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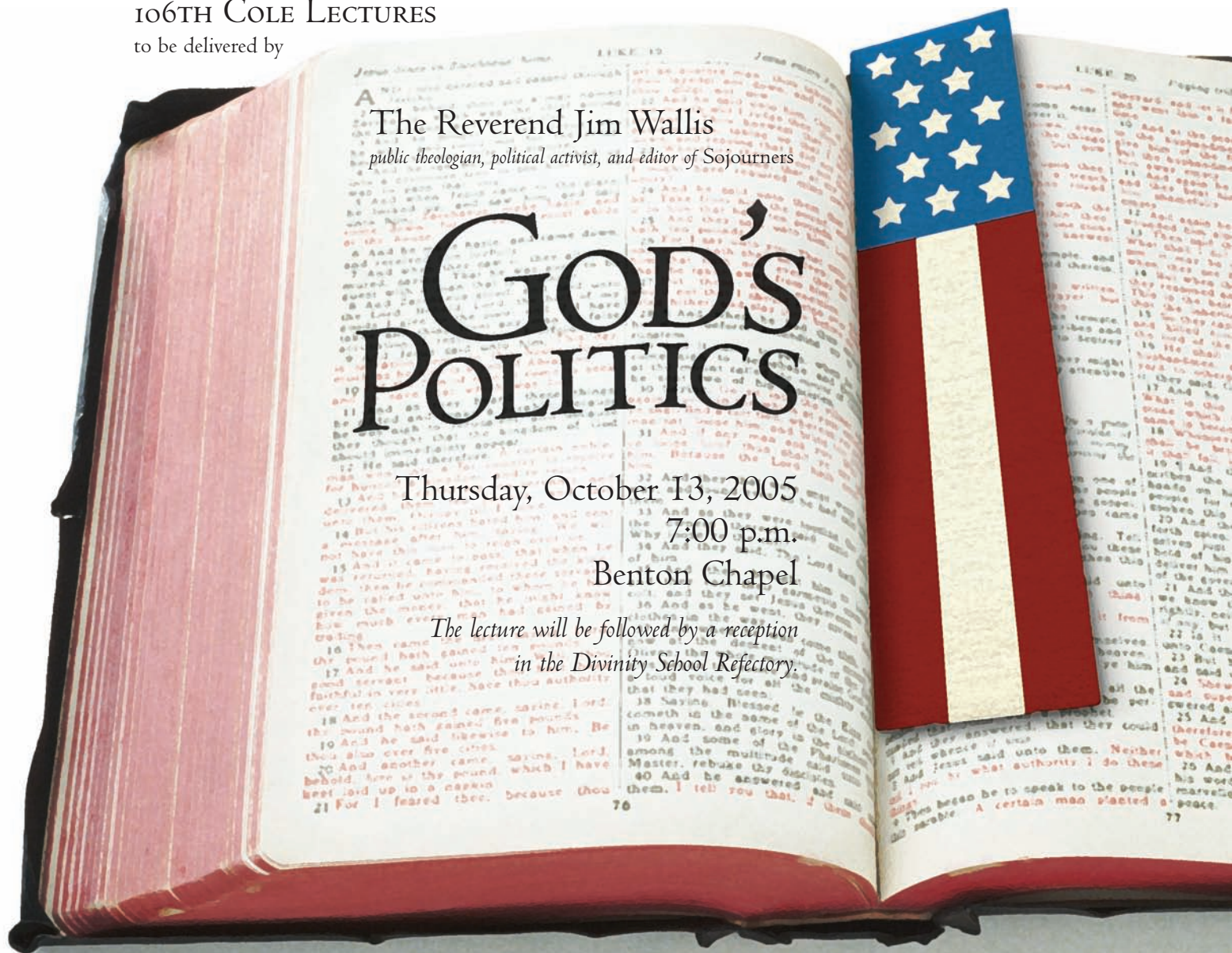
THE SPIRE

Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Graduate Department of Religion, and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology



THE *Gift* OF
Confinement

Vanderbilt University Divinity School
announces the
106TH COLE LECTURES
to be delivered by



The Reverend Jim Wallis
public theologian, political activist, and editor of *Sojourners*

GOD'S POLITICS

Thursday, October 13, 2005

7:00 p.m.

Benton Chapel

The lecture will be followed by a reception
in the Divinity School Refectory.

“To allow political ideology to overshadow human needs and
fundamental issues of life and death is to go seriously astray.”

—JIM WALLIS

“A NEW VISION FOR AMERICAN POLITICS”

Friday, October 14, 2005
10:00 a.m.
Benton Chapel

Born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1948, the Reverend Jim Wallis rigorously eschews political labels, but his advocacy focuses undeniably upon issues of peace and social justice. Reared in a traditional evangelical family, he questioned the racial segregation in his church and community and participated in the civil rights and anti-war movements. He was graduated from Michigan State University where he served as president of Students for a Democratic Society. While matriculating at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, Wallis and his peer seminarians founded *Sojourners* magazine, an alternative forum for exploring questions of faith, politics, and culture. They established in 1971 a Christian community, also named *Sojourners*, whose mission is to proclaim and practice the biblical call to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice while seeking to be guided by the principles of mercy and humility. Wallis also is the convener of *Call to Renewal*, a national, ecumenical federation of churches and faith-based organizations dedicated to overcoming poverty by changing the direction of public policy.

Named by *Time* magazine as one of the “fifty faces for America’s future,” Wallis is the author of eight books including the 2005 New York Times bestseller, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong, and the Left Doesn’t Get It*.

Philanthropist Edmund W. Cole, president of Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad and treasurer of Vanderbilt University Board of Trust, endowed the annual Cole Lecture Series in 1892 “for the defense and advocacy of the Christian religion.” Cole’s gift provided for the first sustained lectureship in the history of Vanderbilt University.

THE SPIRE

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F E A T U R E S

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Fall 2005

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Scriptio Divina: Women Writing, and God

From the illuminations of Saint Hildegard of Bingen to the novels of Virginia Woolf and from the poetics of Julia Kasdorf to the essays of Fanny Howe, Antoinette Brown lecturer Stephanie Paulsell examines the ways in which medieval and contemporary women have articulated the spiritual dimension of the practice of writing.



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The Gift of Confinement

For his act of civil disobedience in protesting the practices of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security, Professor Donald F. Beisswenger was sentenced to six months in the Federal Correctional Institution in Manchester, Kentucky. While serving his prison term, the self-professed, post-Holocaust Christian and ordained Presbyterian minister recorded his reflections on the spiritual gift of confinement.



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Against Explanation and For Consolation

In responding to the religious interpretations of the tragic effects of the tsunami, Professor John Thatamanil presents his argument on the proper aim of theology while refuting the Miltonian premise of “justifying the ways of God to man.”

From the Dean

\$10 Million and a Commitment to Teaching for Ministry

Did you ever have a great professor? Someone who communicated love of his or her discipline and care about who *you* were and who *you* wanted to become? Did you ever wonder how that great teacher got to be that kind of person?

Here at Vanderbilt we have been exploring for some time the question, "What makes for good teaching for ministry?" The question is no mere academic inquiry, either, for we have graduated hundreds of professors into positions where they teach, mentor, and conduct scholarship in seminaries, divinity schools, and other schools geared toward educating ministers. Alongside our own work in educating people for ministry, we wanted to know what we could do to contribute to a stream of great professors for the future. A group of fifteen professors and area clergy spend all of 2003-04 researching what went into making a great teacher for the practice of ministry. We were ably led in that effort by Professors Bonnie Miller-McLemore, practical theologian, and Patout Burns, historian of the early church.

Since the last issue of *The Spire* went to print, the Lilly Endowment, Inc. made a landmark \$10 million grant to the Divinity School to help produce "a generation of mentors" to prepare students called to the ministry. The program is to be called the Program in Theology and Practice. This grant constitutes the largest gift ever received by the Divinity School. The Program in Theology and Practice comes at a critical time in theological education, for there is already a nationwide shortage of practical theology teachers, and there is an acute need for young scholars in all fields to be more in tune with daily life in congregations.

Graduate education in the United States is geared to the development of research knowledge and skills in isolated fields. While this has produced tremendous advances in knowledge, when our graduate students become professors, the old adage will demonstrate its truth: "you have to show them how much you care before they will care how much you know." In teaching people who want to use the disciplines in the practice of ministry, showing that you care means demonstrating the connections between the practices of the church and the great and not-so-great ideas of the tradition.

The grant will fully support fifty graduate students in their doctoral programs. The program itself adds collaborative research with practicing clergy and professors on contemporary ministry issues and required teaching in field education and external seminary settings to the work that all graduate students do to master a field of inquiry. The Lilly Endowment is placing a great deal of trust here, and we in response plan to produce a generation of mentors for the ministry and leaders in theological education. The ultimate beneficiaries will be the congregations and members of religious communities whose leaders are shaped by teachers who are shaped by a program that has no parallel in higher education today. This is a momentous event in the history of Vanderbilt Divinity School and also a great challenge to our faculty to follow through on a commitment to go beyond education to formation of the kind of scholar-teachers theological institutions need today more than ever.

Goals for the Program in Theology and Practice include attracting fifty new graduate

... you have to show them how much you care before they will care how much you know.

students in teaching for the ministry and involving twenty-five Divinity School faculty members and twenty area clergy in an innovative curriculum. Vanderbilt also will become a partner with at least eight regional seminaries as part of the program. I have been asked, "Why graduate education?" and "Is it going to do anything for divinity students?" Let me spend a moment to answer both of these questions.

Why graduate education? Vanderbilt joins the Lilly Endowment in investing in graduate education in such a significant way because it is the best single way we can contribute to the future of the theological and religious enterprise in this and other countries. We form leaders directly for ministry on our Nashville, Tennessee, campus as we work with more than two hundred students each year in the "Minister as Theologian" paradigm. They will continue to serve the church and the purposes of God in ministries guided by imagination and insight. But our



Dean James Hudnut-Beumler

Ph.D. graduates extend this work to literally hundreds of schools across the globe as they take on the work of teaching toward ministry. Why do we invest in graduate education? Because its effect is multiplied many times over. Providing excellent graduate education is essential to the future of ministry and the quality of life in congregations.

How will this affect the divinity students in the ministry programs? They will have more attention from graduate students who are at the University precisely to learn how to teach and mentor theological students. Students in all programs will benefit from the attention our faculty will be directing to the under-researched and under-resourced issues in ministry and from new collaborations with clergy partners.

So we are grateful for the grant, and some things will be changing for the better as the Program in Theology and Practice begins. But not all things about the Divinity School are changed or need changing, and I am also profoundly grateful for that. Our outstanding faculty will continue to mentor students toward lives spent in church and agency ministry, and toward teaching in colleges, seminaries, and universities. You can be proud that your School continues to be innovative in theological education and to give good teaching its highest priority.

Our Featured Artisan

Public Laundry

The dirty words she had written on the white sheets and tee shirts could offend anyone who walked past her clothesline.

Determined that no viewer would be granted a dispensation from the vocabulary of intolerance, the scrivener had soiled the unblemished cotton with slurs about one's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. She had not scrawled the phrases with a mere randomness of hand. The staccato strokes from her index finger dipped repeatedly in moist potting soil suggested an intentional marring of the fabric.

When people stood at the clothesline and complained that her laundry was offensive, she concurred and replied, "Yes, intolerance is offensive. Dirty laundry needs to be washed." If an observer laughed dismissively at her public laundry, she inquired, "Are you certain you are not wearing a garment from this clothesline?"

Hanging the sheets and tee shirts on the clothesline for a public airing, Elizabeth Nicole King had intended to unnerve any visitor to her installation in the fine arts gallery on the campus of the University of Tennessee at Martin.

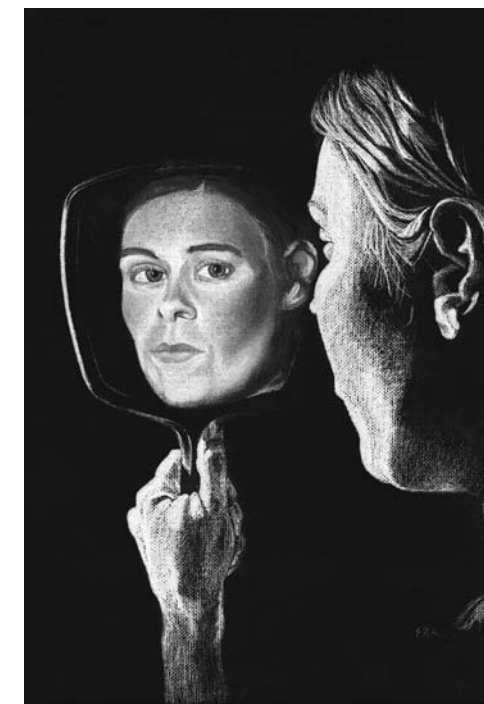
"Art encourages us to look introspectively and to ask questions of our human nature,



Elizabeth Nicole King, MDiv'2

and the answers we may discover within ourselves do not make us comfortable always," contends the twenty-four-year-old native of Franklin, Tennessee. By writing the slurs, generalizations, and stereotypical phrases literally with dirt, King wanted to demonstrate how the language of prejudice is inscribed intentionally by human hands and how the dirty words can diminish another's humanity. By mounting the exhibition for her baccalaureate in art education, she proved that the expression "to treat one like dirt" is not as cliché as wordsmiths may contend, but the artist also hoped to convey another theme: although we wear our prejudices as casually and as comfortably as a tee shirt, we can elect to cleanse ourselves of the dirty words.

King's undergraduate experiment in the hurtful and harmful effects of language may be considered a foreshadowing of her matriculation at a divinity school committed to combating the idolatry of racism and ethnocentrism. Upon distinguishing herself as a University Scholar in art and psychology at



On the Cover

The Gift of Confinement
2005
by Elizabeth Nicole King
American
(born 1981)
pastels and white charcoal on black-textured Strathmore
19" x 25"
The original drawing is displayed in the administrative suite of Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

UT Martin and then studying abroad in Cortona, Italy, King volunteered for a year at N Street Village, Incorporated, a nonprofit social services community founded in 1973 by Luther Place Memorial Church in response to the destruction from the civil rights riots that followed the assassination of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. As a primary case manager at N Street Village, King helped homeless and low-income women to gain and to maintain their highest possible level of self-sufficiency and satisfaction in their lives. From her pastoral opportunities—including the most memorable experience of serving as liturgist for the service of an elderly lady who died from the effects of liver cancer—King felt a calling to theological education.

"Whether I am drawing with pastels or contemplating a question from a lecture, I become self-reflective," she explains, "and from the questions that I ask myself during those reflections, I am humbly reminded there will always be ideas much greater than I."

While pursuing the master of divinity degree at Vanderbilt and fulfilling the ordination requirements for the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, the artist has served as a ministerial intern with the congregation at Woodmont Christian Church and has completed her clinical pastoral education as a student chaplain at the University of Chicago Comer Children's Hospital. Following her graduation from the Divinity School in 2007, King hopes to continue her studies by enrolling in a doctoral degree program in art therapy. —VJ

Editor's Note:

To illustrate the excerpts from the prison journal of Professor Donald F. Beisswenger published in this issue of *The Spire*, Elizabeth King created *The Gift of Confinement* as a representation of the revelations which may be discovered during solitary self-reflection. From the looking glass held by a gray figure silhouetted against a background of blackness, vibrant colors emerge to create an acute juxtaposition against the darkness. The drawing reflects the influence from King's formal studies of Rembrandt's self-portraiture and the seventeenth-century Dutch artist's mastery of light and shadow. Valerie Miller, MDiv'2, served as King's model for the drawing.

Readers' Forum

From the Editor

The fall 2005 issue of *The Spire* marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School's *alumni/ae* publication. Three decades ago, the premier issue commemorated the centennial of the University and documented the installation of Professor Sallie McFague as dean of the School. With the first issue celebrating the installation of the first woman as dean of a North American divinity school on the occasion of the first one hundred years of the University's heritage, *The Spire's* debut occurred at a significant interval not only in the history of Vanderbilt but also in theological education.

In her inaugural address titled "The Church, the Seminary, the Faith," Dean McFague remarked, "Theological study is not like many other kinds of study; to a remarkable extent and to a painful degree, theological study involves the person, the whole person, in what is being studied. A purpose of theological study is to prepare the whole person for practicing the art of ministry critically and interpretatively."

Since 1975, *The Spire* has presented the critical interpretations which the Divinity School's faculty, students, and *alumni/ae* continue to contribute to theological study. Having evolved from a four-page newsletter to a magazine with five thousand readers, *The Spire* remains dedicated to serving the community of Vanderbilt Divinity School. To the editors who established *The Spire's* foundation thirty years ago, and to my predecessors whose work consistently supported a mission of service to the Divinity School, I remain grateful for being affiliated with your editorial legacy. —VJ

In Praise of Great Educators

I received my fall 2004 issue of *The Spire* today and wanted to comment on how much I appreciated the issue. The edition not only had several articles that I deeply appreciated, but it also brought back some fond memories of my years at the Divinity School.

Dr. Herman Norton was one of the greats while I was in school. His influence went far beyond the Disciples Divinity House and students. He influenced many of us in a very positive way as one of the best lecturers on the staff. As one of his Presbyterian students, I will always remember him with great fondness and appreciation.

Also, the articles on Dr. J. Robert Nelson, who was the dean of VDS during my days there, and Dr. James Glasse, who served as my field work director and remained a friend for many years, brought back many memories of how they influenced me in my life. Their guidance and examples during the hard days of the 1960s helped me to keep my feet on the ground and take stands that I, perhaps, otherwise would not have had the courage to take.

I owe a deep debt to these and others I was fortunate enough to sit under as my professors at VDS: Langdon Gilkey, Nels Ferré, Ronald Sleeth, Phillip Hyatt, Everett Tilson, and Bard Thompson made my seminary days outstanding ones.

Again, my thanks for *The Spire*.

