in the Mystery of God,” my dad told me that he had destroyed all his early sermons when, after decades of teaching, he became pastor of a church in Indiana. He didn’t want to be tempted to pull an old one out of the bin on Saturday night instead of writing something new.

I find this wildly overscrupulous. “Lost in the Mystery of God” preached well in churches across eastern North Carolina when my dad was busy teaching and writing and chairing a religion department and helping my mom raise my sister and me. Propelled out onto the back roads of eastern North Carolina by a vocation I could see

clearly as a child and an economic need that is more visible to me now from the vantage point of adulthood, he had to have a bin to dip into. So many church parking lots we pulled into on so many Sunday mornings with “Lost in the Mystery of God” folded up between the pages of my father’s Bible. Gold Point, Goldsboro, Wendell, Wilson, Greenville, Rocky Mount, Kinston, Morehead City. Nobody suffered from such bin-dipping it seems to me. And I wish I could read it again.

My dad says he can’t remember what the scripture text was for “Lost in the Mystery of God.” Every time I bring up that lost sermon and its lost text, he says, “If we still had that sermon, it wouldn’t look as wonderful to you as it does in your memory.” My mother thinks the text was from the psalms, and I think she’s right. But not Psalm 109. Maybe Psalm 42: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” Or maybe Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God, I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Like many books I’ve read and loved, I don’t remember the words of the sermon, but I do remember how it made me feel. It made me feel like the world was opening up all around me, on every side. It made me believe that it was the work of a lifetime to seek the presence of the living God and that there was nothing better to which one could devote one’s life. It taught me that there were a thousand thousand places to seek that presence: in fields and barns, in marriages and families, in acts of mercy and justice, in books, in scripture, in music, in silence, in prayer. Certainly in the psalms.



LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

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HOUGHTON PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY STUDIES

It convinced me that God's presence is available to all of us, not just the ministers and the monks and the saints. And it showed me that even for the ministers and monks and saints God's presence is a mystery so deep that we can swim and swim in it our whole lives long and never sound the bottom. We may feel God's claim on us, but we can never fully understand God, or know God's mind. The mystery of God, the really real, can't be put in a box. The world is full of faithful people, I've heard my dad preach from the pulpit, some Christian, some not. Anyone who has had an experience of God has something wonderful to teach us.

That sermon made me want to be better, more loving, more understanding, more good. It made me want to take risks for what is right. It made me want to pray. It made me want to kneel with all the devoted, everywhere. It made me want to lose myself in the mystery of God.

After the sermon, the elders pray over the bread and grape juice, and we share communion, passing the plates, serving each other. A deacon bends down at the end of the pew where I am sitting and hands me a tray piled with tiny rectangles of pressed bread. I stand up and walk the length of the pew to bring the tray to an elderly couple sitting at the pew's opposite end. After everyone is served, one of the elders says a prayer, and we all eat together, placing those hard pellets of bread in our mouths, letting it soften on our tongues, or crunching down with our teeth. It's hard as a brick, but oddly delicious, and, like most kids, I always wish we got more than one tiny piece.

Next the deacons fan out through the

church with trays filled with tiny glass cups of grape juice. They are heavier than the bread trays, and when I carry one to the couple at the end of my pew. I hold it while they fish out the little cups with their papery fingers. They beam smiles at me, the preacher's child.

After the last hymn and the invitation to join the church, my dad stands at the door to greet folks as they leave, and I walk out into sunshine so bright it blinds me. Now it is as hot as it is going to get. Everything that shimmered in the early morning sunshine—the fields, the barns, the church, the trees—is flattened and drained of color in the noonday heat. Even with the windows rolled all the way down, our car is a furnace, and my dad touches the baked steering wheel gingerly as we follow the car of a family in the church to their home for lunch.

The house is cooled by shade trees, and the food is delicious: fried chicken, green beans, boiled potatoes, and cole slaw. Fried corn bread and hush puppies drying on paper towels. Pie. My father thanks God for the food and the company and God's own sweet presence, and we start passing the food like we're still in church, serving one another. But this time, there is more than we can eat.

The table conversation always begins the same way, with the adults asking me and any other kids at the table how things are going in school. After we deliver our monosyllabic answers, avoiding one another's eyes, the conversation inevitably turns to tobacco. "Tobacco's over," I remember one farmer saying. "We'd do better to plant marijuana."

