

# Just Crumbs



ESSAY BY WILL CONNELLY, MTS2

photographs by Adam Collin Saylor, MDiv'02

It's ten minutes after ten on a fall Friday morning in the Vanderbilt Divinity School Common Room. After a week of attending lectures, participating in discussion groups, and conducting research, Divinity School students convene with the faculty and administration at this time each week to announce upcoming community events, to converse with colleagues, and most importantly, it seems, to partake of bagels, doughnuts, coffee, and tea.

The goal of this gathering is to foster and develop a sense of community among students and faculty within the Divinity School by bringing them together at a common time. Once bodies are fed, minds are primed to plan and discuss activities that should become physical manifestations of the ideas presented in the classroom. Through these activities, students and faculty have opportunities to answer the question, "So what?," a question that prompts and reminds us that theories—no matter how complex, impressive, and intriguing—are as useless as lead life preservers if left in the mind and not applied in the real world.

It's fifteen minutes after ten, and the Common Room is now bustling with people. On one of the larger tables, containers of cream cheese and boxes of doughnuts sur-

round a mountain of bagels. I pour a cup of coffee, grab a bagel, and locate an empty chair. Instead of chatting, I focus on my food. By following such a strategy, I feel justified in not engaging in conversation. Other people appear to have adopted the same practice. Then it hits me. This is all about my food! Do I really care about the "community?" Do I want to ponder the questions "So what?" or "How do I apply my studies?" The question is, rather, "Is this the fat-free cream cheese or regular?"

*"See how small they are," he observes. "They're like crumbs, but that's all it takes to feed a lot of people."*

It's twenty-five minutes after ten and time for announcements. A student reports on plans for a spring gala. Others voice prayer concerns; student leaders announce meeting times and venues for their respective organizations; and others inform the assembly when and where they are preaching and ministering this Sunday.

I am honestly not interested. I have been sleeping, eating, attending classes, studying, and writing, for the past two months and have nothing to show for it save a few less than stellar marks on my academic record. I want to do something, and I need to do something before I become apathetic and gain ten pounds. Many of my colleagues

explain that classroom theory meets action when they provide pastoral care for members in their churches or faith-based organizations. I continue to wonder about what it means "to minister" and when, or if, I will find a ministry.

My bagel and coffee compete with these rather rudimentary questions until a tall man, holding two jars of seeds, stands in front of the group. Someone obviously didn't tell him that food was provided at this function. He proceeds to tell everyone in the room that he lives on a farm, and he wants to start a hunger-relief program called "Just Crumbs" that makes

high-quality organic foods available to those who struggle with hunger. He adds that it only takes tiny seeds, small amounts of land, and a few volunteers to produce large quantities of food. He finishes his brief announcement by saying that farming is spiritual labor and those interested should meet with him when the announcements conclude. I set my food on the table. That's it! It is all about food!

It's forty minutes past ten, and my life is about to change. When announcements end, I walk over to the tall man and introduce myself. I discover the man's name is Freddie Haddox. He immediately embraces me with a handshake and a smile and proceeds to pour about ten seeds into my hand.

"See how small they are," he observes. "They're like crumbs, but that's all it takes to feed a lot of people."

I rotate the seeds in my hand. They are light, fragile, but immeasurably powerful. Finally, I have something real, something physical to work with that actually has the potential to give and sustain life.

Freddie puts the seeds back into the jar and tells me that planting begins in the spring after the first frost. I am now a novice farmer; perhaps farming will become my ministry and the hungry will be those to whom I can minister.

The setting for the Just Crumbs hunger-relief initiative is Freddie's farm in Franklin, Tennessee, land tilled in the 19th century by his ancestors who were slaves of a landowner named Winstead. When Winstead died, he bequeathed in a handwritten will the entire farm to his slaves instead of his own family. This inheritance gives Freddie inspiration daily, as he claims, "Even then, during slavery, there were good people with good hearts." The slave owner's gesture also motivates Freddie to retain the natural beauty of the land despite weekly offers from land developers who claim that Freddie is "hindering progress."

In response to this allegation, Freddie wants to show people his idea of progress. Progress is designating a portion of his farm for an organic method of cultivation called "nature farming" as a model for feeding people who struggle with hunger. Ideally, Freddie and those involved want to streamline this method of farming so that other people, people who have smaller plots of land, can replicate it easily and become ministers. The process of nature farming allows this replication to occur in backyards and other smaller plots of land across the globe. By focusing on the nutrition of the soil instead of external fertilizers, pesticides, and other unnatural growth stimulators, nature farming allows farmers to narrow space between plants. The result is the maximization of growth and yield in a minimal area of land; consequently, a rather small area of land (25 x 25 square feet) can produce large amounts of produce.

Nature farming is the method of agriculture advocated by Mokichi Okada (1882-1955), an accomplished Japanese entrepreneur, painter, calligrapher, and poet, who became spiritual leader of the followers of Johrei (pronounced "joe-ray"). Okada taught that by practicing Johrei, the word he used to

describe God's healing light, one can cleanse the body of impurities and purify the soul to achieve a state of health that allows one to live fully in accord with God's will.

