‘God is Closer to Poetry than Religion’

A Literary Refraction by Julia Spicher Kasdorf

Introduction by Hildi Froese Tiessen, Literary Editor

In 1990 a young female poet was among the relatively few American Mennonites to attend “Mennonite/s Writing in Canada”– the first of five international conferences on Mennonite/s Writing. The inaugural conference took place in Waterloo, Ontario; it was followed by two conferences at Goshen, Indiana, and then two more at Bluffton, Ohio, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. The sixth conference is being planned for Harrisonburg, Virginia in 2012.

Julia Kasdorf, this American poet who now teaches creative writing at Penn State, had not yet published *Sleeping Preacher*. Her award-winning, landmark work in American Mennonite writing would appear two years later, in 1992, and would be followed by *Eve’s Striptease* in 1998. But there was no question that this young woman was a writer, and that she was interested in conversation about things literary. In Waterloo in 1990 – more than twenty years ago – she encountered an established novelist who would become her “conversation partner in support of the writing life”: Rudy Wiebe, the acknowledged “father” of contemporary Mennonite writing. They began a friendship then, and a literary correspondence that continues to this day.

When last year Wiebe invited Kasdorf to speak at his church – Edmonton’s Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church, where Wiebe has remained an active and beloved member since his return to Canada from Goshen College some forty years ago – she delivered the sermon that follows. During that visit to Alberta, Kasdorf and Wiebe – sharing among their many shared interests a fascination with the voices of early Anabaptists – began to collaborate on poetic translations of some Anabaptist hymns. One of these translations, “The 78th Song from the *Ausbund*,” was published in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Beachy, with a foreword by Julia Kasdorf (Herald Press, 2010). In what follows Kasdorf offers language in the form of a sermon (a term delightfully identified in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* as meaning “a stringing together of words”). Who better than a poet to engage us thus?

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In August of 1984, a handsome man in a clerical collar sat beside me on a People Express flight out of Pittsburgh. I was bound for Newark, for my final year at Washington Square University College (New York University), to a boyfriend I had thought I might marry but about whom I had been feeling deeply ambivalent. The British Anglican priest would continue on to London, to Oxford, where he planned to defend his dissertation. Before our drink orders were even taken, I confessed my hope to become a poet and said I was considering Mennonite seminary after college.

"Don't go," he said simply. "You'll find that God is closer to poetry than religion." Then he proceeded to relate his own regrets.

"And another thing," he advised, handing me my bag, which he'd carried off the plane, "Don't marry someone you don't really love." Then he disappeared into the crowded airport. David Byrd. If "angel" means only a carrier of divine messages, he was one. I took my bag and turned to embrace the boyfriend who had come to meet me, a bit late and direct from Sunday brunch with his new girlfriend and her mother. We broke up as the bus made its way back to the city.

Odd for me to remember this now, a Mennonite and confirmed Episcopalian and also a poet who has preached at least two sermons in Mennonite churches. The first time, I was invited to speak of anything or just read poems, but I felt it important to work from the assigned lectionary texts. I make a habit of reading the Daily Office and like to ponder the spaces between set passages, thinking through ancient relationships. Writing within the constraint of the lectionary schedule resembles writing against the constraints of poetic form: it ties you to tradition and sets immediate limits that force invention. On the occasion of the sermon printed here, Pastor Chris Friesen asked me to preach a sermon that would contribute to a series on the Holy Spirit, and he sent a set of scripture passages from which I could choose.

I think of the sermons mostly in genre terms. The sermon is an oral form, which may be composed in writing – I couldn't do it any other way – but which must be delivered with the body; it is made for performance like a play. In this way, it resembles poetry's preliterate roots. Sermons are often inflected with the rhythms of spoken language, and they persuade with feeling and image as well as rhetoric. Growing up, I loved most those

sermons that ended with a poem or a tuneless reading of a hymn text. And now I find, though it may be strange to admit, that I love writing sermons.

