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# Letting Be the Mystery: Storied Lives

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**Jesus is the poet par excellence of God's Reign, of  
God's coming rule.**

John Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*

**Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.**

**Remember language comes from this.**

**Remember the dance language is, that life is.**

**Remember.**

Excerpt from "Remember" in *She Had Some Horses*  
by Joy Harjo

**"...never hurry through the world but walk  
slowly, and bow often."**

Excerpt from *When I Am Among Trees*  
by Mary Oliver

**I**t started with a question: "Do you have a few minutes? May I share a story with you?" It was during the late 1990s in the lunchroom of the Lutheran Center, at that time located on the sixth floor of the building. Gordon Straw and I served concurrently for a few years at the ELCA churchwide organization in Chicago. Although we were located in different departments and admittedly, I didn't know Gordon all that well, the sixth floor lunchroom was a common meeting place, and we shared a common interest in Carl Jung's personality theory and its relationship to spirituality and spiritual formation, which was a good basis for conversation. On this particular day we were the last two people remaining at our round lunch table, so I asked him, "May I share a story with you? I had this experience a few years ago that I have been thinking about on and off ever since and need some wisdom and insight beyond my own." I think he said, "Go for it," so I started talking.

I participated in an immersion experience with the Oglala Lakota people on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in the mid-1990s. One of our guides for the immersion was an elder named Robert. We had been driving around the area one day, visiting various locations—agencies, homes, landmarks,

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etc. It was getting late in the afternoon and Robert and I were the only ones left in his truck, having left two other people at another site. There hadn't been much talking except to narrate the various places on the route, and he said to me matter-of-factly, "There's one more stop."

We drove out of Pine Ridge on Route 18, through Wounded Knee and Porcupine and toward the edge of the Badlands. From paved road to dirt road and finally along a couple of ruts in the bumpy ground to the edge of a break in the land. Robert got out of the truck, said nothing to me, and started walking toward the edge of the ravine. I got out and followed him. He walked to the edge of the ravine, took a deep breath, and stood there, looking out over the sacred landscape.<sup>1</sup> Likely with an internal shrug of the shoulders, I did the same. He stood still, and after a few minutes, he looked up and looked out. I studied him; he seemed very content, and he was speaking quietly. I couldn't make out what he was saying, and I didn't dare break the silence and ask. The landscape was stark; it was still, and the wind was warm. I remember being alert, attuned. It was beautiful moment, a moment of holy mystery.

And then Robert exhaled deeply, turned back toward the truck, and said, "We should probably go." Aside from pointing out and naming a few places along the way—homes, landmarks, geographical features—these were the only words he spoke directly to me. We returned to the community center in silence, a beautiful, sacred, unnerving silence.

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1. Years later I learned that we were probably looking out toward Stronghold Table.

I told Gordon this story, and then I asked, “So what do you think that was all about?” His first response was, “That was a beautiful story. Why did you have to go and ruin it with that question?” And then we sat there in silence, for, maybe, a minute or so. He let me wear that question, own it as my question. Then he looked at me with a puzzled little smile and said, “Are you asking about the significance of what happened, what it meant?” I replied that yeah, I guess that’s what I was asking, though hearing him it say it like that was unsettling. “Well, I guess that he had something he wanted to look at. Trust me, you were there for a reason,” Gordon replied. Right. And ouch. And touché. Gordon was generally gracious, but direct.

He then said: “We humans, we’re always trying to understand things, to explain things. It comes natural to us, I guess. And we’re Lutherans, so maybe that’s another reason, we think we’re supposed to ask, ‘what does it mean?’ all the time.” But sometimes, it’s important to just enjoy an experience, appreciate a moment. Did you enjoy that experience?”

I replied that I did. It was unnerving at the time and I had no idea what was going on. But I was literally along for the ride, and I did enjoy it. I told him again that I remembered feeling alert, aware, attuned (these were the words that I wrote in my journal). It was beautiful and holy and full of mystery. I was grateful to be there. “Then you should appreciate the memory as well. Remember it and enjoy it,” Gordon replied. “Let it be what it was.”

Human beings re-inhabit our lived experiences—the happening truth of an experience—by remembering, through the power of story. “We are indelibly marked by our past. We cannot escape the process of being influenced and influencing. But we may exercise creative freedom within it...we do not exist outside our relationships. We become who we are only in relation: we are network creatures.”<sup>2</sup> The resources for remembering that I have in mind here are a complex constellation of stories and songs, poems and artistry, memories and prayers that humans use to give voice to and seek meaning in the wide array of particular experiences in which we detect Mystery, in which we hear and seek to discern God’s call and what is being called for.