As a deterrent to adding impurities to food, Okada encouraged people to grow vegetables using only the natural components of soil and water and to refrain from adding chemicals, manure, or compost. Vegetables and grains produced in nature farming fields are denser, have longer roots, and are

*Right: As soon as this young kid is weaned, the milk from Haddox's goats will be used for making cheese. The dairy product will be donated as part of the Just Crumbs hunger-relief project organized by Haddox.*



*Above: Divinity School students Will Connelly and Freddie Haddox survey the land that will be transformed into plots for nature farming, an agricultural method that uses only natural components of soil and water and avoids the use of chemicals. The farmland in Franklin, Tennessee, was inherited by Haddox's ancestors during Reconstruction.*

# How the Poor Evangelize Us

## Reflections on an Urban Immersion

BY KURT GILBERT SCHREIBER, MTS2

*Immersion trips are designed as intense opportunities to gain firsthand knowledge of different societies and cultures. The Church in the City Immersion, a course offered at Vanderbilt University Divinity School during Maymester 2002, was an experiment to explore expressions of church in an urban setting, but in contrast to typical immersions in foreign locations, the urban setting was Nashville.*



The first task was to open our eyes to the city. We began with a “sensory journaling” exercise in which the 13 students were divided into four groups that were sent out to explore different quadrants of the city. We were to note the conditions in detail. The premise was that most people, in moving from point A to point B, truly fail to notice the conditions and the people between these points. Our job was to see and to hear.

Three of us drove over to south Nashville and then began walking down the streets while observing sites that I had overlooked during the six years I have lived in the city. We ate at a burrito stand and found ourselves sharing a table with a man who sleeps on the steps of a church. He manifested grace, faith in God, and appreciation for others in his community. I began to realize that in my determination to get from point A to point B, I had overlooked many of those who do not fit neatly into the domains of my professional life and charitable giving. I remembered Jesus’ description of those who heard his parables: “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn...” (MT 13:14, 15)

As the two weeks of the immersion course progressed, it became clear that this was indeed an opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of different societies and cultures. Our schedule was full—meetings with government officials, ministers, church members, social workers, teachers, and a statistician—lunches with the homeless; a meeting with former prostitutes in a sanctuary program; and a conversation with refugees. From all these experiences, the highlight, for me, was

*“I began to realize that in my determination to get from point A to point B, I had overlooked many of those who do not fit neatly into the domains of my professional life and charitable giving.”*

discovering how intervention programs in Nashville treat participants truly as “the image and likeness of God.”

In an educational program, Project Reflect, teachers emphasize the inner purity of children who are from economically deprived backgrounds and who are failing academically. Instructors are taught to focus only on the positive and the good; they are to ignore what is “incorrect” and retrain, thereby giving the children skills to become architects of their lives so they can carry out God’s creation in them.

Former prostitutes in Magdalene, a recovery program are also treated with respect. They are given the responsibility of living without supervision in group homes. They are able to talk frankly about their past addictions and behaviors because they understand that they are now free to progress. In the program’s five years, only one woman has returned to a life of crime. It appears to me that these ministries “mark the perfect, and behold the upright;” and the end does, indeed, appear to be “peace.” (PS 37:37)

A refugee father, his 16-year-old daughter, and his niece had moved beyond the trauma of their past. In 1988, he had preserved his family in the face of warfare by uprooting them, carrying his three children, and helping his pregnant wife over snow-covered mountains in northern Iraq. After three years in a refugee camp, they arrived in Nashville with their only possessions—their clothing—in

two plastic sacks. They were greeted and assisted by a local congregation. Since then the father has worked steadily, and the children have progressed in school; today, they would return to their former home “only to visit.”

As I reflect on these experiences, the words of one of the former prostitutes come to mind. She said that reformation came when she finally realized that there were many wanting to help, with hands extended to her, but that she needed to reach out and grasp one of those hands if she were to change her life. Like one of Jesus’ parables, this image has implications I did not expect. The immersion certainly showed me new ways in which to reach out to offer aid to others in need. But just as important, it opened my eyes to ways in which the poor and marginalized are reaching out to me. They are reaching out, not only for aid and justice, but also as sources of lessons that I need—lessons in humanity, faith, and fellowship—if only I will look, reach out, and grasp their hands. As the director of a program for the homeless told us, “We must also focus on receiving from the poor, because the poor evangelize us.”

*The essayist was graduated from Cornell University where he earned a baccalaureate in economics; he earned the doctorate of jurisprudence from the University of Michigan Law School and holds a certificate in international law from the City of London College. He is an active member of the Christian Scientist faith community.*

stronger against blight and high winds. To comply with the strict practices of nature farming, Freddie irrigates the plot of land with mineral water he draws from a well. He transplants wild blackberry shrubs from the hillsides in the virginal soil. Milk from his goats will be made into cheese.