Dry Bones and the Breath of Forgiveness[1]

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I

> will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord. (Ezekiel 37:1-14, NRSV)
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> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:19-23, NRSV)

The familiar passage from Ezekiel is a text for our times, a tonic for bodies that are oppressed and displaced – or for hearts and minds that are disturbed or depressed, dwelling in the depths. To these dry bones the prophet utters a few words commanded by God. Then, suddenly, the bones stir and lift and find a way to bind themselves together with other bones and tendons; and then, marvelously, they become shapely, enfleshed and clothed with skin. But these bodies cannot breathe until the prophet, once more commanded by God, pronounces:

> "This is what the Sovereign Lord says.
> Come from the four winds, O breath,
> and breathe into these slain, so that they may live."

The breath enters the bodies, and they rise, alive.

What is the meaning of this vision, which Ezekiel dreamed along a grand canal of Babylon, less than 500 years before the birth of Christ?

That God can raise up the hopeless, that God would restore life to the Hebrew people who were so weary and broken-hearted they resembled the living dead: zombies, shell-shocked, the post-traumatic stress disordered – each culture and generation has a different name for beings who appear to be alive, but who have no vitality. These displaced captives, relocated about 86 kilometers south of modern Bagdad, had no hope. But life would return,

the prophet promised, which for these people also meant that God would restore their land and security – their bodies would not only rise up, but they would also abide safely in the place they call home – at least for a time. And indeed, the future of Judaism lay with these exiles, not with the ones who remained back on the land.

In Ezekiel's dream, the resurrection of dry bones comes by way of language, spoken first by God but repeated for human ears by the prophet, so that healing is Divine but mediated by human means. God pulls the animating breath from the Four Winds; that is, from all of Creation, from every corner of God's good earth. The gesture of breathing life into human forms echoes the story in Genesis, when God launched a new world populated with creatures formed in God's image, infused with God's breath. At the same time, the passage points ahead to the gift of the Holy Spirit. God repeatedly says that these acts are performed "so that you will know that I am the Lord . . ." or "that I, the Lord, have spoken . . ," and again, "so that you will know that I am the Lord."

The repetition of this statement admits how difficult, how nearly impossible, it is to feel or sense anything about God from the valleys of human despair. And so this breath, which animates and brings hope to dry bones, this voice which promises the exiles a home, demonstrates God's loving care for us.

In the New Testament, with Jesus walking among the people, it should have been easier to ascertain something about God's abiding presence. But not so on the evening of that first day of the week after the crucifixion, when the disciples huddled like refugees behind locked doors, grief-stricken, bereft, except for the unbelievable stories brought by the women. Disoriented and mourning, the disciples suddenly saw Jesus or perhaps first heard his voice, "Peace be with you." Jesus showed them the wounds on his hands and side – his material body – and we are told that the disciples were "overjoyed" upon seeing their Lord.

Here, before them, Jesus stood resurrected as surely as those dry bones danced in the valley of Babylonian captivity. But that was not all. Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." With this, he created another kind of diaspora as he breathed the Holy Spirit into them.

Then he said a remarkable thing: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

So, the breath that passes from the resurrected body of Jesus into the bodies of his disciples is not merely the animating force of mortal life – which would have been spectacular enough – but a very particular kind of wind. This is the Holy Spirit, and at least in this passage, all we learn about the Holy Spirit is that She grants believers the awful authority to forgive sins or to withhold forgiveness.

Can this be true? Honestly, I can't quite believe it.

I have to recall a date that is as infamous among Pennsylvania Amish people as 9/11 is for the rest of America: October 2, 2006, the day a troubled milk truck driver walked into a one-room schoolhouse at West Nickel Mines, separated the female pupils from boys and adults, and then killed six girls and wounded four more before killing himself. At the time, the story was endlessly retold in the global media as the tale of a peculiar community choosing forgiveness instead of revenge. One Amish man, his back to the TV camera, said, "How can we not forgive when Christ has forgiven each of us?" It happened that this horror occurred on Yom Kippur, and several rabbis were moved to comment: Jews, they said, are taught that only God can forgive sin. Victims may ask God to forgive the offender (as Jesus, from the cross, asked God to forgive), but we cannot do this ourselves, and certainly not on behalf of dead victims or in response to a killer who cannot repent because he is dead. Jews, they said, are commanded to remember instead.[2]