If there are children in the family close to my age, my time at the table is mercifully

short. After we're excused, we disappear into pink bedrooms with the frilly canopy beds that I secretly covet and play board games or Barbies. Or we race up and down the rows of the tobacco fields behind the house. Or climb up two by fours nailed to the trunk of a pine tree to reach a treehouse built in its branches. If I'm lucky, the kids will show me their treasures: a pet snake, a litter of kittens, a secret stash of cigarettes. Once I remember squatting with another girl in a ditch that ran below a train track, pressing wet leaves between flat rocks and imagining the people thousands of years hence who would find our ready-made fossils, wondering if they would wonder about us.

By 2:30 or 3:00 my dad and I are usually on our way back home, quiet after a day full of words. Once home, Dad would disappear into the back bedroom to take a nap, and I'd curl up with a book or play records in my room. Once, I remember taking a sheet of loose-leaf notebook paper, writing "Lost in the Mystery of God" across the top line and filling half the page with my own sermon. I can see it in my memory, one long paragraph in looping cursive. But like my father's sermon, my sermon is lost too.

II

Eighteen years later, I am a preacher. I don't drive through tobacco fields to get to my pulpit. I walk four and a half city blocks, from the basement apartment I share with my husband on the 5400 block of South Woodlawn Avenue in Chicago to the university chapel that rises up, a great pile of Indiana limestone, from the 5800 block of the same street. My congregation is not made up of farmers worrying over the viability of their crops, although some of



LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

STEPHANIE A. PAULSELL

HOUGHTON PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY STUDIES

them did grow up on farms in southern Illinois. My congregation is made up of city dwellers looking for a place to be quiet, or to find a way to be of use, or to move, tentatively, back to practicing a faith they thought they had abandoned long ago. They worry about paying the bills, and about random violence; they worry about doctoral exams, the job market, retirement; about whether they'll ever meet the right person; about cancer and AIDS. Like the members of the congregations my dad served on weekends, they are looking for a way to bring their inner and outer lives closer together. They are looking for a place to bring their anxieties, their fears, their gratitude for being alive. They are looking for a community, people with whom they might study and laugh and work and pray, people with whom they might do some good, some small thing that makes a difference in the lives of others and in their own lives.

It was not my intention to become a minister. I did not go to seminary; I do not have an M.Div. degree. Because I have never done field education, taken a preaching class, or read a book on pastoral care and counseling, I am often winging it. What I am is a doctoral student in religion and literature, studying literary criticism and medieval history, feminist theory and theology, twentieth-century novels and thirteenth-century manuals of spiritual instruction. But the dean of my denomination's house of studies at the University of Chicago, urges me to meet with the regional committee on ministry—the committee that recommends candidates for ordination in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Illinois and Wisconsin. “They will help you think about

your life and work differently than the faculty will,” he says. “They will ask you different questions.”

So I meet with them, twice a year for several years. And they do ask questions different from the ones my teachers ask me, questions about my calling, and how doing what I love might make a difference to others. My best friend asks me to ask the committee if they will license me as a minister in order to perform her wedding. Of course not, they say, that's not what licensed ministry is for. But when I take an evening job leading a study group on classic texts of Christian spirituality at the university chapel, they do agree to license me. And when I become licensed as a minister, not only do I perform my friend's wedding, but the dean of the chapel, an Episcopal priest named Bernard Brown, asks me to join his staff as the assistant minister. I have never preached a sermon or said a prayer at a hospital bed. So I apprentice myself to Bernie Brown, following him from hospital room to soup kitchen, from staff meeting to the dining room table where he and his wife, Carol Jean, welcome everyone: the joyful, the lonely, the broken-hearted, the confused. He listens to my sermons and comments on them; he invites me to sit in on his counseling sessions and to preach from his pulpit. Somewhere at the intersection of my studies and the practices of ministry, a vocation to ministry comes into view. I walk from the chapel to the divinity school every morning after morning prayers with the readings and the collects still knocking around inside me; I walk back in the afternoon after my classes are over, my brain humming with hermeneutical theory and deconstruction, the novels of George Eliot and the visions of Hildegard of Bingen. The

connections between my life in church and my life in school are not always visible. But the space between the academic study of religion and the practices of faith comes to seem like open, experimental space, where ideas and texts and experiences knock against each other and occasionally send off sparks. I spend two years as a licensed minister and then I am ordained and join the staff full-time.