The harvest from the Just Crumbs initiative will be distributed through the Society of Saint Andrew, an ecumenical Christian ministry established in 1979 by United Methodist pastors. Dedicated to the principles of good stewardship, the Society of Saint Andrew collects produce that would otherwise go to waste and delivers the food to the hungry.

The first frost has passed and progress is evident. Generous volunteers have planted seeds, built fences, constructed a new entrance to the farm, and even bottle-fed baby goats. Others who have not visited the farm have also contributed to the effort. Fang Guo, MTS2, donated money to buy three cherry trees; a jar of pennies collected by MarLu Scott, MDiv3, provided the funds for purchasing a plum tree; and P.K. Bramlett, an attorney in Nashville, is doing pro bono legal work for the organization. Every single contribution and effort is a solid step in the direction of progress.

If you are interested in becoming part of the Just Crumbs initiative, please e-mail Will Connelly at [william.h.connely@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:william.h.connely@vanderbilt.edu), or call Freddie Haddox at 615/485-3665.

*The essayist, Connelly, was graduated in 2001 from the University of Rochester where he studied religion and classics. Photographer and Divinity School alumnus Saylor is studying for the doctorate of philosophy in the sociology of religion at Marquette University.*



*Above: Haddox prepares the soil for transplanting wild blackberry shrubs. The fruit will become part of the Just Crumbs harvest distributed to the hungry.*



*Above: Connelly weeds a tract of Haddox’s farm before planting fruit trees purchased with donations from Divinity School students Fang Guo and MarLu Scott.*



# Pursuing a Crown of Perfection

A Journey from Atlantic City to Vanderbilt University Divinity School

BY SHELLI RENEE YODER, MDIV'02, CERTIFICATE FROM THE CARPENTER PROGRAM  
IN RELIGION, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY, AND DOLLAR GENERAL SCHOLAR

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

—MATTHEW 5:48 NRSV

*A decade has passed since Shelli Renee Yoder sang "This is the Moment" from Jekyll and Hyde during the talent competition in the 1993 Miss America Pageant. This year marks the ten-year reunion of her pageant experience, but Yoder elected not to attend the celebrations commemorating her journey from Shipshewana, Indiana, to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Instead of reuniting with the nine final finalists on the runway, she decided to remain in Nashville and compose an essay on the violence of pageantry.*

*Before enrolling at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Yoder was educated at Purdue University where she earned a baccalaureate in interpersonal and public communication and at Indiana University where she was graduated with a master's degree in counseling and human services. She attends Brookmeade Congregational Church and is currently preparing for ordination in the United Church of Christ.*

I always am uncertain how to respond when someone who discovers I competed in pageants offers, "Really? You don't seem the type." Usually I enjoy engaging the other person, and together we discover our own stereotypes and ambiguous pasts. But there are those days when I am in no mood to discuss the subject, and I retort, "Well, I guess I *am* the type."

Unless I am willing to ridicule my own experience, I usually refrain from disclosing my pageant past. I keep the lessons learned from those experiences locked away in the dark along with my Miss Indiana crown. Occasionally, and with people I trust, I bring out the crown, brush off the dust and hold the crown and the experience up to the light for closer examinations. Talking openly about the good, the bad, and the in-between, is like reuniting with an old friend. My pageant past is multilayered and peculiar—complete with big hair and oddly enough, a significant amount of gratitude.

I stumbled into pageantry at the close of my senior year of high school when I participated in a small Youth for Christ choir called Skywatch. We were asked to sing during the Miss Northeast Pageant, a preliminary pageant to the Miss Indiana title. As contestants changed from swimsuits into evening gowns, we sang songs about Jesus and the glory of God and how we all need the Lord and the grandeur of heaven's streets of gold. Such peculiarity did not register with me immediately.

Following the pageant, one of the judges approached me and suggested I enter a local pageant. She offered the name and telephone number of the person to contact. I called the director of the pageant, and two weeks later I participated in and won the Miss Limberlost title which qualified me to compete in the Miss Indiana pageant. Over the next seven years, I competed for the crown of Miss Indiana three times. The first trip resulted in my finishing 26th in the top 26 places. During the second time around, I finished in second place. Finally in 1992, I won the crown of Miss Indiana and competed in the Miss America pageant.

## Long, Long; Short, Short

The days leading up to my departure to Atlantic City are among my most cherished memories. In my home town of Shipshewana, Indiana, the 500 citizens, predominantly Amish and Mennonite, exercised no restraint in celebrating my being crowned Miss Indiana. Welcome home parades, community gatherings, exquisitely handcrafted gifts, horse and buggy rides, endless telephone phone calls, mountains of homemade breads, cookies, pies, and homemade Amish peanut butter were aplenty. An outpouring of love and support encircled my family; our home resounded from the constant activity. Neighborhood children, family, friends, and curious strangers were welcomed guests. I met for the first time my second, third, and

fourth cousins—once removed. Suddenly life became a celebration, day after day after day. The crown became more than a stack of sterling silver embedded with rows of sparkling rhinestone. We shared laughs together as men and women, young and old, Amish and English, tried on that stack of sparkling silver and paraded around like royalty and imitating the stylized Miss America wave—long, long; short, short. The experience was so novel and out-of-the-ordinary, but those days were sacred. Together with my community, a positive experience of Miss America was shared.

