Notes in Lieu of a Manifesto on Anabaptist Theopoetics

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For years now I have found myself pursuing, as humbly as my wild ambitions will allow, large questions about God and human beings and the cosmos in and through poems and essays written from a poet's perspective. I have been guided by many fellow travelers and experts in this pursuit, some poets, some theologians, some not readily categorized. One of them, Scott Holland, taught me to use the term "theopoetics" for this endeavor. It is a useful term, I think, though like many useful words in the hands of intellectuals, it is subject to much pulling and hauling regarding its precise definition. But as a theopoet, I desire to resist careful, rigorous, abstract definitions and their tedious, artificial clarity anyway. So, for now I might say simply that theopoetics happens where poetry and theology cross paths, especially when poetic methods of exploration are brought to theological questions.

Unlike the great theopoets Dante and Milton, and the great Mennonite theonovelist Rudy Wiebe, I am not good at grand narratives, so I will not try to offer one of those here. Like Walt Whitman, I contain multitudes and my contradictions are many. Like William Blake, I am ready to accept, however uneasily, that without contraries there is no progression—and the conversation on this subject is bound to include many such contraries. We must keep trying to explain, but theopoetics is suspicious of orderly, logical argument, and thus I will offer not an argument nor even, as I once envisioned, a manifesto. I do love manifestos but mistrust them as well; they are generally both too large and too small to contain their own discourse. They creak and crack, and whatever is in them spills off into the sand. Still, if the water lies deep and a leaky bucket is all we have, it is worth dropping it into the well, just to see if we can bring up something.

Notes on Theopoetics

1 One origin of theopoetics is in the suspicion that our God-talk is mostly really human talk, that the Great One may not be obsessed with the creation of orderly institutions and systematic belief systems, that revelation

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is continual and ongoing. Or so I claim, knowing that such generalities must themselves be cast under suspicion the moment they are uttered. "To generalize is to be an Idiot," William Blake beautifully (if paradoxically) said.

2 As theopoet I am skeptical of overarching truth-frames and master narratives, even the narrative of skepticism. Theopoetry kneels at no altar except its own necessity, which is born of intuition and craft, attention and introspection, memory and learning, restlessness and desire.

3 So I listen for voices, not those of everyday existence yet ones that speak of ultimate things, and for the moments when they take on an authority irresistible though not susceptible to proof.

4 The vast and orderly systems so beloved of the systematizers and rationalizers, their elaborate and sensible explanations of the darkest mysteries, seem then mere efforts to build little houses and proclaim them the world, to paint the ceilings blue and call them the sky, to drink grape juice and call it wine.

5 Even community, discipleship, peace, those worthy and essential aims, take on a new aspect under the spell of the voice. They do not vanish, but the poem will not be bound to them; it insists on its freedom to say anything, to imagine anything, to question anything, if only for the sake of testing, tasting, discovering.

6 I am happy enough on many days to sit in the balcony if the singing is good, to bring a cheese-laden casserole, and to stay for the potluck. But just when the rest are settling in to discuss their grandkids and the weather, I feel a great urge to take the wrong coat from the rack and disappear into the winter sunshine.

7 As theopoet I am not missional. I make no claims on those who find all this odd if not ridiculous, or those content with their lot, or those at ease with the turn of the lectionary and the comforting buzz of the familiar assurances. God bless and keep them. I speak only for myself and for some

others, those whose brows also sometimes furrow even during the sweetest hymns, those who have spoken the creeds and the verses and found their thirst still not entirely quenched.

8 I know—quite possibly all this yearning is merely the result of too much leisure, liberal education, assimilation, and insufficient persecution, of just the sort Thieleman van Braght and his current enthusiasts warn us against. If I really want to be faithful, I can hear him sternly instructing me that I ought to forget all this frivolity and figure out how to get myself martyred, or at least how to trust in the mission as it has been explained by those duly trained and certified to do so.

9 But could it be that even the beautiful, true stories we have do not include everything it would be good to know? That new stories and new songs and new readings of the old are still necessary?

10 Could it be that we should also praise the non-martyrs, the ones who shinnied down their ropes and high-tailed it back to Moravia, the ones who let the authorities baptize their babies but kept sneaking off to the cave anyway? These, after all, are our literal ancestors.

11 Could it be that outside the Ordnung there might be other orders as true-hearted as our own? Could it be that despite Thieleman van Braght the church is both visible and hidden, that none of us can say what the true path for our neighbor might be, except that we do our best to love each other?