Reverend James D. Clark, BD'59, MDiv'72
Birmingham, Alabama

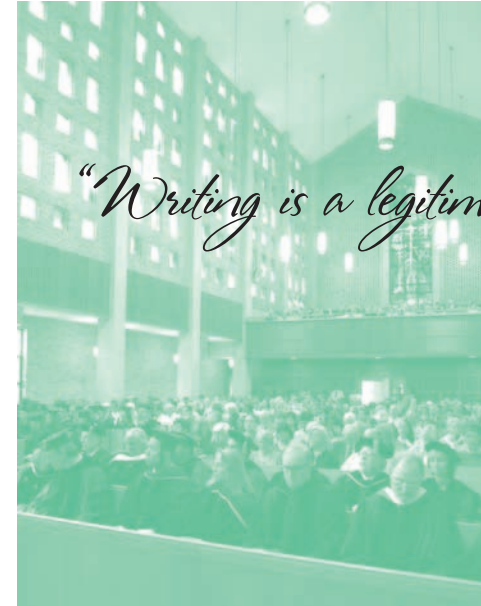
A New Consciousness

I enjoyed very much reading the article titled "Called to the Walls" by Lindsay Meyers published in the 2004 fall issue of *The Spire*. It gave me the opportunity to think about ideas that were quite foreign to me. I had never considered the fact that prisoners do not have the support of a religious community, a condition which I find so sad. I cannot imagine not having such a community of support that comes from belonging to a local church or synagogue. I do not know what can be done about the situation, but at least Ms. Meyers' article has given those of us on the outside a new consciousness about the spiritual life of prisoners.

Also, having returned from a vacation to Hawaii, which included a week on the island of Moloka'i, I enjoyed the article "The Deflowering of Hawaii" by Joseph Blosser. Having not visited the islands in sixteen years, we saw such a change in the way the people are trying to take back their culture. From what I gleaned by visiting with the native Hawaiians, they are proud to be a state but want to maintain their uniqueness as a Pacific island state. They also are teaching the Hawaiian language again through weekly classes at the conference center at Queen Emma's Summer Palace on the outskirts of Honolulu. In addition, the Kawaaha Church, known as the Mother Church of Hawaii and the Westminster Abbey of the Pacific, conducts one of its services in the Hawaiian language every Sunday. It was refreshing to see this change.

Thank you for the articles by Ms. Meyers and Mr. Blosser; both selections were very well-written and thought-provoking.

Charlotte Cook
Nashville, Tennessee



"Writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me."

—TONI CADE BAMBARA
(1939–1995)

literary artist, feminist, and social activist

Archival Passages

"On Vanderbilt's Record Through the Years"

Vanderbilt University opened its doors in 1875. The School of Religion, then designated as the Biblical Department, offered two courses of study. To the "English Theological Course," any student might be admitted who possessed a knowledge of the ordinary branches of an English education. For admission to "The Classical Theological Course," it was necessary for the student to have had such preparation in Latin and Greek as qualified him to enter upon the study of Hebrew and New Testament Greek. Two years were required to complete the English Course while the Classical Course required three years, but each Course when completed yielded a corresponding diploma.

In 1885 a new rule made it necessary for a candidate to have had at least two years of college work before he could be admitted to the School of Religion. At that time also it was decided to award a "certificate" only for the completion of the two years of study embraced in the English Theological Course. Those who were graduates of accredited colleges were for the future to receive the bachelor of divinity degree while those who studied three years in the School of Religion but who did not come from accredited colleges as graduates received, henceforth, the diploma of graduation. The first bachelor of divinity degrees were awarded in 1889.

"On the Value and Necessity of Religion"

Religion is basic for an enduring civilization. It is the foundation of the social order. When science and industry lose the stabilization of religious motivation, there is revolution. When philosophy undermines religious convictions and offers nothing constructive in its place, national character deteriorates.

The hope of civilization and of an enduring social order is found in the training of leaders capable of the spiritual interpretation of history and civilization, fully abreast of the times, friendly to truth from every source, and able to integrate it with the Christian program. Such leaders regard education as an adventurous discovery of the meanings, appreciations, and values of experience and their organization into personal and institutional programs of living. In this realistic sense, civilization is "a race between education and catastrophe." The outstanding need of the South, the section of our country where the Anglo-Saxon type resides in largest number, is such a constructively-trained, forward-looking religious leadership.

(excerpts from "The Training of Religious Leaders for the South," in *The Bulletin of Vanderbilt University School of Religion, Volume XXXII, Number 9, January 15, 1933, page 4*)

Around the QUADRANGLE

Faculty Achievements

Paul J. DeHart has been promoted to the rank of associate professor of theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. A member of the faculty since 1997, DeHart earned the doctorate of philosophy and the baccalaureate from the University of Chicago and received the master of arts degree in religion from Yale University. He is the author of *Beyond the Necessary God: Trinitarian Faith and Philosophy in the Thought of Eberhard Jungel* published by the American Academy of Religion and reviewed consistently as a significant contribution to the English-language scholarship on the German theologian. His forthcoming book from Blackwell Publishers is titled *The Trial of the Witnesses: A Study in the Origin and Future of Postliberal Theology*.

After “thirty years in the call,” **Alice Wells Hunt**, PhD’03, was ordained to Christian ministry on Sunday, April 10, 2005, during services conducted at the Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. The Reverend Doctor William F. Buchanan, pastor of the congregation, delivered the sermon titled “An Altered Life” prior to her receiving the charge to the ministry from her father, the Reverend Bob Hunt of Gunterville, Alabama. The Reverend Angela Denise Davis, MDiv’00, offered the prayer of thanksgiving during the laying on of hands by ordained ministers from the church and the Nashville community as well as Hunt’s ordained colleagues and students from the Divinity School. The associate dean for academic affairs, Hunt also serves as a senior lecturer in Hebrew Bible.

Walter J. Harrelson was among the seven recipients of the 2004 North Carolina Awards. Presented since 1964, the award is the highest civilian honor the state can bestow upon citizens for contributions to the arts, literature, public service, and science. Governor Mike Easley presented the award for literature to Harrelson, Distinguished Professor of Hebrew Bible and dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School, *emeritus*.



Members of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School emeriti/ae community gathered during the spring for a dinner hosted by Eva Hodgson and Peter Hodgson, the Charles G. Finney Professor of Theology, *emeritus*. Attending the event were (standing from left) Annemarie Harrod, Frank and Anne Gulley, Gene and Penny TeSelle, Ed and Doris Farley, Jennie Mills, David Buttrick, Eva Hodgson, (seated from left) Peter Hodgson, Judy and Don Beisswenger, Betty Buttrick, Shirley and Jack Forstman.



2006 SUMMER TRAVEL SEMINAR Religion and Society in El Salvador and Guatemala

directed by Professor Fernando F. Segovia,
the Oberlin Graduate Professor of New Testament
at Vanderbilt University Divinity School

Students, alumni/ae, and friends of the Divinity School who are interested in learning more about this seminar, proposed for June 2006, may direct their inquiries to: fernando.f.segovia@vanderbilt.edu or call 615/343-3992.

On the Shoulders of Sisters and Brothers

“The purpose of Black History Month is not so much to rehearse figures, events, and dates that mark the evolution of the African presence in the Americas but to reflect on the knowledge we have acquired from the quest of African slaves and their descendants to transform the economic and political terrain of their surroundings so that we all might learn the meaning of democracy and freedom,” stated Angela Davis during her lecture at Vanderbilt University on February 21.

The activist, feminist, scholar, and professor of the history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, was among the guest lecturers Divinity School students heard during Vanderbilt’s commemoration of Black History Month 2005. Thirty-two years after she first spoke on the Vanderbilt

campus, Davis returned as part of “A Legacy to be Recalled,” the twentieth anniversary celebration of the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center.

“There was a time when we assumed that one successful black person marked a step forward for the entire community;” Davis emphasized, “therefore, we celebrated each black person’s success as an indication of what might be possible for others. This was the



Stephanie Paulsell, associate dean for ministerial studies and senior lecturer on ministry at Harvard University Divinity School, delivered the thirty-first annual Antoinette Brown Lecture on March 17, 2005. Established in 1974 with a gift from benefactor Sylvia Sanders Kelly, BA’54, of Atlanta, Georgia, the lecture commemorates the life of the first woman in the United States to be ordained to the Christian ministry. The daughter of alumnus William Paulsell, BD’59, PhD’65, Paulsell discussed the ways in which medieval and contemporary women have articulated the spiritual dimension of the practice of writing in her lecture titled “Scriptio Divina” Women, Writing, and God.” Pictured with Paulsell (center) are the chairpersons of the 2005 Antoinette Brown Lecture committee, Dana Irwin, MDiv’03, and Ginger Skaggs, MDiv’05. The complete text of Paulsell’s lecture is published in this issue of *The Spire*.

nature of the community that we imagined, and precisely because of the successes of those struggles and especially over the second half of the twentieth century, doors began to open; barriers began to fall; the law was transformed; the containment of black people became a project—not so much of holding us all down but rather welcoming those of us, at least some of us, who are able to climb out of the muddy swamps on the shoulders of our sisters and brothers—to use a metaphor Dr. King devised.”

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Davis gained national attention in 1969 upon being removed from her faculty position in the philosophy department at the University of California at Los Angeles for her social activism and her membership in the Communist Party, USA. Placed on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List—as a result of false charges related to her involvement in the campaign to free the Soledad Brothers—she was arrested, imprisoned, tried, and acquitted in 1972. A member of the Advisory Board of the Prison Activist Resource Center, Davis lectures extensively on prisoners’ rights and racism within the criminal justice system.

Recommended Reading New Titles by Faculty

Brad Braxton, *Preaching Paul*
(Abington Press, 2004)

Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of
Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian
Community* (Eerdmans Publishers,
2004)

M. Douglas Meeks, editor, *Wesleyan
Perspectives on the New Creation*
(Kingswood Books, 2004)

Daniel Patte, general editor, *Global
Bible Commentary* (Abington Press,
2004)

A Separate Peace

“Learning about other cultures and religions is the best way to resolve differences among humankind,” explained Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi when addressing the University community on May 12. The first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Ebadi was awarded the Chancellor’s Medal on the eve of commencement exercises.

Peace will be lasting only when built on two solid pillars: social justice and democracy.

The cofounder and president of the Center for Defense of Human Rights, Ebadi helped to establish the Association for Support of Children’s Rights. In 1975 she became the first woman judge in the history of Iran but was denied the opportunity to continue her work after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 when the cleric rulers forbade women to serve as judges. Ebadi declined the offer to serve as a clerk in the court over which she previously presided. Despite her insistence that human rights standards do not contradict the principles of an Islamic society and the teachings of the *Koran*, she received her license to practice law and has represented students, journalists, reformists, and the fam-

Fall Facts

As Vanderbilt University Divinity School enters the 130th year of classes, 88 full-time students have accepted admission for the 2005-2006 academic year.

Ranging in age from 22 to 54 years, the matriculants hail from 29 states, the Dominion of Canada, and the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

They represent 15 religious traditions including African Methodist Episcopal, American Baptist, Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, Free Will Baptist, Judaism, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, and United Churches of Christ.

Among the institutions of higher learning where they earned their baccalaureates are

Vanderbilt, Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Rhodes, Cornell, the University of the South, Johns Hopkins, Birmingham-Southern, Texas Christian, Spelman, Lipscomb, Belmont, Trevecca, Wabash, Hiram, Wake Forest, Wheaton, American Baptist College, Mercer, and the Universities of Calgary, Alabama, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Of the 88 new students who can be seen in the John Frederick Oberlin Quadrangle, 26 women and 26 men are pursuing the master of divinity degree while 11 women and 25 men have begun fulfilling the requirements for the master of theological studies degree. They join the 120 Divinity School students who resumed their studies during the fall term.

ilies of the victims of pro-regime vigilantes.

“In peace and tranquility, the tree of knowledge bears fruit, artistic creativity shines, and civilization advances. Peace is a fundamental human right without which other rights—such as freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial—lose their meanings. Peace will be lasting only when built on two solid pillars: social justice and democracy,” Ebadi stated. “Democracy is not a gift that we can give to a nation; we cannot export democracy by weapons, nor can we bomb a nation in order to give the nation human rights.”

When referring to the restrictions upon educational opportunities in the West for students from developing countries—a consequence of the events related to September 11, 2001—Ebadi encouraged the audience “to separate what people do from their nationality and religion,” and to remember that “the wrongs that are committed by people are done by themselves, not by their religion or national origin.”

“Shirin Ebadi is a role model for women and men who have endured unspeakable violations of dignity and basic human rights,” stated Chancellor Gordon Gee. “Her fight for the rights of women and children in Iran is a lesson of courage and conviction for all; her passion for justice in the face of threats is truly an inspiration.”



Vanderbilt University Chancellor Gordon Gee presented the 2005 Chancellor’s Medal to human rights advocate Shirin Ebadi, the first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.



The Translation of Redemption

“Nashville may be the ‘Athens of the South,’ but Vanderbilt University Divinity School is Jerusalem,” proclaimed the Reverend Professor Peter Gomes, the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church at Harvard University.

During his delivery of the 2004 Cole Lectures, Gomes commented favorably upon the significant presence of homiletics courses in the School’s curricula. “From this School of the Prophets, students will learn that preaching is not restricted to Bible verses or to pericopes of the ‘Happy News.’ Preaching involves a comprehensive interpretation of the redemptive possibilities in the Good News and a translation of these possibilities from the Academy into the hearts and minds of people,” he remarked.

In his lecture titled “The Bible: Beyond the Culture to the Gospel,” Gomes stated, “Bibliolatry, or emphasis only on ‘the Book,’ results in the development of an imperialistic culture in which religious values ultimately are hijacked.”

Professorial Appointments

James Hudnut-Beumler, Ph.D., Dean and the Anne Potter Wilson Distinguished Professor of American Religious History, announces the following appointments to the faculty of Vanderbilt University Divinity School:

Fall 2005
Theodore A. Smith, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor of Divinity and Director of the Program in Theology and Practice

Spring 2006
Herbert Robinson Marbury, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible

Fall 2006
Ellen True Armour, Ph.D.,
The E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter
Associate Professor of Theology

Knight Receives Jefferson Award

For his distinguished service to the councils and government of Vanderbilt University, Douglas A. Knight, professor of Hebrew Bible, received the Thomas Jefferson Award during the faculty assembly on August 25, 2005.

Chancellor Gordon Gee bestowed the honor upon Knight and presented him with an engraved pewter goblet and monetary gift of \$2,500. The Divinity School professor and former chairperson of the graduate department of religion was nominated for the award by a consultative committee of the faculty senate.

Established at the University of Virginia in honor of the institution’s founder, the Thomas Jefferson Award is endowed by the Robert Earl McConnell Foundation and has been presented at Vanderbilt since 1967.

As the thirtieth-eighth Vanderbilt professor to receive the distinction, Knight is the fifth member of the Divinity School faculty to be recognized for his contributions to the University. He now joins the company of previous recipients Lou Silberman, the Hillel Professor of Jewish Literature and Thought, *emeritus*, in 1979; Walter Harrelson, Dean and Distinguished Professor of Hebrew Bible, *emeritus*, in 1985; H. Jackson Forstman, Dean and the Charles Grandison Finney Professor of Church History and Theology, *emeritus*, in 1993; and Eugene TeSelle, the Oberlin *Alumni* Professor of Church History and Theology, *emeritus*, in 1996.

Knight was appointed to the University in 1973 upon receiving the doctorate of theology from Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen.



Scriptio Divina: Women, Writing & God

BY STEPHANIE PAULSELL, PH.D.

Editor's Note: When Stephanie Paulsell arrived at Vanderbilt University Divinity School to deliver the thirty-first Antoinette Brown Lecture, she greeted the lecture committee by saying that she hoped her presentation would be worthy of the poster which University graphic designer John Steiner had created for the occasion. The consensus from those who were fortunate to hear "Scriptio Divina: Women, Writing, and God" was that the lecture was worthy, indeed—so worthy that we are delighted to publish the text for our readers. We remain grateful to Paulsell, the associate dean for ministerial studies at Harvard University Divinity School, for granting us permission to share the words with which she inspired us in Benton Chapel on Thursday evening, March 17, 2005.

I am grateful to Dean Hudnut-Beumler, the faculty, and most especially the students for the invitation to be here this evening. Dana Irwin and Ginger Skaggs have been so helpful to me that I hesitate even to say it—I feel I should sing about it—they have been so kind. I am grateful for all their kindnesses, including inviting me to choose a song to serve as a prelude to this evening. The song we heard was *Columba aspexit*, a hymn celebrating Saint Maximin as a priest at the altar, composed by the great twelfth-century writer, musician, and artist, Hildegard of Bingen. "O Maximin," she writes, "you are the mountain and the valley. You intercede for the people who stretch toward the mirror of light." I feel compelled to say, here in Nashville, that my second choice for a song to open the evening was Lucinda Williams' "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road." She is such a writerly composer; in her song about "Passionate Kisses," her fans here will know, she longs not only for kisses but for "pens that won't run out of ink, and cool quiet, and time to think." Sometimes when I am stuck in my own writing, which is often, I go for a long walk and listen to her—loud. When I used to teach preaching, I always urged my students to listen to "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road" to remind them to edit their sermons by the light of their hearts. "Could tell a lie, but my heart would know," Lucinda sings. Hildegard of Bingen would have loved that line.

Among the many reasons I am grateful to be here is that Vanderbilt Divinity School holds such an important place in my family's history. The Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt was my parents' first home after they married. From Vanderbilt Divinity School, my parents became involved with the civil rights movement. From Vanderbilt, my parents learned to be ministers in their student church in LaCentre, Kentucky. From Vanderbilt, my father first visited the Abbey of Gethsemani, a journey he has repeated over and over, a journey that has had a tremendous impact on my own life.