## Impressionistic Violence

But what cannot be ignored or denied is the objectification imbedded in the phenomenon of Miss America, a reflection of the broader culture. This certainly is not news for veteran feminists. But for a novice, who also happens to be a past Miss Indiana, the misogyny is more difficult to name, more painful and shameful. I am not merely reflecting critically on an abstract phenomenon; I am scrutinizing personal experience and acknowledging how unpleasant life becomes when we look inward.

Reflecting on my experiences of pageants is like trying to look at an impressionist painting with my nose against the wall. Gaining distance from the wall, from the painting, from pageants, I begin making out images of an unusual violence against women. Maybe the violence is not physical, but the message sent to women of all ages, especially the young, leaves an unusual kind of scar. As we compete against each other to become the ideal woman, as we struggle to alter our own body shape to achieve a culturally defined image of beauty, as we volunteer within our community not necessarily for our community's sake but to win favor from our peers, a violation of the soul occurs.

Perhaps these scars are not visible to the eye; nevertheless they are etched into the surface of the heart. This objectification of women scars not only women but all creation. It is a violation which keeps us disconnected from each other and imprisoned in harsh and critical self-judgment.

The inherent danger in this violation is that it is couched in terms of women's liberation. Great lengths to change the image of Miss America from a beauty pageant to a scholarship program have taken place over the past decade. Miss America is now mar-



Poor Clares Mourning the Death of Saint Francis  
ca. 1296  
by the Master of the Obsequies  
fresco  
San Francesco, the Upper Church  
Assisi

Gospel of Matthew's prescription, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The Miss America image of perfection challenged the guessing game in life. I was addicted to the control I thought I had in pageants. Competing, achieving, and winning gave me a sense of self-worth, a self-worth defined externally and not internally; "knowing thyself" was not a priority. I used the Miss America program to define who and what I was and would become. Instead of learning the skill of critical thinking, I only had to imagine: WWMAD? What would Miss America do?

This mythical, superheroic figure put God first, followed the Ten Commandments, committed no acts of misconduct, smiled and looked attracted, and performed good deeds for her neighbor. Follow such a list and behold—a excursion down the runway of gold was certain. Such a pursuit of perfection served strictly as an external check and balance system. Never mind about listening within for the voice of God. God was the checklist of America's ideal. Become Miss America, and God's favor would be bestowed upon me.

#### Virtue, Check

When my dream of becoming Miss America ended, I was left with a big, gaping hole of emptiness. The checklist of perfection, that so narrowly defined how I should and should not be, failed to produce a sense of fulfillment or spiritual transformation. What was God if not perfection or power? Even more perverse, what was God if not male or American? The emptiness left me searching. I would like to say I was searching for a way to confront and begin living into the emptiness I felt inside; however, I searched for a replacement checklist, a new inventory of "dos and don'ts" to define who and what I should be.

I still longed to be the ideal, virtuous woman. I got married. Check. I got religious. Check. I started graduate school. Check. I decorated my house for every national and religious holiday. Check. I bought shoes to match every individual outfit. Check. After all, a virtuous woman has all her boxes checked off, for only then is she "far more precious than jewels" (Proverbs 31:10). Check. For the ideal woman, perfection is not just the destination; it is her way of travel.

While fulfilling the criteria of the check-

list, I was "getting religious" and at the same time working toward my first master's degree in the field of counseling. During my studies, I discovered a book by Murray Bodo titled *Clare: A Light in the Garden*. Neither biographical nor a spiritual meditation on the life of Saint Clare of Assisi, the story tells of Clare's relationship with Francis of Assisi.

Reading the book proved to be a transformative experience. I was not comforted by the story; I was angered. I became furious. I questioned. In the middle of my anger and questions, my idolatrous belief system and fettered spirit were exposed. Just as Clare's life was defined and understood through her relationship with a man, I realized this pattern was how I valued and understood my own life—through a male definition of perfection. In the middle of my questions and through my relationship with another woman's story, 700 years removed, I experienced the holy. In a rush of emotion from anger to feelings of solidarity with a woman such as Clare, I questioned "destination perfection."

Clare's commitment to peace, her ability to recognize the Beloved in all creation, her understanding of the connectedness in the world, her contemplative heart, her courage to walk away from wealth and 12th-century expectations of the virtuous woman, inspired me to begin delving beneath the surface of my own reality. What or who would I find beneath the mask of Shelli Yoder, second runner up to Miss America? Where would my questions lead?