12 Could it even be that the human order, and all our fussy conversations about God, are just one minor node of the great and vast creation, one we might profitably regard from a broader perspective? The Brethren theopoet William Stafford heard these words "On a Church Lawn":

> Dandelion cavalry, light little saviors,
> baffle the wind, they ride so light.
> They surround a church and outside the window
> utter their deaf little cry: "If you listen

well, music won't have to happen."
After service they depart singly
to mention in the world their dandelion faith:
"God is not big; He is right."[1]

13 In a more prosaic voice, the ecologist/philosopher David Abram laments our long inattention to the vast realm of life and being outside the human:

> How monotonous our speaking becomes when we speak only to ourselves! And how *insulting* to the other beings—the foraging black bears and twisted old cypresses—that no longer sense us talking to them, but only about them, as though they were not present in our world.[2]

14 The theopoet returns to the old words and finds new secrets hidden in them, ways of experiencing the earth and the skies and the ten thousand things not as mere matter devoid of "soul," but as creation, whole and entire and scorned, dismissed, or ignored only at our peril. Listen to these words from long ago, enshrined in Proverbs, now dusted and revealed to shine by a fresh translation:

> The Secret One through the ecstatic mother founded the earth,
> through consciousness he made the skies go around,
> by secret knowledge the oceans broke open,
> and the clouds let the dew down.[3]

15 The theopoet attempts, with mixed but occasional success, to resist dwelling either in the dead past or the unreachable future. "God himself culminates in the present moment," said Thoreau, burrowing with his head into the mysteries of things and language, fishing in the stream of the

[1] William Stafford, "On a Church Lawn" in *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1998), 55.
[2] David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 175.
[3] Proverbs 3: 19-20, tr. Aaron Blon, in Robert Bly, ed., *The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems from Many Cultures* (New York: Ecco, 1999), 128.

moment, sounding Walden Pond and keeping careful records of both the interior and exterior weather.

16 Thoreau's neighbors thought him odd. He *was* odd, as true poets are; the well-adjusted and compliant satisfy themselves with the ordinary gruel of community and convention, or (as Thoreau suspected) endure their quiet desperations, perhaps consoled by dreams of pie in the sky, perhaps not. Poets have their own desperations, certainly, but they tend to be of a different sort. Kabir said this:

> The idea that the soul will rejoin with the ecstatic
> just because the body is rotten—
> that is all fantasy.
> What is found now is found then.
> If you find nothing now,
> you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death.
>
> If you make love with the divine now, in the next
> life you will have the face of satisfied desire.[4]

17 Often, the theopoet is a lone walker who hears memory and desire shouting and stirring, who hears the whispers and cries of wind and birds, who dwells in the lovely, rich, perilous welter out of which new things made of words are born. The Mennonite theopoet Jean Janzen describes this quest well:

> But most intense of all is the longing to know how to live this life, and to find what is secret and hidden, which pulls us to the deep and watery places. This is the life of the writer, to continue that restless inquiry, and to find, if not the secrets, the connections which make life more whole.[5]

[4] Robert Bly, *The Kabir Book: Forty-four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), 24.
[5] Jean Janzen, *Elements of Faithful Writing* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2004), 23.

18 Alone, with crowds of the dead and the living babbling and bubbling up inside, the theopoets do their part. For the work of the tribe is not only what happens in committee rooms and church kitchens and sanctuaries, not only in letter-writing and demonstrations, visiting the sick and clearing the wreckage after the tornado, necessary and good as all these are. The work of the tribe also happens on the edges, in wandering away, in dreaming, says Rubem Alves, in a passage that uncannily echoes the ur-Mennonite story of Dirk Willems on the thin ice of the pond:

> Truth appears as we stumble, when the frozen surface of the lake cracks and we hear its voice: dreaming . . .
> We are saved by the power of dreaming. Dreaming is the power which resurrects the dead. [. . .]
> So the eucharist: an empty, silent space for our dreaming, before the Absent One—like the dead man of the sea.
>
> Theology wants to be science, a discourse without interstices . . .
> It wants to have its birds in cages . . .
> empty cages,
> words which are uttered out of and before the void.[6]

19 "There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star," said that old pagan Thoreau. When will we wake up? When will we shake ourselves free of the mud and dust of tradition, leave our noisy overheated rooms, head out to encounter for ourselves the Great One who is both Father and Mother? She has spoken before, though for centuries the words here survived only hidden in a clay jar, and even the name given her ("The Thunder, Perfect Mind") bends and boggles our categories:

> I am the first and the last.
> I am the honored one and the scorned one.
> I am the whore and the holy one.
> I am the wife and the virgin.
> I am <the mother> and the daughter.

[6] Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990), 99.

I am the members of my mother.
I am the barren one
and many are her sons.
I am she whose wedding is great,
and I have not taken a husband.
I am the midwife and she who does not bear.
I am the solace of my labor pains.
I am the bride and the bridegroom,
and it is my husband who begot me.[7]

Yes, this voice refuses to be orderly and reasonable. Yes, this voice is mainly but not entirely female. Yes, it seems entirely worthy of our praise.