About the title of her book, *On the Mystery*, Catherine Keller writes, “The way of this mystery, the wonder of its process, is not justified by its endpoint. It wanders ahead in time and in space by no terribly linear path. Yet each step matters. The mystery draws us onward. We are always trying to figure it out; to discern our way; to gather clues, hints, and signs...Is the mystery ‘God’? This is the work of theology, theos/logos, ‘God-talk’ after all...This book is an exploration of the wisdom and the way of a theology that can only be spoken—when it can be spoken—in the spirit of mystery: in attunement to that which exceeds our knowing.”<sup>3</sup>

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**I want to explore with you a theological methodology that supports and evinces Gordon’s counsel about first dwelling in and appreciating an experience before trying to figure it out, before racing to interpretation and understanding.**

before racing to interpretation and understanding. I believe it is important and responsible for a theologian to communicate with people honestly about one’s approach to this beautiful, complex, messy, intriguing enterprise called theology. Being open and honest about such a thing seems also to be an important characteristic and capacity of healthy leadership. To that end, I consider myself a practical theologian with process tendencies<sup>4</sup> and Lutheran sensibilities, which may become more apparent as we briefly explore a theological approach that can help a person first dwell in and appreciate an experience before racing to interpret and make sense of it. The methodology and approach being explored here is both phenomenological and hermeneutical, which is to say, using the more recent language of postmodern continental thought, my approach aspires to the theo-poetical in its orientation, significantly influenced these days by poets, yes, and also by the work of Catherine Keller and John Caputo, among others.

In his most recent book *Cross and Cosmos*, John Caputo suggests that “...a theology worthy of the name has to square the claim that Christ has defeated evil (Christus Victor) with the unchecked reign of evil without turning the cross into a long-term strategy in which the evil-doers eventually get what was coming to them.”<sup>5</sup> Caputo continues to think about the logos of the cross in a new way, and offers theo-poetics as a hermeneutical key to the event that takes place on the cross. In so doing theo-poetics becomes a hermeneutics of the Reign of God. “The scriptures are the word of God (*logos theou*). The word of God means the words we give to

4. “Process theology requires unusual theological virtues, especially curiosity and an acknowledgment of the primacy of questioning over the potential attainment of answers, of searching over finding, of joy in movement and activity over acquiescence of stasis. It is the conviction of process theology that the question of redemption and consummation (eschatology), a question that is part and parcel of theological thought and work as such, can be meaningfully raised and indeed is even possible in the first place only by entering into rather than avoiding the adventure of an irreducibly complex world.” (J. Moltmann, 1995) This quote is from Roland Faber’s compilation on process theologies, *God as Poet of the World: Exploring Process Theologies* (Westminster John Knox, 2008), with credit given to the influence of Moltmann.

5. John Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Indiana University Press, 2019), 106.

2. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 22–32.

3. *Ibid.*, ix–xi.

God so that God may speak to us. Theology means the words we use to describe what God has to say—the shock of the call, the interruptive, even traumatic intervention in our lives, the surprise of the unforeseen demand that is addressed to us. Theology describes the event that takes place in and under the name (of) ‘God.’”<sup>6</sup>

As a practical theologian, I see theology’s first move in response to any given experience, challenge, topic, question, predicament, or ethical issue as *descriptive*, and then *interpretive*—the two work hand in hand and cannot be separated. First one remembers and describes, and then one interprets—preferably and most effectively in dialogue with others—as movement *toward* understanding and meaning. This requires of us a theological posture of openness to unbidden but not unwelcome experiences, a posture of receptive trust to the spirit of Mystery and the presence of the sacred in unexpected moments. “Faith is not settled belief but living process. It is the very edge and opening of life to process. To live is to step with trust into the next moment: into the unpredictable.”<sup>7</sup>

This approach is a more patient and poetic rendering of one’s theological interpretation of events, experiences, and interactions, always toward a limited and provisional understanding of one’s lived experiences. Poetry, literature, and the arts can help one to see differently as one seeks to express and interpret the meaning of an experience. And if one agrees with the premise that genuine understanding proceeds best through genuinely mutual conversation and dialogue, then an approach such as this one can provide additional and perhaps more imaginative conversation partners.