The path of seeking is more circular than linear. I began noticing the endless shades of green found in creation, the unique shape of each individual eye, mouth, and nose, the different ways children laugh and the many ways we experience silence, my bare feet touching the earth, and the overwhelming presence of homelessness in a country of affluence and resources. I noticed how little I knew about the beautiful gift of my sexuality—how fear and ignorance kept me from exploration instead of inviting me to a greater awareness—how the Divine Spirit dwelt within one. I began paying attention.

Ten years have passed since I was Miss Indiana and second runner-up to Miss America. During the decade my thoughts have fluctuated from "What was I thinking?" to offering up a whispered "Thank you." I am grateful for the unique perspective this experience provided, and I am thankful for the kind and generous people my chosen

path encountered. Most deeply, I am indebted to my experiences at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

People whom I met during my reign as Miss Indiana continue to correspond with me. Their words are encouraging. There are many others from whom I have never heard. I am sure meeting a beauty queen in a St. John's knit ensemble, wearing a glitzy crown, talking about accepting and believing in your self regardless of the circumstances, was bound to foster questions as well as create distance. The decked-out beauty queen talking about self acceptance is a rather hypocritical image, an image of my past I live with daily.

I have been told I am only responsible for actions I deliberately perform, that it is the intent of the heart that really matters, and because I did not intend to do harm, I am not responsible.

I disagree.

If I embrace the theological tenet of the connectedness of all life, and I do, I am responsible, or rather accountable to my neighbor and not just the ones defined as human. We are connected and accountable to the hermit crab, the missel thrush, the wood sorrel, the air we breathe, the ocelot, the prairie, and the weeping willow. We stand accountable to the twelve year old girl dying to be thin, the man on death row awaiting

execution, and the Afghan refugee without a home. My choices have consequences. Such privilege demands critical reflection, just responses, and an unfettered spirit embodying the Love of God.

With a list of "dos and don'ts," we can convince ourselves we are granted a special dispensation from life's asymmetry. Perhaps that's the lure of such a phenomenon as Miss America. The pageant sweeps the messiness of life under the train of an ermine-trimmed robe and projects a contrived image of perfection. It helps tie up the loose ends. But what is reality if not loose ends? Life is scarred and flawless, broken yet whole. Perhaps in opening ourselves up to the questions, embracing unconditional compassion, and standing accountable to our neighbor, we are as close as we possibly can be to what it means to be perfect.

The cut-paper stained glass window was created by Cathleen Q. Mumford who serves on the faculty of the Renaissance Center in Dickson, Tennessee. The artist was graduated from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

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keted as the world's leading provider of scholarships for women, but Miss America's relationship with education creates mixed messages of women's liberation and sexual objectification. As long as women are able to name and claim the conditions, the misogyny is no longer labeled as objectification but earns the dangerous label of women's liberation via empowerment. But I ask: Whose definition of the ideal woman are we embracing?

Just as our bodies are manipulated in pageantry, so is the message regarding violence against women; this violation against women is subtle but contributes to our society's objectified gaze upon women. Height, weight, hair color, skin tone, intelligence, talent, sense of style, posture, composure, wit, and personality—women are walking checklists based on a male model of perfection. From my experience, the 21st-century Miss America ideal is a "liberated" woman complete with an education and a career; she is smart, talented, heterosexual, and remains on display for the male gaze.

#### The Prescription According to Matthew

If being a novice feminist who also is a past beauty queen is not enough to raise eyebrows, being a Mennonite and a beauty queen certainly will. Either of the seeming contradictions can provoke eyebrow raising on its own, but combine the two paradoxes and entire faces begin to contort. Discovering my feminist voice would come years later, but I was a Mennonite when I entered pageantry, and at this interval of my life, the pageant ideal and my religious sensibility seemed compatible: abide by a list of rules and morals; dress according to strict guidelines; and by adhering to these codes, salvation—or in this case success—was sure to follow. There was no gray ambiguity. For me, religion and pageants seemed more similar than different. Legalism stood firm. Religion and Miss America seemed to embody the pursuit of perfection. To become Miss America was to become America's ideal, God's ideal, or so I thought. The possibility of achieving perfection arrested me and seemed to clarify the



Shelli Renee Yoder, MDiv'02

*I dwell in Possibility—  
A fairer House than Prose—  
More numerous of Windows—  
Superior—for Doors—  
Of Chambers as the Cedars—  
Impregnable of Eye—  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky—  
Of Visitors—the fairest—  
For Occupation—This—  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise—*

“Poem 657”  
c. 1862  
by Emily Dickinson  
(1830-1886)



# NEGATIVE SPACE

BY VICTOR JUDGE

## Artist Rashida Marjani Browne dwells in the House of Possibility.

Among the fairest visitors to her figurative residence are Imagination, Metaphor, Question, and Revision. Whether a conversation with her addresses techniques of linoleum block printmaking or Paul Tillich’s conception of the ground of being, the leitmotif of the discourse is “possibility,” a word which has a sacramental connotation in Browne’s lexicon. “When one elects to enter the creative life or the spiritual life, one must be willing to take risks; one has to develop a respectful relationship with the unknown, with the possibilities that emerge continuously from a world of constant inconstancy,” contends Browne, whose stylized prints have been commissioned for *The Spire*. “To engage in the creative life, as in the spiritual life, one must always ask, ‘How much control am I willing to yield?’ When I’m applying colors and assembling the blocks for a print, or when I’m contemplating the mystery of God, I am always discovering the unexpected, and each discovery reinforces my conviction that possibility is the essence of creativity and theology.”