When I was a child, my family would drive every other summer from eastern North Carolina where we lived to the Rio Grande Valley of Texas where my mother's parents lived. We always stopped in Nashville to visit Herman Norton, the former dean of Disciples House who, as my dad remembers, poked and prodded and nudged and encouraged a generation of Disciples students through their degrees here. I remember standing in Dr. Norton's yard during cicada season, picking empty cicada shells off his trees. Dr. Norton is a part of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds and upholds your School now. I was lucky to have known him when I was a child, and it is good to be able to say his name out loud, here in Benton Chapel.

Most of all, it is an intense and humbling pleasure for me to have been entrusted with the Antoinette Brown Lecture this year. It is, of course, terrifying to follow scholars like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Emilie Townes to this podium. It is even more daunting to think of the great responsibility this lecture-ship has carried forward for the past thirty-one years. Thanks to the inspiration of the Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the generosity of Ms. Sylvia Sanders Kelly, and the energy and commitment of students in this School, the Antoinette Brown Lecture has, for thirty-one years, opened a space for women scholars to do their very best thinking about religion and about ministry—thirty-one years of feminist scholarship—in season and out of season. My hope for this evening is that my words will match the seriousness of your commitment to this conversation and that you will find in them some resources for doing your own best work in whatever form your work takes. I should like to dedicate these remarks to the Reverend Antoinette Brown, who believed that "women were indispensable to the religious evolution of the human race."

Sometime in the second half of the twelfth century, a Carthusian monk named Guigo wrote a letter to his spiritual director about the place of reading in the cultivation of a life with God. As a member of an order whose ministry was the making of books, and whose rule of life described books as the "food of our souls," it is perhaps no surprise that Guigo's letter is one of the loveliest and clearest articulations we have of the practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of a text,

a practice intended to leave one vulnerable to an experience of God's presence.

"One day when I was busy working with my hands," Guigo wrote, "I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading,



Lucinda Williams shown during a performance at the Theater of Living Arts in Philadelphia

Can we use human language to tell the truth?

meditation, prayer, and contemplation. *Lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. These make a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has few rungs, yet its length is immense and wonderful, for its lower end rests upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets."

We ascend to God by degrees, Guigo contends, stepping onto the first rung by reading, most especially by reading Scripture. We pull ourselves up to the next rung, meditation, by bringing all the resources of our reason to bear upon what we read. If we do this, Guigo believes, we will be led naturally to the third rung of prayer. And if we are very lucky, God will reach down and lift us to the fourth rung of contemplation where we will taste the joys of everlasting sweetness. Meeting God in contemplation is a gift, Guigo says; none of us can make it happen through our own efforts. But through our reading, Guigo suggests, we are made vulnerable and become available for receiving this gift.

A century later, in 1286, a Carthusian nun wrote an account of an experience of God that echoes Guigo's reflections on the ladder of monks. Listening is a kind of reading, Guigo had insisted, in a world in which a book was a rare and precious article, the work of many hands. This woman has stepped onto the ladder of monks through listening to—through reading—a verse from Psalm 17 in the pre-Lenten liturgy. Guigo had compared reading a verse of Scripture to putting a grape in one's mouth, but the verse that entered Marguerite did not make a very delicious treat: "the lamentations of death surrounded me." As Guigo recommends, she

applies her reason to this text in meditation, reaching into other parts of Scripture to interpret the verse. But rather than the deepening pleasure Guigo's account of reading one's way up the ladder to God promises, she, however, experiences a deepening anxiety about her salvation. But when she pulls herself up to the third rung of prayer, God does come to her, full

of sweetness, and lifts her to the fourth rung of the ladder, contemplation.

The God this woman meets at the top of Guigo's ladder is a God who writes, an author whose chosen parchment is the human heart and whose pen inscribes so deeply as to wound. God writes on her heart at the top of that ladder, congesting and crowding her heart with divine writing. Having reached the top of Guigo's ladder, she cannot find a way down; she believes she will die if she cannot relieve her wounded, overburdened heart. But she is also afraid of losing what her heart contains.

This young woman adds another rung to Guigo's ladder, the rung of *scriptio*, a rung of writing by which she can both escape and return to this writing God. Adding this rung, she bends Guigo's ladder into a wheel on which she can turn and turn, creating new texts on which to practice *lectio divina*. She writes in response to God's own writing, and her creative work keeps the wheel turning. As she writes, not only is her festering heart soothed, but she finds that the practice of writing brings her to another experience of God, an experience of God working in her. No longer the passive sheet of parchment upon which God writes, she learns to create as God creates, without another text from which to copy. Feeling God sorting her thoughts into order, feeling God's creativity undergirding hers, images for God begin to pour from her pen: mother, father, brother, friend; creator, judge, blessed food; true refreshment, precious stone; mirror into which the angels peer; medicine, physician, health itself; fragrant rose; life of the soul. She has become a writer.

More than six hundred years later, another young woman, also in the process of becoming a writer, visits a medieval church in a village in West Suffolk, England. She is twenty-four years old. In the last ten years, she has lost her mother, her father, and a sister to death. Although she does not know it now, in a few months a beloved brother will be gone as well.

This young woman has lived through several periods of what her doctors call madness, which have ranged from periods of severe depression to the intrusion of voices she cannot block out. Once, she heard birds speaking Greek in a tree. Two years earlier, she had tried to kill herself.

Throughout all that has happened to her, this young woman has clung to her life as a reader and remained faithful to her apprenticeship to the vocation of writer. In addition to the stories and story fragments on which she is constantly working, she keeps a journal to experiment with form and voice, to test the weight and heft of words. Each time she begins to be tormented by voices in her head or disappears into depression, her journal falls silent. But the instinct to write, “wells like sap in a tree,” and she always returns to keeping a diary. She starts back slowly each time, with a word, a description, a shopping list—a sentence, two sentences—a ladder of words she climbs back into life—a wheel of words she can turn and turn until it begins to sing. The daughter of a famous agnostic, this young woman is not a Christian, emphatically not. On a rare visit to a church service nine years earlier, she had refused, on principle, to kneel although she did find the hymns “splendid.” She has probably never heard of *lectio divina* although she reads as devotedly and passionately as any Carthusian. On this day, a Sunday, she has tramped through meadows and fens and wondered at the people she saw making their way to church. That kind of piety was understandable in the days of the black death, she reasons, but what could possibly be driving it now? When she sits to record this day in her journal, however, she seems, like the Carthusian woman turning words on the wheel of her reading and writing, trying to find words for the connection she senses between her creativity and a larger, more encompassing creative force. “Don’t I feel,” this young woman asks herself, “the steady beat of the great Creator as I write; and doesn’t the Church there record its pulse

this evening, and for six hundred years of evenings such as these?”

You probably recognize the young woman in West Suffolk as Virginia Stephen, who, when she marries six years later, will become Virginia Woolf. In spite of her thoroughgoing agnosticism, her conviction that the practice of writing connects her somehow to what she will later call “something in the universe that one’s left with” runs throughout her work her whole life long. That “something in the universe” is not the personal God our Carthusian woman encounters as she writes. The language Virginia Woolf will use later to describe the



Virginia Woolf (née Stephen)
1882–1941
studio photograph by George Charles Beresford
July 1902, when the literary artist was twenty years old
platinum print
National Portrait Gallery

Like a rabbi beginning with what is not said in a story, filling the gaps in biblical narrative with midrashim, Virginia Woolf entered women’s lives at their most hidden points and filled them with stories about creation—of a painting, of a party, of a play, of a life.

presence that writing opens her to speaks more of the invisible connections that thread through all of life: the pattern hidden behind the cotton wool that wads us all in. But here, a young writer still discovering what she is able to do with words, Virginia Stephen turns to the language of the creator God to describe the larger creativity of which she feels her own creativity to be a part.

The Carthusian nun is perhaps less well known to you, if known to you at all. Her name is Marguerite d’Oingt, and it is her work that inspired the title of this lecture: *Scriptio Divina*. She herself never uses the phrase—much to my everlasting disappointment—but her addition of the practice of writing to Guigo’s ladder, I think, suggests it. Just as the phrase *lectio divina* captures a particular experience of reading, one in which our reading sharpens our attention to what is really real, a kind of reading that wakes us up, and opens us to the presence of God, so *scriptio divina*, I hope, captures the way that writing, as a practice, can also sharpen our attention to the deepest realities. Marguerite d’Oingt discovers this when, through writing, she feels, as she says, God’s grace operating in her. Virginia Woolf describes it as “the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character

come together.” It is something I hope you are all experiencing in your own writing in Divinity School. We all know that writing is quite often unbearable. But I hope we have all had those moments, however fleeting, when we place one ordinary word next to another and the world breaks open.

Marguerite d’Oingt and Virginia Woolf are part of a long history of women writers who have reflected very deeply on those kinds of moments. That is not to say that it is a continuous, unbroken history through which influences can be easily traced. As Woolf herself noted, there are “strange spaces of silence” that “separate one period of activity” in women’s writing from another. Although it is possible to identify common themes and preoccupations in the history of women’s constructions of writing as a spiritual practice, it remains difficult to speak of a “tradition” of such writing. Women’s texts appear and disappear throughout history, and tracing lines of influence is a complicated task. For us, Hildegard of Bingen shines out of the twelfth century like a star. But did women writers in the centuries following know her breathtaking descriptions of her visions and her brilliantly detailed exegeses of them? Were they influenced by her attempt to capture in writing words that came to her like “sparkling flame...like a

cloud moving in pure air?” Sadly, probably not as much as those of us who would like to trace across the centuries a women’s tradition of reflection on the spiritual dimension of writing might hope.

But even though it is not possible to trace an unbroken line from Marguerite d’Oingt to Virginia Woolf and beyond, it is possible to illuminate points of intersection among women writers. The life of Marguerite d’Oingt, about which we know approximately five or six cold hard facts, is the kind of life in which Virginia Woolf was intensely interested: an obscure life, a woman’s life, a life not recorded in the history books (or at least not many of them), but a life upon whose “unhistoric acts,” in the words of George Eliot, the good of the world depends. For Woolf, the hidden lives of the obscure, as she called them, tell the real history of the world.

I think Woolf also loved the lives of the obscure, particularly of women like Marguerite d’Oingt, because the very hiddenness of their lives inspired her imagination and called forth her authorial powers. Like a rabbi beginning with what is not said in a story, filling the gaps in biblical narrative with midrashim, Virginia Woolf entered women’s lives at their most hidden points and filled them with stories about creation—of a painting, of a party, of a play, of a life.

I am interested in understanding how women have understood and experienced writing as a spiritual practice and what this might say to those of us who are students and teachers of religion, ministers, religious leaders, as we struggle also in the many forms our vocations take to feel the steady beat of the creator, to record its pulse. I wonder if, through attention to the spiritual dimension of aesthetic practice, we might come to understand something about the aesthetic dimension of spiritual practice, something about the creativity that the life of ministry and the life of faith demand. Gregory the Great famously described ministry as “the art of arts” because, as he put it, “who does not realise that the wounds of the mind are more hidden than the internal wounds of the body?” So much of our work as ministers and scholars, as students and teachers, is work done in hiddenness. But if Virginia Woolf is right, it is work that matters, work that moves human history forward.

The period of the High Middle Ages is an appropriate place to begin looking at

women’s understanding of the spiritual dimension of the practice of writing. There was a flowering of women’s writing then—it is one of those “periods of activity” in women’s writing of which Woolf speaks. We also know quite a bit about how medieval women thought about the practice of writing because they so often included a defense or an explanation of the act of writing itself in their works. Virginia Woolf once complained

that the aspect in which she was most interested—what drives one to write, to create—was “left out in almost all biographies and autobiographies, even of artists.” Medieval women do not omit these details. They offer a range of complex accounts of the vocation of the writer, from Hildegard of Bingen’s claim to be God’s amanuensis to Marguerite d’Oingt’s description of the influence of divine creativity upon human creativity to



Vision of the Earth
miniature by Saint Hildegard of Bingen
1098–1179
folio from *Codex Latinum*
Biblioteca Statale de Lucca



Building the City
c. 1407
from *Le livre de la cité des dames*
(*The Book of the City of Women*)
Christine de Pisan
1363–1430
Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Marguerite Porete's desire to "write God" as she wished God to be.

Because medieval women often paused to describe their conceptions of the practice of writing or to elaborate on their vocations as writers, critics have sometimes described their writings as "more like journals than like carefully constructed works of art." "[Medieval] women's motivation for writing at all," one critic proclaims, "seems rarely to be predominantly literary: it is often more urgently serious than is common among men writers; it is a response springing from inner needs, more than from an artistic, or didactic inclination."

That is an odd distinction to make, between literary, artistic impulses and urgently serious ones born of inner needs. It implies that women's texts come into being

spontaneously, rather than being constructed from particular literary choices. Far from being an unliterary motivation for writing, I believe that women discover the spiritual dimension of writing through addressing particular literary problems, most particularly the problem of capturing the real in language, what we might call the problem of realism.

By realism I do not mean what Virginia Woolf once called the "appalling narrative business of the realist: getting from lunch to dinner." I mean the search for a language with which to speak the deepest truth about the world and a form to give it shape. This is an age-old problem for artists of any gender, of course, and maybe especially for religious writers. Can we use human language to tell the truth? Can we rely on the heart to tell us

when we have lied, as Lucinda Williams would have it? Hildegard of Bingen was fond of quoting a line from Psalm 115 when writing of the difficulty of writing truly about what is really real: *omnis homo mendax*: everyone is a liar. "No one is in such perfection," she writes to one of her many correspondents, "that he is not a liar in some way." This is a fixture of Christian reflection on writing, by both men and women—that human language cannot suffice to convey the truth of God.

Augustine famously bemoaned the fact that human language cannot tell the truth about God because there is no way to utter Father Son and Holy Spirit at once. Always, these names have distance between them; always, they occupy separate spaces on the page.

This is a rather constraining truth about

language for the writer who is search for a language and a form with which to speak of her experience of God. And if a writer is worried about lying, then one may very well be silenced by the dilemma of human language. But if one is committed to writing as a practice that might make one vulnerable to the presence of God, to *scriptio divina*, then the problem of realism is one to be lived with and worked through over and over and over, never arriving at the perfection at which Saint Hildegard snorted so long ago. It is a problem to place on the wheel of reading and writing, like the psalmist who writes in Psalm 49: "I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will breathe out my riddle to the music of my harp." The problem of realism is not a problem to be solved; it is a problem to be breathed in and out, to be turned over and over, a problem to live with and write towards, a problem that might draw one more and more deeply into the life of God or however one describes the real beneath appearances. It is a problem for writers and artists of all kinds, including those practitioners of the art of arts, whose work is ministry. How do we craft language to speak of a call? Or a transgression? Or a transformation—in a way that is not only true but shareable? How do we offer a word of comfort, of rebuke, of hope, of challenge in a way, as the writer Annie Dillard once asked, would not offend a dying person by its triviality? Dillard meant this as advice for aspiring writers—what can you say that would not offend a dying person by its triviality? It is equally good advice for aspiring ministers.

Virginia Woolf worried about triviality, too. Writers claiming to be realists, she pronounced, expended "immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring." When this happens, she complained, "life escapes." How to write in a way that captured the "luminous halo" of life, the "semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is this not," she asked, "the task of the novelist?"

Indeed it is. The contemporary American novelist, Carole Maso, an inheritor of Woolf's vocation, says that it is the work of the writer

to say to the precious, disappearing moments that make up a life: "Stay a while. I love you." And it is the work of the minister who bathes a new Christian in the waters of baptism, or whispers the promises that couples exchange in their wedding finery, or who holds onto hope until the hopeless can come back for it. Stay a while. I love you.

Perhaps because of their frequently constrained circumstances, women writers have often found startlingly creative ways to approach the problem of realism. Indeed, for many women writers, speaking of what is really real in words presents not a problem

We all know that writing is quite often unbearable. But I hope we have all had those moments, however fleeting, when we place one ordinary word next to another and the world breaks open.

but a free space for creative thought. How does one make language speak the truth of God or of women's hidden lives? We forge our answers in school, but that is a relatively recent development for women. Hildegard of Bingen found her voice in the interpretation of her visions. Marguerite d'Oingt sought her poetics in the liturgy and in dreams. Virginia Woolf, educated from her father's library and excluded from the classrooms of the great universities of her day, developed a way of writing that illuminated the relationship of inner life to outward circumstances in a way that modern literature had never seen.

But what about our own day, the writers we know and read and with whom we share this slice of time? Can we still point to a practice like *scriptio divina* in contemporary women's writing? Without a doubt. One place to look, one place to listen for women's reflections on the spiritual dimension of the practice of writing is in the incredible outpouring of women's spiritual autobiographies that began twelve years ago with the surprise success of Kathleen Norris's *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* and shows no signs of slowing down. I shall mention two contributions to this growing literature—less well-known than books by Phyllis Tickle, Lauren

Winner, or Kathleen Norris—but books in which the notion of *scriptio divina* is alive and well.

An impressive number of books in the literature of contemporary women's spiritual autobiography are by academically-trained theologians: Roberta Bondi, Melanie May, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Rebecca Parker. Interestingly, almost all of the academic women express anxiety about writing—not about writing *per se*, as Marguerite d'Oingt or Hildegard of Bingen did, but about writing autobiographically. "I was afraid I would make a fool of myself," Roberta Bondi wrote,

"I was afraid once I transgressed the boundary between objectivity and subjectivity, I might never be capable of objective historical scholarship again." Just as for medieval women, contemporary women's anxiety about writing has been productive of thoughtful reflections about the practice itself.

Julia Kasdorf, poet and English professor at Pennsylvania State University and author of *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life*, writes of transgressing boundaries in order to write from her life. Here, however, it is not the boundaries of the academy that must be crossed, but the boundaries of her religious tradition, a tradition she wants both to honor and transcend. Writing about her life in that community is "an attempt to negotiate an authorial identity without either abandoning my home community altogether or becoming silenced by it."