At the time, I was more inclined to lament another instance of violence against girls than to praise Amish non-resistance. Instead of celebrating "forgiveness," I wanted people to face this act of gendered violence and regard it in relation to a culture of systemic sexism. (Just a week earlier a nearly identical school shooting had targeted girls for violation and death in a similar fashion in Colorado.) I was frankly skeptical about the speedy resolution afforded by "Amish grace" that the world found so appealing. It seemed to me that forgiveness was not a choice on that occasion but a deeply engrained cultural habit of mind, an immediate response from a religious community that could imagine no other alternative in the face of such violence. I guess I wanted to take advantage of the option to withhold

forgiveness that Jesus also offers.[3]

Which reminds me of a certain Russian Mennonite great-aunt, grown old in western Canada, who, at the mention of Stalin, used to say in her Russian-German inflected English, "Give him the gospel, and off with his head!" There may be a complicated kind of forgiveness in that sentiment.

Consider what the gift of the Spirit meant to the disciples at that particular moment: these men had watched leaders of the larger Jewish community, in cahoots with occupying Roman forces, humiliate, torture, and kill their beloved teacher. Now they reasonably feared for their own lives. On his return, the first gift Jesus gave to them was the ability to forgive or to refrain from forgiveness. In other words, this power that was once only God's fell into human hands exactly when the disciples needed it most.

Forgiveness is not simply done, nor does it deny the wrong that has been committed. We see this clearly in chapter 21 of John's account, a tacked-on second ending to the Gospel which relates a story that scholars say was not witnessed by John himself but was likely added for the literary purposes of narrative closure. Jesus demonstrates the process of forgiveness when he meets his disciples again by the Sea of Tiberias. There, we're told, Peter decided he needed to go fishing, and the others joined him. After a luckless night on the water, a stranger called from the shore and suggested they dip their nets on the other side of the boat, and the nets came up groaning. In that instant, one of the men recognized the figure on the beach to be Jesus, and Peter must have, too, for he instantly grabbed his tunic and jumped into the sea. Maybe he jumped eagerly, to swim ahead of the boat, but I wonder whether he wasn't also afraid. Was it shame that caused Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, to cover his naked body and leap out of sight, as Adam and Eve once hid in the garden?

On the shore, Jesus built a fire and served grilled fish and bread – real food for men working the night shift – and yet this gesture also resonates with the Last Supper. When they had finished eating, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?"– one time for each instance Peter denied him in the high priest's courtyard. And with each response in the affirmative, Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep." In other words, if you love me, you will preach the gospel and care for people as I have cared for you, body and soul. By the

third time Jesus put the question to him, Peter had become offended. It is not easy to be reminded of one's failures; nor is it easy to accept and integrate forgiveness.

The episode concludes with Jesus predicting Peter's martyrdom: "Follow me." According to tradition, Peter did follow Jesus, even to death on one of Nero's crosses. But for Christians, especially in those early years, martyrdom always meant resurrection.

Pagan sources marvel at the Christians' fearlessness before death. Of the early Christian martyrs, Grace Jantzen, the late British philosopher of religion, who also identified herself as an exile from a small Mennonite Brethren village in the Saskatchewan bush, has noted that they "resisted imperial power at the very place where it was most concentrated – in the arena." Roman power was grounded in an ability to rule fatally and efficiently around the world; back in Rome, empire demonstrated its glory in great, public spectacles of death. But the Christian martyrs, because of their confidence in the resurrection of the body, displayed an astonishing and exasperating fearlessness in the arena.[4]

"Unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground…"

Ten days after the shooting, Amish leaders asked a Mennonite neighbor with heavy equipment to raze the schoolhouse before dawn. By noon, the scene of the crime was graded and planted with grass and clover seed.

Resurrection, by analogy and in the context of the Gospel reading, is associated with forgiveness: forgiveness of Peter, forgiveness of the Romans and Jews, forgiveness of all of us who don't know what we're doing half the time. Forgiveness is neither denial nor the desire for tidy closure so that we can get on with more pleasant matters. Genuine forgiveness faces the facts of the offense, grapples with their meaning, yet gently works like the breath of life in the valley of dry bones to grant a new start to both victim and offender. And further, we are commanded to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." We are commanded, in other words, to choose forgiveness, to choose life so that we and our children may live. (This forgiveness does not assume forgetting; survival of an individual or a culture depends upon memory, the meaningful narration of life experience.)