The world of graduate study in religion and the world of the congregation are the not the only worlds between which I have to find points of connection. There is also the world of a congregation gathered by a weekly eucharist in the tradition of the Book of Common Prayer and the world of Lord's Supper in which I grew up. Every Sunday, Bernie celebrates the eucharist at an enormous wooden altar that sits in the middle of a vast chancel. I assist him, receiving bread and wine from the people who bring it up out of the congregation, handing him neatly pressed linen napkins to wipe the lip of the cup. When there is too much consecrated bread and wine for us to consume at the end, we carry it outdoors, pour the wine onto the earth, and spread out the bread for the birds. After a few weeks, when it seems I have gotten the hang of things, Bernie asks me to preside at the altar.

Good graduate student that I am, I know how important it is to give an account of my intellectual positions. I think it over and then say, “In my tradition, we share a meal around a table, not a sacrifice at an altar. We pass trays of bread and juice from hand to hand. I don't think I can lead this ritual, because I don't really know what it means.”

LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

STEPHANIE A. PAULSELL

HOUGHTON PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY STUDIES

And Bernie replies, “Oh, we don’t do this because we know what it means. We do it in order to find out what it means.”

I take those words to heart, and they help me live in the space between school and church, theory and practice, contemplation and action. What does it mean to celebrate the eucharist? What does it mean to set a theory of religion down next to a prayer? What does it mean to study the knowledge produced in a classroom through the lens of the knowledge produced in a congregation, or a soup kitchen, or a hospital room? And what does it mean to study the knowledge produced in congregation, soup kitchen, hospital room through the lens of the knowledge produced in a classroom? As any student in field education knows, it is impossible to know the answers in advance.

Bernie’s words not only shape my approach to ministry, they also influence my approach to my studies. As a graduate student, I am awash in books and arguments that I just barely understand. Occasionally I see glimmers of something I recognize studded along the bottom of those fathomless texts like starfish on the ocean floor. If I stare straight at them, they shimmer, then disappear. But if I look at them slantwise, or catch an accidental glimpse of them from the corner of my eye, they sometimes float upward into my waiting hands.

Preaching is a similar mystery; it requires a slantwise view, a willingness to be led by peripheral vision. It is also, by turns, the most exhilarating and the most utterly defeating work I’ve ever tried to do. When it is going well, making a sermon is the most satisfying work I can imagine. When it is not, my life (and the life of those around

me) becomes what my medievalist husband christens *sermo inferno*: sermon hell.

It was a great conviction of George Herbert’s that the minister should be “full of all knowledge” because “people by what they understand, are best led to what they understand not.” Nothing human is alien to the minister, and so, for the minister, there is no such thing as useless knowledge. There’s nothing a minister can know that can’t be turned toward the work of ministry. “It is an ill mason,” Herbert writes, “that refuseth any stone.”

In his ministry, my dad needed to know the psalms, Bernard of Clairvaux, the politics of tobacco subsidies. What is it I need to know? When my dad brought Bernard of Clairvaux into a sermon on a hot summer morning in eastern North Carolina, he always seemed to be bringing some important news, some information we all needed in order to get on with our lives. My first sermons, by contrast, sound like historical lectures with a little high-minded scolding at the end.

Over time, I discover that writing a sermon is not like writing an academic paper in which I lift myself carefully hand over hand up the rungs of my evidence into an argument meant to convince. It is more like lowering a ladder into the dark and feeling around until I touch something solid. Gradually I learn to trust that if I follow a word, a phrase, a connection that strikes me, something wholly unexpected, but possibly worthwhile, might happen. My best sermons stay close to the mysteries of the text, like my dad’s, but turn those mysteries in the light of whatever I’ve been reading, or the concerns of whomever I’ve been talking

to that week, or whatever I’ve caught from the corner of my eye as I’ve moved between school and church.