In order to write, Kasdorf must overcome what she understands to be her Mennonite impulse not to disturb anyone, an impulse "so deeply ingrained in my Mennonite soul as to be a reflex." Pondering the relative lack of imaginative Mennonite literature, she wonders if the history of violence against Mennonites has kept them silent, "if a memory of trauma and fear of violation" has caused Mennonites to want to hide their "hearts and minds from the curious gaze of others."

One of the books referred to in the title of Kasdorf's own book is the *Martyr's Mirror*, a seventeenth-century collection of narrative accounts, accompanied by vivid engravings, of Mennonite martyrs who were tortured, burned alive, and drowned for their beliefs. When a respected elderly neighbor began

sexually abusing Kasdorf when she was a little girl, the *Martyr's Mirror* played a complex role: the narratives both helped her to survive and kept her silent.

"When the man was done," she writes, "I would let his wood framed cellar door slam shut and walk home through the backyards, thinking, 'Well, that was not so bad. It was only my body.' I think the martyr stories taught me that splintering trick: it is only the body....They can burn the body but not the soul. You may gaze at my body, even touch it if you must, but you will not know my soul: my essential self exists safely apart from my body and from you."

For Kasdorf, the practice of writing gave her a way of "removing language from my own body and inscribing it in that safe, quiet space of the page, where I could assemble and view it again." As an adult, pondering her own traumatic experience in light of the stories of martyrdom which so deeply shaped her religious sensibility, she wonders what it might mean to "write like a martyr."

She asserts, "To write like a martyr means, not to choose death, but to choose to bear life-giving witness, to communicate the truth of one's own vision or insight, to affirm its value with confidence, no matter how arrogant or disturbing it may be, 'and the truth shall make you free'."

Kasdorf believes "an awareness of mortality" is, in the words of Helene Cixous, "the first rung on the ladder of writing." Drawing on the engraved image of a Mennonite martyr lashed to a ladder, tipping towards the flames in which she will be burnt alive in front of her children, Kasdorf writes, "The author must lean into the scorching truth of her own mortality in order to write. She must write the book that threatens to cost her life."

Like Marguerite d'Oingt, Kasdorf refuses to adhere only to the rungs of the ladder she has been given. She adds yet a new rung, the rung of speaking, because for her, writing is finally only a step on the way towards speech. The practice of writing helped to heal her, but it also replicated the splintering of soul from body that she learned from the stories of the martyrs and practiced as a survival skill as a child. "Writing may be the most brilliant splintering trick of all," she writes. Kasdorf acknowledges that writing is a practice that can help us bear witness to the truth. But it is also a practice, she worries, that can perpetrate its own violence: the vio-

lence of disembodiment, the violence of turning away from the demands of others. This idea suggests for me one of the anxieties of the minister, or the theological educator—the fear that in order to write we have to turn our backs.

For Kasdorf, writing is not an end in itself. It is, rather, "part of a long training for the day when I would be able to talk. I bore on my body a violence until I could write; I bore witness in writing until I could speak. The struggle to speak out of silence on behalf of defenseless beings," she argues, "is the primary challenge of our time."

The practice of writing is at once spiritual and political for Julia Kasdorf: a way of drawing close to the truth of her life without allowing that truth to destroy her, a way of bearing witness to the pain and truth of others, a way of both transgressing and honoring her community, of transcending and

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remaining rooted in her body. But it is a practice ultimately to be discarded, and here, perhaps, we hear her Mennonite self speaking most clearly when she writes, "I know that beyond the book, beyond the limits of the body, are healing mysteries that have nothing to do with labor or language."

Another recent articulation of *scriptio divina* can be found in the work of the contemporary Roman Catholic novelist Fanny Howe. The author of several books of poetry and more than twenty-five novels, Fanny Howe is preoccupied in her work with themes of race, marriage, motherhood, religious faith, poverty, and writing. In her recent book of essays, *The Wedding Dress*, she writes of drawing a poetics, a way of writing, from her experience of the world and from her dreams. As medieval women interpreted their dreams and visions as if they were written texts, Howe finds in her dreams "a method for describing sequential persons, first and third." Dreams, for Howe, have

much to teach about the practice of writing, particularly about how to sustain what she calls "a balance between the necessity associated with plot and the blindness associated with experience," a balance she seeks in both poetry and fiction. Howe calls her poetics "bewilderment."

She also draws her poetics of bewilderment from her experience of being "born into white privilege but with no financial security, given a good education but no training for survival." As a single white mother rearing interracial children in Boston in the 1970s, moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, trying to keep her children in the best public schools she could find, she knew firsthand the "blindness associated with experience" and the bewilderment such blindness engenders. The poetics that emerged from these experiences subverted what she calls "the narratives of power and winning" in

much the way dreams do—and in the way Virginia Woolf's attention to lives of the obscure does. As in the poetics of many medieval women's writings, "weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude" replace "courage, discipline, conquest, and fame." What she calls the politics of bewilderment bears similar marks. "It's a politics," she writes, "devoted to the little and the weak; it is grassroots in that it imitates the way grass bends and springs back when it is stepped on."

The poetics of bewilderment shapes Howe's practice of writing, which in turn reflects her understanding of the interaction between human beings and God. Both writing and life with God are marked for Howe by "constant oscillation and clearing and darkening" a quality she finds reflected in the Psalms. And how great a description of the practice of writing is that—a constant movement between clearing and darkening! Howe is drawn to writers who fully inhabit this oscillation, who seem to find more free-

dom than fear in it. She loves Simone Weil, the philosopher who stood at the threshold of the church, loving it, but refusing to enter, and Edith Stein, the Jewish woman turned Carmelite nun who died in Auschwitz, women on the boundaries of Christianity. The wedding dress of the title of her book refers to Edith Stein's adornment when she became a Carmelite, a sign of "the start of a period of waiting" rather than arrival at a definite destination, "not so much running from object to object as receiving the future, which is empty." Howe's epigraph to her book is a line from the novelist Ilona Karmel: "It was the truth but still not quite."

Fanny Howe's practice of writing is shaped by her attention to areas of experience that resist expression in language. You can see her experimenting in her novels with forms that both mirror the narrative dimension of dreams but also what she calls their "greater consciousness of randomness and uncertainty." In Howe's novels, events are most often not what they at first seem. This is her solution to the problem of realism. Through this oscillation between clearing and darkening, this poetics of bewilderment, she is seeking, she says in language reminiscent of the luminous Hildegard of Bingen, "a literature made out of light."

Now there's a vocation—to contribute to a literature made out of light. Think of Marguerite turning on her wheel, moving between reading and prayer, prayer and writing, writing and reading. Think of Virginia Woolf, writing to the steady beat of the creator, illuminating the pattern that holds us all. Think of Hildegard of Bingen, trying to capture a sparkling flame, a cloud moving in air in her words and in her music. Think of Carole Maso saying, stay a little. Think of Julia Kasdorf, writing like a martyr, tilting toward the flames.

The writings of these women are the fragments of a literature made out of light. I set them before you in the hopes that you will place these fragments next to your own, whatever form the literature you are making takes. Are you working with the strange, old words of Scripture, trying to help them speak their truth into this broken world? Have you crossed a boundary—as Vanderbilt Divinity School student Ginger Skaggs crossed during her spring break in Ecuador—and when you returned found your old life inaccessible? Have you sat up



Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Crucifixion (born Edith Stein) (1891–1942) on the occasion of her religious vestition or clothing ceremony on April 15, 1934. Mary Queen of Peace Carmelite Convent, Cologne, Germany

late into the night working on a paper, or a sermon, rejecting word after word after beautiful word because your heart told you they were not true? I hope that when God looks at us, God sees those shining, hidden fragments, the fragments from which the world's literature of light is made.

I should like to offer one last word about *scriptio divina*. One of the ways artists of all kinds, including writers, including ministers, have sharpened their attention to the spiritual dimension of their craft is through the discernment of the spiritual dimension of the craft of others. A writer walks into a tiny foyer that prepares her for the high cathedral space just inside: how can I do this in a novel, she asks? A preacher asks: how can I make my paragraphs move like lines in a poem? A dancer asks: how can I ascend the ladder of monks with my body? A musician sees a dancer turn a ladder into a wheel and asks: how can I accomplish this with notes?

Two years after Virginia Stephen wrote that she could feel the steady beat of the creator as she wrote, she stood before a fresco

by Perugino, the teacher of Raphael, and pondered the beauty of his forms. All the beauty seemed sealed up to her; "all its worth in it; not a hint of past or future." She is in love with beauty, and she admires this fresco. She can see the relation of color and line, she can see the way each part is dependent on the other. Is this what I do, she asks herself? I want to express beauty, too. But, she concludes, a different kind of beauty, one made up not of perfectly integrated forms, but a beauty made up of "infinite discords" that achieves, in the end, a whole made of shivering fragments.

Twenty years later, Virginia Woolf writes a novel called *To the Lighthouse*. All of her past is gathered up and transformed in this book, including the summer day twenty years earlier when she stood before Perugino's fresco and asked herself difficult questions about the kind of beauty she was seeking. In the novel, the writer becomes a painter, who, having finally found a form that tells the truth, a form that captures something real about her subject, ponders her vocation. "Love had a thousand shapes," she thought to herself. "There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays."

Twenty years of pondering her vocation as a writer in the light of the vocations of others brought her to this clarity, that her work was to work with fragments, even with fragments that seem impossible to fit, and make of them something which attracts both thought and love. Twenty years of turning and turning her wheel of words. It takes that long. It takes longer. Do not give up. This is the work of a lifetime. Whether you are preparing to be a minister, a writer, a scholar, a teacher, an activist, a parent, a counselor, a musician—whatever your vocation—you are the lovers whose work it is to take the fragments that are given to you and make of them something for all of us, so that we can take the fragments that are given to us, and make our shivering whole, so that others can do the same. This work is never finished, but the steady pulse of the creator beats under all of it.



THE *Gift* OF CONFINEMENT

Enclosed within a letter I received from Inmate Number 92091-020 was a copy of a B.C. comic strip. The speaker in the first frame resembles Sisyphus as he climbs to the summit of a mountain where an elderly, bearded figure sits in silence. Assuming the posture of a supplicant, the speaker inquires, “Oh, great guru, what is the secret of life?”

The guru replies, “Getting along with your fellow prisoners.”

In the lower-right margin of the frayed comic strip, the inmate correspondent has written in blue ink, “I’m learning.”

During the six months of his incarceration in the Federal Correctional Institution in Manchester, Kentucky, the Reverend Donald F. Beisswenger learned that the secret of life involved more than getting along with his fellow inmates; he learned that a period of confinement can offer spiritual gifts to one

who believes one has the moral responsibility to object to the United States government’s role in supporting human rights violations.

For his act of civil disobedience in protesting the practices of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas, Beisswenger was arrested, charged, tried, convicted, fined \$1000, and sentenced to six months in federal prison. Standing before Judge G. Mallon Faircloth of the United States District Court in Columbus, Georgia, Beisswenger pled guilty to charges of taking six steps past a “No Trespassing” sign at Fort Benning where American military personnel train foreign nationals in the strategies for conducting insurgency warfare against dissidents in their home countries. Graduates of the institute have been involved in human rights atrocities, including the El Mozote Massacre on December 11, 1981, when Salvadoran armed forces slaughtered nine hundred civilians in an anti-guerrilla campaign. Since learning of the United States’ links to assassinations in El Salvador, Beisswenger became committed to educating himself and others about the truth underlying United States and Latin American foreign policy, and he continues working to gain support for a U.S. congressional investigation of our country’s practices in Latin America.

Before his name would be inscribed on the roster of the one hundred and seventy individuals who have served over seventy years in prison for engaging in nonviolent resistance campaigns to close the School of the Americas, Beisswenger told Judge Faircloth, “I am acting out of care for a nation which still has the potential to be a life-giving force in the world.”

This conviction of the Presbyterian minister and professor, *emeritus*, from Vanderbilt University Divinity School became the inspiration for the “gift of confinement” he received during his days of contemplation in prison. Beisswenger translated his interpretation of this gift into the prose of his prison journal and graciously consented to allow us to publish excerpts in *The Spire*.

In my conversations with former Inmate Number 92091-020 since his release from prison on Friday, October 1, 2004, he does not allude to comic strips but to poetry, the literary genre Robert Frost once described as “a momentary stay against confusion.” At the twentieth anniversary celebration of

Penuel Ridge Retreat Center, I heard him quote “Poem 816” from the canon of Emily Dickinson:

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become—
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.

During a recent visit to the Divinity School, he conveyed that since his release he occasionally experiences a moment of confusion in his effort to renew his relationship to time in the free world. As he considers the world’s affairs in his seventy-fourth year, he says he finds himself entering a period of lamentations, but when he learns that a friend’s cancer is in remission, or when he thinks about the blessing of his recent marriage to Judy Pilgrim, or as he observes the trees in Vanderbilt’s arboretum, he realizes that there are resurrections which supersede the lamentations. Standing at the entrance to my office, he read the excerpt from Czeslaw Milosz’ poem titled “The Thistle, The Nettle” which I have mounted on the door:

Who shall I be for men many
generations later?
When, after the clamor of tongues,
the award goes to silence?
I was to be redeemed by the
gift of arranging words
But must be prepared for an earth
without grammar.

As I was telling him that I had heard Milosz read the poem at the University in 1992, Beisswenger walked to the bookcase and retrieved my copy of the Nobel laureate’s volume of verse, *Provinces*. Turning to the poem titled “Return,” he read:

Somehow I waded through;
I am grateful that I was not submitted
to tests beyond my strength,
and yet I think that the human soul
belongs to the anti-world.

A reader of Beisswenger’s journal will discover that the tests of a prison sentence can become a life blow for a soul that strives to give grammar to the earth. And perhaps while reading the pages, one may pause and write in the margins, “I’m learning.” —VJ

THE PREFACE TO THE JOURNAL

The year 2005 stands as a reminder of two important historical events for me. First is the fiftieth anniversary of the hanging of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, just as the war ended, and the subsequent publication of his letters and papers from prison which are important in my life's journey. The second is the twenty-fifth anniversary this year of the murder of Oscar Romero for his challenge of the oppression and murder of the poor in El Salvador. He was killed while serving the Lord's Supper, a symbol of the intertwining

Confinement has provided me with an unwanted isolation, but confinement also has brought me the deeper meanings that lie quietly. I listen better; let events be my teacher.

of death and life, Cross and Resurrection, in our common and individual lives.

My purpose in writing was in part a strategy to survive while in prison, but upon my leaving, the inmates said over and over, "Please tell about what happens here to the world. They need to know about how prisons operate, how they demean life, disrespect us, and make it hard."

Survival was seen as the goal for most every inmate when I asked them their primary purpose while in prison. Luis was especially compelling in his desire for me to speak about what I have seen and experienced. I want to tell what I experienced in the hope it may provoke some transformation in the prison system. There is such brutality and tragedy, without much in the way of positive possibilities for life, only survival.

I also write to keep alive the memory of Sandor, José, Candida, and Carla—all of whom were victims of military officers in their Latin American countries—and to express my hope that United States military policies can stop the support for oppressive governments and their repressive tactics of maintaining order.

Finally, I write to give glory to the God who has blessed me, and called me to be a blessing. I can only trust that this calling will be embodied in some small way. God works in the world in ways we do not comprehend, and I trust that God seeks justice and shalom. Sol Deo gratia.

April 6, 2004

Today I reported to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons located in Manchester, Kentucky. At 2:00 p.m. I walked into the front office and surrendered myself to their *care*, if that is the correct word. If I had not reported, I would have forfeited my bond and would be subject to immediate arrest and further time.

Prior to surrendering, five persons joined me on the trip from Nashville, along with the Reverend Erik Johnson, who drove up from Knoxville. We had a sumptuous picnic prepared by Erik. What a joy! The community

created synergy, hope, strength, perspective, and shalom for the journey ahead.

At 1:45 we drove to the maximum security building where I was to report. Razor wire covered every fence and door. My friends and I held hands and prayed together prior to checking in the office. They walked into the facility with me. The entry looked like a hotel with an atrium—bright lights and color for decoration. A pleasant receptionist asked why I was there. I turned over my papers and waited for about twenty minutes until Officer Wodles escorted me inside the maximum security prison—through five steel doors—where I was fingerprinted, photographed, and given prison clothes, and where all the clothes I came with were put into a box to be shipped home. I could keep only my eye glasses and a Bible. (I had brought two Bibles, and they let me keep both.) Written inside were the addresses and telephone numbers of persons with whom I wanted to keep in touch.

I was driven by an inmate to the minimum security facility which would now become my home for the next six months. It is called "the camp." I have a lower bunk bed, a benefit for me as an older person (older, mind you, not *old* as some suggest). I was taken to a six by ten area room, separated by five-foot tall cement blocks, with open space to the ceiling. We have bunk beds, two lockers, two chairs, and a desk, above which is a bulletin board. There is a two feet by six feet window facing a grassy hillside.

The camp nestles in a valley with high, cliff-like mountain terrain (slate and sand-

stone) on either side. A road at one end leads up to a large grassy plateau where there is a softball field, volleyball court, and a picnic area. This is a restful place.

Five hundred inmates reside here in four dormitories with one hundred and twenty-five persons in each. The facility is located on a former strip mine. Stripping coal from the mountains was the prior goal. Now it is often stripping life from people to make sure they are properly punished. My roommate is a twenty-six-year-old man from Milwaukee who was sentenced here for three months for computer fraud. (He was discharged ten days after I arrived.) It was cold that first night, and I had only my prison uniform until the next morning when I would receive a jacket. I felt cold inside as well.

Today, April 6, is the second day of Holy Week, a time between Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. Before Jesus entered Jerusalem, he wept for the city because the people did not know the way to make peace.