The creative work of the theologian, along with the poet, the writer, and the artist, has a limited horizon within which that creative work takes place: “The worldly limits and parameters of our own understanding are (precisely) the way we have access to what is going on in and under the name of God.”<sup>8</sup> The created order (with its various horizons) is the theatre within which theology does its work and seeks understanding, often given expression through the arts, poetry, and literature. Which leads to an open question (at least for me) instigated by my reading of some of the so-called theo-poetical scholars, specifically the aforementioned Keller and Caputo: In this created order, does God have any direct agency aside and apart from our human agency on behalf of God—for better or for worse?

I remember a former colleague at Wartburg Seminary (Dr. David Lull, a United Methodist New Testament scholar) replying to a question about why Wartburg Seminary required (at that time) in the curriculum both Hebrew and Greek languages by saying: “We continue to require the biblical languages because we want to teach students to pay close attention and listen carefully to texts. This is critical to pastoral formation, because students/pastors/leaders who don’t listen well to texts tend not to pay close attention and listen well to people either.” In the theological trade that we

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ply, we don’t just interpret texts, we also employ texts (Scripture, primarily, but also literature, poetry, art, etc.) to interpret events and our experiences in the world with others toward understanding and making sense of things.

The poetic calling and the calling of the poet in our pastoral work as leaders is precisely what can take us, as hermeneuts, as interpreters, all the way down and into the world and work of a text (to echo the work of Catherine Keller as well as the brilliant textual scholar Mieke Bal<sup>9</sup>), luring us in, into the full experience of the text, to fully experience it, and then challenging us to dwell there and allow the text to do its work. And texts will do their work poetically and prophetically: “The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves (and others) and the world around us...I think it (increased awareness) makes us more human...and more difficult to deceive...all totalitarian theories...have deeply mistrusted the arts...they notice and say too much.”<sup>10</sup>

The pastoral, poetic, and prophetic can be held together in a theologically informed approach to life and leadership. We already sing poetically; it is the nature of song to function poetically and artistically. We can, in fact we are called to preach, teach, and pray poetically as well. In order to do so we are called to enter the poem and the story, inhabit and reside in the narrative world of the poem and the story, as we would any text, biblical texts in particular. “The power of narrative to nurture and heal, to repair a spirit in disarray, rests on two things: the skillful invocation of unimpeachable sources and a listener’s knowledge that no hypoc-

6. Ibid.

7. Keller, *On the Mystery*, xii.

8. John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 102.

9. Cf. in particular Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2003) and *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Fortress Press, 2008), and also Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (University of Toronto, 2009).

10. W.H. Auden, “The Healing Fountain.”

risy or subterfuge is involved. This last simple fact is to me one of the most imposing aspects of the Holocene history of man (sic)."<sup>11</sup> As those called to first hear, and then serve, and only then to share the message of the Christian gospel, we employ texts to bring God's living Word to bear on people's life situations, at times to nurture, at times to heal, and yet at other times to challenge, yet always, to paraphrase Lopez, toward the restoration of a spirit in disarray. Though I was not fully aware of it at the time, there was something deep within my spirit, within my deepest self, that was both challenged and healed as I stood with Robert looking out across that sacred landscape at the edge of the Dakota Badlands. In this regard, the way that one inhabits and remembers a sacred experience is strikingly similar to the way in which one inhabits and resides in a text.

This approach to interpreting both experience and story requires something of us, multiple things in fact: a posture (disposition) of patience and sustained attention; respect for the integrity of the text as a world unto itself—a place, albeit a narrative place and space; it requires imagination, a kind of letting go, surrendering oneself to the call of the text, a heeding to the voice of the text, allowing the text to call, to place a claim on us; and it requires an openness to hearing and being called, creating space within ourselves, within our self, to be called, slipping into the world of the text. Cognition must recede without being dismissed and

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the imagination entertained and opened up. Cognition, at times, must be reduced, even suspended, in order for imagination to be released—and poetry, literature, and the arts offer pathways and practices by which this can occur. This is the poetic dimension of our calling. This is the work of the poet, the rich, deep work and world of the poem. And in so doing, we will make a story. And another. And then another. And if we heed the wise counsel of Gordon Straw, we will “let it be what it is”—something to remember, appreciate, and ponder, as we stand on the edge, open to a life in process, stepping with trust into each new moment.

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11. Barry Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative,” in *Crossing Open Ground* (Vintage, 1989), 69.