But I have to begin each sermon early enough for the stuff of my life, the lives of those around me and the stories of scripture to have time to coalesce into something with a shape—something, as we like to say in the preaching business, that will preach. When I begin early enough, I can write the way I like best: going back over and over to the beginning, drawing a comb through the tangles of my sentences, pulling an idea through each paragraph until I see something I couldn’t have seen when I began. I learn early on that I hate the feeling of racing through the parts of a sermon I don’t like—the paragraphs where I lose hold on what I’m thinking, and instead of following the idea down to the ground, papering it over with something pretty instead. Coming to those paragraphs in the pulpit, I can feel myself speeding up, feel my neck stiffen as I hunch over my manuscript for cover from my own sloppy thinking. Years later, when I hear Lucinda Williams sing, “could tell a lie, but my heart would know,” I hear those words as words about preaching. I make my preaching students listen to her, and I tell them: better to start early and mean every word.

But some weeks that’s not possible. Some weeks a crisis comes late in the week and there’s nothing to do but the best I can. Some weeks I don’t manage my time well. Some weeks I do, and even then, a sermon never arrives any place significant, never opens any window on the really real. I see I am going to have to learn to live with not loving every word I speak from the pulpit. I begin to think that maybe this is just part of

LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

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the job.

At my ordination, my dad prayed that I would live intimately with scripture. And I find that good sermons do seem to come from the kind of intimacy I associate with the closest relationships, the ones not based on clarity and understanding but on living closely enough to see each other's strangeness. Sometimes I hit a groove, and week after week sermons I can preach with my head up come. In those weeks, I feel connected to my words and the people to whom I am speaking them; although I'm the one standing in the pulpit, I feel we are doing something together.

Inevitably, though, I fall into a trough of doubt and cannot climb out for weeks and weeks. What am I doing? Why is anyone listening? What in God's name can it possibly mean to *preach*?

It's not like my school studies, where I can feel myself gaining mastery—over languages, over theories, over ideas and methodologies. With every paper I revise, I can feel myself learning to better able to back up my claims, to prove my points. Preaching is not like that at all. Every time out, everything is at stake. Every time out, I feel that I am starting all over again.

The texts preachers must consider each week are potentially endless—scripture from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Psalms; the language of the hymns and the prayers; the embodied realities of the lives of the people to whom we speak; the life of the world. Every week the texts change, and some of those changes are wrought in secret. Our mastery over “the material” is not the issue; our attention to the ways all these

“texts” intersect, or might intersect, is.

I find this exhilarating. And I find it terrifying. Barbara Brown Taylor compares watching a preacher enter a pulpit to watching a tightrope walker get ready to mount the high wire. If, as a preacher, you are alive to that fact, alive to the risk you are taking, it can become difficult to gather courage week after week to write a sermon. Some preachers protect themselves by developing a shtick and sticking to it. Some steal the sermons of others from the internet. George Herbert composed a panicky “Prayer before a Sermon” full of exclamations like “Oh Lord hear, Oh Lord forgive!” My strategy, when I hit a slump, is to console myself with thoughts like these: who's perfect? Certainly not me. I'm doing the best I can.

On a visit home, I share this hard-won wisdom with my dad. We're two preachers, talking about our shared work. I chatter away, filling him in on all the pastoral insights I've acquired over the last eventful year. I am particularly proud of how I've learned to deal with the terror of preaching. “I've finally come to accept” (*finally*—as if I've been at this half my life, not just twelve short months), “that I won't preach a great sermon every time.”

I see immediately that I have shocked him. My dad is quiet for a minute and then he says, gently, “Well, those people who come to church each week certainly deserve your best.”

I am an untopped tobacco plant, my laziness waving in the breeze for all to see. But even as I feel a red wave of shame wash through me, I know that my dad would forgive me a

mediocre sermon. He would forgive me a hundred mediocre sermons, a thousand. What shocks him is how quickly I've run from the risks that good preaching requires, my attempt to protect myself from spectacular failure by getting comfortable with little failures along the way. He can't abide my forgetting that what's at stake in preaching is not my sense of my own cleverness, nor the compliments I might receive, nor how I feel up there in the pulpit or at the back of the church shaking hands, nor even whether I do my father proud. He would never expect me to be a perfect preacher, but does expect me to remember that all our attempts to communicate matter.

III

Like all human speech, preaching is evanescent—our words strike the air, and then they are gone. And what any sermon means varies from listener to listener. My father preached “Lost in the Mystery of God” in many churches, and it meant something different in all of them. Sermons are something congregations and preachers create together out of the stuff of scripture and the stuff of life, the stories of the Bible and the stories of this great, struggling world.