After Jesus entered the city, he saw the profit-making occurring at the Temple, a place for prayer. He became angry and turned over the tables of the money changers. He met with his disciples and prepared for the Passover. The supper must have been shaped by the climate of confusion, vulnerability, and fear. All they knew was the pounding of their hearts, fear for their own demise, and that this was their last time together. Jesus was a threat to the Romans, as well as to the religious laws. He must be rejected, they believed. The Jesus story keeps me alive to the mystery of life and death, good and evil, greatness and perversion; such a gift for life it is.

May 22, 2004

REFLECTION ON THE FLOWERS AND ANIMALS AT THE PRISON

I love flowers and looked about for the wondrous colors of spring, given without cost. When I arrived on April 6th, the grassy areas around the prison were filled with yellow. The color was striking, with millions of dandelions showing off their hue.

There was little else, however, no tooth warts, Jacob's ladders, shooting stars. I looked for them. Finally, I saw small buttercups and purple violets. There was a strange flower with white shoots coming out of twelve-inch grassy stems. It looked a bit like Allegheny spurge.



NEIL BRANKE

The trees were barren when I arrived. Over the next three weeks, a light green color began to radiate rays of the sun, and four weeks later, the trees were fully clothed in brilliant, bright green.

I also looked again for flowers, and I was delighted to find a patch of wild iris, their purple color bright against the flea bane and the yellow mustard. I was happy. I noticed purple up along the edge of the forest; I found lyre-leaved sage. Flowers coming forth from a strip mine now a prison! Alleluia!

Animals appear once in a while. A groundhog pattered along the base of the cliff where the forest began. At the Native American Center there are two dogs, one with four puppies. The puppies have evoked care from several inmates. I enjoy the birds although I have not been able to identify many.

Just outside the lunch hall is a small ravine, and water has begun to collect by a small dam made from stones. In the small pond, about four feet across, are two large frogs and several smaller ones. Inmates stand at the fence overlooking the pond after each meal and enjoy observing the frogs. Tadpoles also come to the pond's surface—new life, fragile to be sure.

I was sent a prayer which I posted in a plastic cover on the levee by the pond and dedicated to the frogs. The text remained posted for only two days—a sign of my limited influence in this place.

A PRAYER FOR THE WILD CREATURES

Oh, Great Spirit, we come to you with love and gratitude for all living creatures. We pray especially for our relatives of the wilderness—the four-legged, the winged, those that live in the waters, and those that crawl upon the land.

Bless them, that they may continue to live in freedom and enjoy their right to be wild.

Fill our hearts with tolerance, appreciation, and respect for all living creatures so that we all might live together in harmony and in peace.

—Marcellus Bear Heart Williams

May 28, 2004

REFLECTIONS ON FAITH, RELIGION, CHAPLAINS, AND INMATES

There are many religious groups here. Each religious group is assigned a group sponsor. Three chaplains coordinate the activities: a Catholic chaplain who is supervising chaplain, a Southern Baptist, and a Missouri Synod Lutheran who said he was on the progressive wing of the church. We had a good conversation, but when I asked if I might teach a course, he closed up and said, "Inmates cannot teach courses."

The following groups are approved: Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, House of Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhist, Hindu, Protestant, Moorish Science, Muslim, Native

American, Nation of Islam, Rastafarian, Pentecostal, Spanish Protestant, Shatru, Jewish, House of Yahweh, Hebrew Israelites, Wicca, and Life Connections.

I have attended the Protestant service as well as the Catholic service which I appreciate because it has liturgical form which gives continuity over time, as well as inviting me to participate. I do value liturgy.

I plan to share in a Native American sweat lodge on Wednesdays (about five hours) when I receive permission to do so. I have attended several Bible study sessions, and watched a video on prayer.

I entered the prison just after Palm Sunday and desired some liturgical framework to consider my role here, but there was little help. The Protestant Good Friday service had little to do with Good Friday, except a word study on the seven last words without any exposition or reflection. On Easter, the Southern Baptist minister preached using Ephesians where Paul speaks of Jesus' suffering Death and Resurrection, but the minister focused on "The Plan of God" where Jesus died for our sins without any sense of Jesus' death relating to human arrogance and power. (The film *The Passion of Christ* has the same problem). Jesus' great pain and suffering is presented to us, calling us to worship and praise. This is partially true for me—but only in the larger context of Jesus' execution challenging the powers that be and thus reaping the whirlwind. We also celebrate the power of God to bring life out of death. Reducing Jesus' death to personal

healing is too limiting.

I had a conversation about the Bible with two inmates over lunch. One inmate had been a news reporter and the other a fireman. They wondered if the Bible changes. We talked about the different meanings for words through the centuries and the need for dealing with such problems. They appreciated the discussion.

Prior to a softball game a week ago, one of the inmates called the team together to prepare to play, and he said he wanted to offer a prayer. This was their prayer before the game:

Father, Who art in heaven. Thank You for the wonderful day. Thank You for the blessings You bestow upon us. Lord, we thank You for looking over our families while we are separated from them. Yet Lord, we ask for Your forgiveness of our sins and wrongdoings throughout this day. Lord, we ask as we get ready to play this game that You keep us in character. Put a leash upon our tongues so that we will not argue a call. If one of us makes an error or does wrong, let us do as You said, "Lift one another up." Lord, we ask for Your protection on the field. Keep us from harm or injury, not only us, but the other team as well. Lord, we thank You for this chance to play and to come to You. We thank and praise You, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

This is a small glimpse of religious life here.

June 3, 2004

2:35 P.M., UPON THE KNOLL

I have been troubled during the past two weeks. I was unnerved by the move from my cubicle into the hall where there is no light, no desk, no privacy. No locker to store books and papers, no place to put pills and bathroom supplies—I have no place to store my clothes except in a bag on the floor.

I was taken out of my cubicle because I got caught up in my writing responses to letters and cards. The writing has become a burden, and I was seeking to organize it better, but on May 21, I, along with my Bunkie, was called into the administrative office by Mr. Gull, as I shall call him.

I must agree that my room was cluttered. I had a pile of magazines on the left side of the desk, and the letters I had received and was answering were on the right side. On my bed were three copies of the *New York Times* along with four books I was perusing.

There were some papers and reflections also on the bed. My windowsill had dust on it. We had swept the floor, but it was dingy beyond our control.

Mr. Gull completes the forms each week to rate each dorm as to neatness and cleanliness. This goal is sound as the four dorms are rated as to their grades, the best getting to eat first and get to the commissary first.

He called my roommate and me into his office and said we did not deserve a room because our room was, as I have mentioned, cluttered and disordered and with dust on the windowsill. Especially egregious was having the *New York Times* and Martin Luther King's *Bearing the Cross*, a three-inch thick volume, on the bed.

It is well to note that I am seventy-three years with six children and eight grandchildren. I was married for forty-nine years when my wife died some eighteen months ago. I have always had a work area of some sort where I write letters, reflect on books, study, and pray. Usually my work area is cluttered with piles of magazines, papers, and books. It is orderly in the sense that I can find what I need.

For punishment, we were immediately moved out of the cubicle into the hall. The bed in the hall is called the "bus stop," for it is a place of great activity, located between the microwave and the telephone. There is a passageway in front of the bunk bed. So here we live; there is no place to store anything except in boxes under the bed and by hanging items on the bedposts. So I have been troubled, and I have felt vulnerable and constrained, controlled, angry, and afraid.

This morning I began to read *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong. The story reports on her move out of the convent into the secular world only to face many difficulties in adjustment leading to mental illness and physical disability.

She begins her book with a stanza from T.S. Eliot's poem, "Ash Wednesday." The verse "spoke to me." For an older man, the stanza has poignancy:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that
man's scope
I no longer strive to strive toward
such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch
its wings?)

Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

In the third and fourth stanzas, Eliot writes:

Consequently, I rejoice, having to
construct something
Upon which to rejoice.
And pray to God to have mercy
upon us...

Life has passed me, in a way, too. I have come face to face with endings, finitude, and not knowing. I wonder as the men walk, one by one, two by two. Do they seek "to construct something upon which to rejoice"?

Armstrong's book also caught my eye with the detailed life in the convent compared with the life in the world which she has confronted. In the convent, everything had some sacred significance, and now in the world nothing seems to matter at all—a reality to be created. Freedom led to defiance of the past.

This new world was an assault, she says, a bubbling roar of four hundred students, unrestrained, yet she kissed the floor out of the joy of a new freedom, or out of habit, it was not clear. In the convent, she failed to find God, yet convent life proved to be a fixed point of home, an orientation. Now there was nothing, nothing given, only options which led her to stunned bewilderment.

In the convent she felt isolation, without intimacy, where the capacity for affection atrophied or became badly damaged and could not function. It hardened within, crafting a person who cannot love. Isolation is central to initiation. Is it to make a person independent or to make one pliable? In the convent it was not to make one self-reliant but pliable to the superiors. She says she was unable to accept love: "I had wanted to be transformed and enriched; instead, I was diminished, and I became simply hard."

June 6, 2004

Two months ago today, I entered the federal prison here in Kentucky to begin my six-month incarceration. The time has been occupied with coming to terms with the world here. It seemed like a summer camp during the first month in some ways: eating, picking up trash, recreation, group conversations, free times, and sleep. The reality of reg-

A letter dated June 12, 2004

Dear Reverend Don Beisswenger,

My name is Javiera Vergara. I am seventeen years old and attend Immaculate Heart of Mary High School. Last November I, too, attended the WHISC/SOA protest. That was a weekend that changed my life forever.

It's funny how life seems so simple, but it really isn't. Humans are complex beings that can do things so wonderful and beautiful and yet be capable of mass destruction. Going to the protest made me angry, and it also made me feel useless. Things that I thought could be figured out simply are too complex even to think about sometimes. People tend to be so freaking greedy and totally oblivious to those around them; it hurts me deep inside I think more than other kids my age. But what do you do unless you have money? I pray—but I don't think it will do any good. I mean, God did give everyone free will—it's too bad many haven't learned to love; they are too wrapped up in money to see through anything.

But I still pray and ask God to help me not be afraid of the future of our world. I pray so God can give others good judgment and to let them see how wonderful it is to love others. It's too bad many won't have the chance.

Well, I have to go, but I want to finish by saying that I think it's great that you crossed the line. I hope you are doing fine, and may God give you all of God's blessings. You are a wonderful person. I hope this letter finds you well, and let's keep praying. I know I need prayers if I'm going to survive here on earth. And of course, let's pray that the school closes. Thanks for reading, and God bless.

Love,
Javiera Vergara

ular counts to monitor our presence through the day is cumbersome (midnight, 3 a.m., 5 a.m., 9 a.m., Noon, 4 p.m., 9 p.m.). Some counts take an hour until all are accounted for. Whether in the day or night, we are reminded we are in a system of control and power. Mr. Stamper, the unit manager, comes to look at the visiting area. He remarked during orientation, "I know everything that goes on here. Inmates keep me informed." But overall, the life here seems benign and I usually feel upbeat, as my letters indicate. But this feeling has changed.

It is 5:30 a.m., and I sit on the bottom bunk in the hallway of the dormitory. A bunk is against the wall with only a walkway in front, with people going all night, using the microwave or the telephone. I have, along with my Bunkie, been here for over four weeks. This is the punishment that Mr. Gull has given us for having a messy room with a cluttered bed and dust on the windowsill. There is a strict rule about keeping your desk absolutely clear of books, magazines, and papers. Nothing is to be on the desk except the Bible, they say.

I sit here this morning writing with a small book light I purchased. It helps with my morning reflections, reading of psalms and prayers. Because I have no light or desk, I do most of my writing in the laundry room where folks fold their clothes. They have been cordial and supportive.

The event has led me to be aware of vulnerability, mine and the vulnerability of all the men here. The prison system is to incarcerate. It takes us out of the world and wants us to conform to the world of rules. I wondered why Mr. Gull came when he did since I had not cleaned up my room, which I usually do, though not in any perfect fashion. He did come two days earlier than usual. Was it because of a snitch? Are we under surveillance? I do not want to be concerned excessively about all this except it has brought a new concern to my attention.

I talked to an inmate who has been here six years. I asked him his purpose while here. "I have only one goal, and that is to survive," he responded. This has led me to be cautious and to see that survival is a part of my calling here.

I am reading about prison life and the prison system. I am one who dissented from my government's military policies, and this is not keeping with the patriotism of the time—my walk of six steps onto Fort Benning led to a six-month sentence and a fine—a rather stringent penalty for dissent. I believe excessive sentences are the rule here—excess penalty for nonviolent crimes. Conspiracy has been the key to conviction. Implicate other people to get lighter sentences. People implicating others can be grounds for a dangerous social system. Yet conspiracy laws are the key issue in the radical increase in our prison population since the 1980s, the "tough on crime" years. The "tough on crime" approach was the same period when privatization of prisons began. Prisons have become one of the most profitable businesses. I learned yesterday that most items in the warehouse have expired dates on the food packages. The criminal justice system is now a rich source for cheap labor, control of dissent, and private funneling of private funds to increase profit.

Yesterday I was reading at a picnic table on the playing field. Three men came up to sit out of the sun as I had. I was writing and heard them converse.

One asked another, "Why don't you have a tattoo on your arm like this?" as he pointed to a barbed wire rung around his arm.

The man answered, "I am not into this."

The other persisted as if he were recruiting for an association. "You need to get a tattoo! You need to make an appointment right away since he is very busy."

There are two or three inmates who tattoo on location, and tattoos are a key symbol for many of the white men here. The persistent one had a spider web on his whole arm, with the elbow as the center of the web. He said, "My next tattoo will be a skull, with a Confederate flag coming out of it, and a Klan cap on top."

I became aware of the racial dynamics. There was a lengthy article in the *New Yorker* about the Aryan nations controlling the federal prisons—inmates using the same mechanism for decisions as the Mafia, with a person in each facility who has the power to say who is to live or to die. The Nation began as an anti-black group but moved to become oriented toward total power. Black and Latino gangs formed to counter the Nation, and tensions were high. One of the men here told me of his experience with the gang at



Authors John Egerton and the Reverend Will Campbell were among the friends who visited Professor Beisswenger during his sixth-month incarceration in federal prison. A description of their visit is recounted in Beisswenger's journal entry dated June 28, 2004.

the prison next door to this camp. He was to be killed, but found a way out.

Eventually, all the Aryan Nation members were taken out of the prison system and put into a super maximum security facility where they are now. While the power of the gangs has been diluted, the sentiments are still here. I am not unduly afraid, yet I am aware of the reality of the prison—both in how it operates and more aware about the prison population.

When will we get moved back into a cubicle? We do not know. A memo said we would be returned to a cubicle at "Mr. Gull's convenience."

So, my brothers and sisters, I still rejoice at the power of life, its wonders, its diversity. Bill Coffin reminds us there is no shortage of miracles, only those who can perceive them.

I remain concerned about the School of the Americas and the same kinds of atrocities that are present in Iraqi prisons and what is occurring in Latin America. We know how to terrorize. I remain angry but also filled with wonder at the beauty in people, even here in an old strip mine now turned into a prison.

June 28, 2004

VISITATION

On Friday, June 25th, I had three persons come from Nashville for a visit. They arrived about 12:30 p.m. One of the visitors was the Reverend Will Campbell, a well-known Nashville author who is eighty years old and uses a cane for balance. Another was John Egerton who is fifty-seven years old and also

a noted southern writer. The last one was Matt Leber, the twenty-nine-year-old director of a nonprofit social agency. I was excited about the visit.

When I arrived for their visit, after hearing my call to come down, Officer Hobbs confronted me with great anger and stated he was of a mind to cancel my visit for all three persons because the young man had on sandals and socks, and sandals were not permitted. He shouted at me several more times that it was my responsibility to tell folks what to wear (which I have done diligently). Then he said, "I intend to do all in my power to have your visitor privilege revoked." He said I could go into the visiting area at that point.

I greeted Reverend Campbell and Mr. Egerton who told me Matt was told to wait in the parking lot. Reverend Campbell was visibly shaken by the encounter with Officer Hobbs. He cried for a time. Mr. Egerton was angry because of the disrespect he experienced in talking with Officer Hobbs. Our visit continued for a time, and finally Matt appeared with new sneakers which he had purchased and was permitted to enter for the time remaining. Reverend Campbell said, as we concluded our time together that he would not cry the next visit, he hoped. It was a sad conclusion for our visit.

Officer Hobbs does not have the right to abuse visitors as he did. To make an eighty-year-old man cry is clearly excessive. I have asked that he be punished for his action, and furthermore, that he be dismissed as an officer in charge of visitation if he cannot act properly.

BOOK REVIEW AND REFLECTION, AUGUST 2004

Are Prisons Obsolete?
Angela Davis, Seven Stories Press,
New York, 2003, 127 pages, paperback

I am writing this review from the federal prison in Manchester, Kentucky, where I am a prisoner of conscience. I, along with twenty-six others, was arrested at Fort Benning, Georgia, in November of 2003. I took six steps onto the army base and was given a sentence of six months in federal prison and a fine of \$1000. I am about half finished with the sentence and have made efforts to understand the prison system. The book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* has been of great assistance in coming to an understanding of why I am incarcerated and the system under which our prisons operate.

Angela Davis seeks to do two things: first, to reveal the impact of the prison on the lives of people inside and outside the prison. The ones punished most harshly are often the families. Secondly, she seeks to challenge the "taken for grantedness" of prisons as necessary and an inevitable part of our social system in the United States. She describes the historical development of what we have—a prison-industrial complex.

The purpose of prisons, she suggests, has, over the years, focused on different intentions and goals. The brutal forms of torture and personal punishment such as whippings, cutting off hands, and stocks were challenged as inhumane. There was a movement by the Quakers to provide space for persons to repent and start new lives. If persons were penitent, they could move on; penitentiaries had small cells, like monasteries. But this did not work for most. There developed broader concerns with rehabilitation—returning persons to society, healed. Educational interventions, as well as religious conversions, were part of such operations. There were usually insufficient monies to offer what was needed, and offerings were marginal for rehabilitation. Punishment through incarceration then became a central goal. The punishment for long periods in prison has now led to the realization that the goal is incarceration—removal of persons from society.