As one listens to Browne discuss the paramount role imagination plays in one’s artistic and spiritual formation, the auditor observes how she inclines her head to the left and how carefully she enunciates each syllable in a reverential tone as if she were participating in an act of prayer; one notices how deliberately she pauses after each clause, as if she wishes to remove any doubt a transcriber may have regarding the placement of commas or periods. The easeful cadence of her delivery echoes a triadic, scriptural syntax—a rhythmical pattern one might

*“And God created all the beasts of the earth.”  
Number 6 from Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis  
1990  
by Jacob Lawrence  
African American artist of the Harlem Renaissance  
(1917-2000)  
screenprint on Whatman Print Matt paper  
from hand color-separated photo stencils  
63.5 x 48.6 cm.  
screens destroyed  
from Jacob Lawrence: Thirty Years of Prints  
(1963-1993) A Catalogue Raisonné  
Francine Seders Gallery, Ltd., Seattle  
University of Washington Press*

*Among the artists Browne acknowledges as being influential upon her creative development is printmaker Jacob Lawrence whose signature style is described by art historian Patricia Hills as “a reductive, figurative modernism uniquely wedded to socially concerned subject matter and characterized by tight interlocking patterns of simplified shapes.”*

*“...when I’m contemplating the mystery of God, I am always discovering the unexpected, and each discovery reinforces my conviction that possibility is the essence of creativity and theology.”*

not expect in the voice of a 27-year-old—but appropriate for one whose name translated from Swahili means “the righteous woman of coral.”

At one interval in the conversation, she abandons her still posture and slowly raises her hands, like a figure orant, as she professes, “I am a finite being; I have limitations; consequently, my creative expression is limited. I cannot be more grand than the Mystery, but I have the freedom to alter or to revise my expression of the Mystery—to investigate another possibility.”

Browne’s understanding of the inherent power of revision, in both artistic and theological contexts, reminds one of the introductory paragraph of *Pentimento*, the memoir of the 20th-century American playwright Lillian Hellman:

“Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman’s dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called *pentimento*, because the painter ‘repented,’ changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.”

Reared in the Pentecostal tradition of faith but educated for 17 years in Roman Catholic schools, the young artist views her life as a succession of *pentimentos* which have afforded her opportunities for questioning and revising her “ways of seeing.”

### Drawing Against Convention

The oldest of five siblings, Browne was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and began her education at the School of Saint John Nepomucene where she remembers “struggling with the dexterity required for using scissors” during art class.

“When I was in kindergarten, I was perceived by the nuns as not being able to cut well with scissors, so I had to take a pair of safety scissors and sheets of construction paper home and practice at night by cutting out paper hearts,” recounts Browne. Often

accompanying the scissors and paper were notes from the nuns to Browne’s mother, Valerie, regarding her daughter’s deportment. The school children ate their lunches in silence, as the nuns would take their meals in the refectory, and for each time a student cleaned one’s plate while maintaining silence, a smiley-face badge was conferred upon the dutiful pupil.

“I never ate all my lunch, and I always was talking during the meal, so I never acquired a collection of smiley-face stickers,” says Browne as she laughs for the first time during the interview. “I also never understood why we sang the Beatles’ song ‘Yellow Submarine’ each day during music class, and whenever I hear those lyrics, I don’t see images of the Fab Four from Liverpool or of the animated film; instead, I have this vision of an elderly nun playing the piano as we stood and sang about living beneath the waves aboard a yellow submarine.”

Browne was more content to sit at her desk and create graphics with her Etch A Sketch until she was seen shaking the red plastic-framed Plexiglas screen—the necessary procedure for rebooting the drawing instrument. “Sister Mary Ralph confiscated my Etch A Sketch and told me she would return it to me at the end of the school year, and in my first-grade naiveté, I believed her. But on the last day of school, I went home empty-handed thinking to myself, ‘That nun stole my Etch A Sketch.’”

Perhaps Browne’s breaking silence during lunchtime and her boredom with music class were early manifestations of an artistic temperament resistant to repetition and imitation and a disdain for provincial, pedestrian images such as construction-paper hearts and yellow smiley faces. Her mother was not unnerved by the notes describing her daughter’s disruptive conduct but interpreted the schoolgirl’s behavior as a reaction to the introduction of an infant sister into the family. The artist’s mother would pay closer attention, however, to a comment on her daughter’s report card from Saint Stephen Martyr Grammar School.