When a preacher steps into the pulpit, she does not know what her sermon will mean to those who will listen. Her work is to open enough windows and doors in that sermon for everyone to enter with their deepest questions and their fiercest hopes. This is what my father meant, I think, when he told me that the people who came to church deserved my best. Every sermon can't be perfect—if by perfect we mean exquisitely argued and watertight—but every

LOST IN THE MYSTERY OF GOD

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sermon has to open a space for others to examine their lives and the life of the world in the light of God's presence. This is sacred work. And it is work that belongs to all of us, whether we ever preach a sermon or not. For every time we try to communicate something that matters, we have the opportunity to open a space for others to do the same.

The preacher, George Herbert writes, should capture the attention of the congregation "by all possible art": the sound of the words, the rhythm of the sentences should all work together to draw the listeners close. But, in the end, what

makes a sermon a sermon is not artistry but Holiness. The preacher, Herbert insists, should strive to be "not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy." Lest holiness seem so out of reach that there's no point in striving for it, Herbert is quick to give it definition: "there is no greater sign of holiness," he writes, "than the procuring, and rejoicing in another's good."

Maybe that is what I remember in my father's sermon. Like the vast majority of the moments of my childhood, my father's sermon is lost now in the mystery of God. If I want to read that sermon, that is where I will have to seek it. In the meanwhile, I read

the traces that are left behind, traces that I still remember—my father's desire to draw his listeners into a mystery that invites us all into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

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Credit: Katelynn Carver
From the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life

SERMON FOR THE THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

POLLY CARDEN
MDiv '14



Polly Carden, MDiv '14, preached this sermon at the weekly HDS Thursday Ecumenical Eucharist on Thursday March 6, 2014.

Good morning. It's good to see your faces. Welcome to Lent! Did y'all get your ashes yesterday?

The Anglicans did a great noon service here yesterday for Ash Wednesday, and they let me help out. I got to be one of the people with the ashes. I had this little bowl of ashes and holy oil, and this line of people came up to me, and I made the sign of the cross in ash on their foreheads and said "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Except most of these people were people I knew, right? It was noon service. So it wasn't like, "people of God, remember you are dust etcetera." Instead it was, "Jenny, remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." "Rhee-Soo, remember you are dust." "Kerry, remember you are dust."

And then later, I was sitting next to my partner in class, and we were in Matt Pott's sacramental theology class, and we were talking about *The Road*. Which was a good selection for Ash Wednesday, right? And we were talking about how when you bring a child into the world, when you give that child a life, you are giving a death as well. Our deaths are written on and into our bodies from the beginning. And I looked over at my partner, and we both had these crosses traced in ash on our foreheads, and it just seemed very literal, and I thought, we are going to die. Both of us are definitely going to die. And then I looked around the room and several of us had the ashes and several of us didn't but definitely, either way, all of us are going to die. Welcome to Lent.

So it really struck me that our readings today are all about life. The passage from Deuteronomy, "I have set before you today life and death, therefore choose life so that you and your descendants might live." The gospel reading, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

These are pretty major biblical thesis statements. You could

reasonably say that "life" is the whole gospel story. It was definitely the first Bible verse I learned. John 3:16. Did any of y'all learn that one first? I could say it when I was three years old. "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son, so that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It was also made clear to me, from the beginning, that this gift of life was inextricably tied up with death. Specifically, the death of Jesus. Specifically, the death of Jesus, for me. Those of you with more evangelical Christian backgrounds, or those of you who spent formative years in the Bible Belt, will know what I'm talking about. There's a sacred harp tune that I love, that ends with the line, "but I can sing redeeming grace for Jesus died for me." This is four-part harmony, and each of the parts sings this line at slightly different times. The sound at the end is kind of like a round, and then each part holds the last note, the "me" note, until they all finish. So it sounds like this, "for Jesus died for, Jesus died for, Jesus died for, Jesus died for me...." That was pretty much the content of my early childhood education in Christianity, and I think there are a lot of Christians who would say that's all you need to know, and even now I'm not sure I think they're wrong.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus, and particularly the idea of the necessary death of Jesus, is an idea that I still don't really know how to reckon with. In coming back to Christianity as an adult, and in many ways finding it for the first time, I turned hard towards different parts of the story. The lost sheep is a story I can get behind. The loaves and fishes. The resurrection! These stories are life-giving for me: stories of love, stories that death is not the end. And I even love some of the death, in an Ash Wednesday sense--remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. I love the way the gospel mourns the death of Jesus. I love the last supper. I love the garden of Gethsemane. I love poor frightened Peter. I love the sad, lost disciples in the upper room, the women who come weeping to wrap the body of Jesus. I love the stone rolled away. I cannot love the idea that any of this had to happen. It is awfully inconvenient that the gospel keeps repeating that idea.