20 Could it be that God has work for us besides "saving" our souls? Rainer Maria Rilke claimed so, in a poem that feels to me both beautiful and true. It starts this way :

Just as the Winged Energy of Delight

Just as the winged energy of delight
carried you over many chasms early on,
now raise the daringly imagined arch
holding up the astonishing bridges.
. . .
To work with things is not hubris
when building the association beyond words;
denser and denser the pattern becomes
being carried along is not enough.

The poet's work begins in delight and desire, but to build "the association beyond words" requires more than "being carried along":

Take your well-disciplined strengths

[7] James R. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990). Web version accessed April 4, 2012: www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html.

and stretch them between two opposing poles.
Because inside human beings
is where God learns.[8]

21 Could it be that we ought to pay more attention to growing souls than to saving them? When I read some poems, I am convinced that this is so. Consider Julia Spicher Kasdorf's "Bat Boy, Break a Leg," a meditation on a tattooed student and a bat that's invaded her house. Somehow she manages to get through the night without panicking at the knowledge of this intruder; in the morning the bat perches on the screen while she works, then leaves in its own good time:

Pale boy dressed in black,
Maybe the best that can be said for any of us is that
once we were angelic enough to sleep with strangers.
He touched my cheek. I opened the screen.
He flew in his time. We did no harm.[9]

22 And could it be, as some have been saying for a very long time, that the One we worship is outside, under every stone, within every tree and brook? "How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the aery way, is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" So asked the mad and holy Blake. More calmly, just as extravagantly, here speaks David Abram:

> The ineffable and sacred One toward which all monotheisms direct themselves . . . is still whispering even now, beckoning to us from beyond the monotonous hum and buzz of our worded thoughts, inviting us to free our senses from the verbal husk into which we've retreated. . . . An eternity we thought was elsewhere now calls out to us from every cleft in every stone, from every cloud and clump of dirt. To lend our ears to the dripping glaciers—to come awake to the voices of silence—is to be turned inside out, discovering to our astonishment that

[8] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems,* tr. Robert Bly (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 175.
[9] Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Bat Boy, Break a Leg," in *Poetry in America* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 7.

> the wholeness and holiness we'd been dreaming our way toward has been holding us all along; that the secret and sacred One that moves behind all the many traditions is none other than this animate immensity that enfolds us, this spherical eternity, glimpsed at last in its unfathomable wholeness and complexity, in its sensitivity and its sentience.[10]

23 Yes, this is not precisely what I was taught before the ritual of baptism, nor you, I suspect. Is it what I "believe"? How can I answer that? I can only say that discovering others working to revise and rethink our views of fundamental questions has been liberating and transforming for me. One of the most provocative of such thinkers is Grace Jantzen, who undertook a marvelously ambitious and nuanced project in theology and religious history (unfortunately cut short by her early death). Jantzen advocates a "deliberate feminist effort to restructure the religious symbolic," based not on "the justification of beliefs which separate the 'true' from the 'false'" but on "an imaginative longing for the divine in a reduplication of desire not content with the old gods," seeking a new future in which all living beings might flourish.[11] The question is not what we believe, Jantzen insists, but what we desire for ourselves and others, and how we act in the world.

24 Where might such beautiful, unorthodox images and ideas lead us? Keats claimed that what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth. He did not mean that lightly. If the world, and God, are bigger and wilder and stranger than we can imagine, what makes us think that we can bind it with propositions and belief-systems? Consider also Gérard de Nerval:

> Do you think you are the only thinker
> on this earth in which life blazes inside all things?
> Your liberty does what it wishes with the powers it controls,
> but when you gather to plan, the universe is not there. [12]

[10] Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 178-81.
[11] Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 99.
[12] Cited in Robert Bly, *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (San Francisco:

25 This theopoet loves and embraces some theologians: besides Grace Jantzen and John D. Caputo (to be taken up soon), I recently, belatedly discovered the rebel priest Matthew Fox. He mistrusts St. Augustine, asceticism, and the doctrine of original sin, and praises the bountiful universe which is in fact our home, despite the efforts of reductionists and tyrants to deny that we are part of something bigger, stronger, and stranger than any human structure. Fox argues that scientism and authoritarian patriarchy have cost us dearly:

> The cosmos has been lost in the West, and especially in religion and its rituals. . . . One reason has been the Newtonian parts mentality of the scientific era . . . which does not allow one to feel the mystery and the interconnectedness of microcosm and macrocosm. Another reason is patriarchal politics: . . . a threatened ecclesial establishment trying to control those who suggest that life is bigger than controls, that life is cosmic for everyone.[13]