When a lay-teacher in the art department



Above: Upon earning her degree from the Divinity School, Rashida Marjani Browne accepted a faculty appointment in the art department at Montgomery Bell Academy, a college preparatory school for young men in Nashville.

saw a picture that her student had created based upon an imaginary scene from a Milwaukee fair, she was impressed with the innate sense of composition and advanced perspective demonstrated by the drawing. “I had drawn the figures at the fair in profile; their lips and noses were protruding, and the teacher remarked that most children would draw frontal figures with circular heads and represent their facial features with single lines,” remembers Browne. “The teacher wrote to my mother that my drawings were stylistically mature because I was able to draw lines more loosely instead of trying to make the pencil follow the contours of an object; she believed I had a raw sense of how to respond to a subject and that I drew against the preconceived, conventional representations.”

Convinced that Browne’s creative development would be enhanced by the art curriculum in a city feeder-school where she could prepare for admission to the high school for the arts, the teacher recommended that Browne transfer from Saint Stephen Martyr and matriculate in the public school. But her mother was unreceptive to the proposal.

“My mother had a profound conviction that public education was synonymous with poor education,” contends Browne. “She had attended Catholic schools and believed that her five children would have more academic and cultural opportunities by attending parochial schools.”

Because Browne and her siblings were not Catholic, they were not entitled to receive the discount in tuition offered to parish members, and the cost of private education required sacrifices of her mother, a homemaker, and her stepfather, a public works employee for the Village of Whitefish Bay. While attending



PENTON HOISE

Above: During a studio art course, Browne helps MBA senior Jack Bryant, son of Divinity School student Rick Bryant, MDiv2, with an assignment in clay.

Saint Joan Antida High School for Girls, Browne participated in forensic competitions and was always excited when tournaments were conducted at the high school for the arts where she could view the displays of student artwork. "I often wonder if I might be more advanced as an artist if I had attended a school with an art curriculum instead of elective classes," ponders Brown, "but I also understand my mother's motive; she wanted to provide for her children a gift she believed to be of uncompromising importance in her role as a parent—a private education."

#### Confusing the Homonyms

The discipline of parochial education was reinforced by the strictness of the African American Pentecostal faith tradition in which Browne's spiritual formation began. At the Church of God in Christ, women were not allowed to wear makeup, slacks, or open-toe shoes, nor were they allowed to cut their hair.

"I was the quintessential tomboy who lived in jeans and shorts," says Browne, "and I never understood why I had to wear long sleeves when we went to church, even during summer." But from this conservative tradition, which she describes today as "legalistic," emerged Browne's earliest conception of God.

"From my perspective as a child, the music was the redeeming feature of going to church, and I particularly remember singing the chorus of a hymn with the clause, 'Our God reigns.' One Sunday I illustrated the hymn by drawing with my crayons a large umbrella and raindrops, and I wrote 'Our God rains' in the sky. The refrain inspired me to imagine God as water falling from the heavens, and my mother had the drawing transferred to a decal and applied to her coffee mug before she told me I had confused 'rains' with 'reigns.'"

When her parents grew uncomfortable with the unrelenting legalism that characterized the denomination's polity, the family began attending services at the more charismatic, interracial Assembly of God but quickly discovered a similar emphasis upon the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic. "There were only three questions that were seemingly valued by that congregation: Who held the record for attending the most services? Who prayed out loud the most? and Who could demonstrate the most spirituality? This environment was not as oppressive as the one in the first church we attended," says Browne, "but I now realize, after studying theology at the Divinity School, how both congregations of my childhood were more concerned with what could be measured by the eyes."

#### Moving South

In 1993, Browne bid farewell to the cold winters of Milwaukee and was greeted by the humidity of New Orleans where she enrolled in Xavier University of Louisiana, the only historically Black, Catholic college in the Western hemisphere.

"When I arrived in the South, I had to become accustomed to people saying 'Hello' at the bus stop; in Milwaukee, everyone tends to stare ahead as they walk down the streets, but in New Orleans people greet one another as if they are acquaintances."

The first expression of discrimination Browne experienced in the South was not related to race but to her identity as a university student. As a participant in the Jesuit university's outreach program, she tutored children and adolescents at the community center in Gert-Town, a neighborhood across the canal. Because the students under her tutelage had experienced failure in their classes, they adopted an anti-intellectual

posture as a defense against their fear of not succeeding academically.

"Unfortunate circumstances in their lives had conditioned them to disappointment," explains Browne, "and they would tease me by saying, 'You think you are so smart because you are in college,' or when I initially tried to help them, they resisted and replied, 'We don't need you.' But I believe their resentment was a façade for their feelings of unworthiness. A session with a tutor from Xavier was among the few constructive experiences in their lives, so I approached my volunteer work with the same degree of seriousness with which I approach teaching."