It's the first sentence of our reading today, "Jesus said to his disciples, the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." It's the "must" that gets me there. The idea that the whole story was leading to the cross, the whole time. That the marks of the nails were ghosts in his palms from the beginning. That this was part of

SERMON FOR THE THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

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the plan, that--whatever complex theology we build around it--our reconciliation to God required, in some way, the suffering and death of God's son. Required the suffering and death of anyone. That we needed to be ransomed in blood.

In my three years here and in my turning back to Christianity I have learned to say, that's not the point. That's the wrong question. It's not the death that's the point but the resurrection. And I think that's true. But it's also true that I don't know what to do with the death, at all. I don't know what to do with the blood. That idea that Jesus "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed." I hate it, and I don't understand it.

I should say that you may have the impression that my homily is leading to some great realization or revelation or moment of clarity about all this. Well, it's not. I didn't get there. I've spent the whole morning hoping for a last minute lightning bolt of insight, and it hasn't arrived.

So here's what I'm gonna say about all this. I'm gonna use a Sacred Harp analogy. I want to say, let's think about this complicated Christian story, and particularly these difficult parts of it, like a particularly difficult song. Many of you have heard me say that Sacred Harp singing is my most authentic spiritual practice, so maybe it makes sense that those are the lessons I draw on when trying to reckon with the most difficult parts of my faith.

What happens in Sacred Harp singing is that each song only gets sung once a meeting—you sing the notes and maybe two or three verses at full speed, with no practice or instruction. If it's new to you, you may be beginning to find your feet by the last verse; if it's complicated, you may not get there at all. Some of your fellow singers will be singing confidently, with their books closed on their laps. Many will be stronger at some parts than at others. Some will be even more lost than you. In fusing tunes, sections will trade parts, voices rising and then falling as other voices rise. If it's a song everybody knows well, you can make the rafters ring. More often, it's at least a little bit messy, stumbling along into occasional moments of grace, coming together to sound and hold the final chord.

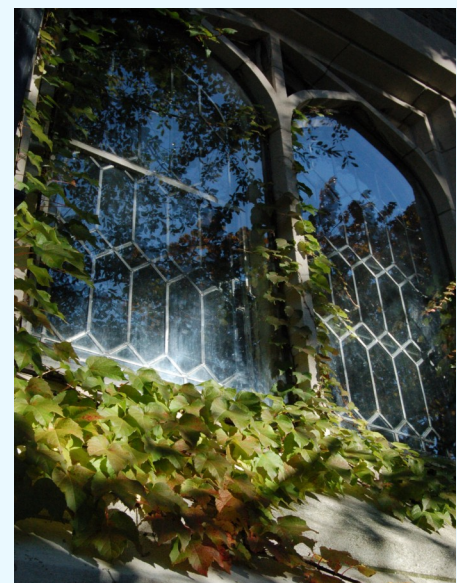
Here is the good news: the tunes will come around again, whether at the next singing or one a few months down the road. You get

another chance to try it out, and maybe it will be a little more familiar next time, and maybe you will be a little better of a singer by then. In the same way, in the Christian liturgical year, we are continually retelling the same story, revisiting the same readings—the ones everybody's comfortable with and the ones everybody stumbles on—hoping that eventually we will find our feet, find our way in.

And we don't do it alone. The song requires everyone's voice, and most people are better at some parts than others. In the same way, we don't carry the whole story of Christianity by ourselves. We do it together, and maybe there's a part that you know better than I do, and we sort of stumble and stagger along and muddle through and it's all okay as long as we all come together on the last note, and sound that last chord.

And I do believe that the end of the story is resurrection. I do believe that the last word of the story is love. And hopefully that's what we get to, one of these days.

Amen.



Credit: Kristie Welsh

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