What kind of life? Already there is enough blood in this sermon to float

a navy: Babylonian exile, two crucifixions, the Roman arena, Mennonite migrations, Stalin, school shootings. The Holy Spirit can mysteriously breathe hope into all of those dark valleys and memories, so that, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, "you may know that I am your Lord." Yet, we know She also works quietly, in simpler ways.

We associate the Holy Spirit with grace in both senses of the word: with mercy and with beauty; we identify Her with voice, with the provocative or soothing words of the prophets. When our own words fail us in prayer, the Spirit intercedes. She is a wind that blows where it will, gathering breath from the four corners of the earth or fanning the flames of Pentecost. The Spirit grants new life: signaled by the waters of baptism and the waters of birth. She engendered the Incarnation and remains the sustaining presence of God in the world, comforting the broken hearted and building relationships through inspired acts of charity and forgiveness – which leads me to an ordinary chapter from the book of life: the everyday wisdom of my own mom.

My mother attributes to the Holy Spirit intuitive hunches: the urge to phone one of her friends, only to find that the woman has just gotten a sudden shot of bad news. She believes the Holy Spirit works to feed and comfort people through our labors, through the delivery of covered dish dinners, for instance, if only we attend to Her nudges. Scholars debate and point to the Gnostic gospels where Jesus states that his real Mother is not Mary but the Holy Spirit. They cite the feminine gender of *ruach*, the term for "spirit" in Hebrew, as well as similar terms in Aramaic and Syriac – although the Greek word for "spirit" is neuter and the Latin, masculine. (The French word for "cabbage" is masculine, too, so I'm skeptical of a linguistic argument.) More important to me is seeing that the work of mending relationships and binding community, of creating beauty, the work of feeling rather than avoiding emotion, of nurture and support, of patience and encouragement are all traditionally associated with the feminine – whether those qualities are embodied in the lives of women or men. This is why I refer to the Holy Spirit as "Her."

The Spirit is not human, of course, but the gendered pronoun matters to me in the same way that the risen body of Jesus mattered. This is how

we know ourselves and others in the world; this is how we were created by God: male and female, he or she. This is how God came to us – in the form of a particular human being – and this is how Jesus appeared to his disciples – as a man with five wounds. The breath of life in Ezekiel was not drawn from anywhere or nowhere, but from the Four Winds. And the Holy Spirit, that busy, multi-tasking member of the Trinity, always at work in the world – urging us to comfort the afflicted, to trouble the comfortable, to teach and to nurture, to mend relationships, to make safe spaces of hospitality, to knit dry bones, and to heal real bodies – of all things, and not least, She grants a measure of value to the kinds of work that women have traditionally done, labor that is typically undervalued and often unpaid.

I wonder whether women's work would seem less humble or demeaning if we esteemed it as Holy. Can we all – men and women – like Jesus cooking breakfast for his disciples on the beach – join in the domestic labors of the Holy Spirit in the world, not out of mere necessity or duty but also joyfully, out of desire?

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks. Then feed my sheep.

One of my poems anticipated these thoughts – and hinted at the cost of such holy work – almost two decades ago, the mind of poetry preceding the mind of rational discourse as it often does:

What I Learned From My Mother

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands

of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.[5]

Notes

[1] This sermon was written for the morning service at Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmonton, Alberta on May 16, 2010. I am thankful to Rev. Charles Hoffacker, now serving St. Christopher's, Carrolton, Maryland, and formerly interim priest at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, State College, Pennsylvania, for his thoughtful reading of an earlier draft that enabled me to complete this one.

[2] I do not wish to suggest a false dualism that pits Jewish justice against Christian grace, an opposition that in crude forms contributes to anti-Semitism. Later in this sermon, I allude to Deuteronomy 30:19: "choose life," a rich and graceful inheritance of the Hebrew tradition.

[3] For a full discussion, see Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "To Pasture: 'Amish Forgiveness,' Silence, and the West Nickel Mines School Shooting," *CrossCurrents* 59.3 (Fall 2007): 328-47.

[4] Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 333-36.

[5] "What I Learned From My Mother" from *Sleeping Preacher,* by Julia Kasdorf, © 1992. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.