I am incarcerated—pulled out of my life for six months as a form of punishment. It is

not aimed at correcting me for anything. There are no offerings to help me to grow, and work is minimal as to be absurd. I work about one hour a day, and wait around for about three to four hours each day to be "counted."

Some years ago, John Egerton, a Nashville author, wrote a fine book titled *Speak Now Against the Day*. In the book he examines the civil rights movement prior to 1954 to ascertain what had been done about racial injustice. What he discovered was that almost all persons seeking change focused on humanizing the separate but equal system. They tried to secure equal educational opportunity within the separate school systems. The same applied with equal housing and transportation; they did not seek to challenge the separate but equal system but to seek a more humane system. But Egerton argues that there were few who spoke against the separate but equal laws. Some worked to humanize the law. Almost universally, he says, they tried to negotiate within the separate but equal system. (It is interesting to note that even Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Association wanted to negotiate within the system at the beginning.) *Brown v. the Board of Education* showed that the separate but equal system and structure was wrong and unconstitutional. It had to be dismantled. This meant a new day had begun. The whole system had to be transformed, and we still seek the reality of this transformation.

Davis argues along a similar line. We have tried reforming prison, and it has not worked. Racism and sexism are deeply ingrained in the system, as well as homophobia. It cannot be fixed. It is obsolete. Prisons, as a way to deal with persons who commit crime, are obsolete.

The complication has now been compounded by the fact that prisons are a profitable business—the more prisons, the better. We have over two million citizens in prisons as of this date. The number of persons in prison has escalated exponentially. There are nine million persons in prison throughout the world; two million of these are in the United States—in prisons, jails, youth facilities, and immigrant detention. The U.S. population is five percent of the world, but we have more than twenty percent of the world-combined prison population. In the late 1960s, there were two-hundred thousand individuals in prison. Now, thirty years later, we have

ten times that number locked up.

Are we willing, Davis asks, to "relegate large number of persons from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technology of seclusions that produce several mental illnesses?"

Why has this happened?

During the Reagan administration, there was a strong movement to be tough on crime. It was exaggerated in many ways. From this period came legislation leading to certain imprisonment and longer sentences. Power was taken away from the judges to exercise discretion. There was also much unemployment and homelessness. The continued racism of the culture meant black persons were targeted. (One in three black men, ranging in age from twenty to twenty-nine years, is in prison according to a study conducted in 1995; black women also have been incarcerated at increasingly high numbers.)

Segregation ruled the South until a century after the abolition of slaves. The system of exploitation saw black persons as property, and such views continue, even now. In prisons there is deep racism. After abolition, blacks were still treated as second-class citizens with curtailed voting rights, educational opportunities, and marginal jobs. Lynching was an extra-legal institution where ruthless groups took thousands of lives.

We rarely acknowledge the role of race in prisons. Is racism so deeply entrenched in the institution of prisons that it is almost impossible to eliminate it? (Here in this prison, there are few black staff and officers although approximately forty percent of the inmates are black.)

After slavery, black codes were established in slave states. Slavery and involuntary servitude had been abolished by the first amendment, but not as punishment for crime. The black codes defined crime state to

An Essay Composed by my Granddaughter, Sara Beisswenger

"I'm going to jail," my grandfather said on the walk we were going on together. "I'm going to jail."

Those words struck me by surprise. My grandfather wasn't a bad man, was he? At first I didn't know what to say; then a question popped into my head. "How?" I asked. "Why?"

My dad had gone down to Columbus, Georgia, to see my grandfather, who lived in Tennessee. I asked him about it when he got home, but I didn't get any answers. I didn't know what had happened, but I was going to find out.

It ended up that my grandfather wanted to tell me himself, so he came down to my house for the weekend. My grandfather and I were on a walk around my neighborhood. He started talking about God's plan for him, and then he just said it. He told me he was going for six months to jail in Kentucky. Then he told me why. While he talked, I stayed quiet. I didn't know what to say.

He started out telling me how much he loved me. Then he said that every year, down in Columbus, he protests at a camp that trains South American men how to be army men. He told me how nineteen men, who had been graduated from this camp, had gone into a small town down in South America. They had killed everyone in the town. Only one woman survived. He thought that was terrible and wanted to stop it from happening again. I agreed.

Then he told me that a person could protest all he wants, but if there is violence, or if he goes on personal property, he can get arrested. He said that he took six steps onto that base and knelt in prayer. He got arrested along with the twenty-six other people that did the same. He was not sorry for what he had done. I am very happy that he is out although the place that he was at wasn't a bad place. He probably could have walked out, but then he would have had to stay in jail longer. There was a baseball field that they could go to. He was not in a bad place. But to my dad, it was still jail. I felt for my dad. It's not easy having your father in jail.

Now I think about God and his plan for me. I look up to my grandfather for doing what he did. I think he did a very good thing.

The Beisswenger File

A CHRONOLOGY

1995 retires from Vanderbilt University Divinity School as professor of church and community; is named professor, *emeritus*; begins to work more vigorously to resist the global war against the poor; works with the homeless in Nashville and continues studies and engagement with the poor of Latin America—an interest that developed in 1980 with the murder of Oscar Romero and the rape and murder of four missionaries

1997 participates in first vigil at Fort Benning, Georgia

1997 participates in second vigil at Fort Benning and crosses the line with over two thousand other people; is arrested and given a five-year ban and issued a bar letter

2000 participates in third vigil; crosses the line, again; violates the five-year ban and terms of the bar letter; twenty-seven persons are arrested and taken to the Fort Benning armory; they are searched, fingerprinted, and secured with chains around their arms and legs before taken to the Muscogee County jail for thirty-six hours; the judge arraigns Beisswenger and sets bail at \$1000; bail previously had been set at \$500

2001 stands trial with other defendants on January 26 and sentenced to six months in federal prison; fined \$1000; will not receive social security payments while in prison; other defendants are sentenced to six months, three months, a fine, or probation

2002 reports to prison in Manchester, Kentucky, for sixth-month incarceration; turns over garments but is permitted to keep eye glasses and two Bibles

2002 released from prison on October 1 and returns to Nashville for a reception at the Peace and Justice Center

2002 delivers first reflections on confinement during a service at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville

2002 participates in fourth vigil at Fort Benning; does not cross the line

2002 begins organizing correspondence and journal entries from the period of confinement



Protestors dressed as corpses and carrying symbolic coffins lead more than 3,800 others in a procession onto Fort Benning, Georgia, November 21, 1999, to protest human rights abuses they say are committed by graduates of the Army's School of the Americas.

state, and only black persons were convicted. Following slavery, the southern system hastened to establish new forms of restriction. Vagrancy became a crime punishable by incarceration or forced labor. Convict leasing programs were prominent.

Being in prison has made me aware of how prison fits into this economic system. The close relationship of prisons and corporations has become a pot of gold. The "tough on crime" legislation, which includes long sentences, has led to mass incarceration. More and more prisons are built year after year, yet the statistics on crime go down.

Why?

Why is there no major debate on the enormous increase in incarceration? Why is there no discussion on an alternative to prison? Let us begin the debate.

August 23, 2004

A REFLECTION ON CONFINEMENT AS GIFT

I have been incarcerated over four months now. I await October 1st when I will be released and free to roam beyond the camp where I am now confined. I cannot leave the camp without serious consequences. They keep track of me with midnight counts,

stand-up counts, and "give your number" counts. I am confined in every sense of the word. Confinement, separation, enclosure, withdrawal to a desert—all have been disciplines in the life of faith. Confinement in prison adds another dimension.

Flannery O'Connor had lupus, a debilitating disease that sapped her energy and confined her to the family's farm in Georgia. Her affliction and confinement were permanent. It would not change. She named it "passive diminishment." "From what I have to give out," she said, "I observe more clearly. I can, with an eye squinted, take it all in as a blessing." Confinement led her to use her energy by attending to life at the farm and to the people about her.

I have wondered a lot about being more present to the time, the present time. What I pay attention to sharpens my life. If I pay attention to what's in the future, I may miss something right before me. What about this day? This time? Much of the energy of inmates is focused outside the camp either on their appeals, family matters, or girlfriends. Mostly, the energy focuses on wanting to get out. Life is seen in the future. Often, this characterizes me, also. For most, they also find ways to "pass the time." Distractions become central. Playing cards, playing at sports, or lifting weights become

life-giving. Religious faith becomes central for some.

As I reflect upon the time here, I have paid attention to my relationships with inmates, and to finding space for others in my heart. I have paid attention to *me*, to dispositions, to tiredness, to confusion. I cherish the support and give thanks to my friends, colleagues, and family. I am especially grateful now for the women in my life. I ponder those in the Living Room, those caring for Penuel Ridge, and those working for the people in Nashville. I continue my thoughts about the graduates of the School of the Americas and how they affect the children, women, men, and communities in Latin America and how the congressional investigation into the SOA was rejected. I see how the atrocities by the U.S. military took shape in Iraq and how this investigation is avoided, rejected, and ignored. And I praise the people of God who gather in praise and service in their love and hope. I consider the beauty of flowers, the sky, running water, and eating peaches for breakfast.

Confinement has provided me with an unwanted isolation, but confinement also has brought me the deeper meanings that lie quietly within each of those areas already mentioned. I listen better; let events be my teacher.

And amidst all, I have found a holy presence in my life, filling the spaces with sacredness. Such a gift! Van Gogh said, "I think that everything comes from God." Even here, an awareness of this thought presents itself, especially in the morning and at night when I retire. I realize that I am glad, grateful to be able to reflect theologically on the incredible life given to me, even here. There is majesty in all of this.

O'Connor says that she "embraced life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for." Such a wondrous way to see.

And Paul, a prisoner, wrote to the people of God in Philippi, "I rejoice in the Lord greatly; I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little; I know what it is to have plenty. In any

and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty, and of being in need. I can do all things through Him that strengthens me. In any case it was kind of you to share my distress."

Thank you as well.

September 13, 2004

I have about three more weeks here in Manchester, Kentucky. The time has moved along, and soon I will be free from this confinement, October 1st to be exact, and I am looking forward to seeing my friends at the October 12th banquet to celebrate Penuel Ridge's twentieth year.

The middle period here has been easier, especially having a cubicle, a light, desk, locker for storage, and a chair. I also know the ropes better, so I rest more easily within the system. I have not had an altercation for two weeks. Alleluia.

I continue to believe the prisons are obso-

Violence and war are thought to be the way to security—justifying all kinds of military policies, including interrogation. Dissent becomes essential to choosing life over death. Thoreau said, "Protest without resistance is consent."

lete as a way to deal with ordering our society. Violent persons, of course, need safe space to protect them and others; however, the five hundred persons in this camp do not need to be here but to be with their families, at their jobs, and with the communities which support them.

I want to address briefly what I call the increasing costs of dissent. I am a part of the effort to close the U.S. army school in Columbus, Georgia, because of the serious human rights violations, including the torture and assassinations by graduates of the school. The activities of graduates parallel what was done in the Iraqi prisons, yet Congress does not support serious investigation into the military policies which led to these atrocities.

Furthermore, to dissent from U.S. government policies, supported by economic institutions which benefit from them, is to be a troublemaker. The cost of active dissent increases. Three instances come to my mind. When I was arrested, I was told to bring \$500.00 for bond. When we arrived, however, we were told that the bond would be \$1000. This made for considerable difficulty, and I had to ask the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship for help. Lois Baker from Wisconsin loaned me the money.

All of the twenty-seven persons arrested were upright and responsible citizens and could have been released on their own recognition, but the judge denied this argument from our attorney. Sixteen of the twenty-seven persons arrested were given six-month sentences, the maximum; ten received three months; most everyone got a fine of some amount.

The escalation of the cost of dissent continues. An article written by Jim Hightower and published in the August 23, 2004, edition of *The Nation* should be accessed for further information on the question of dissension and government policies (www.thenation.com).

We are seeing the doctrine of "permanent" war become established. Terrorism is used to justify all kinds of military activity. We will no longer think of peace. The cost goes up, but the reasons for resistance go up, also. The notion of "perpetual war," never-ending war because of terrorism, gains credence. Violence and war are thought to be the way to security—justifying all kinds of military policies, including interrogation. Dissent becomes essential to choosing life over death. Thoreau said, "Protest without resistance is consent."

We are called to be peacemakers. We must do so, lest we forget shalom. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus. And so we shall continue.

The way to peace is not demonstration but by developing that network of relationships, agreements, and accords by which nations can come to trust and work with one another. "Development is the new name for peace," wrote Paul VI. This must be our vision and hope, still.



A house under construction can be seen through the ruins of a tsunami-destroyed house in Meulaboh, Indonesia. The date the tsunami struck, December 26, 2004, is painted on the ruins.

KEN MORITSUGU © KRT PHOTOS

AGAINST *Explanation* AND FOR *Consolation* FAITH IN THE WAKE OF THE TRAGIC

BY JOHN J. THATAMANIL, PH.D.

Reading the newspapers during the weeks after the tsunami has been for me nearly as heartbreaking and faith-shaking as reading the first accounts of the unfolding tragedy. The initial news was and remains overwhelming. How, after all, does one begin to think about the death of 160,000 people, perhaps a third of whom were children? How does one register in one's heart and mind the force and reality of entire villages simply vanishing in raging waters?

But what has moved me again to grief, frustration, and even anger is what has transpired since the tsunami: listening to the religious attempt to make sense of this tragedy drives me to doubt. When I hear Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims attempt to explain and account for this tragedy, I wonder: Are we not better served by surrendering faith rather than by preserving it through dubious means? The explanations of the religious push me to the brink of irreligion.

An online news story began with the headline "Israel Rabbi, Indian Catholic Bishop, Anglican, and Muslim Leaders Agree Tsunami is Warning from God." The Anglican leader in question, Philip Jensen, the Anglican Dean of Sydney, remarked, "The will of God in this world involved His creation of the world, but it also involves His

judgment upon the sinfulness of humanity, and it also involves His salvation of people through the Death and Resurrection of His Son. And so all the beautiful things we see in this world are an expression of His creative goodness to us, and all the disasters of this world are part of His warning the Judgment is coming, and both these things should focus our mind on the Death and Resurrection of His Son and how He saved us."

Jensen's words are elegant but impious. To suggest that God should strip thousands of mothers and fathers of their sons to concentrate our minds on the Death and Resurrection of His Son gives us a God unworthy of worship, a God who bears no resemblance to the God proclaimed by that very Son.

The news from the nontheistic traditions is not better. Among Buddhists and Hindus, the question is not one of God's responsibili-

ty but of human agency. Karma is the culprit; people suffered and died because of their actions in this life or lifetimes past.

Amy Waldman, a reporter for the *New York Times*, described a scene in a small town in Sri Lanka. "Next door to four houses flattened by the tsunami, three rooms of Poorima Jayaratne's home still stood intact. She had a ready explanation for that anomaly, and her entire family's survival: she was a Buddhist, and her neighbors were not," reported Waldman. "Most of the people who lost relatives were Muslim," said Ms. Jayaratne, adding for good measure that two Christians were also missing. As proof, she pointed to the poster of Lord Buddha that still clung to the standing portion of her house."

After hearing this litany of judgment and self-righteousness from the religious, I find myself in profound sympathy with scientifically minded atheists and secularists. An ounce of scientific understanding—a minimal knowledge of plate tectonics and an appreciation of wave dynamics are worth more than the sum total of what the religions can offer by way of explanation. Scientific explanations commend themselves especially because they are not immoral as the explanations of the religious so often are. Scientists do not blame dead children for picking a bad day to play on the beach. Only the religious offer such a rationale.

Given the general and profound inadequacy of religious attempts to explain suffering, should we give up faith entirely and devote ourselves to such knowledge as we can gain from the sciences? If the central labor of religion is explanation, then the answer is *yes*. We would be better served by stripping ourselves free from these religious explanations. Time and again, explanations of suffering become temptations either to complacency or to judgment. Every comprehensive account of suffering seems to distance us from the pain of those who grieve by giving to such suffering an air of necessity or inevitability. If the victimized, if the poor and the oppressed, suffer because of their karma or because of God's judgment, then such suffering, far from being an offense, becomes a necessary part of the fabric of an orderly universe. To commit ourselves to such a vision is to compound tragedy with the unnecessary evil of an unfeeling heart.

But what if religion is not finally a matter

of explanation but consolation? Of course, religions have sought repeatedly to provide consolation by way of explanation. The fruit of such efforts has been ambiguous at best and criminal at worst. Have we not erred in believing that consolation comes primarily by way of explanation?



Head of Job
c. 1823
by William Blake
English poet, painter, engraver,
printer, mystic, and social critic
(1757–1827)
pencil study for *Illustrations of the Book of Job*
260 x 200 mm.
Sir Geoffrey Keynes Collection

... what has moved me again to grief, frustration, and even anger is what has transpired since the tsunami: listening to the religious attempt to make sense of this tragedy drives me to doubt. The explanations of the religious push me to the brink of irreligion.

I am reminded of words penned by the philosopher, Voltaire, after the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 which laid waste the city of Lisbon on All Saints' Day while most of the city's residents were at worship. "The problem of good and evil remains an inexplicable chaos for those who seek in good faith," wrote Voltaire. "It is an intellectual exercise for those who argue: they are convicts who play with their chains."

An apt description for theologians: "Convicts who play with their chains." Before we rise up with indignation to challenge Voltaire and defend our craft, we should be well-advised to turn again to the Book of Job, for the author of that great work would surely agree with the great French critic. Secularists and skeptics are not alone in condemning facile theologians and their attempts to explain and to explain away suffering.

The Book of Job begins with a prose prologue in which God and the satan—not the pointy-horned figure we know and dread, but a figure who keeps company in God's

heavenly courts as God's chief prosecutor—are having a conversation. God asks the satan to consider the exemplary virtue and justice of his servant Job; however, the prosecutor replies that Job's faithfulness is due entirely to the material blessings and protection God has given him. The prologue accomplishes many purposes, but most importantly the narrative makes us insiders by giving us an absolute and unequivocal God's-eye verdict on the man, Job: innocent, faithful, and just.