26 Even the Mennonite quasi-patriarch John Howard Yoder, of course, sings the praises of not being in charge, listening with patience, and following the grain of the universe. The Yoderian Jesus is a nonviolent revolutionary, the Yoderian community one of nonviolent witness and communal service. Yet even Yoder was heard to go on in a rather brusque manner about the virtues of "missionary arrogance" (in "That Household"[14]) and to assert even more grandly that "The Rule of God is the basic category. The rebellious but already (in principle) defeated cosmos is being brought to its knees by the Lamb."[15] When this Yoder begins to explain how the fellowship should be regulated, I do my best to listen and sit still. But the bald cypress outside the window is waving in the wind, the muddy water of the creek is hurrying off to the north, and the buzzards are back from the south. None of them seem

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Sierra Club, 1980; 1995), 38.

[13] Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 75.

[14] John Howard Yoder, "That Household We Are." Typescript of presentation at Bluffton Believers' Church Conference, 1980. Personal copy in possession of the author.

[15] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 53-54.

remotely interested in wrestling with the Lamb.

27 There are many varieties of humility, of yieldedness, of pride. This theopoet is convinced that the "humility" which despises the self and the body, and which demands that others submit to the group in all things is as far outside the perfection of Christ as the sword. With Matthew Fox, I believe that true humility is close to the earth, does not regard the body as an enemy, and is ready always to praise the Great Being within and around all things. I will readily confess that I know this Being through the many things and creatures of the cosmos and through the words and images that God's creatures offer up as part and parcel of this creation, and that I continue to love the world, though I lament the many ways that its glory is pierced and wounded.

28 What is it that makes me unwilling to yield myself up fully to anything less than everything, unable to surrender to Community or Discipleship or Nonresistance, or even to the Messiah who is so often described and defined by others as though their version of him is as precise and authoritative as a stop sign or the Ohio Revised Code? What is it that makes me yearn always for the mysterious, elusive Jesus, the one described in the Gospel of Thomas, itself hidden away in the desert for more than a millennium? In its noncanonical but beautifully eloquent verses we read of a Jesus who said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."[16]

29 Walt Whitman lived while the scrolls of Nag Hammadi slept in their red clay jar. He never read the words of Jesus about turning the stone and breaking the branch. But his "Song of Myself" and other poems are central texts for this theopoet, at least, and much of what I have written here is an homage to him, uncredited until this too-hasty acknowledgment. The grand "I" of "Song of Myself," Whitman insisted, was not merely himself but the voice of all people, all times, all places, "For every atom belonging to me as

[16] James R. Robinson, ed., The Gospel of Thomas, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), verse 77. Web version accessed April 4, 2012.

good belongs to you."[17] In the poem's visionary final stanzas he also imagines a marvelous reunion:

> I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
> I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
>
> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.
>
> Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
> Missing me one place search another,
> I stop somewhere waiting for you.[18]

30 The name of God is a call, not a presence, says John D. Caputo, and what we seek is not physical reunion but a uniting of desire and deed in "making truth come true":

> The world quivers quietly under the weak force of an event, made restless by the silent promptings of God's divinely subversive call. But is it really God who calls? Who knows who is calling? . . . No matter. We have been delivered from the search for the name of God by the event. . . . The truth of the event releases us from the order of names and transports us to another level, where truth does not mean learning a name but making truth come true, making it happen. [19]

31 We know so little. The world is so large, and the spaces within as well, and this world is but a grain of sand on the edge of one small sea. The

[17] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass and Selected Poems*, ed. John Kouwenhoven (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 23.
[18] Ibid., 75.
[19] John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006), 199.

infinities within and around us may be terrifying, but they are exhilarating to contemplate and to explore, as best we can. Let us take to the open road, to the wide and unbound world. Let us listen for the call, and turn the stone.

32 Poetry, my friend Dean Young insists, is about the making of birds, not bird cages.[20] I suspect I will never make a real bird—but the gifts of voice and attention and imagination have been given to me, and to all of us, and why would God give such gifts if not to be used, if not for the making of songs and stories that have not yet been heard? Cages are useful, perhaps needful at times, but so are windows, doors, and wings.

33 Not so far away, as God measures distance, planets spin under strange suns, and perhaps creatures who look nothing like us—or a great deal like us—tell stories of One who came among them, bearing wisdom and offering a difficult, joyful new life. With voices unlike any we have known, perhaps, they sing and praise, so sweetly that the fabric of the cosmos shivers and wavers. And if we pause in our daily busyness and bluster, if we still ourselves deeply enough to listen, we might catch an echo of their song.

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[20] Dean Young, *The Art of Recklessness: Poetry as Assertive Force and Contradiction* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2010), 88.