

Nine Streams towards the River of Theopoetics: An Autobiographical Approach

Jean Janzen

The Power of Place and Displacement

The body's awareness of our place on earth is powerful. In the Midwest I experienced the big sky, and the bordered and cultivated land. In retrospect it seems that farmland became an emblem of good behavior and right belief, a way of controlling God, even as the threatening tornados could appear overhead. Moving to the San Joaquin Valley in California changed that. Here the vast areas of wilderness, the grand mountains and the ocean, and the threat of earthquakes allow little possibility of control. Living in this place requires continual relinquishment, a surrender to uncertainty. The body with a renewed sense of place can be in a process of a growing recognition of a sacramental view of matter. The story of the incarnation and the cosmic Christ thrives in this connection. "We all ride earth's original music," I say in the poem "Night Falls on the Neighborhood."¹

My Father's Story and Mine Intertwine

In 1980 I entered the graduate creative writing program at California State University in Fresno with the hope to render an artistic version of my father's story—the tragedies of his childhood, his adolescent journey as an orphan to Canada, and his search for joy as he changed vocations and furthered his education, taking us along on that adventurous ride. He moved our entire family from Saskatchewan, where he had been a country school teacher for over twenty years, to Mountain Lake, Minnesota, where his first pastorate coincided with World War II and with revivalists traveling through. Then we moved to Tabor College in Kansas, where at the age of 13 I lived in a men's dormitory house in which my father and mother were house parents. Theology and intellectual discussion were at the table throughout childhood

¹ Jean Janzen, "Night Falls on the Neighborhood," in *Piano in the Vineyard* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004), 56.

as my father discussed ideas with my older siblings and fellow college students. And always there was singing and harmonizing.

Even as my father clearly leaned toward theology, he opened the door to new discoveries by his restless inquiry and his constant search of scripture for possibilities of meaning. By his physically moving our family into new settings, he shaped my own development of faith. As Stanley Hopper has written, “What theo-poiesis does is to effect disclosure through the crucial nexus of events, thereby making the crux of knowing, both morally and esthetically, radically decisive in time.”²

My Marriage

All seven of my siblings were either preachers or church musicians, or married to preachers. I married a doctor, a marriage which began in Chicago while my husband Louis was attending Northwestern Medical School. We lived with other Mennonite students attending seminary and graduate schools on the city’s South Side. These were crucial years of enlarging our faith as we learned for the first time about our Anabaptist heritage. Our churches in the Midwest had moved into the evangelical, fundamentalist stream, and now we were engaged in worship and conversation with graduate students who were involved in peace and justice issues. Here is where I learned that the Sermon on the Mount was not for a future world but for the present. And we were living in a neighborhood where many African-Americans were crowded into rooming houses and seeking jobs. We worshiped in an integrated Mennonite church, and we entered the arts, which Chicago offered in abundance. Here is where I also began to study literature as my major.

While my marriage to a doctor was not a transgression, the early years of exposure to the city opened the door of inquiry and led to questioning some of the “truths” of my childhood God. This was a time of learning about false piety, and finding some release.

The Presence of Music

For me the piano has become an emblem of the power of music, of how faith and the arts are intertwined and how music is sometimes profoundly itself

² Stanley R. Hopper, “Introduction,” *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, eds. Stanley R. Hopper and David L. Miller (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), xix.

and new. The elemental effect of a pitch or interval continues to be a mystery, and the power of solos and harmonies opens the self to new spaces. Louis and I had a big upright piano moved into our first apartment in Chicago, which became a solace and stimulus for me, and that continues. Pure music without language seems to come from a source that underlies and challenges our perceptions, drawing us into unfamiliar territory. Jeff Gundy writes that one of its faces is in the “strange and disturbing stories that rise, strong and dangerous as snakes, from some deep hollow within, refusing to be neatly contained or explained, but demanding to be reckoned.”³

The Earth and its Gifts of Sustenance

Life in the San Joaquin Valley offers the blessing of vines and orchards, and a strong sense of earth’s gifts. Growing up in Minnesota with cornfields, wheat, flax, and extensive gardens became a foundation of connection. Food as central to our knowing who we are is a theme of Scott Holland, as he reminds us of the many feasts that are laid out in Scripture for the sake of body and soul. He writes that poets have been teaching him about the tongue as an organ of both language and taste, and describes the Eucharistic hunger underlying all our loves and losses.⁴

The pomegranate, which seemed so exotic to me in the Valley, holds various meanings in ancient history. I learned that for the Jews it became a symbol, its 613 seeds standing for the 613 commandments of the Torah. I choose it as an emblem of the Two Great Commandments of Jesus when I cut it in half and press it for juice, trusting my imagination to test the boundaries of theology.