The prologue also presents to us six critical questions: Will Job continue to worship God when no material gain can come from such worship? Is a relationship with God wholly a transactional matter? Is human

faithfulness contingent on divine blessing? And what are we to say about a God who permits the innocent to suffer? Is God unjust? How do we speak of God when faced with the suffering of the innocent? The Book of Job suggests these profound questions and makes it impossible for us to turn away from them.

What then of Job's friends, these theologians *extraordinaire*? How do they respond to the suffering of their friend? What do they have to say about God in relation to Job's suffering? Initially, his friends say absolutely nothing.

"Now when Job's friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place.... They made an appointment together to come and condole with him and comfort him. And when they saw him from afar, they did not recognize him; and they raised their voices and wept; and they rent their robes and sprinkled dust upon their heads turned toward Heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."

Before we proceed to examine the theologians articulated by Job's friends, we would do well to ask whether *our* capacity to keep company with those who are caught in utter

desolation and sorrow complements their capacity. Most of us know from personal experience that little in life is more difficult than keeping company with those in the grip of physical and emotional agony. Something within us recoils and wants to turn away from such circumstances, but Job's friends do not respond this way. Much to their credit, we see that their capacity for silence and solidarity vastly exceeds ours. The Book of Job reminds us of our profound obligation to keep company with those who suffer; our first and foremost obligation in the face of tragedy and grief is to keep silent solidarity with those who suffer.

But there is also a time for speech, and such a time inevitably arrives in the lives of the afflicted. Every pastor or hospital chaplain knows that the question of theodicy will inevitably surface. The cry, "Why?" comes unbidden and spontaneously to the lips of those who suffer, as it comes to Job. What then are we to do, we who would dare to call ourselves theologians? I shall not pretend "to dispense answers" to these great questions, but I do believe that we can learn lessons about what we ought not to say and do by

watching Job's theologian friends run aground.

In the depth of his agony, Job begins the conversation by wishing that he had never been born and cursing the very day of his birth: "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? For then I should have lain down and been quiet; I should have slept; then I should have been at rest...."

To suggest that God should strip thousands of mothers and fathers of their sons to concentrate our minds on the Death and Resurrection of His Son gives us a God unworthy of worship, a God who bears no resemblance to the God proclaimed by that very Son.

How familiar and painful these words are to those of us who have kept company with those surviving acute injury, those who have lost dear ones, those who are caught up in acute depression, those who are suicidal and who look longingly upon death as rest compared to the torture of living. Nevertheless, Job's lament differs from those we so often

hear in one critical respect. Job is fortunate to maintain a relative clarity of vision in a time of great pain because he steadfastly and unwaveringly asserts his own innocence rather than blame himself for his own suffering. But this attitude is precisely what his friends cannot countenance, for his steadfast commitment to his own innocence disrupts the moorings of their theology of suffering.

For his friends, the matter is quite clear.

The world is an orderly place that runs according to a strict moral logic: God punishes the guilty and blesses the innocent; Job is suffering; therefore, God is punishing Job. After all, God does not punish the innocent; ergo, Job must be guilty—his protests to the contrary notwithstanding. His friend Eliphaz begins, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of His anger they are consumed."

His friend Bildad even has the temerity to pass judgment on the children Job has lost. "How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against Him, He has delivered them into the power of their transgression."

Lest one protest too quickly about the naivety of this theology—we should do well to remember that this theology has a good claim to being both Biblical and impeccably logical. Eliphaz's words nicely echo Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked...his delight is in the law of the Lord...he is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff driven away by the wind."

Theologians of our day, too, can cite Scripture for their claims and mount arguments with impeccable structure, even if such argumentation should run roughshod

over the experience of the suffering. Job's friends do well to keep company with Job, but when Job speaks out of his experience of suffering and anguish, he articulates an idea unfamiliar and disturbing to his fortunate friends. Job discovers that a theology to which he once subscribed is breaking down, and he can no longer believe that those who suffer deserve to suffer. It is true that Job never allowed his theology to interfere with the work of doing justice and looking after the needs of the poor—that is all the more to Job's credit—but now that Job finds himself on the other side of the table, he can no longer accept a theo-logic that gives him a picture of a morally tidy universe where the good prosper and the wicked perish. He knows better, and so do we. Confronted with the choice between continuing to adhere to an unworkable theology and entering into the experience of their suffering friend, Job's friends elect to abide with their theology.

Let us not, however, be too quick to judge. Abandoning our classroom theologies—the ones you write in Divinity School—is an easy gesture. To surrender entirely the theologies by which we live is another matter. Such theologies die hard. To surrender them is to be broken open, to find that our way of inhabiting the world is insufficient and unworkable. To surrender our living theologies is to find ourselves moving into a new vulnerability that will render us raw and naked to the suffering of others without the armor of our mediating categories. It is not accomplished easily.

There are precious lessons here for we who dare to call ourselves theologians. Not least among these lessons is that when we are given a choice between saving our comfortable and well-worn theologies and entering into vulnerable solidarity with those who suffer, we must always choose the latter.

You may well ask, "How are we to know whether and when a given theology that has sustained us needs to drop away from our lives?" Here, too, the experience of Job gives us valuable insight. As we listen to Job's laments, we find that his protestations initially are provoked by his private pain, his singular and unique personal anguish. As we follow the trajectory of his conversations with his friends; however, we learn that his private grief is transformed into a collective lament on behalf of all who suffer. We discover here a mysterious and grace-full alchemy of transformation.



To surrender our living theologies is to find ourselves moving into a new vulnerability that will render us raw and naked to the suffering of others without the armor of our mediating categories.... We must cast away any theology that sanctions the status quo by declaring the privileged blessed and the poor accursed.

Every Man Also Gave Him a Piece of Money
c. 1824
William Blake
pencil study
228 x 177 mm.
formerly Kerrison Preston Collection



Satan Smiting Job with Boils
c. 1823
William Blake
pencil study
200 x 135 mm.
Fitzwilliam Museum
Cambridge, England



KHAMPHIA BOLAPHANH © KERT PHOTOS

Refugees in Lamno, Indonesia, read from the Koran, January 14, 2005. The tsunami left hundreds of thousands homeless in Indonesia.

So often, acute personal anguish encloses us in the prison-house of our private pain. This enclosure is characteristic especially of the lives of those who suffer in the grips of psychological suffering—and not surprisingly, that is where Job begins. In his case, however, a transformation occurs. When Job gives up the idea that the poor and the unfortunate merit their suffering, he decisively leaves behind a world divided into those who take themselves to be prosperous and blessed on account of their righteousness and those who take themselves to be accursed because of their pain. Now, he is able to cast his lot squarely with those innocent who suffer as he does. Now, he can utter words of protest on their behalf: “Why are not the times of judgment kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know Him never see His days? Men remove landmarks; they seize flocks and pasture them. They drive away the ass of the powerless; they take the widow’s ox for a pledge. They thrust the poor off the road....There are those who snatch the fatherless child from the breast, and take in pledge the infant of the poor...”

What lesson shall we learn from Job’s transformation?

No words spoken about a situation of suffering can be true or accurate if they make

... our first and foremost obligation in the face of tragedy and grief is to keep silent solidarity with those who suffer.

suffering into an occasion for sundering community; no words about suffering can be right if the words undermine the possibility of the beloved community. We must stand always ready to discard any and every theology that disrupts our capacity to form community with the least of these. We must cast away any theology that sanctions the *status quo* by declaring the privileged blessed and the poor accursed.

We can draw a further corollary from witnessing Job’s transformation. Given a choice between defending God’s innocence and integrity or defending the downtrodden, we must always choose to defend the weak. God does not need us to come rallying to God’s defense. Those who suffer desperately need us. Any theology that has more invested in defending God’s innocence than defending those who are the beloved of God must perish. May I presume to venture a theological commandment? *Thou shall not seek to preserve*

God’s innocence and power at the expense of those who suffer. God does not need your vindication; the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering do!

These conclusions may seem altogether obvious to one. If so, I am pleased. But they seem far from obvious to many of our learned theologians who are committed, always and everywhere, “to cherish explanation” even if it should come at the price of consolation. If we take the experience of Job seriously, then we theologians may have to learn to abandon one of our favorite preoccupations: the work of theodicy. For what is theodicy save a tremendous intellectual investment in defending the innocence of God? Can we imagine a theology without theodicy? Must we not?

Job gives up on his conversation with his friends whom he quite rightly calls, “worthless physicians.” How keenly we theologians ought to fear that those who suffer will pass on us an identical indictment. Nevertheless, remarkably and miraculously, Job turns from talking about God to talking *to* God. He turns from the accusative case to the vocative case; consequently, a theology of address and prayer replaces disputation.

It is a wonder that Job is not put off from speaking to God by the theological machinations of his learned and overzealous friends. We theologians should pray that our inevitable theological failure—and fail we must when we try to talk about the ineffable—will drive those who listen to us not to despair and faithlessness but to God-talk, not talk about God but talk *to* God.

And when Job addresses God, God responds to vindicate Job, to silence his friends, and to correct Job as well. God repudiates the logic of God’s self-appointed defenders; God explicitly states that they have spoken wrongly about the divine nature; God refuses to accept the rigid and inflexible role of moral enforcer who always rewards the righteous and punishes the guilty. No such God can be a God of Grace.

But God also dismisses Job’s accusations that God has treated Job unjustly. Job is right to protest his innocence. God agrees. But as Gustavo Gutierrez explains, Job remains captive to the very logic of innocence and guilt that he is learning to outgrow. If I suffer but know myself to be innocent, then it follows that I suffer wrongly; therefore, God must be guilty. Someone must be guilty; if not I, then God. In Job’s faithful but moralistic logic, a

dichotomy of innocence and guilt remains in place. To undercut this logic, God blesses Job with a vision of the immense scale of the creation and God’s creative power. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!” (Divine sarcasm) “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place? Where is the way to the dwelling of light?” as God’s interrogation continues.

The force of this interrogation draws Job into the realization that God’s universe is not made to the scale of Job’s moral imagination. Thanks to the sciences of our day, we, too, are growing in our time to realize the vast and unimaginable scale of the universe as we come to appreciate our fragile place in interstellar spaces.

But even as God bequeaths to Job and to us a sense of our smallness relative to the vastness of God’s creation, Job comes to see that the God who can hook Leviathan like a fish is, nonetheless, speaking to him. To be addressed by God is simultaneously to recognize both our smallness in God’s universe and the dignity of human life that is, nonetheless, addressed by God.

The Book of Job never indicates that Job is satisfied by what God actually has to say. It is not clear whether God’s explanation suffices. What consoles Job is the *experience of God* in the midst of devastation: “I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee.” We are left to believe that even God can console only by way of presence.

A proper aim of theology is to make it possible for the suffering to speak to God once more. Our capacity to inspire such speech does not hinge on our explanatory powers. We cannot explain, but we can console. We can and must strive to speak, however fallibly, of a God Whose grace defies our moral logic, a God Who will address creatures who address God. Jesus’ response to those who sought to establish the guilt of the man born blind is significant. We glorify God not by way of argument and explanation and not by establishing who is or is not guilty. We glorify God when, by grace, we are able to be agents of healing and consolation. Contrary to John Milton, we have not been called to Christian life “to justify God’s ways to man” but to be the continuous incarnate presence of Christ to the world. May God help us to be such theologians.

An assistant professor of theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, John J. Thatamanil earned the baccalaureate at Washington University and received the master of divinity degree and the doctorate of philosophy from Boston University. He teaches courses in constructive Christian theology, process theology, comparative theology of South Asia, Hindu and Christian dialogue, Buddhist and Christian dialogue, God and the other, Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality, theology of religious pluralism, and Paul Tillich and the future of theology. Thatamanil states that his essay was inspired “by a close reading of Gustavo Gutierrez’s indispensable book” titled *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Orbis Books, 1987). “Father Gutierrez many not agree with my conclusions,” contends Thatamanil, “but I am in substantive agreement with most of his argument.”



Job and His Daughters
c. 1818
William Blake
pencil study
215 x 255 mm.
National Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.
Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection

May I presume to venture a theological commandment? Thou shall not seek to preserve God’s innocence and power at the expense of those who suffer. God does not need your vindication; the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering do!



The hand of God extended toward Adam's hand
central detail from the *Creation of Adam*
1508-1512
by Michelangelo Buonarroti
(1475-1564)
fresco
18' 8" x 9' 2"
Sistine Chapel ceiling
The Vatican

Truth

Truth is what you cannot tell.
Truth is for the grave.
Truth is only the flowing shadow cast
By the wind-tossed elm
When sun is bright and grass well groomed.

Truth is the downy feather
You blow from your lips to shine in sunlight.

Truth is the trick that History,
Over and over again, plays on us.
Its shape is unclear in shadow or brightness,
And its utterance the whisper we strive to catch
Or the scream of a locomotive desperately
Blowing for the tragic crossing. Truth
Is the curse laid upon us in the Garden.

Truth is the Serpent's joke,

And is the sun-stung dust-devil that swirls
On the lee side of God when He drowns.

Truth is the long soliloquy
Of the dead all their long night.
Truth is what would be told by the dead
If they could hold conversation
With the living and thus fulfill obligation to us.

Their accumulated wisdom must be immense.

—Robert Penn Warren, BA'25
In commemoration of the centenary of the poet's birth
(1905-1989)
from *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980*
page 63, Random House, New York, 1980

gleanings

Commencement 2005

The Habit of Different Perspectives

Ninety graduates from the Divinity School and the Graduate School's Department of Religion were welcomed into the Vanderbilt University *alumni/ae* community on Friday, May 13, 2005. Chancellor Gordon Gee conferred the master of divinity degree upon thirty-four students, the master of theological studies degree upon twenty-eight students, and the dual master of theological studies degree and doctorate of jurisprudence upon two students during the commencement exercises on Alumni Lawn. Six students received the master of arts degree in religion while twenty members of the class of 2005 were awarded the doctorate of philosophy in religion.

During his address to the University's degree candidates, Chancellor Gee remarked, "Vanderbilt is a special place, even among universities, because here we gain the habit of treating perspectives that differ from our own with honor, respect, and civility. We dread the intellectual and spiritual loss that would come if we did not accord dignity to the viewpoints of others.

"But such is not the case in our culture right now, and there are many extreme advocacies that would have you swayed into habits of confrontation. They would have you create a category of ideological enemy, and they would have you develop the reflex of decisively shutting down the voices of those who fit that category. They would encourage you to let aggression and defensive triumphalism become the rock rib of your relationship to others, of all your political affiliations. Or they would have you succumb to the notion of yourselves as a victim and hope that you would allow that notion to figure into how you respond to all circumstances.

"I have so much faith in your capabilities and your good sense, but the zeitgeist is a forceful gale, indeed. Do not let it erode the habits you have learned. Please do not let yourself be blown off center. Do not let yourself be used. Do not let yourself be a useful tool in someone else's scheme for power and profit, for ratings, or for influence. Resist being a tool for those who would manipulate you to their own ends. Please do not choose to capitalize on keeping this country out of joint. For if you give in to these temptations, then your diploma, your degree, might as well be valueless."

After Dean James Hudnut-Beumler presented diplomas to the Divinity School candidates, he charged each graduate with the responsibility "to grow into a religious leader whose life will be remembered for its example, its articulation of meaning, and its integrity."

He encouraged the newest members of the *alumni/ae* community to "cultivate holiness; seek justice for the vulnerable; wait not for authority to respond in faith; take courage from hope and turn aside from fear when it is time to act; develop high expectations and exceed them by relying upon the strength of God's Holy Spirit; and lift your eyes from the holy books and seek out the faces of your neighbors."

A Symphony of Understandings

Commencement 2005 marked the third time Joseph Daniels Blosser has been graduated first in his class; as valedictorian of Jefferson City High School in Missouri, he enrolled as a chancellor's scholar at Texas Christian University where he received a baccalaureate in economics and religion, *summa cum laude*, and was ranked first among the undergraduates. He distinguished himself this year by earning first honors as the eighty-sixth Founder's Medalist in the history of Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

Chosen as one of the Divinity School's Carpenter Scholars for his commitment to social justice and ministry, Blosser sought a theological education in the context of a research University which would promote his intellectual and spiritual formation and provide practical instruction for nurturing the people of God.

"The Divinity School's rigorous academic standards and the challenging ministerial opportunities have tested continuously the limits of my knowledge," remarks Blosser. "My education at Vanderbilt has invited me to ask significant questions about community, justice, ethics, and God and has exposed me to the raw realities of congregational and chaplain ministries. I have discovered that ministry is not a one-person show but a symphony that requires one to have a thorough



Joseph Daniels Blosser, MDiv'05, (center) received the Founder's Medal for first honors in the Divinity School during the 2005 commencement exercises. Among Cornelius Vanderbilt's gifts to the University was the endowment of this award given since 1877. Members of Blosser's family who witnessed the conferring of the honor included (from left) his paternal grandfather, Robert Blosser; his parents, Cynthia and John Blosser, and his grandmother, Marjorie Blosser.

knowledge of religious traditions and a sensitive understanding of the tension which exists between living in a culture and living in a religious world."

Blosser experienced such tension by serving as a hospital chaplain for Pacific Health Ministries in Honolulu where he studied the intricate interweaving of Micronesian and Western cultural and religious practices. He documented his observations on the effects of imperialism in his essay titled "The Deflowering of Hawaii" which was published in the 2004 fall issue of *The Spire*. Blosser also was chosen by the Divinity School to travel to Mexico where he studied the social, political, and economic circumstances affecting the citizens and the reasons they make the difficult journey across the border.

While fulfilling his degree requirements, he served as an intern minister for the congregation at Vine Street Christian Church in Nashville and as the interim minister at Bellevue Christian Church. He continued to develop his skills as a homilectician by preaching for congregations in Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky.