While fulfilling the requirements for the baccalaureate in fine arts, Browne encountered three individuals at Xavier—an artist from Harlem, a Jesuit priest, and a professor of biblical studies—who changed her relationship to creativity and to religion. From the painter Jacob Lawrence, she learned there was no legitimate excuse one could employ to justify *not* creating. When Lawrence lectured at Xavier, he described his adolescence during the Great Depression and how brown paper bags served as improvised canvases for painting with tempera, the only medium he could afford. Upon hearing Lawrence speak so reverently about his urge to create, Browne remembers admitting to herself, "I will never have a reason for believing I cannot create—even if I have to search for scrap metal on the roadside—I can find a surface on which to express my ideas." Viewing the African-American genre scenes comprising Browne's portfolio, one immediately recognizes the influence of Lawrence's distinctive angular, cubist-expressionist style upon her work; she shares with the Harlem Renaissance artist a keen sense for vibrant colors and a commitment to meticulous research.

When her academic advisor informed Browne that she had to declare a minor for her program of studies, she decided to adhere to the conventional wisdom of her peers and take courses in business. "Other art students told me I needed to enroll in finance and management classes so I would not have to hire an agent to promote my work, but I soon grew weary of numbers." She considered taking a minor in education, but found the methods courses dull. Computer science did not complement her aesthetic sensibility, but the inspiration she was deriving from her theology classes resulted

in these courses becoming more than mere requirements at a Catholic institution; consequently, she declared theology her minor.

Studying with Father Phillip Linden Jr., S.J. allowed Browne to realize that asking questions could not destroy one's faith. The religion classes of her secondary school years and the Sunday school lessons in the Pentecostal church had not fostered a healthy respect for interrogation, but the priest incarnated the gospels by encouraging her to examine contemporary society and to criticize the conditions that contradict the teachings from Scripture. "Father Linden was the first authentic critic of religion I met because he lived within questions and never dismissed concrete evidence," says Browne. "And despite his being criticized by the hierarchy, he has never stopped believing in the possibilities and the constructive changes the Catholic church can bring into reality."

Linden's insistence upon questioning was reinforced by the pedagogy of Monya Aletha

During her courses with Sallie McFague, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Theology, emerita, Browne discovered how the vocabulary of art was compatible with the lexicon of theology.

"I remember becoming anxious in Constructive Christian theology class when Professor McFague required us to write our creed in which we were to develop and defend a systematic conception of God," says Browne, who continues struggling with that assignment five years later as she searches for a faith tradition to claim. "I do not perceive God as being a controlling force in the sky; through my imperfect reasoning, I perceive God to be a Mystery who continues to be revealed—a Mystery whom I cannot experience completely in time and who exists within negative space."

To illustrate her argument, Browne reaches for a pencil and drawing paper and hurriedly sketches the outline of a heart, similar to those patterns she cut from construction

art and Tillich's conception of the gestalt of grace proved to be one of the most significant academic exercises during the two years Browne studied at the Divinity School. A week after submitting her creed, she was crossing the street at the traffic light at 21st Avenue, South and Wesley Place, where she heard someone from behind call her name. The voice belonged to Professor McFague, who told Browne that she found the thesis of her argument to be quite credible. "The confidence I gained that day while walking across the street remains more important than the grade I earned in the Constructive Christian theology course; I admire Professor McFague's style of writing because she communicates remarkably profound ideas in accessible language, and her prose has such a literary, figurative quality. Having her as a teacher and as a reader has helped me not only in writing but in teaching art because I learned in her courses how to moderate a classroom dialogue; I introduce the students to a technique; I start the demonstration, but I never finish the demonstration by myself; I invite them to apply layers of color or to mold the clay."

Should one of the young gentlemen in Browne's classes at Montgomery Bell Academy confess, "I can't draw; I'm not talented." Browne tells him of the day she arrived at Vanderbilt to begin graduate studies and how she did not feel her contributions to a group discussion would be worthy of theological discourse. To dispel the myth that creativity and talent are synonymous, she asks the student, "How did you learn to write a coherent paragraph?" and after the student recites the litany of stages—diagramming sentences, developing a topic sentence, employing declarative, compound, and complex syntactical patterns, writing a preliminary draft, and revising to ensure that each word supports the topic sentence—Browne encouragingly advises, "The same lines you draw for diagramming a sentence can be transformed into the lines of a landscape or of a human figure's profile."

Perhaps the teacher's response to the doubtful student is an invitation to imagine the possibilities that will unfold when one enters negative space.

Drawing correlations between a theory of



*"I perceive God to be a Mystery who continues to be revealed—a Mystery whom I cannot experience completely in time and who exists within negative space."*

Stubbs, MTS'95, who taught biblical studies at Xavier before returning to Vanderbilt University where she is pursuing the doctorate of philosophy in New Testament. "I was fascinated by Monya's literary approach in teaching Scripture; she treated the Bible as a tactile text with which a reader should become engaged, in the way an artist would touch the canvas. Before studying with Monya, I had not been exposed to the importance of reading the Bible in context; my previous engagement with the text had been for the purpose of memorizing Bible verses to recite in Sunday school."

#### The Heart of Negative Space

The experience of having a professor who was educated at Vanderbilt Divinity School also motivated Browne to apply to the University and begin formal studies in theology.