At the age of 46 I made a choice between seminary and graduate school in creative writing, a choice which determined the shape of my life. I entered the great poems of the world and learned about Keats’s concept of Negative Capability, the ability to be in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”⁵ My inspiration to pursue writing

³ Jeff Gundy, “Notes toward the Heretical Sublime” in *CrossCurrents* 60, no.1 (March 2010): 43.

⁴ Scott Holland, quoted in Jean Janzen, *Elements of Faithful Writing* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004), 4.

⁵ The definition offered by Philip Levine in Philip Levine, ed., *The Essential Keats* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), 11.

was fortified by the work of Rudy Wiebe, Katie Funk Wiebe, and John Ruth. I was challenged to write with humility, patience, and honesty—a lifelong task—and to ask the questions: Is it true? Is it beautiful? Does it lead the reader to her own experience? This can be a wild terrain, as one ventures into unknown territory with every poem in progress.

An early influence was Emily Dickinson, who continues to challenge me with her theopoetics. Her questioning of tradition and easy answers, and her affirmation of the elemental in human experience, sets a high standard. The presence of the Sacred is given unexpected description as she trusted her imagination as an inexhaustible source of truth. Poets like Theodore Roethke were early influences in my writing, stretching the possibilities of exploration. And sometimes in the process of writing a poem, I found that my theology was altered and that I was willing to risk “a new theology.” I also found that poetry can become a kind of container to hold what is overwhelming, a kind of “domestication” without losing immensity and intimacy.

Meeting Three Medieval Mystics

Early in my writing life I had become acquainted with Hadewijch of Antwerp (ca. 1220-1250) while I explored early Dutch literature. Her stunning images included the idea of “the upside-down tree,” which inspired a poem and a kind of theopoetics. In 1991 the Mennonite Hymnal Committee sent me the writings of three medieval mystic women, asking me to consider writing hymn texts based on their work. Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich made claims of visions I had never had, their intuitive insights stretching my imagination and offering a feminine point of view. Shaping some of their wild language into hymn texts was a privilege and gave me a sense of being found. Their writings and those of other mystics assure me that we will never exhaust the possibility of names for God and our experience with God.

My Travels into History

Thanks to my husband’s love of history and the arts, we traveled to places which brought rich resources for poetry and theology. Living in the Netherlands for a month in 1996 allowed me to smell and taste and touch

my history. Finding my lost family in the former USSR in 1989 opened a deep vein of sorrow and joy. I also became fascinated with the intersection of the lives of my grandmother Anna Akhmatova and the Czarina Alexandra in the early 20th century, and I borrowed the parable of “the pearl of great price” as an emblem of suffering. In this process I found that parables allow and encourage the reinterpretation of faith experiences and descriptions.

The Power of Visual Art

In my journey with poetry I have periodically been drawn to visual art—Vermeer, Breughel, Van Gogh, Fra Angelico, and now paintings by my own son and son-in-law. Entering into paintings or sculpture, one is laid open to energies that run deep and offer the spaciousness of possible new understanding. During a visit to Venice, I found Bellini’s “Mother and Child” in the Frari Church, a painting in which the Madonna resembled my own mother. I wrote about this in a poem and found myself seeking connections to my mother’s life, and I continue to ponder the possible meanings of this painting for me. During this process I read a review by Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker* magazine. He admires the work of artist Frida Kahlo, observing that her self-portraits, like “the serene Madonnas of Giovanni Bellini, with their hints of crucifixion . . . assure me of two things: first that things are worse than I know, and second, that they’re all right.”⁶

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These nine streams, though limited, allow me to identify part of what I understand about theopoetics as a deepening river—a river ever recirculating the original waters of our world, and ever resisting passivity and shallow living. These sources also reassure me that God’s breath continues to brood over the waters of our world and ourselves.

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⁶Peter Schjeldahl, “All Souls: The Frida Kahlo Cult,” in *The New Yorker*, Nov. 5, 2007.