Ordained as a minister in the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ on May 22, Blosser has begun doctoral studies in ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School where he has received a full scholarship. Upon completing his doctorate, he hopes to pursue a vocation in the Academy and in congregational life.

Kudos for the 2004-2005 Academic Year

Founder's Medal for first honors in the Divinity School

*Joseph Daniels Blosser, MDiv'05
Jefferson City, Missouri*

Academic Achievement Award

*Emily Ferrel Ramsey, MTS'05
Mount Juliet, Tennessee*

Banner Bearer for the Procession of Degree Candidates

*Emily Ferrel Ramsey, MTS'05
Mount Juliet, Tennessee*

The Umphrey Lee Dean's Award for exemplifying the mission and vision of the Divinity School

*Dawn Latrise Riley Duval, MDiv'05
Denver, Colorado*

William Newcomb Prize for exemplifying the idea of the "Minister as Theologian" and for receiving honors on one's project for the master of divinity degree

*Lisa Ann Dordal, MDiv'05
Nashville, Tennessee*

for her essay titled "On the Way to Emmanuel: Deception as a Vehicle for Illumination and Transformation"

Honors for the master of divinity degree project were awarded also to:

*Charles Benjamin Delaney, MDiv'05
Stow, Ohio*

for "Coming To and Going From: A Christian Pedagogy of Short-term Mission Trips"

*Nancy Jacobs Jenkins, MDiv'05
Hermitage, Tennessee*

for "Does She Even Know I'm There? A Theological Reflection on Pastoral Care to Patients with End Stage Alzheimer's Disease and Other Forms of Dementia"

*Lea Marcella McCracken, MDiv'05
Murfreesboro, Tennessee*

for "Setting a Place for the Children: The Lord's Supper as an Inclusive Ritual in the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ"

*Lindsay Cathryn Meyers, MDiv'05
Nashville, Tennessee*

for "A Company of Prophets"

*Jenny Tyler Redding, MDiv'05
Jackson, Tennessee*

for "A Common Table: Making Room for Eating Disorders in the United Methodist Church"

Florence Conwell Prize for outstanding preaching

*Charles Benjamin Delaney, MDiv'05
Stow, Ohio*

Saint James Academy for outstanding sermon

*Lisa Ann Dordal, MDiv'05
Nashville, Tennessee*

for her sermon titled "Remembering Zipporah"

W. Kendrick Grobel Award for outstanding achievement in biblical studies

*Emily Ferrel Ramsey, MTS'05
Mount Juliet, Tennessee*

J. D. Owen Prize for most successful work in Hebrew Bible

*Priscilla Johanna Hohmann, MDiv'05
Framingham, Massachusetts*

Luke-Acts Prize for the outstanding paper on an aspect of Luke-Acts

*Lisa Ann Dordal, MDiv'05
Nashville, Tennessee*

Elliott F. Shepard Prize in church history

*Matthew Christopher McCullough, MTS'05
Frisco City, Alabama*

Wilbur F. Tillett Prize in theology

*Joseph Daniels Blosser, MDiv'05
Jefferson City, Missouri*

The Nella May Overby Memorial Award for honors in field education in a congregation or community agency

*Amy Virginia Cates, MDiv'05
Henderson, Kentucky*

Chalice Press Book Awards for academic accomplishment by Disciples of Christ students

*Amy Virginia Cates, MDiv'05
Henderson, Kentucky*

*Audrey MacMillan Connor, MDiv'05
Bowling Green, Ohio*

*Charles Benjamin Delaney, MDiv'05
Stow, Ohio*

Certificates earned in the Carpenter Program in Religion, Gender, and Sexuality

*Patricia Kent Gardner, MDiv'05
Charlotte, North Carolina*

*Anne Margaret Hardison, MTS'05
Raleigh, North Carolina*

*Blake Austin Mann, MTS'05
Cullman, Alabama*

*Katherine Jean Carroll Nelson, MDiv'05
South Bend, Indiana*

*Kimberly Nicole Crawford Sheehan, MDiv'05
Kingsport, Tennessee*

*Ginger Renée Skaggs, MDiv'05
Neosho, Missouri*

Certificates earned in the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies

*Christophe Darro Ringer, MDiv'05
Nashville, Tennessee*

*Annette Lorraine Taylor, MDiv'05
Madison, Tennessee*

Student Government Association Community Service Awards

*Ginger Renée Skaggs, MDiv'05
Neosho, Missouri*

*Dale A. Johnson
The Drucilla Moore Buffington
Professor of Church History*

Bettye Ford Award for service to the faculty and students of the Graduate School's Department of Religion

*Amy Elizabeth Steele, MDiv'00
Nashville, Tennessee*

doctoral student in ethics

The Bishop Holland Nimmons McTyeire Award presented by the United Methodist Student Association for outstanding service to the Divinity School and to parishes

*Lisa Hamilton Gwoock, MTS'05
Brentwood, Tennessee*

*Nancy Jacobs Jenkins, MDiv'05
Hermitage, Tennessee*

Sliding into Nicaragua

BY PRISCILLA JOHANNA HOHMANN, MDIV'05

I have always enjoyed a good relationship with nature. Hiking and camping, regardless of the weather, are among my favorite avocations. Prior to owning my first car (when I was thirty-two years old), I rode my bicycle everywhere—even in the snow, and I confess to scoffing at folks who fear displacement when a few snowflakes descend.

My relationship to nature, however, was undermined deeply when I traveled to Nicaragua during the rainy season. I never have liked the phrase, "fighting the elements," as if rain or snow were obstacles to be endured, but after I encountered the mud in a rural Nicaraguan village, I felt as if I had, indeed, survived an environmental ordeal.

Everywhere I walked, mud—caked with rotting leaves and chicken feathers—clung stubbornly to my shoes, gathering mass with each step. Mud engulfed the tiny house in which I stayed with my host family and threatened to take me hostage in the front yard. While the native children skipped down

the slick hills, I plotted every step with careful hesitation, wondering whether I could make it through the next twenty-four hours without succumbing to this murky mass.

An overnight homestay in Sontule, the coffee-growing region of Nicaragua, was part of the past academic year's cultural immersion seminar organized by the field education department at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. For one day, we experienced what it was like to live as most Nicaraguans live: no electricity, no running water, but lots of dirt floors, bare pantries, and in the remote farm villages—lots of mud.

Before meeting my host family and entering their modest house, I tried to wipe the grime from my sneakers, but my efforts proved useless. One of the older children, Raymond, who observed my futile attempts, shook his head and pointed to my sneakers as if to say that the problem was not the

mud but my poorly equipped shoes. I could only nod my head in agreement. While his inexpensive plastic sandals slipped over the surface effortlessly, I was stuck with my inadequate, albeit expensive, American footwear. Even the chickens and pigs that scurried in and out of the house tracked in less mud.

The physical discomfort of this homestay was exceeded only by my embarrassment of not being able to adapt to this situation with grace or ease. I struggled to maintain not only my footing but my sense of humor. Initially, I was able to shrug off my awkward attempts to navigate this new setting, such as my numerous excursions to the privy located atop a sharp muddy slope. These trips à la commode provided amusement for the small children who watched me cling to the towering branches as I tried to overcome the slip-

Everywhere I walked, mud—caked with rotting leaves and chicken feathers—clung stubbornly to my shoes, gathering mass with each step.

pery earth beneath my shoes. I tried to laugh and feign amazement with my footwear, but I grew tired of keeping up the jolly front, especially as the Nicaraguan diet was challenging my digestive system on a regular basis. I became desperate for some degree of control over the uncertainties of this whole encounter and even thought about limiting my fluid intake for the rest of the home-stay to avoid the privy ordeal. Perhaps I would just stay inside on the dry dirt floor with the chickens and the pigs until it was time to leave.

There were many moments during this homestay when I could not wait to get back to the city where my Divinity School cohorts and I could sit on the patio and talk about poverty without actually experiencing the discomforts of substandard living. Exhausted by the strangeness of this encounter, the language barrier, and the lack of amenities, I



wrestled with a desire to flee the village, but I also wanted to forget the mud, the sneakers, and the tiny wooden outhouse and just be with my host family who welcomed me into their home and taught me, with great patience, how to make corn tortillas.

In the early morning hours, with corn flour-caked hands and a stray dog licking tortilla batter off my shoes, I surrendered my attempts to be mud-free and sterilized from this brief encounter. Keita, a young mother living with her parents, showed me how to pound the batter into thin tortillas and fry them over a makeshift mud stove while Carlos, Raymond's younger brother, laughed at the thick broken cakes of my culinary efforts. When Raymond strapped an old transistor radio around Carlos' neck and encouraged him to dance to the disco sounds of "Don't Bring Me Down," Carlos stomped his bare feet and shook his hands beside his head to the music as we pounded the tortillas to his movements and sang the words that we all knew: "I'll tell you once more, before you get off the floor, don't bring me down."

The chickens pecked the fallen corn from the floor; the pigs grunted under the table, and my sneakers—lying outside by the door—dried stiffly in the morning sun. I was no longer fighting the elements.

The essayist, a native of Framingham, Massachusetts, was graduated in 1993 from Smith College where she earned a baccalaureate in religion. While fulfilling the requirements for the master of divinity degree at Vanderbilt, she was the recipient of the Saint Thomas Health Services Scholarship awarded to a matriculant from the Roman Catholic faith tradition.

Alumni/ae Class Notes

**Please Note: Class Notes appear only in the printed version of this publication.
(Do not remove the Class Notes pages!)**

Divinity School Staff and Faculty

Barbara Hart Simpson, of Nashville, Tennessee, on April 22, 2005, at the age of 77. She was retired from Vanderbilt University Divinity School where she served in the office of development and external relations. Congregants from various houses of worship in Nashville remember her as one of the organizers of the Divinity School's continuing education program. A service of thanksgiving for her life was conducted on April 23 at Christ Church Cathedral where she was a communicant.

Langdon Brown Gilkey, of Charlottesville, Virginia, on November 19, 2004, from the effects of meningitis, at the age of 85. A pre-eminent Christian theologian who argued for the rational coexistence between faith and science, Gilkey was acknowledged by theologian David Tracy, as "the surest theological guide for the joys and terrors of living as a modern Christian."

As one who debated publicly against the initiatives of Christian fundamentalists, Gilkey served as a witness for the American Civil Liberties Union and testified in 1981 in

the case which challenged the constitutionality of an article passed by the Arkansas State Legislature mandating that creationist views be taught with evolutionary theory. Although the authors of the law had been careful not to present their intention in religious terms, Gilkey was not persuaded. During his testimony, he remarked, "A creator is certainly a god, if he brings the universe into existence from nothing." He described the case as "a modern day version of the Scopes Monkey Trial" and argued successfully against the fundamentalists' claim that "creation-science" was a science, as distinct from religion cloaked as science. The author of fifteen books, Gilkey did not approach faith as a rarefied abstraction but explored the difficult terrain where religion, technology and culture converge.

Gilkey earned the baccalaureate from Harvard where he was a classmate of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and of the future Cardinal Avery Dulles. After traveling to Europe with the Harvard tennis team at the onset of World War II, Gilkey and Dulles formed "Keep America Out of the War Committee;" however, both students soon felt distasteful that other members of the committee equated the atrocities of Nazi Germany with British colonialism. Gilkey traveled to China to teach English to university students in Beijing and was caught in Japanese-held territory after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Captured with thousands of other enemy nationals, he was sent to an internment camp. "This internment camp reduced society—ordinarily large and complex—to viewable sizes, and by subjecting life to greatly increased tension, laid bare life's essential structures," wrote Gilkey.

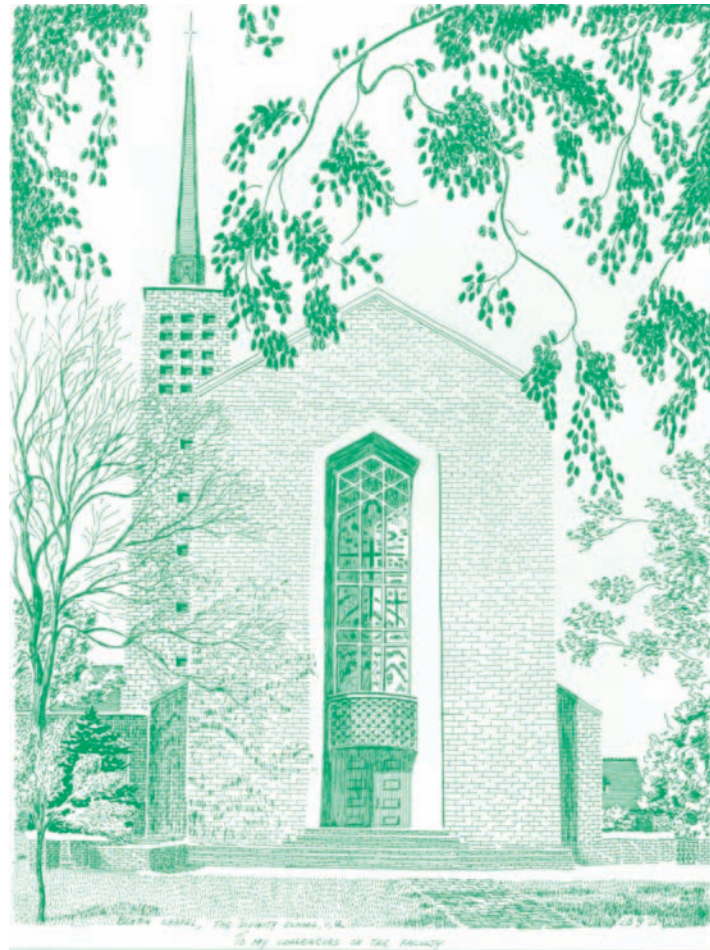
At the conclusion of the war, he moved to New York to study international law but became bored with the subject and enrolled in Union Theological Seminary where he studied with Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich while earning the doctorate of philosophy. He was a member of the faculty at Vassar College from 1951 to 1954 and taught at Vanderbilt University Divinity School from 1954 to 1963 before accepting an appointment at the University of Chicago Divinity School from where he retired in 1989 as the Shailer Matthews Professor of Theology.

"I had the good fortune to begin doctoral study in time to take the final classes Lang-

don Gilkey taught before retiring from the University of Chicago," remarks Paul DeHart, associate professor of theology at Vanderbilt. "His well-known theological writings were rigorous, imaginative, and utterly committed to speaking to the contemporary situation, but it was as a teacher that he left a lasting impression on me, especially in two ways. On the one hand, his moral seriousness and deep compassion were unforgettable, especially once when his accounts of the reality of human suffering which theology must address drove him to unembarrassed tears before his students. On the other hand, only a teacher of rare talent and respect for the life of the intellect could present a difficult thinker like Karl Barth to his students with such brilliance and sympathy, in spite of his own radically opposed theological orientation."

Gilkey delivered the Cole Lectures at Vanderbilt Divinity School in 1969 and in 1977 and served as the Anne Potter Wilson Distinguished Visiting Professor during the fall semester of the 1998-99 academic year. He was a participant in the compilation of "The Lawson Affair, 1960: A Conversation," the sixth chapter in *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest and Change*, edited by Dale A. Johnson, the Drucilla Moore Buffington Professor of Church History at Vanderbilt. Gilkey was among the faculty members who protested the expulsion of Divinity School student James Lawson for his participation in the peaceful sit-in demonstrations for civil rights.

During his last interview for *The Spire* in 1998, Gilkey remarked, "One of the strangest



Benton Chapel

1963
by Langdon Brown Gilkey
American theologian
(1919-2004)
black ink on paper
13" x 10"

A gift from the artist to his colleagues at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, the original drawing traditionally remains displayed in the office of the associate dean for academic affairs.

lessons that our unstable life-passage teaches us is that the unwanted is often creative rather than destructive. Only in God is there an ultimate loyalty that does not breed injustice and cruelty but a meaning from which nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us."

(Details for Professor Gilkey's obituary were obtained from the University of Chicago News Office.)



An Apostle Reading

1740
chiaroscuro woodcut on laid paper
Anton Maria Zanetti
Italian engraver, draughtsman, and printmaker
(1680-1767)
6 11/16" x 4 1/8"
Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery Collection
Gift of Thomas B. Brumbaugh, Ph.D., professor of fine arts,
emeritus
Vanderbilt University
2003.031

The chiaroscuro woodcut was an innovative form of early color printmaking designed to imitate Renaissance wash drawings. The term "chiaroscuro," (derived from the Italian, chiaro for "light," and oscuro for "dark") was used to describe the prints because of the contrast between the highlights and the surrounding areas, often printed in two related shades of color, with a black outline for emphasis.

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Vanderbilt University Divinity School announces the thirty-second annual

ANTOINETTE BROWN LECTURE

When Hell Freezes Over FEMINISM, ONTOLOGY, AND MULTIPLICITY

to be delivered by alumna

Laurel C. Schneider, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Culture
The Chicago Theological Seminary

Thursday, March 16, 2006

7:00 p.m.

Benton Chapel

Theologian Laurel C. Schneider is dedicated to the development of a stronger, more interesting public theology that understands historical antecedents and courageously examines the critical issues of justice in the contemporary world. Through her scholarship and teaching, she seeks a language that reflects the complexity of historical Christian theology and that addresses the interactions of faith, theology, science, and culture. Before earning the doctorate of philosophy in 1997 from Vanderbilt University as a Harold Stirling Vanderbilt Graduate Scholar, Schneider received the baccalaureate in international studies from Dartmouth College and the master of divinity from Harvard University. She is the author of Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology, published in 1998 by Pilgrim Press. Her forthcoming manuscript to be published by Routledge Press is titled Revelations: Divine Multiplicity in a World of Difference.

Dragon Casts Out Water,
with Woman Given Wings to Fly
from Apocalypse
French manuscript
late thirteenth century
based upon the Book of Revelation 12:15-16
Lambeth Palace Library
London, England